

**Wednesday
21 June 2023**

**Volume 734
No. 177**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 21 June 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Early Learning and Childcare: Funding

1. **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): If he will have discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on ensuring similar levels of funding for Northern Ireland to that announced for early learning and childcare in the spring Budget of 2023. [905481]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): Today is a day of reflection in Northern Ireland. It marks an opportunity for people to think about the tragic and needless loss experienced by so many families during the troubles. It also allows us all as a society to reflect on how far Northern Ireland has come from the most difficult days of the troubles, and the further work required to ensure that we never again return to violence and that Northern Ireland is a truly peaceful, prosperous and reconciled society, which is something this Government are determined to deliver.

If I may, Mr Speaker, I would like to note that my permanent secretary since January 2020, Madeleine Alessandri, is leaving the Department next week for another role within Government. I would like to place on record my thanks to her for all the help and guidance she has given me and everyone else over the last 10 months.

In answer to the question, in his spring Budget the Chancellor stated that Northern Ireland would receive Barnett consequential for 2023-24 and 2024-25 as a result of increased UK Government spending on childcare policy reform in England.

Claire Hanna: The Secretary of State may be aware that there is no childcare strategy in Northern Ireland and very little support, which is placing many families under extreme financial pressure because of growing costs, exacerbating inequality among children and forcing many, particularly women, to abandon their career for years. Research by the advocacy group Melted Parents demonstrates that families in Northern Ireland have been consistently failed on this issue. Does the Secretary of State agree that childcare must be recognised as a core part of the economic and societal fabric, as well as a tool to give kids a great start in life? Will he support the Department of Education and others to ensure that families in Northern Ireland can finally access the benefits promised in the Budget, promised in New Decade, New Approach and promised before that as well?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government recognised in the Budget, as I have just mentioned, how important childcare is for all the reasons the hon. Lady gave, and we do work with the Department of Education as much as we can. According to its figures, in the 2022-23 academic year there were 22,715 pupils in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland, which is 91% of three-year-olds in the population. However, she makes a very valid point about how this needs to go further, as it will do across the other parts of the United Kingdom.

Healthcare

2. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the performance of the health service in Northern Ireland. [905482]

13. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Whether he is taking steps with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce waiting times for healthcare in Northern Ireland. [905494]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): We are acutely aware of the challenges facing the health service in Northern Ireland and, indeed, across the UK. That is why tackling waiting lists is one of the Prime Minister's top five priorities. The performance of the NHS in Northern Ireland is not good enough, substantially because much-needed reforms have been avoided for years. Taking action to cut waiting lists and transform healthcare in Northern Ireland is the job of the devolved Government. For that reason, and many others, we urgently need the parties back in the Executive.

Simon Baynes: Over 500,000 people in Northern Ireland are waiting either to see a clinician or to have treatment, which represents one in four of the population. Does my hon. Friend agree that health services desperately need a working Executive to help address the huge problems they are facing?

Mr Baker: Yes. Without an Executive, local leaders are not able to deliver reforms to transform public services, and that is now being felt in the most uncomfortable, undesirable and difficult of ways by people in Northern Ireland, especially by those on long waiting lists. Northern Ireland desperately needs a working Executive.

Christine Jardine: I share the expressed concerns about the lack of an Executive in Northern Ireland and about support for the NHS, which is struggling. However, as the Minister mentioned, we are seeing similar problems across the United Kingdom. If it is one of the Prime Minister's priorities, could he not meet the leaders of the NHS in each of the devolved nations, and the leaders of those devolved nations, to discuss how they can learn from each other and perhaps tackle the problem on a wide scale across the board?

Mr Baker: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State just said to me that the British-Irish Council did not discuss health this time, but it has in the past. That would be a good forum for that discussion, but the hon. Member will realise that it is rather above my pay grade.

Power Sharing

3. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on restoring power sharing in Northern Ireland. [905483]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I regularly discuss Northern Ireland affairs with my extremely interested Cabinet colleagues and keep them fully abreast of the efforts being made to restore the power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive. My total focus is on the return of a devolved Government, and the Windsor framework is the basis on which to do that.

Mary Glendon: In the past, successful attempts to restore power sharing involved weeks of intensive talks between both Governments as well as the five main parties in Northern Ireland, but there is a vagueness about the current process. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he will try the previously tested methods over the coming summer?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I give an assurance to the hon. Lady that no stone will be left unturned in trying to get the Executive back up and running. The one thing that I did learn from the Windsor framework negotiations is that confidentiality in modern-day British politics and western politics is key in trying to get anything over the line.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The Windsor framework will make a significant difference to businesses and communities in Northern Ireland as they seek to trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the Windsor framework agreement has an international dimension, in that it has improved the status of the UK around the world, allowing the Prime Minister and the President of the United States to agree the Atlantic declaration and other such agreements?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is true, and I am slightly surprised by the element of pleasure that worldwide institutions—other Governments, the European Union and the United States Government, as my right hon. Friend says—have taken in seeing the Windsor framework come to fruition and, indeed, by how we are now talking about all sorts of important other things that seem to have been unlocked by the Windsor framework agreement.

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

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Today is a day of reflection across Northern Ireland, and I share the Secretary of State's support for those who are participating. The Secretary of State has said that the Government need to demonstrate that Northern Ireland remains a "strong and integral" part of the United Kingdom to restore power sharing. The problem for him is that his Department still plans to impose immunity for terrorists on Northern Ireland, against the wishes of all local parties and all victim groups there. Does he not see the damage that that could do to the Union?

Chris Heaton-Harris: This question is about the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, which is currently on Report in the House of Lords. I disagree fundamentally with the principle behind what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Yes, none of the political parties in Northern Ireland is behind this particular Bill, but in great fairness to the Democratic Unionist party, it has never been behind any sort of amnesty. That has been a principled position on its part from the Belfast/Good Friday agreement onwards, which I completely understand. I do not think I will ever be able to win that argument with the DUP. However, we do need to address these issues. We have a question later on legacy and a family who need information to allow themselves to reconcile the death of a family member. The Bill that we will present, which will be article 2 compliant—I truly believe that—will get information for a whole host of families who have not had it for well over 25 years.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the Secretary of State's detailed answer. There are ways forward that the DUP and other parties have supported, but the Government have chosen a different path. His Department cannot be fully focused on restoring power sharing while it is spending so much precious time on this Bill. Yesterday, even the Irish Government officially requested a pause in the Bill's passage through Parliament. The Secretary of State says that the Bill will be a different beast after the Lords, so will he consider giving people the time to assess the changes before it returns to this House?

Chris Heaton-Harris: This Bill has had a long gestation. It had two days of consideration on the Floor of this House in its original form this time last year. It had one of the longest Committee stages ever in the House of Lords, taking nearly five months to complete. We laid a whole host of amendments as a Government at that point. It has its first day on Report today and another day next Wednesday. This House will have plenty of time to consider those amendments and others when the Bill returns to this place.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to his outgoing permanent secretary, Madeleine Alessandri, and we wish her well in her new position.

The Secretary of State will be aware that since New Decade, New Approach at the beginning of 2020, we have pressed for legislation that will protect Northern Ireland's ability to trade within the internal market of the United Kingdom and respect our economic rights under article VI of the Acts of Union. Are the Government any closer to bringing forward such legislation?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I very much look forward to being in a space where, following further conversations with the right hon. Gentleman, I can bring forward legislation in this place that does exactly what he needs it to do for his party to be able to give me a date when it will go back into the Executive in Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The Secretary of State will know that we want to see Stormont back up and running and fully functioning again, but it is critical for us that Northern Ireland's ability to trade with its biggest market—which is, of course, the rest of the United Kingdom—is protected. We do have concerns

about the practical outworking of proposals in the Windsor framework and what it means for the movement of goods in the non-EU lane. The Prime Minister has stated that there will be free movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and we need to see that reflected in the practical arrangements, which, I have to say, are not matched by what the EU is saying about the non-EU lane and its operation.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The right hon. Gentleman has detailed knowledge of this area, and I do enjoy our regular conversations on these points. He knows that in the Command Paper on the Windsor framework, which was published back in February, we detailed the British Government's view of how we could bring in unfettered NI to GB trade as we move forward. We need to put more flesh on that bone—of that I am sure—but, as he knows, I constantly seek his guidance to ensure that I get this bit of my job completely right.

Electronic Travel Authorisation Scheme: Tourism

4. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent discussions his Department has had with representatives of the tourism sector in Northern Ireland on the implementation of the electronic travel authorisation scheme. [905484]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that the Department most recently met with Northern Ireland tourism organisations alongside the Home Office for discussions on how to communicate the ETA requirement on 7 June. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also hosted a tourism roundtable with sector leaders at Hillsborough castle on 20 April. The Government will continue their engagement with the tourism sector, which we recognise plays a vital role in Northern Ireland's economy.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful for that answer, but does my hon. Friend acknowledge that if an ETA exemption was granted for tourists—or, indeed, people claiming to be tourists—travelling from the Republic of Ireland, that would undermine the integrity of the whole scheme?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend is right, and that is the Government's policy. We have engaged closely with not only the tourism sector but our friends in the Irish Government on this issue. I hope that we will be able to work together to ensure that there is a consistent and coherent communication strategy to ensure that tourists know they must register for an ETA and must continue to comply with the UK's immigration requirements. I should say that whether one stays at Hillsborough castle, the Travelodge or any of the other great hotels in Northern Ireland, it is a wonderful place to visit.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Does the Minister recognise that Ireland is marketed internationally as a single entity with respect to tourism? Does he understand that treating movements on the island of Ireland the same as any entries into the UK from the rest of the world is not fair and does not recognise the specific circumstances that exist on the island?

Mr Baker: I am most grateful to the hon. Member. We do recognise elements of what he said, and indeed we have had those conversations most recently with the Irish Government at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. It is the Government's position that we should not create a loophole through the ETA scheme, but we do need to ensure that we communicate clearly with everyone the need to register and comply with immigration requirements. He may know that we have created an exemption for third-country nationals who are ordinarily resident in Ireland, and of course the requirement does not apply to citizens of the UK or Ireland under the common travel area, which we will continue to honour.

Education Funding: Community Groups

5. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with community groups on the potential impact of changes in the level of funding for education in Northern Ireland. [905485]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are acutely aware of the challenges facing the education sector in Northern Ireland. He has met member organisations of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action to discuss these issues, and I have been engaging with stakeholders about the wider cost of division in education, which a report by researchers working independently at Ulster University recently estimated was an extraordinary £226 million per year. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that it would be preferable for the Northern Ireland Executive to be restored so that they may make decisions on the issues that matter to the people of Northern Ireland, including the right level of funding for education.

Mike Amesbury: The Department of Education in Northern Ireland has announced that it will not proceed with proposed cuts to early years, extended schools and youth service programmes, which is broadly welcomed by community groups. Will the Minister confirm whether the Northern Ireland Office took direct action and advised on how guidance should be interpreted?

Mr Baker: We are always willing to work closely with the Northern Ireland civil service, but the hon. Gentleman knows that we have put in place an Act of Parliament to formalise arrangements by which decisions are taken by Northern Ireland civil servants during this governance gap. We will continue to work closely with civil servants, but if he would like to discuss a specific concern more closely with me, I will be glad to meet him. The answer to the problem is something that I think the whole House agrees on: it would be preferable to have locally accountable, devolved Government restored as soon as possible to take those decisions.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Our Prime Minister has described education as the "closest thing to a silver bullet there is".

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has heard concerns about the fact that Northern Ireland's education budget is going down as the budgets in the rest of the UK are going up. Will the Minister make the case for

further investment in education in Northern Ireland and continue to pursue integration, which is crucial to the future success of education?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend makes a reasonable point. Integration is central not only to the Government's policy but to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. I am rather grateful that there has been some small controversy over the Ulster University report on the cost of division. We must have that conversation. If we are spending £600,000 a day on maintaining a system within which only 7% of children are educated in formal integrated schools and, overwhelmingly, children are educated separately as Catholics or Protestants, we should have a serious conversation about the cost of that system.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Universities recently wrote a joint letter to the Secretary of State warning that his budget will force them to cut student places and will have a "fundamental and dangerous impact" on the future of Northern Ireland. Will the Minister carry out an assessment of the effect that a loss of student placements would have on Northern Ireland's economy, so that the House can be fully informed of the long-term impacts of the budget?

Mr Baker: We are in frequent conversation with the vice-chancellors. The hon. Gentleman will remember that we have taken a power to commission advice and to consult, and he will know that there is a need to look at revenue raising. All those things come together and point in a direction on which I hope, in the end, there will be consensus: to ensure that the excellent higher education sector in Northern Ireland continues to be a beacon of great education for the world.

Public Services: Budget

6. **Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the budget for public services in Northern Ireland. [905486]

8. **John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the budget for public services in Northern Ireland. [905489]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): For many years, the UK Government have recognised the unique challenges that Northern Ireland faces. We have provided around £7 billion in additional funding to Northern Ireland since 2014, on top of the Barnett-based block grant. Northern Ireland Executive spending per person is around 20% higher than the equivalent UK Government spending in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Peter Grant: A recent study has showed that 90% of people in Northern Ireland are having to cut back on their spending. The cost of living crisis means that a third are cutting back a lot on basics such as food, fuel and housing. Against that background, the Secretary of State's Government are imposing real-terms budget cuts across almost the whole public sector in Northern Ireland. At the time of a cost of living crisis, are his budget cuts making the crisis better or worse?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The budget for Northern Ireland was set out in the spending review a couple of years and is unchanged. All UK Government Departments are being asked to absorb inflation and energy costs within their budgets; Northern Ireland's Executive is no different. I am fully aware of what is going on with the cost of energy, food and other things in Northern Ireland, as I meet people regularly who tell me about it.

John Mc Nally: New research from Northern Ireland found that women were the shock absorbers of poverty, with 75% struggling to pay for food and 73% struggling to pay their electric bills, leading to mothers missing meals to feed their families. The saving efficiencies to the Northern Ireland budget include cuts to holiday hunger payments and, now, free school meals. Will the Minister explain why women and children are forced to starve to repair the chaos that the Tories caused to the economy?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman is wrong in one aspect. The budget is fair and allows for the statutory things to be delivered. I meet with women's groups very regularly—I met a whole group of them last week. I fully understand the implications of the budget. However, it should be for Northern Ireland Ministers to sort it out.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Beyond the cost of living crisis, there is a crisis facing public services across Northern Ireland. To give one very pertinent example, the chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Simon Byrne, reported to the policing board last month that the force faced a budget gap of some £141 million. That is a gap that can only be met by cutting police numbers further. Given that police numbers are already at 6,500, which is 1,000 below the recommended establishment figure quoted by Chris Patten and the lowest number since 1978, that is clearly a poor situation. Given the severe terror threat, what will the UK Government do to ensure that Northern Ireland has a police force capable of meeting continued security challenges, as well as meeting the needs of the communities the police force is there to serve?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The police budget in Northern Ireland is devolved. It comes through the Department of Justice, which has to live within its means just like every other Department, but I regularly meet and talk to the chief constable. The UK Government also provide an extra £32 million a year for such security measures.

Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery

7. **Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con):** What recent progress his Department has made on establishing the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. [905488]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I have identified the right hon. Sir Declan Morgan to be appointed chief commissioner designate of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and

Information Recovery. Hopefully, his appointment will come into effect when the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill receives Royal Assent.

Sarah Atherton: I welcome the progress made towards establishing the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, but after 40 years of waiting—I have also been raising the case in the Chamber over the past three and a half years—Mr Vaughan-Jones and his family have never received a conclusive account of what happened to his brother Robert, 2 Para, at Warrenpoint in 1979. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss the case and progress?

Chris Heaton-Harris: My hon. Friend raises a critical point and I would be delighted to meet her to talk about it. As I said earlier, many families across Northern Ireland and Great Britain still do not have the answers they require about the acts of serious harm committed in the troubles. The system has not worked as it is, which is why we need to pass the Bill and establish the ICRIR as soon as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. When it comes to recognising the need for reconciliation and information recovery, it can never, ever be a substitute for victims' access to justice. Will he confirm that innocent victims will always be a priority for the Northern Ireland Office and this Government?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I can do that, 100%. The hon. Gentleman is completely right.

Promotion of Northern Ireland Businesses Overseas

9. **Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote Northern Ireland businesses overseas. [905490]

11. **Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote Northern Ireland businesses overseas. [905492]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): As a result of the Windsor framework, Northern Ireland will be in the unique position of being part of the UK internal market as of right, having privileged access to the EU market, being under UK services regulation, and having access to the free trade agreements to which we are acceding. In addition, I have led trade missions with Invest Northern Ireland to Canada and South Korea to promote brilliant Northern Ireland businesses overseas, and will take further similar steps.

Andrew Selous: What will be the benefit to businesses in Northern Ireland of working with the UK Export Academy?

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the UK Export Academy, brought forward by the Department for Business and Trade. To illustrate its success, I would point to Lowden Guitars, which takes its products from its factory in County Down to customers in Australia. I encourage businesses across Northern Ireland, and indeed across the UK, to use the Export Academy, as he implicitly suggests.

Robbie Moore: How will the New Deal for Northern Ireland funding help to boost economic growth and increase Northern Ireland's competitiveness overseas?

Mr Baker: The £400 million in the new deal for Northern Ireland funding will underscore the UK's commitment to supporting and protecting the interests of people and businesses in Northern Ireland. New deal funding has been invested in projects such as £15 million for the Skill Up project to improve skills, £11 million for a cyber-AI hub at Queen's University Belfast, and a number of other projects, including £8 million for Invest NI to help to promote trade. It is a commitment of which we are very proud and I could speak at even greater length.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What is the Northern Ireland Office doing, and what is the Minister doing, to promote Northern Ireland businesses at COP28, which will provide a significant opportunity for those businesses to be marketed on the world stage, especially those involved in hydrogen technology? We have a hydrogen hub in my area.

Mr Baker: I know that the hon. Gentleman has a personal interest in this subject, and I should be happy to meet him to discuss how we can do more. There are some excellent businesses in Northern Ireland, including Catagen, which has an incredible technology for converting wind power and water into hydrocarbon fuels, and other businesses which should have the opportunity to participate.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905566] **Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 21 June.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): This morning I opened the Ukraine recovery conference alongside President Zelensky. The aim of the conference is to secure a resilient economic future for Ukraine.

As we mark the 75th anniversary of the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush tomorrow, I am sure the whole House will celebrate the contribution of the Windrush generation, who have done so much to build the Britain that we cherish today. In this Armed Forces Week, we also thank our armed forces for all that they do to keep our country safe.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Patricia Gibson: Given that inflation continues to outstrip pay awards, and given that we expect to see the 13th consecutive rise in interest rates tomorrow, will the Prime Minister tell us by how much living standards have fallen during his eight months in office?

The Prime Minister: I have always been clear about the fact that inflation is putting pressure on family budgets. The UK Government have taken decisive action to support families through this difficult time, including

households in Scotland, who are receiving considerable support—not just help with energy bills, but help for the most vulnerable as well.

Q2. [905567] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): On this side of the House we have a proud record of supporting the nuclear industry, which plays an essential part in the achievement of secure, low-carbon energy. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has given his backing to the next generation of nuclear reactors, including small modular reactors and larger projects. Will he now commit himself to ensuring that the fuel for these projects is manufactured in the UK, which will secure long-term, high-skilled employment at key sites in the north-west such as Springfields Fuels in my constituency, and a supply chain across the UK?

The Prime Minister: We are preserving and strengthening the UK's nuclear fuel production capacity through our £75 million nuclear fuel fund, and I know that Springfields Fuels has benefited from £30 million of funding. My hon. Friend is right to say that our domestic nuclear fuel sector has a critical role to play in supporting the UK's energy security and independence, and I know that he will continue to be a champion for the industry in the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I echo the Prime Minister's comments about the Windrush generation, who have contributed so much to our country, and join him in paying tribute to the armed forces, in this week and all weeks.

Let me also say that Glenda Jackson's passing leaves a space in our cultural and political life that can never be filled. She played many roles, with great distinction, passion and commitment: Academy award-winning actor, campaigning Labour MP, and an effective Government Minister. We will never see talent like hers again.

One of the Prime Minister's own MPs says that Britain is facing a "mortgage catastrophe". Does he agree with her?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by joining the right hon. and learned Gentleman in his tribute to Glenda Jackson.

It is right that we support those with mortgages, which is why halving inflation is absolutely the right economic priority. Inflation is what is driving interest rates up, and inflation is what erodes savings, pushes up prices, and ultimately makes people poorer. That is why, a long time before I had this job, I highlighted the importance of tackling inflation, and it is why I said that it was never easy to root out inflation but we would take the difficult and responsible decisions to do so. It is an approach that the International Monetary Fund has strongly endorsed, in its words, describing our actions as "decisive and responsible".

Keir Starmer: I realise that the Prime Minister has spent all week saying that he does not want to influence anyone or anything, but he was certainly keeping to that in his answer. He knows very well the cause of the "mortgage catastrophe": 13 years of economic failure, and a Tory kamikaze Budget which crashed the economy

and put mortgages through the roof. Will the Prime Minister tell us how much the Tory mortgage penalty will cost the average homeowner?

The Prime Minister: As ever, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is not aware of the global macroeconomic situation. Let me tell him and the House what we are doing to support those with mortgages. We have deliberately and proactively increased the generosity of our support for the mortgage interest scheme. We have also established a new Financial Conduct Authority consumer duty, which will protect people with mortgages—for example, moving them on to interest-only mortgages or lengthening mortgage terms. And we have spent tens of billions of pounds supporting people with the cost of living, particularly the most vulnerable. That is the difference between us: while he is always focused on the politics, we are getting on and doing the job.

Keir Starmer: Let's test that. The question that the Prime Minister refuses to answer—he knows the answer: £2,900 extra—is the cost to the average family of the Tory mortgage penalty. He was warned by experts about this as long ago as autumn last year, but he either did not get it, did not believe it or did not care, because he certainly did not do anything. When I raised this a couple of months ago, he had the gall to stand at that Dispatch Box and say he was delivering for homeowners. How is an extra £2,900 a year on repayment delivering for homeowners?

The Prime Minister: Let's just look at the facts. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about interest rates. Perhaps he could explain why interest rates are at similar levels in the United States, in Canada, in Australia and in New Zealand and why they are at the highest level in Europe that they have been for two decades. That is why it is important that we have a plan to reduce inflation. In contrast, what do we hear from the right hon. and learned Gentleman? He wants to borrow an extra £28 billion a year. That would make the situation worse. He wants to ban new supplies of energy from the North sea. That would make the situation worse. And he wants to give in to unions' unaffordable pay demands. That would make the situation worse. He does not have many policies, but the few that he does have all have the same thing in common: they are dangerous, inflationary and working people would pay the price. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Seriously? *[Interruption.]* Sorry? I don't think we need any more, do we? No.

Keir Starmer: I appreciate that the Prime Minister has a keen interest in the mortgage market in California, but I am talking about mortgage holders here. Whilst his Government are consumed in lawbreaking, chaos and division, working people are paying the price. This morning, I spoke to James in Selby. He is a police officer, working hard to keep people safe every day. The Tory mortgage penalty is going to cost him and his family £400 more each and every month. That is nearly £5,000. He told me this morning—Conservative Members may not want to hear this—that they have decided to sell their house and to downsize, and he has just told his children they are going to have to start sharing bedrooms. Why should James and his family pay the cost of the Prime Minister's failure?

The Prime Minister: I hope, when the right hon. and learned Gentleman was talking to James, he explained that his economic policies would make James's situation worse. It is not just me saying that. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies says that his policy of never-ending debt and borrowing would damage James because it would "increase inflation" and drive up interest rates, leaving James and everybody else in this country poorer. The International Monetary Fund has said that our plan prioritises not what is politically easy, but what is right for the British people. That is what responsible economic leadership looks like.

Keir Starmer: James and his family will have been listening to that, Prime Minister, and their plight should keep Conservative Members awake at night because, over the next few years, 7.5 million people are going to be in the same boat, all paying the Tory mortgage penalty month after month after month. The situation is so dire that repossessions are already up 50%—a total betrayal of the idea that if you work hard, you will get on. What is the Prime Minister going to do to make sure that more families do not lose their homes?

The Prime Minister: I know the right hon. and learned Gentleman is reading from his prepared script, but he failed to listen to the answer I gave. I spelled out in detail what we are doing. We have increased the generosity of support for the mortgage interest scheme, and we did that proactively in advance. We have also established a new Financial Conduct Authority consumer duty that will protect borrowers by, for example, allowing them to extend their mortgage term or switch to interest-only mortgages, and we have spent tens of billions of pounds supporting households with living costs. Those are the practical steps that we are taking to help James and other families who are facing these situations.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned mortgage arrears and repossessions, and I am pleased to say that today they are running at a level below when we entered the pandemic because of the actions we are taking. More importantly perhaps, they are also running three times lower than the level we inherited from the last Labour Government.

Keir Starmer: I am sure that, from the vantage point of his helicopter, everything might look fine, but that is not the lived experience of those on the ground. After 13 years of economic failure, people across the country are paying the price of uncoded, reckless, damaging decisions by the Tory party. Even now, as mortgages go through the roof, the Prime Minister is planning to wave through honours and peerages for those who caused misery for millions. What does it say about this Government that, while working people are worrying about mortgage rates, paying the bills and even repossessions, the Tory party is rewarding those who are guilty of economic vandalism?

The Prime Minister: No amount of personal attacks and petty point-scoring can disguise the fact that the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not have a plan for this country. He comes here every week to make the same petty points. We are getting on and delivering for this country. Yes, inflation is a challenge, which is why we are on track to keep reducing it. We are reducing

waiting lists and stopping the boats, all while he is focused on the past and focused on the politics. It is all talk. Whereas this Government and this Prime Minister deliver for the country. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Philip, I know you are popular.

Q5. [905570] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

My constituents continue to be concerned about energy prices and energy security. Can the Prime Minister assure me that he will not cave in to the extremist bullies from Just Stop Oil and their palsies in the Labour leadership and will instead commit to developing new oil and gas production in the United Kingdom, which would be good for jobs, good for the economy and make us less dependent on foreign countries for our energy supply?

The Prime Minister: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Putin's weaponisation of energy has amplified the need for greater energy security, which is why we deliberately launched a new licensing round for the North sea. Official forecasts suggest that a block on North sea oil and gas investment would mean that the UK's dependence on imports rises substantially. The Labour party's decision is one that puts ideology ahead of jobs, investment and Britain's energy security.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In February, the Prime Minister told this House that

"borrowing costs are...back to where they should be".—*[Official Report, 8 February 2023; Vol. 727, c. 904.]*

In March, he boasted

"we are on track to halve inflation by the end of this year."—*[Official Report, 22 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 330.]*

In May, he said that "economic optimism is increasing." Given the dire economic reality of today, is it not now clear that he has taken his honesty lessons from Boris Johnson?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman also fails to mention that it is not just the Bank of England, not just the Office for Budget Responsibility and not just the OECD but the IMF that have all upgraded their growth outlook for the United Kingdom economy this year. While he and others were predicting that this country would enter a recession, the actions of this Government have meant that we have, so far, averted that. We continue to be on track to keep reducing inflation, because that is the right economic priority.

Mr Speaker: I want Members to be a little more cautious in what they say. These are questions to the present, serving Prime Minister. There is a danger that the way the question was put could mislead.

Stephen Flynn: From listening to the Prime Minister's answer, I do not think he quite grasps the reality of the economic situation facing households across these isles—how could he? But it does not need to be like this and it did not need to be like this. Because mortgage deals in Ireland are not sitting in excess of 6%—they are at

about 4.5%. Inflation in the euro area is not sitting at 8.7%—it is sitting at closer to 6%. Britain is broke. Seven years after the Conservatives' EU referendum, will he finally admit that it was Brexit that broke it?

The Prime Minister: Again, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman was paying attention earlier; interest rates in this country are at similar levels to those in America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The rise in inflation and interest rates is a global phenomenon. But that is why, early, I set out that bringing inflation down was the right economic priority to have. That is what this Government will do, but that requires difficult and responsible decisions. That is what leadership looks like—I do not think the SNP will ever do the same thing.

Q7. [905572] **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): Wylfa, in my constituency, is recognised as the best site for small modular reactors and large-scale new nuclear in the UK. Given the UK Government's commitment to nuclear and Wylfa, when can my constituents expect to hear the result of Great British Nuclear's small modular reactor competition? Diolch yn fawr.

The Prime Minister: There will be no greater champion for this technology and her community than my hon. Friend. My understanding is that the first stage of market engagement is already under way. The expectation is that the down-selection process will be launched this summer, with an ambition to assess and decide on the leading technologies this autumn. The competition will be open, judicious, fair and robust, and I express all my confidence that we will select the best technology for the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: Lancashire is welcoming it.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Four months after the welcome Windsor framework, there is still no restored Northern Ireland Executive or Assembly, and we are facing an unprecedented budget crisis. This situation is untenable, and it is getting worse every day. The Government's approach seems to be to wait to see whether something happens, rather than to lead from the front. So will the Prime Minister confirm that he is willing to work with the Northern Ireland parties on a financial package for a restored Executive? Will he work more closely with the Irish Government to try to drive a process, including putting reform of the institutions on the agenda, so that those who want to govern Northern Ireland can do so?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his engagement with me and the Government during this process. I share his frustration, and our focus remains on delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, who expect and deserve their locally elected decision makers to address the issues that matter to them most. I thank him for his kind words about the Windsor framework and how it allows us to move forward. For many years, we have recognised the particular challenges facing Northern Ireland, which is why we have provided more than £7 billion of funding, on top of the Barnett block grant, since 2014. I assure him that my right hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Secretary remains in close

contact with all the parties in Northern Ireland to clarify what more is needed, so that we can restore the conditions for Executive formation.

Q9. [905574] **Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): Since 2016, cumulative growth has been 4% in Italy and 5.5% in Germany, whereas in the UK it has been 6.8%. In July last year, British exports to the European Union were the highest not just since Brexit, but since records began. The UK had the highest growth of any G7 country in both 2021 and 2022. The eurozone is currently in recession, but we are not. Is it not time that we heard more good news and talked Britain up?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the improvement in our economic outlook and the good, positive news showing the strength in the underlying economy. I know that he joins me in saying that our economic priority right now must be to continue to bear down on inflation, but while we do that, we are putting in place the conditions to grow the economy. As he said, unlike the Labour party, we will not talk Britain down; we will grow the country's jobs.

Q3. [905568] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Last night was another fantastic night at Hampden—it was a real tonic during tough times for the tartan army and Scotland more widely. However, whereas English and Welsh fans could watch their national teams for free on Channel 4 and S4C, only a small fraction of Scots could watch their match, with many unable to afford the subscription to Viaplay, particularly during this cost of living crisis. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is inherently unfair, and will he ask the Department for Culture, Media and Sport Secretary to meet me to discuss how to fix this situation?

The Prime Minister: I join the hon. Gentleman in his comments about the match. I know the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), is engaging with him and others on this particular topic, and I will make sure that she gets back to him.

Q10. [905575] **Anne Marie Morris** (Newton Abbot) (Con): In December last year, LINK conducted research about the acceptance of cash. It found that nearly half—45%—of people have been somewhere where cash has not been accepted or has been discouraged, and 49% of people said being unable or being discouraged to pay in cash was inconvenient. Will the Prime Minister look again at the Financial Services and Markets Bill, when it comes back from the other place, and ensure that any entity providing a public service directly to the public, involving payments or a charge, must accept cash?

The Prime Minister: We know that cash continues to be used by millions of people, particularly those in vulnerable groups. That is why the Financial Services and Markets Bill will, for the first ever time, protect people's access to cash in UK law. The Bill also supports businesses that continue to accept cash by ensuring reasonable access to deposit facilities, but as technology and consumer behaviour changes, it is right that organisations themselves should be able to choose the forms of payment that they will accept.

Q4. [905569] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister believe that the reward for being a law breaker should be to be made a lawmaker?

The Prime Minister: As we discussed last week, Mr Speaker, there is a well-established process of vetting for all peerages and I, in keeping with the convention followed by Prime Ministers of both parties, have followed the same process.

Q11. [905576] **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): Wiltshire leads the world in agritech—the farming processes that increase productivity and will feed the world's growing population, without wrecking the environment. I welcome what the Government have done in this space, particularly in gene editing, which is only possible because of Brexit. Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge the work of Wiltshire farmers and tech entrepreneurs, particularly James Dyson, although there are many more? Does he agree with me that this is one of the key opportunities for our country to become a high-wage, high-skill, high-tech economy?

The Prime Minister: When it comes to agritech, we are among the best in the world, with fantastic research bodies, businesses and pioneering farmers and growers. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all of them. They are getting our support through the £270 million farming innovation programme and, as he rightly mentioned, we are seizing the opportunities from our exit from the EU, including through our plans to develop gene-edited crops that are resistant to drought and flooding more quickly. That will drive up growth and productivity, and create jobs.

Q6. [905571] **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Just to recap, during this Parliament we have had one Tory Prime Minister who turned out to be a proven liar, and a second Tory Prime Minister who was outlasted by a lettuce. After this week's pathetic no-show by the Prime Minister, what one word would he use to describe himself? Might it be "weak"?

The Prime Minister: What is weak is those in the party opposite being unable to stand up to the people who fund them and stand behind hard-working families in this country.

Q14. [905579] **Kate Kniveton** (Burton) (Con): I welcome the steps the Prime Minister is taking to stop illegal, dangerous and unnecessary small boat crossings, which are overwhelming our asylum system, but I have to raise significant concerns about a recent decision to stand up a third hotel in Burton, as well as increase capacity at another hotel by 64%. That will have a serious knock-on effect on our response to homelessness and rough sleeping, as well as causing challenges for wider public services in east Staffordshire. What further support can the Prime Minister provide local authorities in east Staffordshire to deal with these urgent concerns?

The Prime Minister: That is why we need to stop the boats so that we can relieve the unsustainable pressure on our asylum system and accommodation, which is costing British taxpayers over £3 billion a year. Our new Bill will ensure that anyone arriving illegally will be detained and swiftly removed, but in the meantime we will take action to address the unacceptable cost of housing migrants in hotels. We recognise the pressure

this places on local areas. That is why the Government are providing further dispersal financial support, but I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting with the Immigration Minister to discuss her specific local concerns.

Q8. [905573] **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust described the Government's recent decision to delay the rebuilding of Charing Cross, Hammersmith and St Mary's Hospitals as

"hugely damaging for the health and healthcare of hundreds of thousands of people."

Will the Prime Minister keep the promise made to me by his predecessor one year ago from that Dispatch Box and guarantee completion of new hospitals on those sites by 2030?

The Prime Minister: The Government remain committed to two new hospital schemes for Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust at Hammersmith Hospital and Charing Cross Hospital, and for St Mary's Hospital as part of the new hospital programme. We have expanded the programme, as the hon. Gentleman knows, to include buildings with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and we need to address those as a priority for the safety of staff and patients. However, we still expect the majority of schemes in cohort 4 to be in construction before 2030. I know that the Department will continue to keep him updated on progress.

Q15. [905580] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The United Kingdom sanctioned Iran for promoting terrorism, destabilising the middle east, supplying weapons to our enemies and, of course, the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Within the past few weeks, the journalist, David Rose, has reported in the *Jewish Chronicle* that British universities have been undertaking research in collaboration with Iranian researchers and universities into areas of potential military applications, including drone technology, fighter jets, battlefield armour and laser communication. Will the Prime Minister initiate an investigation into this and take action to stop the failure of our sanctions regime before it does any more harm to the national interest of the United Kingdom and our allies?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this important topic. We take all allegations of breaches of export control seriously. My understanding is that officials in the Department for Business and Trade are currently investigating the allegations made in the recent press article cited. We will not accept collaborations that compromise our national security. That is why we have made our systems more robust, including expanding the scope of the Academic Technology Approval Scheme to protect UK research from ever-changing global threats, but my right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that and he has my assurance that we will keep on it.

Q12. [905577] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Could any of the material that the Prime Minister's Government are trying to avoid giving to the covid inquiry cover his tenure as Chancellor and his eat out to help out policy?

The Prime Minister: As I have said previously, it is right that we learn the lessons from covid so that we can be better prepared for the future. That is why the Government have co-operated with the inquiry in a spirit of transparency and candour, handing over more than 55,000 documents so far. There is a very specific point of disagreement, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, and it is the subject now of legal proceedings, so I am not able to comment further.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Despite being world leaders in motorsport, the UK has not hosted a round of the World Rally Championship since 2019. We now have an opportunity to host a round in Northern Ireland next year to bring in in excess of £100 million to the economy, but to make that happen the promoters need Government underwriting of approximately £1 million. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this event simply must go ahead and will he instruct the relevant Departments to work with the motorsport all-party parliamentary group, Motorsport UK and the promoters to make it happen?

The Prime Minister: Northern Ireland is a fantastic place to host international events. I am delighted that my hon. Friend shares my enthusiasm for driving forward prosperity in Northern Ireland. However, with tourism being devolved in Northern Ireland, I suggest that he engages with Tourism NI on this potential event, and I look forward to hearing how he gets on.

Q13. [905578] **Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** The UK Government and His Majesty's Loyal Opposition refuse to face up to the bleak reality that Brexit is causing weaker growth and soaring inflation, according to the former Governor of the Bank of England. The LSE says that EU trade barriers have added, on average, £250 to household food bills, and Scots fishing chiefs are saying that they were sold down the river and scoff at the talk of treaty renegotiation as just spin. With such colossal failures stacking up and the former PM, who played a leading role in the leave campaign, finally exposed as a serial liar, will the current PM apologise to my constituents in Edinburgh North and Leith?

The Prime Minister: I just point out to the hon. Lady, as she is going on about the EU and us leaving it, that we have actually grown faster than France and Italy since we left the single market, our exports have grown by 25% just since covid and, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) earlier, every single international organisation has upgraded its forecast for UK economic growth. That is because we have the right priorities to drive growth, create jobs and spread opportunity in every part of our United Kingdom.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Hospices across the UK provide not only quality, but compassionate care to people at the end of their lives, including Mountbatten

hospice in my constituency, which looked after my office manager Sue Hall when she passed away in March. That is why I and her son-in-law, Miles Rogers, will be skydiving to raise money on Saturday. We have raised £6,000 so far. The Prime Minister should feel free to donate to the campaign, but will he send his best wishes to all hospice workers across the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in wishing Miles good luck this weekend as he raises money, and in paying tribute to all our incredible hospice volunteers and workers across the country. They do a fantastic job in all our constituencies at a very difficult time in families' lives, and we all owe them an enormous amount of thanks.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Half of us, sadly, will get cancer at some point during our lives and half of those with cancer will need radiotherapy treatment, yet 3.5 million people in this country live in radiotherapy deserts where they do not have close access to that treatment. That includes my constituency, where my constituents living in Westmorland have to take three-hour round trips every day to get lifesaving treatment. Will the Prime Minister back our proposal for a satellite radiotherapy unit at Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal, and support all the other Members living in radiotherapy deserts to bring radiotherapy close to their communities, too?

The Prime Minister: Like the hon. Gentleman, I know that access to healthcare in rural areas is particularly important, given the distances that our rural constituents have to drive. That is why we remain committed to expanding the range of diagnostic services that are available through our proposal to roll out community diagnostic centres. The record-breaking capital budget that we have in the NHS is delivering that. I look forward to the Department's engaging with him on his plans for his local area.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): The Bank of England is raising interest rates to try to stem spending and therefore preventing inflation from being baked into the economy. The same cannot be said for those with savings accounts. Would it not be good for people to be encouraged and incentivised to save more? Will my right hon. Friend and the Chancellor talk to the industry and encourage them or impel them to give a good deal to savers too?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. It is vital that savers are treated fairly and that markets function as competitively as we would expect them to. I am pleased to tell her that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is meeting the industry and the banks this Friday to discuss the matter she has raised, and will make sure that she and everyone else gets an update after that.

Point of Order

12.33 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, on 24 May, at Prime Minister's questions, I asked the Prime Minister why he was forcing the British public to pay the legal bill for Boris Johnson for the Privileges Committee, which is a parliamentary Committee of this House. In his reply, the Prime Minister said there was a convention that former Ministers or Ministers would have the legal bill covered in scenarios requiring lawyers such as public inquiries—Iraq, the contaminated blood scandal and other such inquiries. What the Prime Minister did was to suggest that the precedent was already set. It is not. It transpires, following several questions to the Cabinet Office, that it cannot give me a single example of a Minister or former Minister having their legal bills covered for a parliamentary inquiry. He has effectively extended the precedent.

How do we get the Prime Minister to come back to the Dispatch Box, apologise and correct the record? One would have thought, given the events of recent days, that he would be keen to get back here to set the record straight.

Mr Speaker: May I say first that I am very grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order? He will have heard me say before that, if Ministers and others have different interpretations of events, it is not for the Chair to determine which is correct. That said—and I stress this—if a mistake has been made by a Minister, they should, of course, correct the record. What I do know very well is that, although the hon. Member has raised it here, this is certainly not the end of it. He will continue to pursue different avenues. I am sure that he will use the good offices and advice of the Table Office until he gets an answer—it may not be what he wants, but I am sure that he will get an answer. He has put his concern on the record for us all to know.

Karl Turner: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

BILL PRESENTED

HIGHER EDUCATION (DUTY OF CARE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Munira Wilson, Wera Hobhouse and Debbie Abrahams, presented a Bill to provide that higher education institutions have a duty of care for their students; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 331).

Banking and Postal Services (Rural Areas)

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

12.36 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to set minimum service standards for the provision of banking and postal services in rural areas, including for the provision of services through physical outlets; and for connected purposes.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss an issue that impacts on a significant portion of our population but too often falls by the wayside. I will shine a light on the unique challenges faced by our rural communities because of the withdrawal of vital services such as bank branches and post offices.

In a world hurtling towards digitalisation, we sometimes forget that not every part of our society can adapt to that transition equally. For some in rural communities, the cloud is more likely to provide rain than a platform for accessing essential services. For many in rural areas, banks and post offices offer more than just financial transactions or mail delivery points: they are lifelines and community hubs that connect individuals to the wider social and economic network. The withdrawal of those services is more than an inconvenience; it is a disruption that risks leaving our rural communities high and dry.

Rural communities form the bedrock of Scotland, and I am sure others will agree that it is the same for their countries, too. Such communities safeguard our natural resources, produce our food and contribute significantly to our cultural heritage, yet they face increasing marginalisation and neglect. The closure of bank branches and post offices owing to economic shifts and technological advancements has left our rural residents feeling overlooked and isolated. When they were needed to save the banks, they were told in countless adverts that the banks would support their communities, but village by village, town by town, those promises have vanished as corporate priorities have shifted. Similarly, the failure to pay postmasters properly, and the steady withdrawal of government services, has left many local post offices simply unsustainable and struggling. Let us not forget the damage that the Horizon scandal did to the post office network.

For our communities, this issue transcends financial and communication inconveniences. For our older citizens, those services might be their only way of managing finances or staying connected with loved ones. Local businesses rely on those outlets for transactions and receiving supplies. The digital alternatives, which are often considered commonplace in urban areas, are inaccessible because of inadequate internet connectivity or a lack of digital literacy. After all, if an Amazon customer in London cannot find a working Evri return point after trying four different locations, what chance do those living in rural areas have?

How do we address this problem? What can we do to ensure our march towards progress does not sideline these vital communities? The Bill proposes the implementation of legislation to safeguard these physical services in our rural areas. The legislation would mandate

[Drew Hendry]

a minimum number of physical branches per population, ensuring rural communities have access to these crucial services. We must certainly invest in improving digital infrastructure and digital literacy programmes, but the physical presence of these services is indispensable. They provide a sense of community and reassurance that digital platforms simply cannot replicate.

Incentives for banks and institutions to maintain these services in rural areas could be introduced, such as tax breaks or shared service models where multiple providers share a facility to lower operational costs. Yet while banking hubs may offer a solution to some, progress on these is glacial at best. With no legislation to back a community right to back this up, there is no meaningful incentive to provide these everywhere that they are needed.

Of course, we should also consider innovative delivery models such as mobile bank branches or post office vans to ensure accessibility for all, particularly those who might find travel difficult, but these models should supplement, not replace, physical services, and they must be designed to foster rural resilience. Services for rural areas must be designed to succeed, not to fail. That is why rural communities require a legal obligation for these services. The ongoing withdrawal of essential services from our rural communities is not just an issue: it is a crisis.

We must ensure that our digital transition is inclusive, compassionate and considerate of all of our citizens regardless of their location. Progress should never come at the expense of leaving anyone behind. Our rural communities deserve the right to access the same services and facilities as urban communities, and legislation to protect these services gives voice to the needs and rights of our rural communities.

The role of rural communities in our nation is indispensable, preserving our environment, ensuring food security and maintaining cultural heritage, yet these communities are often sidelined, left grappling with dwindling essential services. Bank branches and post offices are not mere conveniences: they are essential lifelines connecting them to the broader social and economic network of our country.

The UK Government's inaction in addressing these issues has left our rural communities floundering. The onus lies here in Westminster where the power has been retained. The UK Government are the only ones currently capable of taking action, yet concrete measures to halt the decline of these essential services have been sorely

lacking. Without intervention, the digital divide will continue to widen and our rural communities will face increasing marginalisation. It is crucial that the UK Government take proactive steps to tackle this issue, or devolve the power to Scotland for us to do so ourselves.

In Scotland, especially after Brexit, our rural communities are experiencing population decline. Young people are leaving to seek new opportunities elsewhere without the new blood we previously had coming in, leaving behind an ageing population. This demographic shift poses its own challenges, from a dwindling workforce to added strains on services for the elderly. The very fabric of these communities—the traditions and practices preserved over generations—are consequently at threat.

Immigration can play a significant role here: by welcoming new Scots from overseas into these areas, we introduce new residents eager to contribute to the local economy and community, but we must also strive to create inclusive, welcoming communities that can support that necessary growth and sustainability of these towns and villages. With independence, we can do that ourselves, but action is needed now.

The survival and prosperity of our rural communities, particularly in Scotland, requires a multipronged approach. The protection of essential services, investment in infrastructure, and the creation of opportunities are all threads in this intricate tapestry. The fate of our rural communities is intrinsically linked with that of our nations. By ensuring their survival and growth, we create a resilient and diverse Scotland rich in tradition and culture and natural resources.

This could be true for the other nations of the UK as well. Let us not forget that progress is not solely about thriving cities and technological innovations; it is also about our villages, towns and farmland, and the people who call those places home. The strength of our nations lies in the unity and welfare of all our communities, both rural and urban. Let us ensure that we uphold that strength by safeguarding the services that our rural communities depend on.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Drew Hendry, Brendan O'Hara, Ben Lake, Marion Fellows, Allan Dorans, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Richard Thomson, Patricia Gibson, David Linden, Dr Philippa Whitford, Owen Thomson and Alan Brown present the Bill.

Drew Hendry accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 332).

Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that none of the Lords amendments engages Commons financial privilege.

Schedule

MINIMUM SERVICE LEVELS FOR CERTAIN STRIKES

12.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2B.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendment 4B, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 5B, 5C and 5D, and Government motion to disagree.

Kevin Hollinrake: There are three motions before the House. I am grateful for the fact that both Houses have reached agreement on the appropriate territorial application of the Bill, but I regret that we have not yet reached agreement on some remaining issues. I must once again urge the House to disagree with the Lords amendments before us. Again, the Bill has been amended in ways that would delay implementation or seriously limit the operation of minimum service levels. That would mean that we could not provide the all-important balance between the ability of unions and their members to strike and the ability of the wider public to access, during periods of strike action, the key services that our country needs. I will briefly summarise for the House the reasons why the amendments remain unacceptable to the House.

First, through Lords amendment 2B, the noble Lords seek to introduce additional consultation requirements and new parliamentary scrutiny processes. We recognise the importance of ensuring that the public, employers, employees, trade unions and their members are all able to participate in setting minimum service levels. That is why we ran consultations on applying MSLs to ambulance, fire, and passenger rail services on that basis. The Government maintain that the Bill enables the appropriate consultation to take place, and we are confident that the affirmative procedure will allow Parliament to conduct proper scrutiny of secondary legislation.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Proposed new section 234F of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, inserted by the schedule, says,

“the Secretary of State must consult such persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.”

Does that not mean that there is no obligation to consult at all? The Secretary of State can decide that no one needs to be consulted. Does that not show the importance of the Lords amendment?

Kevin Hollinrake: If there is anybody whom the hon. Gentleman thinks was not able to contribute to the consultation, I ask him to please let me know, but it was

open to anybody to make a submission to the consultation, and all those submissions will be properly assessed by Ministers and officials.

I turn now to the Lords amendments that would restrict the ways in which we can ensure that minimum service levels are achieved, Lords amendment 4B still leaves employers powerless to manage instances of non-compliance when workers strike contrary to being named on a work notice.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Could the Minister set out the timescale for the consultation and how he intends to carry it out?

Kevin Hollinrake: As the hon. Lady may know, our initial consultations closed around the middle of May—9 May to 11 May. Those submissions will now be considered, and we will report back to the House accordingly.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): To be absolutely clear, Lords amendment 2B addresses the concerns that many of us in this place have about the right to strike and how it will be protected. How are the Government going to ensure that these minimum service levels are fair and balanced and do not affect that right to strike?

Kevin Hollinrake: We are very clear that we want to maintain the right to strike. Previous derogations, which we very much appreciate, have not interfered with people making their views known through industrial action. We do not expect that situation to change. As I say, the consultation ran for a good period of time, and the submissions are now being considered. Of course, we want to make sure that people have been properly consulted and that the regulations are fit for purpose.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Kevin Hollinrake: I will make a little progress, but I will make sure that both the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) get a chance to make their points.

The Bill takes the same approach as to any other strike action that is not protected under existing legislation. Lords amendment 5B may suggest that the other place accepts that trade unions should have a role to play in ensuring that minimum service levels are met, but in reality under, that amendment, whether and how the unions encouraged their members to comply with work notices would be at their discretion. Unions would be able to induce people to strike as normal and take steps to undermine the achievement of minimum service levels. That is clearly directly counter to the objectives of the policy.

Alan Brown: The Minister has said that the consultation has already closed, but the whole point of the Lords amendment is to oblige the Government to consult on draft regulations when they bring them forward and to publish impact assessments. If the consultation has already closed, that proves that there will be no transparency going forward, does it not?

Kevin Hollinrake: Not at all. There will be further scrutiny of the minimum service levels when they are brought forward, in the usual way that legislation passes through this House. Those regulations will be considered by both Houses.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): In response to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), the Minister indicated that the Government agree with the right to strike and want to protect it. However, rejecting Lords amendment 4B does not do that, because the consequence would be that employers would have the right to dismiss a worker taking part in industrial action, with no recourse to a tribunal. How does that protect the right to strike action?

Kevin Hollinrake: Because it requires people who are named in a work notice to turn up for work, which is common in other jurisdictions that use minimum service levels in order to ensure that the public can go about their daily lives and businesses continue to operate. It does not interfere with that ability.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Hollinrake: I will give way for the final time.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is an honourable person, and I know that he understands the issues and where we are coming from. Decent, ordinary people vote to strike only when they feel voiceless and invisible to management. Government and big business can prevent strikes by listening and acting before that stage is reached, but the right to strike must always be a last-ditch possibility, and those people must reserve that right. Does the Minister understand that and agree with it?

Kevin Hollinrake: As always, I entirely agree with all the points that the hon. Gentleman has made. Of course strikes should be a last resort, and workers should be able to take industrial action when they feel their voices are not being heard. I do not think there is anything in the Bill that cuts across that. Hon. Members may disagree, but that is our position, and it is a position we have maintained throughout the passage of the Bill.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Hollinrake: No, I have given way twice to the hon. Gentleman.

The Government maintain that there must be a responsibility for unions to ensure that their members comply. Without that, and without any incentives for employees to attend work on a strike day when identified in a work notice, the effectiveness of the legislation will be severely undermined. Unfortunately, I do not consider that these amendments are a meaningful attempt to reach agreement. I fear that we are having a somewhat repetitive debate that is delaying us getting on with the important business of minimising disruption to the public during periods of strike action, and I encourage this elected House to disagree with the amendments.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Today, we consider a number of Lords amendments that will go some way towards making the Bill slightly less draconian than it currently is, but will not make it a Bill that we can ultimately support. I start by paying tribute to Members in the other place who have done their best to ameliorate the Bill with the sensible amendments that we are considering, and which we will be supporting. What those Members understand is that the Bill is the act of a weak Government who have lost the authority and the will to govern for everyone; a Government who prefer legislation to negotiation, diversion to resolution, and confrontation to consultation. How Ministers have the gall to come to the Dispatch Box and talk about the importance of minimum service levels when we have seen the decimation of our public services under this Government—with a record 7.4 million patients left on waiting lists, record teacher vacancies, and ever-increasing response times to calls to the police—is beyond me.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making excellent points. I have heard from doctors in Wirral West who firmly believe that the Bill represents an intrusion on legitimate trade union activities, undermines workers' rights to representation, and would leave unions unable to effectively represent their members. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I do agree with those doctors. I will go on to explain why the Bill is an attack on basic freedoms and liberties that I thought this country held dear.

Turning first to Lords amendment 2B, as we know, the Bill presents the Secretary of State with huge, unchecked powers, throwing scrutiny and democracy out of the window. We think it is entirely reasonable that if a Secretary of State wants the power to set, impose and police minimum service levels, they should be accountable for the impact of those powers and able to demonstrate what their impact will be. Requiring them to conduct a proper impact assessment on the use of those powers and hold a consultation on any specific proposals they have could be helpful to a Secretary of State, because they cannot possibly know how every nook and cranny of any particular sector operates and what is needed to deliver a minimum service level—assuming they can define what one is.

If the Government think that it is such a wonderful idea to introduce minimum service levels in the sectors covered by the Bill, they should not fear scrutiny of their proposals, consultation with those directly affected, or challenges to their assumptions. My fear is that the Government fear all of those things. When the Regulatory Policy Committee described the Bill as “not fit for purpose”, one would have hoped that any sensible and rational Government would put a little bit of effort into talking to people to make sure that their own Bill had even a remote chance of working, but I suspect that—like so many things that we hear from this Government—they do not look beyond the easy headline and do not think through the consequences of their actions.

I will turn briefly to Lords amendment 5B, which attempts to deal with what is essentially a full-blown attack on the independence of trade unions and their

members. I know that the Government have been raising the bar ever higher on the number of members required to vote in favour of industrial action. However, even they must see that putting a requirement on a trade union to take action to stop some of its members from participating in industrial action once they have voted in favour of it—as proposed new section 234E of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 would do—undermines the very essence of what a trade union stands for.

We have never had an adequate explanation of what reasonable steps a union is expected to take in those circumstances. The Minister previously told us that it would be a matter for the courts to determine, but that represents an abject failure by the Government to do their job. Are they really saying to trade unions that they can face damages of up to £1 million if they fail to comply with the Bill, but that they will have to wait for a court to decide what they need to do to avoid that liability? That is ludicrous, dangerous, and a potentially disastrous situation for any trade union to be in. This amendment removes Government interference in lawfully and democratically made decisions by an independent non-governmental organisation, and removes the completely disproportionate risk that trade unions face if they fail to adhere to the undemocratic, unspecified and unconscionable requirements of this provision.

1 pm

Rachael Maskell: I should refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the jurisdiction of trade unions. I have said this in the House before, but Government Members just do not seem to understand it. It is the members of the trade union who determine what happens within a trade union—it is not a general secretary or even an executive, but the members—so how are they, as individual members, going to instruct workers to attend work?

Justin Madders: That is really a question for the Minister, and one that I think the Government have failed to answer adequately. I think the point my hon. Friend makes is a good one. When Conservative Members traduce the union barons, they actually traduce every single member of the trade union who has voted in support of industrial action, and I am afraid that that is no way for any Government to operate.

I would ask Conservative Members, not that there are many here, to consider what the Bill actually means. Representatives of trade unions will be required to encourage, cajole, advise, pressurise or even demand that their members cross a picket line. They will be asking trade unions to actively go against the very thing they were set up to do. I would say that it is a bit like asking a Conservative MP to vote in support of higher taxes, but I guess that, with the highest tax burden in over half a century, we may have to drop that particular analogy.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. I am a proud trade unionist, but I am also a former schoolteacher. I am concerned not only about the administrative burden that this requirement

for employers to serve work notices on staff will create, but about the risk of damaging relationships within the workplace. He is talking about people being required to cross picket lines, and that would most definitely be a case in point. I am very concerned, because schools and hospitals in particular operate through staff collaborating with each other, and risking those relationships is a very dangerous thing to do.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why so many employer organisations are also against this Bill, because they understand what it will do for industrial relations: it will make them worse, not better. I would ask Conservative Members to think carefully about what they are asking trade unionists to do, which is to go against deeply held, genuine and sincere beliefs—

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I intervene to give my hon. Friend a chance to get his throat in order. Does he agree with me that, first and foremost, the Prime Minister withdrew his Labour on Monday with the intention of not showing leadership, which is a remarkable feat on the part of a Prime Minister? Does my hon. Friend agree that these are the death throes of a Government who have really run out of steam? They are trying to blame everybody else for what is going wrong. They are going for a cheap headline and have created this piece of legislation, which is anti-trade union and anti-democratic, to try to throw the blame on to the trade unions and workers, and away from where it really lies—with this Government.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention—I think my voice has returned, thankfully—and he is absolutely right. This Bill is counterproductive because ultimately it will not quell the concerns of many people in those sectors that have taken industrial action. Taking away the right to strike will not take away people's concerns; it will just make them worse, and it will prolong anxiety, concern and discord.

Again, I ask Conservative Members to think about what they are asking trade unions to do—to go against deeply held, genuine and sincere beliefs. Whether or not they agree with the right to strike, do they really think in all conscience that this is something that sits comfortably with notions of dignity, respect and freedom? How would they feel if they were compelled to take actions in direct contravention of their own values?

Finally, I turn to Lords amendment 4B. It attempts to tackle the pernicious heart of this Bill, which seeks to destroy the basic freedoms that the trade union and Labour movement have fought to secure over the course of history. From the Chartists to the founding of the TUC, the trade unionists at Taff Vale and the formation of the Labour Representation Committee, the working people of this country have faced a long and arduous struggle to improve their working conditions, and fundamental to that struggle has been the right to withdraw labour. When Conservative Members inevitably vote down this amendment, they are saying to their constituents—the teachers, doctors, nurses, bus drivers and train drivers—that their voice does not matter and that, should they dare to withdraw their labour in search of better terms and conditions, they do so at their own risk.

Chris Stephens: The shadow Minister is being very generous in taking interventions. The heart of the Lords amendment is to protect workers who have been dismissed so that they have recourse to a tribunal. That is a fundamental human right, is it not?

Justin Madders: One would have thought so, and that is probably why the Equality and Human Rights Commission has expressed great alarm at this Bill. If the Government want to give themselves the power to threaten every firefighter, every teaching assistant and every paramedic with the sack when they exercise their democratic right to withhold their labour, they should think very carefully about what they do with that power, because in a free society no Minister should hold that power—not that Ministers seem to understand what this Bill actually does, because the Minister said last time:

“The reality is that nobody will be sacked as a result of this legislation.”—[*Official Report*, 22 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 103.]

I know that the Government chose to bypass the normal line-by-line consideration of this Bill, but one would have hoped that the Minister had read as far as the schedule, because it does actually contain the power to sack people for going on strike.

Even if the Government do not understand the powers they are giving themselves under the Bill, they ought to understand the principle of the withdrawal of labour in the event of a dispute. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) has mentioned, many Conservative Members withdrew their labour the other night. In fact, 200 of them had no difficulty in doing so. Indeed, former Prime Minister Johnson withdrew his labour after he disagreed with the report from the Privileges Committee. So they should understand that the principle of people withdrawing their labour is an important one. It is a basic and fundamental right that every one of our citizens should enjoy in a free and democratic society. We are not serfs required to provide toil to the lord of the manor or conscripts engaged in a war against an invading force; we are citizens of this country, and in a free country the right to withdraw labour should be protected and respected.

Even if Conservative Members believe that the requirement to send someone into work against their will is somehow consistent with a free and democratic society, they should at least consider the fact that the Bill as it stands means an employee can be sacked for failing to comply with a work notice, even if they say they have not received it. Yes, someone can be sacked for not complying with a work notice without any challenge to it legally, and they can also be sacked for not complying with it even if they have never seen it. How is that justice, how is that reasonable and how is that good industrial relations? It is a recipe for injustice, for toxicity and for abuse by employers who want to get rid of the most troublesome employees.

I will not list all the organisations that have condemned this Bill, but two of the main employers in the key rail and health sectors have called this out for what it is, because they know that rather than resolve industrial disputes, this Bill will prolong them. They know that the kind of restrictions this Bill places on people are anti-democratic and not in the best traditions of this country. It is no wonder that even members of the Cabinet have criticised this Bill. Indeed, this week we had the shameful news that the United Nations, through

the International Labour Organisation, has called on the Government to respect international law, such is the threat that this Bill poses to it. No, we cannot accept this tawdry, vindictive, unworkable disgrace of a Bill. This Bill attacks the people who keep this country going, and the sooner the Government realise that the politics of division will not work, the better.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alan Brown: I want to start by simultaneously condemning and praising the Lords, because although I still disagree with the premise of unelected peers for life, I respect the work ethic of some of those who have been trying to improve this God-awful Bill. It also shows that, while the Tories can stuff the place with their cronies and donors, the issue with cronies and donors is that they cannot be bothered to turn up, do their work and vote accordingly, as in the case of Baroness Mone, who is absent after pocketing millions of pounds for selling dodgy personal protective equipment to the NHS. On the Lords as an institution, we have a perfect illustration of the Labour leader's continued flip-flopping. Overnight he has gone from wanting to abolish the Lords to now planning to stuff it full of Labour peers when he gets into government. It is pretty shameful.

I am disappointed that the Lords did not hold out on an amendment to restrict the Bill's extent to England only, which would recognise the position of the devolved Governments.

I commend the Lords in their consistency on other matters pertaining to the Bill. Lords amendment 2B would require the Government first to publish draft regulations, and then to undertake impact assessments on their effects and to consult with representatives of trade unions and employees. That is hardly an onerous request—in fact, it is just putting in place basic transparency. Throughout the Bill's passage, the Tories have been eager to tell us that it is about health and safety, minimum service levels and allowing the public to get to work. If that is the Bill's real intent, and it is not a draconian attack on the rights of workers to strike, surely the Government should be willing to comply with the requirements of Lords amendment 2B.

Paragraph (c) of the amendment perfectly encapsulates the rhetoric of the Tory Government about balancing the impact of regulations on the general public with complying with workers' rights to strike. Given all the quotes and speeches from Tory Ministers and Back Benchers, surely they should be content with the amendment and be confident that they can comply with it and set out the aims of any draft legislation, allowing the public to understand its intent and impact. If the Government were true to their stated aims, the amendment could mean them backing trade unions into a corner with transparency. At a stroke, the amendment would take away claim and counter-claim on the impacts of any regulations, as the impact assessments and consultations would be crystal clear to everyone involved. What is it that the Government are objecting to, because the Minister certainly did not make that clear earlier? The Minister said that the consultation is already closed, which means there is no transparency going forward.

In voting to disagree with the previous Lords amendments, the Government said that it was because the Bill already contains adequate consultation requirements.

I have already illustrated that the Government are completely at it with that statement. If we look at proposed new section 234F of the 1992 Act, the Secretary of State is required only to consult such persons that he or she considers “appropriate”. That clearly leaves the door open to consult nobody at all.

Subsection (5) of proposed new section 234F advocates that any consultation requirements can be satisfied before the passing of the Bill. How is that even logical? According to the Government, adequate provision takes the form of consulting who they decide they want to consult, and in the absence of any doubt, any past consultation, past Government rhetoric or past announcements will count as satisfying these non-consult requirements. That is certainly a much easier pathway for the Government than having to bother to undertake impact assessments, proper consultation and parliamentary scrutiny in the form of a Joint Committee to review these impact assessments. The reality is that, with Lords amendment 2B, Parliament has a choice to take control or to cede unlimited powers to a Secretary of State.

Turning to Lords amendment 4B, I refer to the Government’s response to Lords amendment 4, which shows their real intent. They have said that the reason for objecting to Lords amendment 4 is

“in order for the legislation to be effective, it is necessary for there to be consequences for an employee who fails to comply with a work notice.”

The Government rationale is clear that the legislation is intended to be the “sack the workers, sack the nurses, sack the doctors and sack the train drivers Bill”, plain and simple. Forget the pretence that this legislation brings the UK into line with other countries that the Government keep telling us have minimum service levels legislation on the right to strike, because this legislation brings the UK into line not with other democracies, but with Russia and Hungary.

Lords amendment 4B provides some protection for workers—protection from malicious employers and protection for individual workers and, in particular, union representatives to stop them being targeted by employers. Surely the Government must agree with proposed new subsection (1) under Lords amendment 4B that a person is not subject to a work notice if they have not received it. This Government demand that people prove who they are before they can exercise their right to vote, but at the same time they seem to believe that a worker can be sacked for not complying with a work notice they have not actually received. It is preposterous. Proposed new subsection (2) confirms that the employer has to prove that the work order was served and received in compliance with subsection (1). Any decent employer would do that anyway, but it makes sense for an employer to have to prove that to ensure no unfair dismissal claims. Otherwise, I return to the point that the sacking of workers is clearly a key outcome and sanction that this Government intend.

No longer is there any need for illegal secret blacklisting, because all employers now have to do is the sack awkward squads for not complying with notices they did not receive. That is how open to abuse the legislation is in its current form, and it is outrageous that the Government are moving against Lords amendment 4B. They are bringing in legislation to make it easier to sack workers

when we do not have enough workers to fill vacancies. It is truly perverse that the Government are sticking with such draconian legislation to make it easier to sack key workers.

1.15 pm

Lords amendments 5B, 5C and 5D attempt to provide some protection for the unions. It is crystal clear that the Government are trying to break the unions by making them agents of employers to make employees comply with work notices. It is utterly bizarre and outrageous. Unions are formed by worker members and are intended to work on behalf of those members. They cannot and should not be forced to work against the wishes of their own members. Amendment 5B is a much slimmed-down version of Lords amendments 5 to 7, which the Government rejected because they want the legislation to have maximum impact in attacking workers and union rights.

Lords amendment 5B also removes the outrageous aspects of proposed new section 234E of the 1992 Act, which allows employers to recover losses from a union, even if the union has taken the reasonable steps under proposed new subsection (1). Thinking about that subsection alone, unions can be forced to pressure workers to comply with work notices, which is an infringement of the aims of a union. Even if a union caves in and takes reasonable steps, the employer can still sue the union for losses. How can that be right if the union is complying with the legislation?

In summary, the Lords amendments are intended to protect workers from being targeted by work notices; to ensure that an employer serves and proves receipt of a work notice so that workers cannot be sacked for non-compliance with a notice they have not actually received; to make sure that workers are not sacked for non-compliance full stop, which is in line with international norms; and, finally, to prevent unions from being forced to undermine their agreed action on behalf of members. The Government’s intent is clear, so I hope that the Lords stick to these simple, basic protections. Yet again, this Government are going to dismiss basic rights and freedoms out of hand. To call themselves a party of workers is a complete and utter shambles.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I will briefly touch on the reasons why I think it is important that this elected Chamber does the right thing and rejects the Government’s opposition to the message from the other place. I will focus on two amendments—Lords amendments 4B and 5B—that go to the heart of this matter and the heart of this pernicious Bill. They relate to the protection of employees and protections for unions.

The context for this Bill, as have said before, is that we have a Government who are increasingly desperate, draconian and authoritarian. We have seen that in the restrictions on the right to peaceful protest and on people’s ability to cast a vote at elections, and now we see it with this draconian attack on trade unions. How can anybody in this place believe that it is in any way acceptable for workers to be sacked if they fail to cross a picket line in a strike that has been lawfully called and conducted, even under the restrictive and onerous requirements we have in this country? How can that be viewed as acceptable in any way?

[Richard Burgon]

I will conclude on the protection for unions. I do not want to detain the House for long, because a few people want to speak and there is limited time. Lords amendment 5B is fundamentally necessary because the Bill is an unprecedented attack on the role of trade unions in our society and our democracy. The Minister should not need to have it explained to him that trade unions in our society are independent bodies representing workers. Trade unions in our democracy are not meant to be agents of a Government. They are not meant to be agents of an employer. They are not there to ensure that the bidding of a Conservative Government or a big corporation is done. Unless Lords amendment 5B is backed, unions will be required to take steps to persuade their members to cross picket lines and go to work during lawful disputes, or they will face gargantuan fines.

That is truly chilling. It changes the role of trade unions in our society. That is no small matter; it goes to the very core of what the trade union movement in this country has been about for hundreds of years. Failure to support Lords amendment 5B is a failure to stand up for a basic democratic principle. Conservative Members can snigger about it, but there was a time when even Conservative MPs understood the independence of trade unions.

Let us be clear: the Bill allows the Secretary of State or an employer to set minimum service levels and to issue work notices requiring workers to break a picket line and go into work, and unless we back Lords amendment 5B, the Bill will require trade unions to help the Government and the bosses to achieve that aim. It is draconian and anti-democratic. It should be opposed by everybody in the House, whether or not they are a socialist, a trade unionist, a Conservative Member, a Labour Member or a Member of whatever party. It should be opposed by anybody who believes that trade unions in our democracy are there to represent the will of the workers and their members, not that of the Conservative Government or the boss of a company. It is basic democratic stuff that takes us back hundreds of years. The legislation needs to be resisted if we in this place have any respect whatsoever for our democracy and the democratic role of our independent trade unions, which are there to support the workers, not to support the Government or bosses against their will.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): All I can say about legislation like this is that the Government should be careful what they wish for. This is possibly the most significant piece of trade union legislation introduced in this country for a century—right back to Taff Vale—because it strikes at the basic human right to strike. Because it is so significant, wise people in the House of Lords—I rarely say that—have tabled Lords amendment 2B. All they are saying to the Government is, “This is such a significant piece of legislation that you really do need to consult on its detail and implementation.” Without that detailed consultation, I think that a whole range of problems will be exhibited.

I will give one example from my constituency, which I have raised before. How can there be a minimum level of service for air traffic controllers? It does not exist. Therefore, in effect, the legislation means that constituents

who are air traffic controllers will not have the right to strike any more. If that is what the Government want, they should be honest and explicit about that.

Again, the Government should be careful what they wish for. Individuals who are trade unionists will see the Bill as the withdrawal of their right to strike, because at any time an employer will be able to say to that individual, “You have got to work.” If that individual says, “Well, I want to go on strike,” they could be sacked, and they would have no protections left in law. That is an attack on the basic right to strike. What will those individuals do? Large numbers of them will not comply. Then what happens? It will escalate into an even more significant dispute.

The legislation also says to a trade union, completely contrary to three centuries of history, “You will be required to discipline your members for not working.” That basically means that the Government will cause conflict within that particular union, or across the trade union movement overall. Maybe that is what the Government are all about.

When the legislation was brought forward, I thought that the motivation for it was one of two things. The first possibility was that the Government were panicking because of the scale of industrial action taking place, not realising that the vast majority of those industrial disputes would, as always, be settled by negotiation. That is what has happened with most of them. If it was not panic, it was something more sinister. It was Ministers thinking, “Why waste this opportunity? Why not bring forward the legislation that we have wanted for generations to undermine the right to strike?”. If that was the Government’s motivation, I tell them that they cannot implement legislation, no matter how hard they try, if it goes against the grain of our history, which is to respect workers’ rights, because those have been fought for over generations.

The Bill will exacerbate the industrial relations climate in this country. The Government should at least accept the Lords amendments, because they go some way towards establishing a piece of legislation that may be seen as implementable through consultation and through the protection of rights. If they go ahead like this, I can see nothing but further conflict. That will undermine the commitment across the House to try to develop a growth economy again, rather than one held back by disputes, some of which have been engineered in recent times because of the cost of living crisis.

Chris Stephens: I, too, refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. In opening the debate, the Minister skirted round amendment 4B and just said that the Government were opposed to it. A number of us intervened at the time, but I really do think that he needs to consider the Government’s position carefully, particularly on that amendment, because it gets to the heart of the Bill and why so many of us are expressing concerns about the attacks on natural justice and on human rights.

Lords amendment 4B asks that employees receive a work notice in good time. It seems fairly uncontroversial that a work notice should be issued to a worker in good time if they are to attend their work. If we do not accept the amendment, we will end up with a scenario where someone returns to work after a day of industrial action and is told they are being dismissed with no

evidence whatsoever that they have been given a work notice. Of course, the Government do not want to give the responsibility for the work notice to the employer, so the employer will have no obligation at all to serve an employee with a work notice, but they could dismiss them the very next day after industrial action.

Let me emphasise that the employee would have no recourse to an employment tribunal. Surely it is a fundamental human right, and fundamental to natural justice, that if a worker is dismissed, they have recourse to a tribunal to challenge that decision. That, to me, seems fairly self-evident and obvious, but the Government are allowing a situation where rogue employers will be able to dismiss a worker for taking part in industrial action with no recourse to a tribunal, and they will not need to evidence the fact that that worker was served with a work notice.

The Government find themselves in a preposterous situation by opposing Lords amendment 4B, so I hope that the Minister will be able to answer some of these questions. Is it really the Government's position, as I have outlined, that it is okay for an employer to dismiss those on strike and that they will not need to provide evidence that the employee was obliged to go into work? It is ludicrous.

Rachael Maskell: While the Government clearly do not want workers to have access to justice through the employment tribunal, of course those workers' human rights will have been infringed, so will they not have access to other courts to challenge this egregious legislation?

Chris Stephens: Hopefully the Minister will answer that question.

The Minister did say in answer to my intervention that it happens in other countries. Yes, it happens in Russia and Hungary. Are Government Members really going to justify the Bill by saying, "It happens in other countries like Hungary and Russia"? Is that the Government's example? Let me name another country—Italy, where workers can be disciplined but short of dismissal. But the Government do not want to follow the Italian model; they want to be in line with Hungary and Russia. It is incredible that the Government have found themselves in that position.

1.30 pm

I hope that the Lords hold firm if the amendments are rejected. Amendment 4B is a fundamental principle of natural justice, and I hope the Minister will explain why he is against that principle for workers in this country.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank Members for their contributions. It is fair to say that we will have to agree to disagree. We believe that this legislation is a proportionate response that gives the Government the power to ensure a safe level of service in areas such as health, transport and border security, so that people's lives are not put at risk and they can work, access healthcare and safely go about their daily lives.

I will touch on one or two points raised by right hon. and hon. Members. I have a great deal of time for the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), though perhaps we do not agree so much in this debate. He asked who we

govern on behalf of, and he listed very important people in our society—our nurses, train drivers and border security officers. But is he properly representing the many other stakeholders in this debate, such as pub landlords, restaurateurs, hoteliers and people seeking urgent medical treatment or trying to get to work or to see family? There have been 600,000 cancelled appointments as a result of the strikes of recent months and £3.2 billion of economic detriment—much of that to our restaurateurs, hoteliers and pub owners. It is important that their voices are heard, too.

Justin Madders: I hear what the Minister is saying, but that is an argument to ban strikes altogether. Is that not what he is doing?

Kevin Hollinrake: We have been clear that there is a balance between people being able to seek industrial action and being able to go about their daily lives. That is the balance that we are trying to strike. He asked if we fear scrutiny; not at all. What we fear is delay. That is what the Opposition parties are trying to bring about: delay in wrecking amendments.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Will the Minister expand on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and give us a list of the people whom he thinks should be able to go on strike? Who are the ones he approves of?

Kevin Hollinrake: Any person who is legislated for in these measures should be able to go on strike, subject to minimum service levels. It is quite clear, and we have been consistent all the way through.

In response to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), our objection to the amendments is the delay that they will cause. We want to ensure that people can go about their daily lives. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) raised some points about reasonable steps. Unions will not somehow have to compel people to go to work; we are asking them to undertake reasonable steps to ensure that people comply with a work notice. In fact, we were willing to set out in the Bill what those reasonable steps would be, but the right hon. Gentleman's counterparts in the other place rejected such measures.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) talked about the independence of unions; of course we respect that. It is true that if a union fails to take reasonable steps, the strike would be unprotected, as it would if the trade union failed to meet other existing requirements in the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, such as balancing requirements. This is not a departure from the existing position.

Alan Brown: The Minister keeps talking about wrecking amendments, but how is obliging an employer to ensure that an employee has received a work notice a wrecking amendment?

Kevin Hollinrake: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to other points in Lords amendment 4B: proposed new section 234CA(4) of the 1992 Act is a wrecking amendment because it says there is no contractual obligation for someone to comply with a work notice. That drives a coach and horses through the Bill.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) talked about how other jurisdictions deal with requiring people to go to work under a work notice. He may be aware that in France, people can be subject to criminal charges if they do not comply with a work notice. These are proportionate measures. We must make the view of the elected House as clear as possible, and avoid any further delay to fulfilling our duty to protect the lives and livelihoods of those we represent.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2B.

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 205.

Division No. 261]

[1.35 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Sir Conor
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Chalk, rh Alex
Chope, Sir Christopher

Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark

Fletcher, Nick
Ford, rh Vicky
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, rh James
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon

Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherylyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Paisley, Ian
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Jeremy
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Mr Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rowley, Lee
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec

Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig

Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Amanda Solloway

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella

Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dixon, Samantha
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Dowd, Peter
Eastwood, Colum
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Flynn, Stephen
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John

Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacAskill, Kenny
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)

Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thomson, Richard
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Williams, Hywel
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Navendu Mishra and
Colleen Fletcher

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 2B disagreed to.

1.48 pm

More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords amendments, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 22 May).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 4B.—(Kevin Hollinrake.)

The House divided: Ayes 277, Noes 209.

Division No. 262]

[1.48 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Collins, Damian
Afriyie, Adam	Courts, Robert
Aldous, Peter	Coutinho, Claire
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Anderson, Lee	Crabb, rh Stephen
Anderson, Stuart	Crosbie, Virginia
Andrew, rh Stuart	Crouch, Tracey
Ansell, Caroline	Daly, James
Argar, rh Edward	Davies, rh David T. C.
Atherton, Sarah	Davies, Gareth
Atkins, Victoria	Davies, Dr James
Bacon, Gareth	Davies, Mims
Bacon, Mr Richard	Davies, Philip
Baillie, Siobhan	Davis, rh Mr David
Baker, Duncan	Davison, Dehenna
Baldwin, Harriett	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Baron, Mr John	Dines, Miss Sarah
Baynes, Simon	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Bell, Aaron	Docherty, Leo
Benton, Scott	Donelan, rh Michelle (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Beresford, Sir Paul	Double, Steve
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Drax, Richard
Blackman, Bob	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Blunt, Crispin	Duddridge, Sir James
Bone, Mr Peter (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Duguid, David
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Bowie, Andrew	Dunne, rh Philip
Bradley, rh Karen	Edwards, Ruth
Brady, Sir Graham	Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Brereton, Jack	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Brine, Steve	Eustice, rh George
Bristow, Paul	Evans, Dr Luke
Britcliffe, Sara	Evennett, rh Sir David
Browne, Anthony	Everitt, Ben
Bruce, Fiona	Fabricant, Michael
Buchan, Felicity	Farris, Laura
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Firth, Anna
Burghart, Alex	Fletcher, Katherine
Burns, rh Sir Conor	Fletcher, Mark
Butler, Rob	Fletcher, Nick
Cairns, rh Alun	Ford, rh Vicky
Carter, Andy	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Cartlidge, James	Frazer, rh Lucy
Cash, Sir William	Freeman, George
Cates, Miriam	French, Mr Louie
Chalk, rh Alex	Fuller, Richard
Chope, Sir Christopher	Fysh, Mr Marcus
Churchill, Jo	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Clark, rh Greg	Gibson, Peter
Clarke, rh Sir Simon	Gideon, Jo
Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Girvan, Paul
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Clarkson, Chris	Gove, rh Michael
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Graham, Richard
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Grant, Mrs Helen
Colburn, Elliot	Gray, James
	Grayling, rh Chris
	Green, Chris

Green, rh Damian	Metcalf, Stephen
Griffith, Andrew	Miller, rh Dame Maria
Grundy, James	Mills, Nigel
Gullis, Jonathan	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Halfon, rh Robert	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Hall, Luke	Moore, Damien
Hammond, Stephen	Moore, Robbie
Hancock, rh Matt	Mordaunt, rh Penny
Harris, Rebecca	Morris, Anne Marie
Harrison, Trudy	Morris, James
Hart, rh Simon	Morrissey, Joy
Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Morton, rh Wendy
Heappey, rh James	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Henderson, Gordon	Mundell, rh David
Henry, Darren	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Higginbotham, Antony	Neill, Sir Robert
Hinds, rh Damian	Nici, Lia
Holden, Mr Richard	Nokes, rh Caroline
Hollinrake, Kevin	O'Brien, Neil
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Offord, Dr Matthew
Holmes, Paul	Paisley, Ian
Howell, Paul	Pawsey, Mark
Huddleston, Nigel	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Hudson, Dr Neil	Penrose, John
Hughes, Eddie	Poulter, Dr Dan
Hunt, Jane	Pow, Rebecca
Hunt, Tom	Prentis, rh Victoria
Jack, rh Mr Alister	Pritchard, rh Mark
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil	Pursglove, Tom
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Quin, rh Jeremy
Jenkinson, Mark	Randall, Tom
Jenkyns, Dame Andrea	Redwood, rh John
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Johnson, Gareth	Richards, Nicola
Johnston, David	Richardson, Angela
Jones, rh Mr David	Roberts, Mr Rob
Jones, Fay	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Jones, rh Mr Marcus	Robinson, Gavin
Jupp, Simon	Robinson, Mary
Kawczynski, Daniel	Rowley, Lee
Kearns, Alicia	Sambrook, Gary
Keegan, rh Gillian	Saxby, Selaine
Knight, rh Sir Greg	Scully, Paul
Kniveton, Kate	Seely, Bob
Kruger, Danny	Selous, Andrew
Latham, Mrs Pauline	Shannon, Jim
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea	Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Levy, Ian	Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Lewer, Andrew	Skidmore, rh Chris
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon	Smith, rh Chloe
Loder, Chris	Smith, Greg
Logan, Mark (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Smith, Henry
Lopez, Julia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Smith, rh Julian
Lord, Mr Jonathan	Smith, Royston
Loughton, Tim	Stafford, Alexander
Mackinlay, Craig	Stephenson, rh Andrew
Mackrory, Cherylyn	Stevenson, Jane
Maclean, Rachel	Stevenson, John
Mak, Alan	Stewart, rh Bob
Malthouse, rh Kit	Stewart, Iain
Mangnall, Anthony	Streeter, Sir Gary
Marson, Julie	Sturdy, Julian
May, rh Mrs Theresa	Sunderland, James
Mayhew, Jerome	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Maynard, Paul	Syms, Sir Robert
McCartney, Jason	Throup, Maggie
McVey, rh Esther	Timpson, Edward
Menzies, Mark	Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Mercer, rh Johnny	Tomlinson, Justin
Merriman, Huw	Tomlinson, Michael
	Tracey, Craig
	Trott, Laura

Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather

Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Amanda Solloway

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha

Debonnaire, Thangam
Dixon, Samantha
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Dowd, Peter
Eastwood, Colum
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian

Law, Chris
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacAskill, Kenny
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess

Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmar, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thomson, Richard
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Williams, Hywel
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Navendu Mishra and
Mary Glindon

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 4B disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 5B, 5C and 5D.—(Kevin Hollinrake.)

The House divided: Ayes 280, Noes 214.

Division No. 263]

[2 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart

Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard

Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Sir Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve

Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David

Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy

Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Mr Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Amanda Solloway and
 Robert Lorgan

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir

Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Dowd, Peter
 Eastwood, Colum
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John

McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Mary Glindon and
Navendu Mishra

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 5B, 5C and 5D disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendment 2B, 4B and 5B, 5C and 5D.

That Kevin Hollinrake, Mike Wood, Alexander Stafford, Jane Stevenson, Justin Madders, Navendu Mishra and Alan Brown be members of the Committee;

That Kevin Hollinrake be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill

Consideration of Lords message

After Clause 16

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

2.12 pm

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 15D.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment 42D, and Government motion to disagree.

The Solicitor General: This House has been asked these questions before and twice this House has said no, with an overwhelming majority. We are asked to consider, for a third time, two amendments, neither of which is radically different from the amendments we have already rejected. It will come as no surprise to anyone in this Chamber that I invite the House, once again, to disagree with the Lords amendments.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the Solicitor General give way?

The Solicitor General: Because the hon. Gentleman asks with a smile every single time, of course I will give way.

Patrick Grady: I congratulate the Solicitor General on his consistency at the Dispatch Box, which was lacking throughout most of the rest of the Bill's progress, as the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), the Labour Front Bencher, said last time we were here. The selection list says:

"Environmental protection; Parliamentary scrutiny

Govt motion to disagree...Govt motion to disagree".

That sums it up, doesn't it? The Government disagree with enhanced environmental protection and they disagree with enhanced parliamentary scrutiny. That was the whole point of Brexit for the Government, wasn't it?

The Solicitor General: I am delighted to have given way to the hon. Gentleman, not least because I like him a lot and because of his smile, but also because of his warm welcome for the Government's position. I entirely disagree with him; he is wrong. On the last occasion he intervened, he did not hear the whole debate. I invite him to do so this time because, when he does, he will see precisely what the Government's position is.

I make it clear that we are not rejecting these amendments out of hand. As I stressed in our last debate on the Bill, and as acknowledged by Baroness Chapman in the other place, we have listened to their lordships' views. We have worked collaboratively on a number of issues and made fundamental changes to the Bill. There has also been significant collegiate working on the reporting requirements that will provide robust scrutiny. Parliament will be able to examine the Government's plans for reform up to six months ahead of the legislation being tabled, thanks to the regular reporting brought in by that amendment.

Lords amendment 42D is based on the process contained in the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Act 2006, which is a very different beast from a very different Bill designed for a completely incomparable power. A legislative

reform order is capable of operating on any statute, including Acts of Parliament, whereas the relevant regulation-making power here is limited to secondary retained EU law, which is not primary legislation.

Further, I respectfully disagree with the noble Lord Hope when, in the other place, he described the process in his amendment as "light touch", not least because of the fundamental issue of time, which is crucial when we consider how long parliamentary processes can take. Lords amendment 42D envisages up to 60 sitting days for Parliament to consider and debate proposals for statutory instruments, and potentially time after that for further scrutiny before an SI can be made. By adding such significant time for additional scrutiny, this amendment would place in doubt the effective use of the repeal and replace powers before they expire.

Perhaps that is the intention. This is the additional friction that was so neatly alighted upon by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) during one of our previous debates. Additional, deliberate friction, as my noble Friend Lord Callanan said in the other place

"is not about additional parliamentary scrutiny; this is actually about stopping Parliament acting in this area."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 June 2023; Vol. 831, c. 117.]

It is perhaps worth noting that, since 2008, only 35 LROs have been brought forward.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My hon. and learned Friend is making some excellent points. He has just referred to Parliament as a whole but, in this particular context, a difficulty arises in subsections (6) to (8), which confer a power on the House of Lords to, let us be honest, effectively block proposals if it decides so to do. That is an inherent objection.

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Knowing him, he will develop those points in due course. He agrees with what my noble Friend Lord Callanan said in the other place, that this is not about additional scrutiny so much as about preventing Parliament from acting.

It is right to say that Lords amendment 42D has been given serious consideration, as were other iterations previously before this House. It is disappointing and hardly conducive to constructive conversation or detailed debate to resort to insulting hon. and right hon. Members, as unfortunately happened in their lordships' House yesterday. Apart from my noble Friend Lord Callanan, their lordships have not grappled with the provisions already in the Bill for a sifting committee, the detail of which is found in schedule 5, and which will result in significantly more scrutiny than EU law had when it was first introduced into our law.

On Lords amendment 15D, I have little to add to what has been said many times. We have repeatedly made commitments, at every stage of parliamentary passage, that we will not lower environmental protections. Our environmental standards are first class: the Agriculture Act 2020, the Fisheries Act 2020 and the landmark and world-leading Environment Act 2021.

The Labour party has a choice, both in this House and in the other place. Will it choose to frustrate this necessary post-Brexit legislation, this natural next step that was always going to have to happen? Will it continue

to delay the delivery of the significant opportunities that await us? The Government want to get on with the job. Enough is enough.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We are back once again, and maybe it will be third time lucky, although it does not sound like it will be. The House will no doubt be familiar with our position, that the Bill, as originally drafted, was reckless, unnecessary and undemocratic. The Government talked about a bonfire of regulations when the Bill first came before the House, but I would instead describe it as a scorched earth policy that made for a good headline but completely failed to grasp the scale and complexity of the task before us. That the approach has been at least partially reversed is of course welcome, but concerns remain. The Lords amendments before us will deal to some extent with some of the outstanding issues, and we therefore intend to support them.

I turn, first, to Lords amendment 15D. I pay tribute to Lord Krebs for showing maximum flexibility in trying to find something that will gain Government support. I fear that it sounds as though his efforts will be in vain, because although he has taken the approach that the Government's problem with his previous amendment was its wording rather than its substance—on the basis of the Government's claim not to want to water down environmental protections—I think he was hoping that reasoned argument and compromise might see a resolution to this endless game of ping-pong. The sad reality is that he has been looking for reason where none exists.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point. A number of constituents have written to me in recent weeks to set out their concerns and point out that we are in a climate emergency. They believe it is essential that the current level of protection for the environment is not weakened. In addition, they are concerned as we have a responsibility to not just ourselves, but future generations. Does he agree on that?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I agree with it, which is why we are continuing to support the Lords on this amendment.

The Minister has referred to the conditions of previous iterations of this amendment as both “burdensome” and “unnecessary”. It is of course complete nonsense that something can be both of those things at the same time. A burden would be an additional requirement, but the Government also consider such amendments unnecessary. That implies that these are things they intend to do in any case, yet in their eyes they somehow remain a burden. I am sorry to say that I have yet to alight on any rational explanation for that stance, and poor Lord Krebs has stripped away his amendment to the bare minimum now in the futile search for common ground. His new version of the amendment has just two elements, instead of the four in the previous version. The remaining ones are non-regression on environmental protections and consultation with relevant experts; he has dropped the requirements for compliance with international obligations and transparency in reporting on expert advice. I would have thought that the two dropped conditions ought not to have been considered

too troublesome for a Government committed to maintaining environmental protections, but we are where we are.

The Lords amendment therefore simply puts in the Bill what the Government say they intend to do in any event, yet the objections remain. We should be mindful of what the Government's own watchdog, the Office for Environmental Protection, said in its evidence on this Bill, which was that it

“does not offer any safety net, there is no requirement to maintain existing levels of environmental protection.”

I find myself both bemused and alarmed by the Government's intransigence on this issue. When they are not listening to their own watchdog and instead present arguments that disintegrate on the barest of examinations, it is right that we should continue to press for this amendment. If everything that was said at the Dispatch Box became law, we would not need legislation, but I am afraid the longer this goes on and the more unreasonable the objections become, the stronger the case becomes for putting in the Bill the protections the Government say they want to see.

The confidence that the public have in this place has been severely tested in recent years. If our democracy is to work, and if we want people to engage and participate in the democratic process, what a Government say has to be honoured and has to be seen through, otherwise we risk forever losing trust in the political process. Once that trust has died, it cannot be brought back to life by magic or by good intentions. So I say to Conservative Members: think very carefully about how you vote on this Lords amendment. If they trust the Government to keep their word and can find a way to reconcile that blind faith with the Government's refusal to put those promises in law, they should vote down the amendment. But if that word is broken, they should not ever expect anyone to trust the Conservative party to stick to its promises on the environment or any other matter, ever again.

Lords Amendment 42D tackles one of the most controversial clauses in the Bill, clause 15, which the Hansard Society called the

“‘do anything we want’ powers for Ministers.”

I remind Members that the Hansard Society is a body whose opinion ought to mean something. It describes clause 15 as that because, as has been extensively covered previously, it empowers Ministers to revoke regulations and not replace them; replace them with another measure that they consider

“appropriate...to achieve the same or similar objectives”;

or to “make such alternative provision” as they consider “appropriate”. Those are extremely broad powers covering broad areas of policy.

If this Bill has taught us anything, it is that the reach of EU regulations permeates every aspect of life and covers many important issues that most people would expect Parliament to have a say over: consumer rights; public health; the environment; and, of course, employment rights. These regulations cover many things that many people would want to see protected, and many more things that nobody said would be removed or watered down back in 2016.

I pay tribute to Lord Hope for trying to find a compromise that the Government can accept. I fear that, as with Lord Krebs, his efforts will be in vain. In

[Justin Madders]

short, this latest amendment would see a Committee of this place sift regulations made under the clause, following an explanation by the relevant Minister as to why that particular regulation is required or desirable. It should be noted that Lord Hope made it clear in the other place that this Committee would be a Commons one only; how ironic that an unelected Lord is the one pushing an amendment to give the elected Commons more say in how our laws are decided, and that the Commons is resisting this move. Perhaps he, at least, understands what taking back control was meant to be about.

The Lords amendment further provides that once the Committee has considered the Minister's explanation, it can, if it wishes—it is not required to—draw special attention to the regulations in question, following which the Minister must arrange for them to be debated on the Floor of each House. The Minister must then have regard to any resolution of either House and may, but is not required to, amend their proposal in the light of what has been resolved. The Committee can also recommend that the proposal should not be proceeded with, but, in the true spirit of taking back control, this House will get the final say on that. Is this not what the true spirit of Brexit was really about: the democratically elected Members of this House asserting influence and passing our laws?

I am sure that we will hear, once again, the fallacious arguments that because these laws were passed in the first place without proper democratic involvement, that means, by some twisted logic, that it is fine now to hand all the power over these laws to Ministers, without any reference to Parliament. Those arguments do not wash because they come from a place that says that anything that originates from the EU is bad and we therefore do not need it. Tell that to the millions of people enjoying paid holidays for the first time, to the disabled passengers who were given priority on transport for the first time and to the millions of people who have kept their job because of TUPE protections. I do not believe anyone who voted to leave the EU voted to dispense with those rights. If it is the Government's intention to change any of those protections, or the thousands of others that our citizens enjoy, it is only right that this place has a say in that.

I am afraid the lack of transparency that this Bill represents, and the sidelining of genuine scrutiny, show up all those arguments that were made back in 2016 about sovereignty for what they are: a fig leaf for a select few to shape and determine the future of this country without reference to Parliament, and certainly without reference to the people they are supposed to represent. Democracy in the 21st century does not die in one swift act, but erodes over time, bit by bit. This Bill is another example of that, and until this Government restore basic democratic principles, we will do all we can to oppose it.

Sir William Cash: I have read with great interest the record of the proceedings yesterday in the House of Lords, noting some extremely wise and democratically well judged comments by those such as Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts and Lord Hamilton of Epsom. I note, however, that Lord Clarke of Nottingham, with whom

I have crossed swords a few times in the past, to say the least, was conspicuous in his support of Lord Hope of Craighead's amendment, as were a number of others I do not have time to mention, although their appearance in the Division list was entirely predictable.

I wish to add that the wise words of the Lord Hodgson and Lord Hamilton reflect not only a question of parliamentary sovereignty in relation to the elected House, but the elected will of the people, both in the referendum in 2016, the anniversary of which is almost upon us, and in the general election of December 2019, where there was a massive majority to get Brexit done. It is therefore also a manifesto commitment, clear and unequivocal, which invokes the Salisbury doctrine. The Government have stood firm in these proceedings; I was extremely glad to hear my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General yet again showing the degree of diligence and determination that is necessary, and I know he will continue to do so in this matter of retained EU law. I also speak as Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, whose report was unequivocal on the subject. I am glad to say that the Government supported the amendment I proposed, which is part of this exchange between the Lords and the Commons.

Lord Hope of Craighead and Lord Pannick are on the same page with regard to what they term a "constitutional principle". I note the judicial and legal enthusiasm for the amendment they have put forward, which demonstrates the issue of parliamentary sovereignty. Indeed, Lord Hodgson rightly referred to "parliamentary sovereignty" when he read out what I had said in the House of Commons on the subject the other day, about the Lords' "intransigence" in this matter. The amendment is a matter of democracy, as well as constitutional principle, because it involves the elected House and its majority view.

2.30 pm

Coincidentally, it is also a matter that, at bottom, is about judicial difference of opinion at the very highest level. That was expressed by one of the greatest jurists of modern times, namely Lord Bingham of Cornhill, in his magisterial essay, "The Rule of Law and the Sovereignty of Parliament", in his book, "The Rule of Law". In fact, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts glanced at that point in his remarks and—it is more than merely interesting to note, most unusually, but driven by deep frustration—he criticised Lord Hope of Craighead by name, I am sure with the greatest respect, along with Baroness Hale of Richmond, for their views on the issue of parliamentary sovereignty and the courts. I note the clause we are debating is entitled "Parliamentary scrutiny", which involves parliamentary sovereignty and the overriding role of the elected House of Commons in particular, as regards subsections (6), (7) and (8).

The essay is well worth reading. In a pertinent passage, Lord Bingham describes what is at stake and why he, for his part, could not accept, I am sure respectfully, the views of Lord Hope of Craighead as being correct. It is a very much a question of attitude of mind, which is a parallel and intertwined issue, regarding the sovereignty of the House of Commons as the elected House, by contrast to the unelected constitutional position of the House of Lords, not to mention the judiciary. The Bill demonstrates an intransigence, with a failure to appreciate the importance of the role of the elected House.

Lord Bingham invokes the words of Professor Goldsworthy, whom he regards as the magisterial authority on matters relating to parliamentary sovereignty and its derivation from democratic decision making by the electors. What Professor Goldsworthy says, and which Lord Bingham says he agrees with, is:

“What is at stake is the location of the ultimate decision-making authority—the right to the final word.”

In the case of the Bill, the final word must be with the House of Commons as the ultimate decision-making authority, particularly in the context of ping-pong.

At that point, Professor Goldsworthy is referring to related matters, but he might as well be referring to ping-pong between the Lords and the Commons. He identified the importance of the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty as ultimately belonging to the House of Commons, in respect of that final word, and he emphasises the fact that on the attitude and view of some judges, it would be their word, other than Parliament’s, that would be final.

Goldsworthy goes on to say:

“this would amount to a massive transfer of political power from parliaments to judges”.

I would argue it could equally apply to a transfer of political power of the same order to the House of Lords. Moreover, he states:

“it would be a transfer of power initiated by the judges to protect rights chosen by them rather than one brought about democratically by parliamentary enactment or popular referendum.”

He adds:

“it is no wonder that the elected branches of government regard that prospect with apprehension”.

Personally, I could not agree more and it is significant that Professor Goldsworthy’s words echo down the decades on this subject, as well as Lord Bingham’s agreement with them. Ultimately, it is about the same question and it is specifically related to the very words he chooses, namely legislation

“brought about democratically by parliamentary enactment”, therefore by the House of Commons, rather than the House of Lords.

The words he chooses are “democratically” and “popular referendum”. In this context—now, in the present day—they refer to the outcome of the popular referendum of Brexit, the anniversary of which we will celebrate in two days’ time. This is the constitutional principle that must prevail, and the manifesto that goes with it from the general election. The final word on ping-pong should be determined by that principle.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): Here we are again—plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. I always remember that nobody ever criticised a speech for being too short, and I think I can excel myself this afternoon.

Our position, like the Government’s, has not changed in relation to the Bill. We think the Bill is unnecessary. Retained EU law became law when we left the European Union. The special status that we have heard so much about does not, I believe, stand any sort of academic analysis. It is open to the Government to retain, repeal or change any measure on the statute book without this provision. We think this provision augments the powers of the Executive in relation to this body of law, not on the basis of what the law does, how effective it is or how up to date it is, but on the basis of where it came from. That is a poor premise.

I find myself in the strange position of backing the Lords amendments. The SNP does not send Members to the House of Lords because we have issues with the democratic legitimacy of the place, but I am glad of their work on this. Where I say this is a bad Bill, and where I fear it will be bad law, I would also put on record my appreciation of the very hard-working Clerks and others who have got it to where it is today. I disagree with the politics of this, not their work.

On amendments 15D and 42D, the environmental non-regression clause, that is taking Ministers at face value. If Ministers do not want to regress, then let us put that on the face of the Bill, which would reassure an awful lot of people.

Scrutiny measures are foreseen within the Bill. We acknowledge that, but we do not think they are enough. This is a new set of powers for the Government and I think it needs a new set of scrutiny powers for this place and for the House of Lords, to make sure that there are brakes on what they might do with those powers so given.

The legislative consent motions have been denied by the Holyrood Parliament and the Welsh Senedd. That should give any Unionist in this place cause for concern about the Bill, both in the way it is being taken forward and the attitude that it shows to the devolved settlement. So we are against the Bill and we are backing the Lords amendments to make the Bill a little less bad. I am weary of our entrenched position and a dialogue of the death, so I draw my remarks to a close.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): In another attempt to recreate complete déjà vu, I follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) again, as I did some weeks ago. I will not repeat the point I made to him about his remarks on devolution, in an otherwise beautifully constructed speech, with which I respectfully completely disagree.

We are left with two issues. The first issue can be dealt with fairly swiftly. I do not see the need to put on the face of primary legislation a non-regression clause. The Government have been crystal clear about their approach to environmental standards and I know from my own inbox experiences, and from those of many other right hon. and hon. Members, that the British public just will not have a regression from high environmental or food safety standards. They are the sort of standards where we have led global opinion about regulation. With respect to Lord Krebs, I do not see the need for that amendment.

However, I will press the Solicitor General, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), on amendment 42D. While I accept that in its detail there might be some further work, I think 60 days is a long time. In effect, that would mean 60 working days, so if one started in late July, the matter may not be resolved until October or November. I can see that is an issue, but I pray in aid what the noble Lords said about the need to disaggregate this issue from the issue of Brexit. It does not matter about the source of the law or where it comes from; this is a question of the ability of this place—Parliament—to scrutinise the operations and decisions of the Executive.

I am always interested to listen to the careful words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). I thought that his exposition of Lord Hope’s

[Sir Robert Buckland]

position on parliamentary sovereignty was a fair one. He and I actually agree quite strongly about parliamentary sovereignty and the need to avoid the trend in the noughties—before the current Supreme Court—to downplay the role of parliamentary sovereignty to suggest that, somehow, we have moved on from the age of Dicey, and the role is no longer unqualified. I think he and I agree on that—we are both defenders of sovereignty—but to pray in aid an argument about ceding powers of the judiciary is rather odd bearing in mind the context of the amendment. The amendment is all about giving more power to this place and, indirectly, I accept, to the other place.

Sir William Cash: I made a very careful distinction. I appreciate the point that my right hon. and learned Friend is trying to make, and accept, of course, that Lord Hope of Craighead is a very distinguished judge and a member of the Supreme Court. I thought that it might just be relevant to draw attention to the fact that, in the context of parliamentary sovereignty, Lord Bingham used some quite trenchant words with regard to the judgments that he had observed both from Lady Hale and from Lord Hope. That was all.

Sir Robert Buckland: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's analysis. I think that we are on the same side on this. I have always been extremely vigilant in observing, scrutinising, criticising and making my own comments in lectures outside this place about the dangers of going down that road and of not understanding that, far from being mutually contradictory, the rule of law and parliamentary sovereignty are both sides of the same coin. If we do not have strong parliamentary sovereignty, the rule of law itself is undermined. The rule of law is a political concept rather than the law itself, and, I think, that that is sometimes misunderstood. It is the duty of Conservatives, from my hon. Friend right through to me, to remind this place and other places about the importance of these principles. We agree on that, but that is not the precise context of this amendment. The amendment is legitimately and properly seeking to make sure that this place has a role in the scrutiny of the revocation of legislation.

I do not accept the arguments that there is an attempt, certainly by the mover of this amendment or of some of the others who spoke in the debate, to try to frustrate the purpose of this important Bill, which I support. We are at a stage now where, with the greatest respect to my hon. Friend, we should not concern ourselves with the Salisbury Acts, because the Lords have given us a Second and Third Reading, and that convention relates to the commanding heights of a Bill, but we are now down to the dirty detail, and that is what we are talking about. Therefore, it is important that we lean into this process in as sensible a way as possible to see whether there is a potential compromise—either by a reduction in the number of days, which I would agree with, or, indeed, by looking again at the precise role of the other place with regard to the approval or otherwise of any regulation. That is what I would be seeking to do if I were in my hon. Friend's place, because I detect that there is, if not a head of steam, a determination by the noble Lords to press the Government on this particular issue.

As I have said before, if we start to take the “B” word out of this issue and look at it on the basis of parliamentary scrutiny, then perhaps we can take the heat out of the debate and have something far more considered and reasonable.

Sir William Cash: My right hon. and learned Friend may be just ducking an issue, which is that, actually, it is not about the “B” word or Brexit as such; it is about parliamentary democracy and sovereignty, the general election and the referendum as well. We are talking about a massive amount of law. I am glad to note that the Government accepted my proposal that we should examine the list and have a proper list. However, having said that, I am afraid that I do not agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. He is doing his best to find a compromise, but I do not think that a compromise is legitimate in these circumstances.

Sir Robert Buckland: I listened with care to my hon. Friend. Although he and I are on other sides of the argument, we have always had, I think, a very strong mutual regard for each other's position and the way in which we put our arguments. I am afraid that I do not agree. It is absolutely right to pray in aid the democratic decisions that have been made by the British people and this House, but we are also here, I think, as guardians of this place. It is important to note that, when we created retained EU law, which he and I were heavily involved with, we said at the time, either explicitly or implicitly, that we would, in good order, look carefully at the body of retained EU law, and that we would get rid of what we do not need—I am absolutely up for that, as it would be good, tidy law-making and doing service to the statute book—but at the same time we would retain what we regard as important safeguards or regulations that underpin particular activities. That is good for the rule of law and good for certainty, and we should remember that. I do not think that the bulldozer approach is the right one; the scalpel surely should be applied to these regulations, so that we get it right.

Therefore, in closing, I ask my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General to consider carefully whether, through further amendment and change, we can strike the right balance between the need to fulfil the objectives of this important Bill and to make sure that this place is not lost in the rush to revoke or amend regulations. There may be a time, even with sunset, that we will no longer be the party of government and we need to remember that we should be here to defend the position of this House irrespective of who might sit on the Treasury Bench. On that note, I urge my hon. and learned Friend to think again about amendment 42D, but, otherwise, I am in full support of his remarks.

2.46 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland). I have much sympathy for him and his attempts to speak to deaf ears.

We are back dealing with the renegade masters of this Government and their ill behaviour—the arrogance they have yet again expressed towards the concept of parliamentary scrutiny. People watching these proceedings—few, I am sure, on a lovely Wednesday sunny afternoon—will understand what is being said: “Our way, or no way

at all.” The amendments are a reasonable way of trying to address the loss of parliamentary scrutiny—the ministerial power grab—that this Bill represents.

It is seven years since we were told that Brexit was all about taking back control; seven years that we have been waiting for any kind of benefit at all; and seven years in which our constituents have certainly seen the damage that has been done. The only benefit that the Bill will bring is to Downing Street. It takes back power not to the people, but to the Prime Minister. That is why thousands of people have been writing to their MPs, begging and pleading them to look at the damage that the Bill would do to the powers in this place and to their voice in that process. Following the logic of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), we could call anything Brexit. He wants to say, “Well, we had a referendum, so this piece of legislation, as it is currently written, must go through this place unamended.” Well, I would quite like all the money that we were promised for the NHS also to go through this place, but we cannot always get what we want. My constituents are concerned about democracy; that is why people writing to us; that is why there is a concern about the process that the Bill would set up. The powers that it gives, that continue way beyond any sunset date at the end of this year, are over consumer rights, environmental standards and employment rights.

Let us be honest: in a week when the reputation of Parliament could not get much lower, any attempt to restore the ability of a Member of Parliament to represent their constituents, propose amendments or participate in scrutiny—not just shout at Ministers about something that they will pass without challenge—cannot be a bad thing. I welcome their lordships having stood up for the role we could play. We have seen a week in which some MPs would rather have gone to watch the cricket than come to Westminster to do their job, but some of us still think that there is a job worth turning up for and that we should do that job.

Sir Robert Buckland *rose—*

Stella Creasy: I know that the right hon. and learned Gentleman agrees. I have never seen him at the cricket. I will gladly give way.

Sir Robert Buckland: Some of us, including my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), love cricket, but we can do both, and that is why we are here.

Stella Creasy: In fairness to the hon. Member for Stone, I recognise that he was here on Monday and is here today. On the powers of this Bill, he is like the Earl of Lucan—leading his cavalry into the charge of the Light Brigade—because he has already seen the arrogance of Ministers in responding to his concerns. I will never understand why he is giving away the power that he has as a Back-Bench MP to challenge for things—things that I might disagree with, but that, in a democracy, I would stand up for his right to argue for—but he is doing that today and he has done so consistently because he thinks this Bill is Brexit. It is not.

This Bill is a complete break-up of our parliamentary system, because it gives Ministers powers over 4,000 areas of legislation, using statutory instrument Committees with hand-picked groups of MPs to wave through any

changes that Ministers want to make. And what has the hon. Gentleman got out of the process? He has got a list of the things that are not going to be deleted that he would like to see deleted. What a glorious victory that is. Little wonder the Earl of Cardigan would be looking at him—

Sir William Cash: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: With the greatest respect, I have listened at length to the hon. Gentleman and I am conscious of time. I simply recognise the parallel with the charge of the Light Brigade in that, at first, the cavalry was lauded, and only later did we see the damage and destruction and only then did the British people hold them accountable. It will be the same when he argues against the very principle of ping-pong, which is about scrutiny.

The hon. Gentleman matches the arrogance of the Minister, who first of all challenged the proposals put forward by the Lords on the basis that they were a novel process—they were not; they were based and rooted in parliamentary expertise from a former parliamentary Clerk, who had plenty of experience of the different mechanisms of scrutiny that can be brought to bear—and now complains that the Lords, having listened to the debate in this place and tried to find a compromise, have come forward with another proposal. That is not good enough for him either.

Yet, all along, the Minister wants to claim that the Government have listened, while the Government have failed to table a single alternative proposal or to make a single suggestion to reassure those of us concerned that, if we give up 4,000 areas of legislation to Ministers to use SI Committees, we may as well all go home, because we will be bystanders to the parliamentary process. It is sheer arrogance to suggest that scrutiny is additional friction; it is called asking questions. Even Back-Bench Conservative MPs would think that that is a good idea, because it is a mistake to think any Government get it right all the time. That is why we have scrutiny and a process of trying and testing legislation.

“Computer says no” speaks to the real truth behind Brexit and behind this legislation, which is that the Government never intended to listen to the British people at all, because they never intended to give powers to the people who represent them. That is why it is an insult to democracy to see all this. Constituents across the country will be deeply concerned about a Bill that will allow the Government to revoke or water down legislation without any scrutiny at all, beyond possibly waving it through a five-minute Committee sitting.

People are concerned about environmental standards, which Lord Krebs is trying so hard to protect, and which the Government say they will protect—yet they will not write that down. That should be very telling, because we shall see that that becomes a developers’ charter. We shall see, for example, people trying to develop Holton Heath, which I am sure the Minister is well aware of, a site of protected heathland in his own constituency. Development was refused for that site on the basis of the special protection areas and special areas of conservation—both regulations that will be abolished under the Bill, unless the Government write them back in.

[Stella Creasy]

That development attempt was rebuffed, but the Minister's constituents can have no confidence that development will not be proposed on that site again if we lose those pieces of legislation. The fact that Ministers will not write in the Bill that that absolutely will not happen, and the fact that we have not had that clarity over those pieces of legislation, should give his constituents pause. It would certainly give my constituents concerns about somebody seeking to develop the Walthamstow wetlands, for example.

The proposals before us today reflect the Lords listening and trying to find a way forward. They are talking about a non-binding form of legislative scrutiny, whereby the Commons could suggest amendments to a statutory instrument. The Government could even refuse to accept those amendments, but it would be a process of scrutiny and accountability—the mildest form we have seen—and yet, still, computer says no.

The Minister might think it is acceptable to be this arrogant about the concept of parliamentary sovereignty. Conservative Members might shake their heads and say, “The good chaps and chapesses of this Government could not possibly do anything wrong. Of course they will be sensitive to the electorate.” I am not sure the electorate think that that is the case. If the only opportunity for challenge and scrutiny is at a referendum or election, our capacity to make good laws—the whole point of this place—is gone.

I am sure, based on what he just said, that the hon. Member for Stone will now be leading the campaign for the abolition of the House of Lords—or at least for an elected House of Lords. Certainly I presume he will not take up a seat in the other place when he leaves the Commons. But that is the point, is it not? Our time here might be fleeting but, if we start unpicking the strands of parliamentary scrutiny, the processes that exist and our capacity to speak up for our constituents when their rights are affected, the damage will be everlasting.

The Minister might dismiss people such as me, still looking for those elusive benefits of Brexit seven years on, but he cannot dismiss the concerns of thousands of constituents. I hope he will finally engage in a serious process with the Members of the House of Lords and stop dismissing them, because they come with the very best of intentions. If we are absent at work and not doing our job of defending democracy, somebody else must do so. I hope that this House will support Lords amendments 15D and 42D, because our environment and our parliamentary democracy deserve better.

The Solicitor General: With the leave of the House, I thank all right hon., right hon. and learned and hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. I was going to say I need not go into the fine details but, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) mentioned the “dirty detail”, perhaps I can touch on one or two of them.

I thank the shadow Minister for his engagement, as always, and for giving a welcome to the change of approach—although not a full welcome, of course—during today's debate. I am grateful to him for his words. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for reminding us about parliamentary sovereignty and the wise words of Lord Bingham. I know that his

words will be studied carefully. I always enjoy listening to the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) during the course of these debates; he is right that he is consistent, as the Government have been consistent throughout the process.

I disagree fundamentally with what the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) says. She reminds us of the charge of the Light Brigade, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon first introduced to the debates on this Bill some two debates ago. She mentioned friction and made a complaint about Back Benchers, but the suggestion of friction came from a Back Bench, as I mentioned in my opening speech.

The hon. Lady says there is a failure to listen, but I disagree. There is a lot of listening and there is a disagreement. It is not the same. One can listen and one can still disagree; I disagree, having listened to what she says. One thing I am grateful to her for, though, is bringing cricket into this debate. That is always a welcome subject of distraction, so I am grateful to her for that and I look forward to reading it back.

If I may engage directly with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon, I am grateful to him for his words. I agree with him that the example he gave, of 60 sitting days starting in July, is a significant period of time. I am afraid he and I will not agree entirely on that, and he will not be surprised by that. I encourage him to look at schedule 5 and the sifting Committee. I know he understands the point and he heard my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who explained two debates ago the detailed work that his European Statutory Instruments Committee does. He diligently gets on with that work—he described it as dry work, but it is important work and I know he will continue that work with his Committee.

I was delighted to see agreement between my hon. Friend the Member for Stone and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon; it was similar to the agreement between my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson)—a rare moment, but an enjoyable one nonetheless. I simply repeat to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon that our concern with the approach is that, by adding such a significant amount of time, the amendment would place in doubt the effective use of the repeal and replace powers before they expire, and that is an important part of the Government's programme for smarter regulation.

It is vital that we bring this most important Bill to Royal Assent as quickly as possible. This House has made its view clear twice before and I ask that it makes its view clear for a third time. I encourage their lordships to take note of the strong view from this House and the fact that the will of this House should be respected.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 15D.

The House divided: Ayes 277, Noes 208.

Division No. 264]

[2.59 pm]

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter

Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Anderson, Lee

Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline

Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane

Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John

Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Amanda Solloway

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Dowd, Peter
 Eastwood, Colum
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)

McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt

Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mary Glindon and
 Colleen Fletcher

Question accordingly agreed to.

3.13 pm

More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords amendments, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 24 May).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 42D—(Solicitor General.)

The House divided: Ayes 275, Noes 209.

Division No. 265]

[3.13 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriye, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin

Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew

Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Amanda Solloway

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin

Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dixon, Samantha
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Dowd, Peter
Eastwood, Colum
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fletcher, Colleen
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew

Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacAskill, Kenny
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame

Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Rayner, rh Angela
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Slaughter, Andy

Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomson, Richard
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Williams, Hywel
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Mary Glendon and
Navendu Mishra

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 42D disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments;

That Michael Tomlinson, Mike Wood, Alexander Stafford, Jane Stevenson, Justin Madders, Taiwo Owatemi and Alyn Smith be members of the Committee;

That Michael Tomlinson be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Jacob Young.*) *Question agreed to.*

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, notwithstanding paragraph (2)(c) of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), business in the name of the Leader of the Opposition may be entered upon at any hour and may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours; proceedings shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Jacob Young.*)

Opposition Half Day

18TH ALLOTTED DAY, FIRST PART

Animal Welfare (Kept Animals)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I inform the House that I have selected amendment (a), which is in the name of the Prime Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the only veterinary surgeon in the Commons, I am passionate about all aspects of animal health and welfare, and I seek your advice. The Opposition motion that we are about to debate seeks to take control of the Order Paper and timetable a Bill, the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) (No. 2) Bill, about which we have no details whatsoever. How is it possible to debate the motion, which could have unintended and adverse consequences for many aspects of animal health and welfare, with no Bill, and no details? Or are the Opposition aiming to reintroduce the Government's original Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill? It would be helpful to have clarification on what we are debating and voting on today, and what it may mean for the health and welfare of the precious, much-loved animals in our country.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. The motion seeks to take control of the Order Paper on 12 July, so that the House can consider a Bill on animal welfare on that date. If the motion succeeds, the content of that Bill could then be scrutinised on that date, according to the timetable set out in the motion. The fact that the text of the Bill is not yet available is not a procedural bar to considering today the motion before the House.

3.27 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,
That—

(1) On Wednesday 12 July 2023:

- (a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;
- (b) any proceedings governed by this order may be proceeded with until any hour, though opposed, and shall not be interrupted;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private);
- (d) at 3.00 pm, the Speaker shall interrupt any business prior to the business governed by this order and, notwithstanding the practice of this House as regards to proceeding on a Bill without notice, call the Leader of the Opposition or another Member on his behalf to present the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) (No. 2) Bill of which notice of presentation has been given and immediately thereafter (notwithstanding any rule of practice of the House as regards a matter already decided this Session) call a Member to move the motion that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) (No. 2) Bill be now read a second time as if it were an order of the House;
- (e) in respect of that Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(f) any proceedings interrupted or superseded by this order may be resumed or (as the case may be) entered upon and proceeded with after the moment of interruption.

(2) The provisions of paragraphs (3) to (19) of this order shall apply to and in connection with the proceedings on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) (No. 2) Bill in the present Session of Parliament.

Timetable for the Bill on Wednesday 12 July 2023

(3)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at the sitting on Wednesday 12 July 2023 in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 5.00 pm.

(c) Proceedings on any money resolution which may be moved by a Minister of the Crown in relation to the Bill shall be taken without debate immediately after Second Reading.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 7.00 pm.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put on Wednesday 12 July 2023

(4) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(5)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (3), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

- (a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
- (b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
- (c) the Question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Chairman or Speaker for separate decision;
- (d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a designated Member;
- (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph (15) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and Messages on a subsequent day

(8) If any message on the Bill (other than a message that the House of Lords agrees with the Bill without amendment or agrees with any message from this House) is expected from the House of Lords on any future sitting day, the House shall not adjourn until that message has been received and any proceedings under paragraph (9) have been concluded.

(9) On any day on which such a message is received, if a designated Member indicates to the Speaker an intention to proceed to consider that message—

- (a) notwithstanding Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order), any Lords Amendments to the Bill or any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly;
- (b) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private) in the course of those proceedings.

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion as if:

- (a) any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member;
- (b) after paragraph (4)(a) there is inserted—
“(aa) the question on any amendment or motion selected by the Speaker for separate decision;”.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of a Lords Message to a conclusion as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies.

(14)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a designated Member, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

- (b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.
- (c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.
- (d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.
- (e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(15)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies except by a designated Member.

- (b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) No private business may be considered at any sitting to which the provisions of this order apply.

(18)(a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which proceedings to which this Order applies are to take place shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(19) In this Order, “a designated Member” means—

- (a) the Leader of the Opposition; and
- (b) any other Member acting on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition.

The motion is in my name, and the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and others. We tabled it because Britain is a nation of animal lovers who rightly demand world-leading standards and protections; I know that many Members from across the House share that desire, as do their constituents, and that many of them are not comfortable about being in this position, whereby a Bill that they had supported was withdrawn by their Government. This is also about holding the Tory Government to account for not delivering on their manifesto promises, because we believe that promises should be kept.

Of course, Labour is and always has been the party of animal welfare. The last Labour Government left a proud legacy of delivering on promises to protect animals. We banned experiments in the UK on great apes such as chimpanzees, orangutans and gorillas in 1997. A Labour-led Home Office ended licences for testing cosmetics on animals in 1998. Labour established the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research, and led the way on research on alternatives to animal testing, and Labour ended cruel fur farming in England and Wales by introducing the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act 2000. Despite vociferous opposition from the Conservatives, Labour made it illegal to hunt wild animals with dogs in England and Wales, passing the groundbreaking Hunting Act 2004. It was also Labour who stopped the use of drift nets and so helped to protect dolphins, sea birds and other marine animals. My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) introduced the landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006, which finally called time on mutilations such as the docking of dog tails, and made owners and keepers responsible for ensuring the welfare of their animals. We can also be proud of our record on halting the decline of farmland birds while increasing rare and woodland bird populations and, in 2009, it was the Labour Government and Labour MEPs who worked to secure an EU-wide ban on the commercial trade in seal products.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for outlining so many successes of a Labour Government and commend him for reintroducing the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill today. Does he agree that, if Government MPs try to vote down the motion, they will be voting to continue puppy smuggling, puppy farming, pet theft and live animal exports?

Jim McMahon: It is hard not to agree with that position. Members have a choice today. The benefit of our democracy is that Members get to cast their vote, and declare their view and their representation on behalf of their constituents. There is nothing in the Bill that Conservatives should not support. It was in the Conservative

manifesto. It is letter by letter, word by word and paragraph by paragraph a Conservative Bill in name and content. There is no reason not to support it.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend has highlighted an important point. Despite multiple reassurances by the Government, they have now made yet another U-turn by shelving the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, making a mockery of all the fantastic work of many organisations—such as Battersea Dogs and Cats Home in my constituency—that have been working tirelessly to significantly improve animal welfare. Does he agree that the Government now need to set out what provisions they intend to introduce that would prevent things like puppy smuggling, but also make abductions of dogs an offence?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Interventions are supposed to be interventions, not speeches. The Chair will take account of Members intervening at length in terms of the speaking order when we come to that part of the proceedings.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention—it is an absolutely accurate interpretation. I was at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home in her constituency when news came that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was being ditched. The irony was not lost on a charity that campaigns and works so hard for our animals.

Labour has always placed animal welfare high on our list of policy priorities, which is why the Government have been dragged here kicking and screaming today. The Tories have promised, promised and promised again on animal welfare, but they fail to deliver.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Labour fought as hard as it possibly could to reverse the referendum result and keep us in the single market. If Labour had succeeded, we could not have banned live exports or cracked down on illegal puppy imports.

Jim McMahon: That begs the question of why on earth the Government are so bashful about bringing forward new powers and freedoms as a result of us leaving the European Union. Surely we should be embracing them—bringing them forward for the benefit of our much-loved animals—but they have not done so, even on an issue that is not controversial across the House. I assume and hope that there is support to end puppy smuggling and stop the export of animals that we care about. I will come on to that later, but I am afraid that it is a missed opportunity, despite Government Members' comments.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I will make a bit of progress first, if that is okay. In the end, it is those promises that—if we are not careful and they are not kept—undermine the very foundation of our democracy. Let us be clear: at the last general election, every single Conservative MP stood on the platform of a pledge to voters that they would deliver the priorities subsequently set out in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. It was a key part of their 2019 manifesto.

What has happened since 2019? Well, a fair bit. First, we have witnessed a Prime Minister who did not survive a lockdown party, or at least his catalogue of lies that followed it. We had a second one who did not even survive a lettuce and a third one who will be lucky to survive the post-election fallout, but, regardless of leaders, a manifesto stood on by every single Conservative Member should stand the test of time. The former Prime Minister who has left the House in disgrace promised the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill but, like much else, he failed to deliver. According to members of her own party, the next Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—who left Downing Street in disgrace and undercut our animal welfare protections in her botched trade deals—wanted to ditch the Bill, not just failing to deliver that promise but actively selling us out.

Dr Hudson: Animal welfare unites us in humanity and across this House. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, by creating the Animal Sentience Committee, whereby Governments of all political persuasions have to be cognisant of and pay due regard to animal welfare, is a huge benefit to animal health and welfare?

Jim McMahon: The Act certainly has that potential, except for the fact that the committee has not even been set up yet, so let us make some progress on that. On a matter of principle—by the way, I do take at face value the compassion for animals, which we do share across the House—the question is, how are we going to get there? How are we going to increase the protections for the animals that we all say we care about and that we know the nation loves? In the end, whatever is said here is slightly academic compared with the vote that will take place later, because that is what constituents will judge MPs on—not warm words, but the voting records that we all have to defend.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I am going to make a bit of progress, but I will take interventions a bit later.

The current Prime Minister, who during his leadership campaign last summer promised he would keep the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, now seems to have killed it. It did not have to be this way because—let us be clear—there are always choices to be made. Let us be clear about the choices that have been made: the choice to give the green light to criminals who smuggle tens of thousands of vulnerable, under-age, unvaccinated, diseased, mutilated and heavily pregnant animals into the country in the cruellest possible ways; the choice to give a thumbs up to puppy farms and irresponsible breeders who treat animals horrifically, breeding at high volumes for profit, with no respect for the health and welfare of puppies or their parents; and the choice to allow the distress of primates that are being kept as pets unsuitably, when they need specialist care, specialist treatment, diets and socialisation with other primates. This also shows utter contempt for British animals that are exported and transported on excessively long journeys and in dangerously appalling conditions. Why? For the purpose of fattening or inhumane slaughter.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will know that no animal has been exported for many years now and the Government are committed to putting that into law. My question is on puppy smuggling—Lucy’s law. I was honoured to meet Lucy, the Cavalier spaniel, and I have two Cavalier spaniels. This Government have done an amazing amount to clamp down on puppy farms. Puppy smuggling is a separate issue. I have received repeated reassurances that the Government are making time and their method—private Members’ Bills—is going to make this legislation happen more quickly, saving more animals. Political game playing on something so sensitive is irresponsible.

Jim McMahon: To be absolutely clear, this is not the Labour party framing our own motion and own draft Bill, and bringing it to the House and trying to bounce the Conservative Government. This is a Government manifesto commitment and a Government Bill—word for word, sentence by sentence. There is nothing to disagree with. Let us be clear as well that it passed on Second Reading. It is not as though we are starting from scratch; it passed on Second Reading unanimously with support from Members on all sides of the House.

Philip Dunne: First, the hon. Gentleman has told us that we have been brought kicking and screaming to this place. This is an Opposition day debate. It is his choice as to what he puts up as the subject for this debate. Secondly, he has not responded to the point of order, which he could have done to settle the issue, made by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). *[Interruption.]* I know it is not his place to do so, but he could have made it clear in his opening remarks that he has not published a Bill, which is normally the case when someone puts forward a motion such as this. Without any explanatory notes, we do not know what he is talking about.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I dealt with that issue very clearly indeed and the Speaker has ruled that the debate taking place today is orderly.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You made that point in response to the point of order, and the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) will know that I do not have the facility to come in on a point of order, but I can and I will cover that in my speech. To be clear, and I have been clear: this is a Government Bill. There is no other Bill to publish—it does not exist. The only Bill that exists is the Bill that passed on Second Reading in this House and that Members voted for. Let us move on from the smokescreen here. Members know exactly what Bill we are debating, because they have been lobbied by their constituents and by charities, which desperately want to see these protections brought forward.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this Government Bill back to the Floor of the House so that Members can decide whether to proceed with it. The point is that this Government made a commitment to improve animal welfare laws, but this same Government have a track record, having already backtracked on banning fur imports and the import of foie gras. Is this not

just another logical step in them saying one thing about animal welfare and doing something completely different?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let us be clear about some of the tensions here. The fear was never that the Labour party would vote down protections for animals; our history and legacy is about protecting animal welfare. The real fear is that the protections that we and many on the Government Benches believe should be in place are seen by some on those Benches as red tape and bureaucracy and as things that should be banished and not supported. That is a real issue. If I were the Prime Minister with a majority and I could not even get an animal welfare Bill through the House of Commons, I would be wondering what power and authority I had in my own party, frankly.

Let us reflect on what we were told when the Government did a U-turn. We still need to find out how many animals have been affected in the time between the election and the first promise to bring in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill in 2021 and today. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), said:

“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.”—*[Official Report, 25 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 495.]*

I am guessing from the comments today that the Whips have sent that out in the briefing note because that is exactly what we have been hearing today. I am afraid it does not pass the test because what Tory Members really mean is that Labour has ambition for animal welfare. We want to see the protections strengthened—absolutely—but not in a way that would derail the Bill. That was not our intention and it never would be.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jim McMahon: I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): My hon. Friend referred to Second Reading. The Dogs Trust tells me that, since Second Reading, it has been caring for 485 smuggled puppies. Does he agree that we could put a full stop to that by backing this motion today?

Jim McMahon: It is not only that. Animals are not an object or a possession; they are part of our family in many ways. Just think about those smuggled dogs being a member of your family—the dog that looks after your children and supports them growing up, or gives compassion to an older person. The idea that puppies have been smuggled in the numbers that just one charity reports—there are many charities in this space—says it all.

In the end, is it not the truth that the Government are running scared—not from the Opposition, although they should be, but from opposition from their own Back Benchers?

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress first. Regardless of their majority, the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister cannot govern if they cannot even get this Bill through the House. What is the

point of a Government with a sizeable majority when in the end they admit that they might be in office, but they are very much out of power?

The problem with the Bill cannot be parliamentary time, which we hear about all the time in the Tea Room and the voting Lobby. We have frustration from Members, many of whom trek hundreds of miles to be here representing our constituents, with a Government who are so chaotic and unconfident about getting their business through that whole segments of the day are completely written off as Members are sent out of the House early after votes. Even yesterday, we were sent home hours early because the Government did not table any business for us to debate and discuss. The idea that the House is so overwhelmed by business that we just do not have the time to discuss this Bill is ridiculous. There is a will, there is time and there is no reason not to do that other than the fact that the Tories cannot even guarantee how their Members will vote. That is the real issue.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for showing absolute leadership at this difficult time while the Government are falling apart, particularly when it comes to animal welfare standards. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are so concerned about the Government's U-turn. Does he agree that Britain is a nation of animal lovers, unlike this Tory Government?

Jim McMahon: I am not sure that I would go as far as to say that Government Members do not care about animals. I think they do, but they probably care about their own jobs a bit more, and too many of them probably do not want to be seen voting for a Labour motion for fear of losing the Conservative Whip. That is a shame, but I suppose that in the end, that is politics.

I want to be really clear about what Labour mean by the motion and why we care about this. When we talk about animals and why they are so important to the British public, we are not talking about possessions or objects. We are talking about the puppy that grows up with a child, through their teenage years and into adulthood. We are talking about the dog that is the companion of an older person, making sure that they do not have to go through the long nights alone and they have a reason to go out during the day. We are talking about animals that are very much part and parcel of our families and our national psyche. That is why it matters so much. The fact that the Government do not understand that really speaks volumes.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I would like to put it on the record, as somebody who has been outspoken on this matter and got a petition going, that I have not been threatened once by the Whips about having the Whip withdrawn. The Government have not threatened me or anybody else.

Jim McMahon: I appreciate the intervention. I have the Downing Street letter in my hand, and there is nothing in it that I would disagree with. The hon. Member's real difficulty is that the Government do not agree with it, which is why they have not given time for the legislation. If there is no overarching threat of Whips being removed or future positions being lost, there is no reason for Members not to join Labour in the Lobby and support the motion when the vote comes.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that there is the issue, and then there is the politics. If the Opposition had genuinely wanted to put pressure on the Government to adopt the Bill, they should have tabled a simple motion that said, "We would support the Bill being adopted", as that would have got everybody in favour of it. He knows very well that, by trying to take over the business, the motion is actually about the politics. If we really care about sentient animals—Government Members do, and I want to speak today about my criticisms of the Government—surely there would be purpose in us joining together and finding a better way of getting the Government to do what they said.

Jim McMahon: I am happy to explain the process by which we got to the motion, if that is helpful, although I am not sure whether it will convince Government Members to vote with us later. To be clear, if there had been a route to reintroducing the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill as it stood after Second Reading, that would be in the motion before us, but given the sunset clause built into that Bill, the advice was that it died weeks ago, so we could not do that. That is why the motion speaks of a No. 2 Bill, but word by word, line by line and paragraph by paragraph, it would be exactly the same Bill. In a way, with respect, the right hon. Member is dancing on the head of a pin, because it is the same Bill. On that basis, there is no reason not to support it.

We are not discussing the Labour party trying to bounce the Government into any position whatsoever. We do not even set out the detail of the Bill, partly because it is not a new Bill—it is already there—but also because all we are doing is voting on one issue alone, which is whether Parliament should have the time to debate and vote on a matter. What we debate and vote on and what the Government move on that day is for them. I accept that it will require a bit of work, but it is for them to bring forward the Bill, allow amendments and do the normal things that we do in the House before we come to a vote. All the motion does is allow time for that process to take place. That flies in the face of the "if only we can find a way of working together" idea. There is a way in which we can work together to achieve that end.

I have set out Labour's history on animal welfare and exactly what we are to vote on. I have set out the Conservatives' tensions, which have been absolutely on display today and in the run-up to the debate, but I hope that I have given Government Members enough confidence that there is a bridge here to cross. They do not have to stubbornly say, "It's an Opposition day, so we can't be seen to support the motion" when they know that the charities emailing them and the constituents reaching out to them really care about this legislation and, in the end, want them to do the right thing. When the vote comes later, I urge Members across the House to get behind the motion and finally allow time for the kept animals Bill to pass.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "That" in line 1 to the end of the Question and add:

[Trudy Harrison]

“this House notes the Government’s statement on 25 May 2023 regarding the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill; and welcomes the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries’ commitment that the Government will be taking forward measures from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill individually during the remainder of this Parliament, including on the keeping and licensing of primates, livestock worrying, export of livestock, pet theft and the importation of dogs, cats and ferrets.”

We are a nation of animal lovers. Animal welfare has been the priority of this Government since 2010. Internationally, our animal welfare standards are already top class—according to the World Animal Protection index, they are the best not just in the G7 but in the entire world. Our manifesto commitments demonstrate our ambition to go even further on animal welfare. To remind the House, we have already committed to bring in new laws on animal sentience, introduce tougher sentences for animal cruelty, and implement the Ivory Act 2018 and extend it to other species. We have ensured that animal welfare standards are not comprised in trade deals. We have cracked down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies, and we will bring forward cat microchipping. We will ban the keeping of primates as pets and imports of hunting trophies and endangered species. We will ban the cruel live shipment of animals and ensure that, in return for funding, farmers safeguard high animal welfare standards.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I would be extremely grateful if the Minister could explain why the Government dropped the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. It had cross-party support. We would have got it over the line and saved the lives of thousands of animals.

Trudy Harrison: I am delighted to hear that the hon. Member understands that the measures in that Bill were important. I will set out later just how we will achieve each and every one of them.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The House will know that the Home Office made the decision recently to ban animal testing in toto across the UK, even though it has been ruled lawful in the UK and the EU. Does the Minister agree that the UK has a much higher bar for animal welfare in testing than the European Union?

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend is spot on. The Home Office banned new licences granted for animal testing on chemicals exclusively used for cosmetics.

On top of that very long list, in 2021 we published our ambitious and comprehensive animal welfare action plan. The plan sets out the breadth of work that we are focused on pursuing through this Parliament and beyond, related to farmed animals, wild animals, pets and sporting animals, including legislative and non-legislative reforms in relation to activities in this country and abroad. Since publishing the action plan, we have already delivered on four key manifesto commitments: we have increased the penalties for those convicted of animal cruelty; we have passed the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 and launched a dedicated committee; we have made microchipping compulsory for cats as well as dogs; and we have announced the extension of the Ivory Act that came into force last year to cover five more endangered species—hippopotamus, narwhal, killer whale, sperm whale and walrus.

Even before the action plan was launched, we were cracking on with key reforms. Since 2010, we have delivered a wide range of valuable reforms that make a real difference to animals, including raising farm animal welfare.

Janet Daby: Many constituents have written to me really concerned that the Government have done a U-turn. They promised in their manifesto that they would deliver the policies set out in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. Could the Minister say why the delay and the U-turn have taken place?

Trudy Harrison: The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was not in the manifesto, but I think the hon. Lady is referring to the measures. I will set out in more detail how we will achieve those measures in the interests of animal welfare across single-issue Government Bills, private Member’s Bills, regulations and by working with the industry.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but the logic does not flow. There is a Government Bill. Why is she now saying that the Government will rely on private Members’ Bills to do what she has already introduced to this House? With the full support of the Opposition as well as those on the Government Benches, why does she not just crack on with it as a Government Bill?

Trudy Harrison: Absolutely. That is just what we will do. The track record speaks for itself.

Dr Hudson: As we have heard, countless numbers of puppies, heavily pregnant dogs and dogs that have had their ears horrifically cropped are smuggled into the country, and potentially thousands of horses are illegally exported to Europe for slaughter. Does my hon. Friend agree that the measures the Government will bring forward in legislation will absolutely and unequivocally stamp out those horrific practices?

Trudy Harrison: I certainly do. I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that intervention. There can be nobody more qualified and experienced in animal welfare than a vet, and he speaks with such sense.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Trudy Harrison: I will just make some progress.

I will set out what has been achieved since 2010, with a wide range of valuable reforms that make a difference to animal welfare: implementing a revised welfare at slaughter regime and introducing CCTV in all slaughterhouses; banning traditional battery cages for laying hens and permitting beak trimming only by infrared technology; and raising standards for meat chickens. We have significantly enhanced companion animal welfare by revamping the local authority licensing regime for commercial pet services, including selling, dog breeding, boarding and animal displays.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Trudy Harrison: I will just make some more progress.

We have banned third-party puppy and kitten sales through Lucy's law, introduced protections for service animals through Finn's law, introduced offences for horse fly-grazing and abandonment, introduced new community order powers to address dog issues, provided valuable new protections for wild animals by banning wild animals in travelling circuses, given the police additional powers to tackle hare coursing, and banned glue traps. That is an important list, and it goes on.

Jane Stevenson: I want to reassure Opposition Members and my constituents that private Members' Bills are extremely efficient. I received extremely good support from the Government while putting through my private Member's Bill to get a ban on glue traps—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps Opposition Members might learn something if they listen. I am very pleased that Wales and Scotland followed, too. That Bill became law two years ago, if Opposition Members care to look it up in the House of Commons Library. Does the Minister agree that private Members' Bills will enable this proposed legislation to come in more quickly, and will she reassure my constituents that, on things like pet theft, including the theft of cats, we can see real progress?

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To support enforcement, we recently supported private Members' Bills to pave the way for penalty notices to be applied to animal welfare offences. At this point, I want to make particular reference to my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris). It is due to her sterling work on sitting Fridays that so many private Member's Bills have been successful and enacted swiftly.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): To echo the point that has just been made, currently in the other place is my Animals (Low-Welfare Activities Abroad) Bill, which will hopefully receive Royal Assent in this Session. It managed to get to the other place without being amended, because it came as a single-issue Bill. It could not be Christmas-treed like other Bills, which means it has been able to progress quickly through the Commons and then into the other place. Does the Minister agree that by taking elements of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and putting them into single-issue Bills, either through private Member's Bills, presentation Bills or Bills introduced by the Government themselves, we will be able to get legislation on the statute book much more quickly—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. These interventions are becoming outrageous. There are 22 Members who wish to take part in the debate. I am making a note, and I will not call people who intervene excessively.

Trudy Harrison: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) made an accurate comment about the speed with which we have been able to support a large number of private Members' Bills.

Many of our key reforms have also been made possible by Britain's being outside the European Union. In respect of animal sentience, we have gone beyond the EU's symbolic and narrow approach, which was riddled

with exemptions. Departure from the EU has made it possible to ban cruel live exports from ever happening again, and to tackle puppy smuggling with tighter import controls.

As well as legislating, we have launched a pioneering animal health and welfare pathway, setting out the way forward for improving farm animal welfare for years to come and building on the work that we have already done to improve conditions for sheep, cattle and chickens. We are working in partnership with industry to transform farm animal welfare on the ground through animal health and welfare reviews with a vet of choice, supported by financial grants. In addition to all that, we have given our support to a number of private Members' Bills which are making their way through Parliament.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Trudy Harrison: I am afraid I will not give way any further.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) introduced a Bill to ban the import of hunting trophies, implementing another key manifesto commitment. There have also been private Members' Bills to ban the import and export of detached shark fins and the advertising and offering for sale here of low-welfare animal activities abroad, for which I thank the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) and my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford.

Our intention in presenting the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill to the House two years ago was to implement several of our ambitions, including our manifesto commitments to ban the live exports of animals for fattening and slaughter, to crack down on puppy smuggling, and to ban the keeping of primates as pets. There were additional measures seeking to prevent pet abduction, tackle livestock worrying, and improve standards in zoos. However, as the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries—my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer)—said in his statement to the House on 25 May, there have been a number of attempts to widen the Bill during its passage, beyond the commitments made in our manifesto and, indeed, our action plan. We are seeing yet more of this political game-playing today, with an Opposition motion attempting to take control of the Order Paper. That is absolutely not in the interests of animal welfare.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): While scanning the party political letter that the Labour party issued today, I noticed two things very quickly. The first was the lack of achievement on the part of the last Labour Government on animal welfare. The second was that, strangely, the candidate for the upcoming Uxbridge by-election was missing from a list of parliamentary candidates who apparently support animal welfare. Does the Minister know why that is, and whether we should conclude that—on top of Labour's hated ULEZ expansion—there is a parliamentary candidate who does not care about animal welfare?

Trudy Harrison: I cannot answer that question, but what I can say is that I was with Steve Tuckwell in Uxbridge, and he clearly cares deeply about animal welfare and the environmental improvement plan.

[Trudy Harrison]

We will continue to take forward measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, successfully and swiftly, during the remainder of this Parliament. Having left the EU, we can and will ban live exports for fattening and slaughter. I am pleased to report that there have been no live exports of livestock from Great Britain for fattening or slaughter since 2020. People have long been rightly anxious for the export of farm animals such as sheep and young calves for slaughter and fattening not to start up again, so our legislation will make that change for good. We will take forward our plans to ban the import of young puppies, heavily pregnant dogs, and dogs with mutilations such as cropped ears and docked tails. We have already consulted on that, and a single-issue Bill will allow us to get on with cracking down on puppy smuggling.

I am pleased to inform the House that we launched a consultation just yesterday on the standards that must be met by anyone responsible for the care of a primate. As we have heard, the needs of these captivating creatures are extremely complex, and we saw in the media just yesterday how primates can be horrifically mistreated. By requiring all privately held primates to be kept to zoo standards, we will stop primates being kept as if they were pets.

There is much more besides, from publishing updated zoo standards later this year in collaboration with the sector and the Zoos Expert Committee, to considering primary legislative vehicles to take forward measures to tackle livestock worrying, and our wider work, including through the countryside code, to raise people's awareness of how to enjoy walking their dog responsibly.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Trudy Harrison: We are also taking forward measures to make it an offence to abduct a much-loved pet.

James Wild: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Trudy Harrison: This Government share the public's concern for the welfare of animals. That is why we have delivered an unprecedented package of welfare improvements since 2010. We remain steadfast in our focus on making good on those manifesto commitments, which mean so much to the British people.

Alex Davies-Jones: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. The Minister has made it absolutely plain that she is not giving way.

James Wild: Will my hon. Friend give way? [Laughter.]

Trudy Harrison: That will remain our policy in this Parliament and beyond.

4.6 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate, although I honestly wish it was not necessary—and it ought not to have been necessary. I and the SNP support the Opposition day motion.

Two years ago, the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was introduced. The UK Government made a commitment to improve animal welfare, and we in the SNP supported that. Now, three DEFRA Secretaries of State and three Prime Ministers later, we are not one step forward. We are exactly where we were three years ago on banning foie gras imports, which the Minister noticeably did not mention; we are exactly where we were two years ago on banning animal fur imports, which the Minister did not mention; and we are exactly where we were two years ago on tackling illegal puppy and kitten smuggling. That is why my SNP colleagues and I support the motion for the measures in the Bill to proceed.

As the Minister has conceded, there were a lot of important provisions in the original Bill. It has now been quietly dropped, and we are told that the Government will take forward individual measures. I understand that those will be private Members' Bills—I thought that Governments were elected to govern, but apparently not. We are meant to be convinced by that display, but why should we believe it?

Alex Davies-Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way on that point about private Member's Bills. I was pleased to support the private Member's Bill from the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on trophy hunting imports, which is currently in the other place. However, I met campaigners just yesterday who are very concerned that, due to machinations in the other place, the Bill will run out of time and never reach the statute book. Is that what we are to expect on animal welfare from this Government?

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Lady tempts me on to my next point. The Minister—ludicrously, despite her protestations—cannot tell us which provisions in the original Bill will not be brought forward as individual measures now that it has been dropped. I would really like her to tell us what measures the Government will not proceed with, how the priority list will be decided and when we will see the measures the Government are so keen to bring to this House—by whatever circuitous route. Will anything be presented before summer recess? Will we get through that priority list, such as it might be, before the next general election?

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend very much for the point she is making. With every twist and turn in the farce around this Bill, I get letters and emails from concerned constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that it really does undermine the faith that many constituents have in democracy that the Government promised a Bill and had a Bill, and that we have lots of Government time and business collapsing early, yet no Bill is coming forward?

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and leads me on to my next point. We know that people right across the UK really care about animal welfare—all we have to do is give our inbox the most cursory of glances to see that. The people who write to us, email us and contact us on this issue will be deeply concerned about the antics—that is what they are—of the Government today as they twist on their own line. The Government have blamed everyone else, arguing that this Bill has been dropped because it had become too broad in scope, beyond what was originally intended.

The reality is that this Government are crumbling in the face of opposition from certain sections among their Back Benchers—the same kind of Back Benchers who were vociferously opposed to a ban on importing foie gras and fur products—as highlighted most eloquently by the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg). The UK Government do not want to engage in a fight with their own Back Benchers, despite these measures being in their manifesto. Foie gras production and fur farms were banned in the UK because of the cruelty they inflicted on living creatures, but this Government are perfectly content to outsource cruelty, which is political in itself, to appease some sections of their Back Benchers. This is truly shameful, and the Government may wish to reflect on it.

We know this is the case due to the very frank comments of the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who predicted in February that the animal welfare commitments in this Bill would be shelved, and he turned out to be right. It is worth reminding the House of what he was reported as saying:

“‘The way we treat animals, in particular farmed animals, is a hallmark of a civilized society and you should be constantly striving to do better,’ he says of the legislation that bans primates as pets, outlaws live exports and further regulates puppy farming.

Officially the government is still committed to the Bill...but the former environment secretary says he is hearing ‘mixed signals’ about whether it will, in fact, pass into law before the next election which must be held by the end of next year.

‘My sense is that they’re putting less emphasis on animal welfare, which I think is a shame.’”

We know the measures proposed in this Bill have huge public support. He continued:

“‘The annoying thing for me would be if the kept animal bill now also doesn’t go ahead because of a lack of resolve to take it through.’”

Interestingly, he refers to a “lack of resolve.”

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for setting out what is really happening here, because we know there is not only broad support for this Bill in the country but massive, overwhelming support for it in the House of Commons. It was introduced here, we supported it and now it has been shelved. That has more to do with the politics on the Government side of the House than animal welfare, does it not?

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. It also tells us about the Conservative Back Benchers who rally around the right hon. Member for North East Somerset, who has been a busy boy.

The Minister can wriggle all she likes on the proverbial hook about individual measures and suchlike, but the fact is that the Government’s resolve to proceed with the Bill, as set out by the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth, has broken for fear it might upset some of their Back Benchers, who have fewer concerns about animal welfare than the people they purport to represent.

As for the Government’s so-called position of ditching this Bill and introducing individual measures, where is the timetable? The Minister stood up to defend the fact that the Government will be bringing forward various measures, but there is no timetable, no detail and no

priority list. Nothing. Clearly banning the importing of foie gras and animal fur and making real efforts to tackle puppy smuggling are off the table. We do not know if we will get anything before the summer recess. What we are left with are the shattered remains of what was a perfectly decent and comprehensive Bill.

This Bill largely relates to England, but its UK-wide elements are extremely important and they show where Scotland is being held back on animal welfare. The dropping of this Bill also means that the plans to ban live exports for slaughter and fattening from or through the UK, which all the major parties supported and which appeared in each of the manifestos in 2019, have also been dropped. That move was described by Compassion in World Farming as an unacceptable backtracking on animal welfare commitments, allowing this trade to continue.

It gives me no pleasure to say that the dropping of this Bill must be a cause of celebration for ruthless puppy or kitten smugglers—both of those trades are lucrative in their own right and there are insufficient deterrents to the barbaric practice. The dropping of this Bill must also have been good news for those who import foie gras and animal fur products into the UK. The dropping of this Bill is a depressing day for those who genuinely care about animal welfare. For all the fights that the UK Government like to pick with the Scottish Government, the Scottish Government passed legislative consent for this Bill. It seems that even when they agree with the UK Government, the UK Government then decide to disagree with themselves.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): The hon. Lady is correctly outlining the deficits and the broken promises. She may be aware that Northern Ireland has even less legislation on animal rights. The Assembly even rejected an attempt to ban hunting with dogs and we have made no progress on issues such as having a register of banned welfare abusers and banning the online sale of puppies. She speaks about the UK-wide provisions. Does she agree that the House now has an opportunity to bring in progressive and far-reaching legislation that would even pick up the slack in regions such as ours, which are without governance?

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. What I find really distressing is that in Scotland we have come so far on animal welfare, only to find that we are shackled to this dead hand of a Government who refuse to act because they are paralysed by their own internal divisions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Patricia Gibson: I am making some progress.

Meanwhile, Scotland, under the SNP, continues to be a beacon across the UK and Europe on animal rights, with the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2021 and the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023. In its Programme for Government, the SNP implemented the majority of recommendations on the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002 and further measures on preventing trail hunting.

Angela Richardson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: No.

[Patricia Gibson]

The SNP is consulting on proposals to improve animal transport legislation and to phase out cages for game birds and laying hens, and farrowing crates for pigs; it is consulting on legislation to extend the framework for the licensing of activities involving animals to new areas such as performing animals and animal care services; it is considering whether the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals should have extra legislative powers to investigate wildlife crime; and it is reviewing the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 to inform future policy and legislative changes to tackle irresponsible dog ownership. Last year, it became a legal requirement for puppy, kitten and rabbit breeders to be licensed. There is ongoing work with the Animal Welfare Committee to examine issues associated with sheep castration and tail docking. This very week, highland cats are being reintroduced to the wild, and work will be undertaken over the next three years to save the species from extinction. The SNP is also examining the use of acoustic deterrent devices in salmon farming, as well as the issue of e-collars.

I could go on, but I fear that I am showing off now. I am showing the contrast between two Governments, a Government who are ambitious—

Angela Richardson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: The answer is no.

One of those Governments is ambitious, progressive and keen, as a mark—as the former DEFRA Secretary said—of how civilised Scotland is on these matters. However, we are shackled to a corpse who will not act and cannot act. I merely point out the dithering of the UK Government when it comes to delivering on their own promises in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. They do not even have the confidence to deliver their own manifesto commitments and the very Bill they brought to the House.

By contrast, only this week, Christine Grahame MSP introduced a Bill to the Scottish Parliament to tackle unlicensed puppy farming, establishing a code of practice for the buying and selling of dogs in Scotland. Meanwhile, in Scotland, we are forced to twiddle our thumbs waiting for this Government to implement their own measures on puppy farming.

Angela Richardson *rose*—

Patricia Gibson: People will read little about what I have just said in the media, but the Scottish Government are absolutely committed to the highest animal welfare standards, indeed exceeding EU regulations.

Jane Stevenson *rose*—

Patricia Gibson: The UK Government's work compares very poorly with the excellent work being done in Scotland, but where we in Scotland are reliant on the UK Government, in reserved areas, we are held back. Of course, that extends way beyond animal welfare, but I will not go into that.

I recall the nonsense we were told during the Brexit campaign about how Brexit would allow improved animal welfare standards, even outstripping EU standards, because we would be liberated to move at a faster pace of improvement. But this Government cannot move beyond

that—they cannot even move beyond the width of their own Back Benches. They are terrified of their own Members.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. The hon. Lady has made it abundantly plain that she is not giving way. It would be good if we could inject just a few of the normal courtesies into the debate.

Patricia Gibson: I am merely extending the same courtesy that was shown to me by the Minister.

The former Secretary of State for DEFRA, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), was right; everybody in the Chamber knows that he was right. The way we treat animals, in particular farmed animals, is a hallmark of a civilized society. Everyone who is watching can see what dropping this Bill tells us about this Government, and what we can conclude about how civilised they are when we compare and contrast their record on animal welfare with that of the Scottish Government.

The Bill was a significant moment in our progress towards improving animal welfare across the UK, but dropping it is out of step with what we know our constituents want and what we know is right. That is why I would support any motion to have the provisions of the original Bill passed through the House. Dropping the Bill shows that the Government are in retreat. They are out of ideas and have lost any semblance of moral authority. They have a Prime Minister who is afraid to proceed with his own legislation, despite it being in his manifesto, for fear of upsetting some of his notable Back Benches.

The UK Government are a shrinking, lily-livered, weak-kneed, base, husk of a shell of a Government; they have lost their way and their purpose. Dropping the Bill is symptomatic of that. Animal welfare will pay the price. To tell this House that the Bill has been ditched and that the Government will bring forward individual provisions, covering what was in the Bill, simply does not ring true. Quite frankly, it is a lot of nonsense.

We need to ensure that the important provisions in the original Bill, which the UK Government are too preoccupied and too cowardly to proceed with themselves, are allowed to progress through the House. That is why we in the SNP support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I appreciate that this is a sensitive and contentious issue, but we do ourselves no favours and no service by ignoring the conventions and courtesies of the House. I would like to see if we can inject a little more good temper into the tone of the debate.

That said, we have 22 Members still seeking to take part. I will put an immediate five-minute time limit on speeches. If there are a lot of interventions, as there have been in the past, then that will swiftly drop to four or even three minutes. Given the number of Members who wish to take part, I am afraid that is where we find ourselves.

4.24 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me early in this debate. I do not wish to flout convention, but may I make a personal

tribute to you, Sir, for the work that you have done from these Benches on supporting animal welfare measures? I know that you cannot talk on that matter yourself while you are in the Chair.

I also pay tribute to the Government for their support of my private Member's Bill, the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill, which is currently in the other place. I thank, too, the Secretary of State, the Comptroller of His Majesty's Household, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), and the officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who have helped me with that Bill.

The Government say that the measures in the now halted Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill can be delivered via statutory instruments and private Members' Bills. If that is so, can I have an assurance from the Government that, should there be wrecking amendments in the other place on the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill, Commons time will be afforded to us to ensure that the clearly expressed will of this House to enact that legislation can be met so that the legislation makes it on to the statute book before the end of this parliamentary Session?

I also pay tribute to this Government for achieving a number of animal protection measures. As the Minister told us from the Dispatch Box, they include: a new prison sentence of up to five years for animal cruelty; the Ivory Prohibition (Civil Sanctions) Regulations 2022 and the extension of its provisions; the installation of CCTV in slaughterhouses to ensure greater welfare standards; the micro-chipping of dogs and cats; and the establishment of the Animal Sentience Committee, so that all future Administrations will have to pay the highest regard to animal welfare. That being said, I am disappointed that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill has been withdrawn. It was probably the best vehicle to get all those manifesto commitments made three and a half years ago on to the statute book. However, whatever parliamentary vehicle is used, I want to see those commitments met and completed before the end of this Parliament to ensure that, among other things, the export of live animals for fattening and slaughter is halted. I know that none has taken place since Brexit, but it is important that we make sure that that becomes law. Let me point out that that has only been possible because we have left the European Union. If we were to rejoin, such a measure would not be possible.

Pet theft is another important matter. As has been mentioned, our love and respect for our pets is an aggravating factor when pets are stolen, and that should be recognised in law. I was pleased to hear the Minister say that measures relating to primates and to livestock worrying will also be introduced.

In the limited that I have left I wish to address the important matter of food labelling. We have a sophisticated electorate and they want to know how their food has been produced and the method of slaughter. I know that the Government had committed to a consultation on food labelling. I would be grateful if, in their response, the Minister or the Secretary of State updated us on where we are on that important matter.

It is important that, as a House, we try to park the politics when it comes to animal welfare, because the vast majority of us want to achieve the same thing, and it is only by working together that we will do that for the wellbeing of animals.

4.29 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I rise from my place to put on record my opposition to yet another broken promise from this Government. It is such a shame that this key legislation for the wellbeing of so many kept animals has been shelved. So many Conservative Members, alongside hon. Friends on the Opposition side of the Chamber, have done so much to secure that legislation, but they have been failed by the Government. Of course the impetus for the Bill originally came from the former Member for Richmond Park; I am sure in his ermine in the other place he is none too happy either. As is the case day after day with this Government, it is wasted opportunity after wasted opportunity.

The Government have been keen to cut trade with Europe, but now inaction offers the puppy smugglers a charter. While renter's reform offers nothing to support tenants to keep their loved pets, those who want to ship them are emboldened. Puppies continue to be illegally imported into the UK on an industrial scale, alongside increasing numbers of heavily pregnant dogs and dogs with mutilations. The pet travel scheme continues to be abused by smugglers; it is not fit for purpose. Smugglers continue to find loopholes to import dogs and puppies—often underage, unvaccinated and in poor welfare conditions that could have been fixed by the Bill.

But we are not looking at the only broken promise on animal welfare. Fur imports and exports were to be banned too. What happened there? The Government caved in to a small number of extremists in their own party. Ideology also hampers existing animal welfare efforts. While we remained in Europe, we supplied details of trade in live animal exports. Now we no longer even bother to collect the numbers. Inhumane live exports have been curtailed by the shambles of Brexit, but the Bill could end their shame forever.

It is not just in this country that we have abandoned animal welfare by abandoning the Bill. I should note a minor interest here, Mr Deputy Speaker: since joining this House, I have become involved with STAE, Save The Asian Elephants, alongside the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who has been indefatigable in his fight to protect these majestic creatures. He has done a lot on the Government side of the House to raise awareness of the plight these incredible pachyderms face. This is not just a welfare issue; it is existential.

The Asian elephant has been classified as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature since 1986. Their population has declined by more than 50% in the past three generations. Across Asia, these symbols of power and fortitude are at risk of extinction, and British and western tourists are a part of that risk. We must address and stop the commercial exploitation of Asian elephants through unethical tourism fuelled by businesses and their customers from outside India and south-east Asia.

On the Opposition side of the Chamber, we have action, not inaction, with an Opposition motion to bring back the kept animals Bill. I call on Members across the House to back Labour's motion today and bring back the Bill.

4.34 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I start by saying what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

(Mr Sharma), whom I congratulate on his position on saving the Asian elephant? That is a noble cause, if nothing else.

I will focus simply on the problem that we face right now. We have enough collective experience in government to know that large, multi-subject Bills will invariably lend themselves to unnecessary amendments. We knew that before, so my question is: why did we discover it so late that we have ended up having to dump the Bill? That is a gentle criticism of the Government, I know—I bear the scars of trying to do that myself—but we do know that, so we should not have found ourselves in the situation of having to dump the Bill and start all over again. If the Government's purpose is now to see the issues in that Bill proceeded with on a much tighter schedule, I understand that—although it could have happened earlier—but, if we are to do that, we need answers to some important questions.

First, do the Government have an idea of the timeframe now required for unpacking the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and for single-issue Bills to progress with speed? It would be great if my hon. Friends on the Front Bench would, when they return to the Dispatch Box at the end of the debate, start to put together some idea on that, because I think that would satisfy a lot of people outside this place as well.

Will all parts of the Bill be retained, or only selected elements of it? Will the Government support the pet theft part of the legislation, for example, which is closest to my heart? If not, what amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, in the form of statutory instruments, could be made to change quickly the rules and definitions of “property”. I worked very hard with many colleagues from all sides of the House to get the pet theft stuff through, only to discover during lockdown that that had become a criminal business, and a violent one to boot, in which often quite elderly people were knocked to the ground, beaten up—sometimes very badly—and pets of value were stolen. Not only were those people hurt, but they suffered the loss of what had become a friend.

We treat that too casually if we do not care about it. It mattered to our constituents then and still does today. The idea that the police take less action than they should because they characterise a sentient pet in the same way as they do a stolen bicycle is quite ridiculous. I say simply to my hon. Friend on the Front Bench that many of us are very disappointed that we have not got on with this quicker and earlier. I say that because the situation is now so desperate that this needs to be in statute by the next election, whenever that may be. It simply cannot be that we do not get it there. This should therefore be a priority for the Government.

I do not want to make it party political because, right now, our constituents expect us to work together for their benefit on this matter. We do not have a difference on it, and we should not create one, but what we should have is a Government response to what is quite clearly the emotion of the House in trying to get such legislation through. I urge the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), to answer these questions when she gets up. If there is anybody in government kicking around and saying “Oh, we can't do this; we mustn't do it; there are more important

things to do”, will she tell them that the mood of the House is that this is a priority? Let us do it, let us deliver on what we said we would, and let us get it done quickly.

4.38 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I rise in support of today's motion to revive the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. I hope that Conservative Members see that this issue stretches beyond party lines and will stand with us to improve the lives of millions of animals.

This year alone, hundreds of constituents have contacted me to call for more stringent animal rights. The Government's introduction of the kept animals Bill two years ago was welcome. It included a wide range of long overdue measures, ranging from tackling the keeping of primates as pets to cracking down on puppy smuggling and banning live exports. I looked forward to the Bill's progress and to working cross-party to ensure that it met its aims, but we now see that the Government were simply paying lip service to the millions who support those changes. Two years of delays and three Secretaries of State later, the Bill has been dropped for good, giving the green light to puppy smugglers and those who profit from such abhorrent practices—yet another broken Tory promise.

The 2019 Conservative manifesto was perfectly clear. It said, word for word:

“We will crack down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies... We will end excessively long journeys for slaughter and fattening... We will ban keeping primates as pets”.

Like so many other promises, those commitments now lie in tatters.

Ministers now say they will take forward each part of the Bill separately but, after so many broken promises and no clear timetable, how do they expect the public to trust them to deliver? Two years ago, when the Bill was introduced, the Government

“committed to improving our already world-leading standards”, but that is a far cry from the reality we see today. Under this Government's watch, Britain's proud record of being a leader on animal welfare standards is quickly diminishing. We are now falling behind Australia on banning primates as pets, behind the EU on ending the use of cages in farming and behind New Zealand on ending live exports.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware that, yesterday, we announced a consultation on banning primates as pets, which will enable us, through secondary legislation, to get that on to the statute book far faster than if we relied on the kept animals Bill? Does she agree?

Gill Furniss: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. We already have a Bill ready to go. It is oven-ready. It reached Second Reading and was ready to go the full distance. Her party chose to put a stop to it.

That U-turn flies in the face of so many experts on the frontline tackling these issues. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has warned that the UK is

“facing the prospect of a dramatic downward spiral in animal welfare.”

It makes no bones about it: while this Government dither, animals suffer.

We are a nation of animal lovers. Polling shows that 80% of the public agree that animal welfare should be protected by the Government through legislation. Very few issues garner as much widespread public support as this one. It is therefore all the more baffling that Ministers would choose to turn their backs on all those who wish to see change.

The only people celebrating will be those who benefit from these terrible practices that will now remain legal. It just shows whose side this Government are on: not the millions of us who want to see an end to the abuse and mistreatment of animals, but those who continue to profit from puppy smuggling and other despicable practices.

I know the Minister and have every respect for her; we have worked together on a number of issues over the years and I know of her compassion. I only fear that she has been sent here today to defend the indefensible. I hope Members will send a strong message today that we are committed to ending animal suffering once and for all by voting in favour of the motion.

4.42 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I pay credit to the Minister, and indeed to other Members, for outlining the huge number of animal welfare measures we have taken over our period in government, so I am a little disappointed that the Labour party says that we do not care about animal welfare. I give the Labour party credit for what it achieved in its years in government, but Labour is taking us and anyone listening for fools in saying the Conservative party is not interested.

This is an Opposition day debate. It is a day for fun and for Labour Members to do what they usually do, but I will not allow them to take over the Order Paper. We saw too much of that during the Brexit trench warfare times, when Labour tried exactly that. We did have a perfectly good animal welfare Bill, but I take on board what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said: it had become a Christmas tree upon which too many new baubles could be dangled. So we find ourselves where we are.

I was most interested in clause 40 of that Bill, which was very relevant to South Thanet because Ramsgate port—a fairly small port in the scheme of things—had become the only port in the country from which live cross-channel exports were taking place. We had to suffer this foul trade. It became a true stain on our community for far too long. I pay tribute to Kent Action Against Live Exports and particularly an activist there called Yvonne Burchall, who campaigned year in, year out to try to stop the cross-channel live animal export trade.

Matters came to an appalling head at the port on 12 September 2012, when 43 sheep died. Many had to be euthanised; others drowned—a truly awful event. Following that, Thanet District Council, the port owner, unilaterally banned the use of the port for live animal exports, and the public agreed with that; they did not want the port used for that trade. Unfortunately, the council was taken to court by three Dutch companies in 2014. The High Court ruled that the council had acted unlawfully in stopping that use of the port, and £5 million of local taxpayers' money had to be paid out in compensation.

It was clear that the basis for the Dutch companies' successful High Court action was single market rules; it was EU membership. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) made the point admirably that single market rules required animals to be treated not as sentient beings, but as mere goods to be traded as you please. It is funny; the Labour party, joined by the SNP, did all it could in the Brexit period to keep us in the single market.

I tried to stop live animal exports by other means. I put forward a private Member's Bill to amend the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847—a rather peculiar bit of legislation from the age of sail and steam, which said that any harbour had to be made available to any ship, because of the dangers in those days. That still applied, but I tried to change that so that any port owner could stop a ship, or stop a trade being conducted. It was a back-door route through which I tried to stop this trade. Obviously the Bill was not passed, but it was at least an attempt.

Brexit gave us the opportunity to take control of these matters—to decide what we, our electors, the country and Parliament want to do; and what Parliament wants to do is stop this foul cross-channel trade in live animals. I am very pleased that the trade has stopped since Brexit, but it has done so really for administrative reasons—because the Calais authorities did not want to spend a huge amount of money on new facilities where vets and others checked the animals. It is great news that, administratively, this trade cannot take place, but I say to the Minister that I want it banned legislatively, so that it cannot take place again. That is what my electors want, and it is what dear Yvonne Birchall has been fighting for all these years. I certainly hope that we can bring in the measure in some other way before the election.

4.47 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In their manifesto, three and a half years ago, the Government promised a single Bill that would crack down on puppy smuggling, ban live exports, protect sheep and other livestock from dangerous dogs, and ban the keeping of primates as pets—a Bill that I think pretty much everyone in this place would have been in favour of and voted for. The Government seem to have time on their hands; we will probably finish at about 6.30 pm today, and we stopped at 4.30 pm yesterday, so it is no excuse to say that the agenda is packed. Parliamentary time is clearly available, so there is no excuse for the Conservatives having failed to pass the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill that they promised in their manifesto three and half years ago, in the general election of 2019. We are told that all will be well—that the Bill will be broken up into bits and delivered over the next year. We will see.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Nearly 200 constituents have written to me about the Bill. They want it to happen, and are so worried that it will not. The plan is for the provisions to be put into private Members' Bills, but given that Members, not the Government, decide what is in private Members' Bill, and that there is no clear plan for how the measures will be apportioned to Members, I am not filled with confidence that this will get done before the next general election. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Tim Farron: I do not know when the next general election will be; most of us have no more than a bit of a clue about that. My hon. Friend makes a really good point: there is an absence of leadership from the Government. They have declared what they want to do, and most of us agree with it, yet they are delaying the process, for reasons that have been set out, though they all seem pretty weak. The Government are, at best, dragging out a process that should have been completed by now. At worst, this is in effect a betrayal of their promises to the electorate to care for our animals in a practical way. However, even before the Government begin that weakened and watered-down process, there has to be yet another month of consultation—pointless consultation, I would argue. A cynical person would say that that has the benefit to the Government of kicking the issue into the long grass of the summer recess. They might hope that after that recess, people will have stopped caring, but we will not have stopped caring.

All this dither and delay is transparently not because Government Members are all monsters who hate animals—that is clearly not the case. It is because the Government are scared of unhelpful amendments from their own Back Benchers. That is in keeping with what was demonstrated earlier this week by the mass abstentions on Monday night. Rather than challenging bad behaviour or standing up for what is right, we have a Government who habitually bravely run away. As Lord Lamont said in this place of a previous failing Conservative Government, they are a Government who are in office, but clearly not in power. That weakness is not just embarrassing for the Government, but costly: it costs animals the protection they need, or at least delays those protections, and it costs our country the reputation it deserves. As such, I support the Opposition's motion, as I hope they will support my private Member's Bill on pet theft and importation, tabled on 6 June. By the way, if the Government wished, they could give that Bill its Second Reading next week. I am not precious: it is all theirs if they want to take it off me.

The Government's own Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill matters, because how we treat animals and how we allow animals to be treated marks out what kind of people we are and what kind of country we are. We are a nation of animal lovers, not just in theory but in practice, so we cry out for a Government who will act in accordance with those values in practice. Liberal Democrats have a track record of animal rights advocacy, including improving standards of animal welfare in agriculture, ensuring the protection of funding for the National Wildlife Crime Unit, and ending the practice of housing chickens in battery cages while we were in the coalition Government. That matters because, like humans, animals experience suffering, pain and fear, so it is crucial that we change the law to better protect animals from harm.

Of particular interest to our communities in Westmorland and Lonsdale is that the Government's Bill would have extended the cover of law on livestock worrying to include deer, llamas and other animals, and would also have given police more powers to investigate and prosecute the worrying of sheep and other livestock. NFU Mutual estimates that livestock worrying costs farmers £1 million a year, and the word "worrying" does not conjure up the reality of what that practice actually means and what people in our communities understand that it means. For instance, sheep worrying by dogs means

ewes miscarrying lambs, lambs being separated from their mothers, and horrific incidents of goring causing unspeakable pain and suffering.

Just as the Government's weakness in this case is sadly characteristic, so is their willingness to put political considerations ahead of animal welfare. It is not that they do not care about animal welfare—they just do not care as much as they care about the politics. The Australia and New Zealand trade deals are a case in point. Those deals were agreed despite farmers and animal welfare charities protesting the fact that they gave an advantage to those who practise lower animal welfare standards over British farmers who practise higher standards. The Government's desperation for deals at any price for political reasons came at the cost of British farmers and animal welfare. Here we see a pattern: this delay, or this betrayal, is sadly characteristic. That might be hard for Government Members—many of whom, of course, care about animal welfare—to hear, so I challenge and invite them to prove me wrong by backing my private Member's Bill and supporting today's motion unamended.

4.53 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I am here not just on behalf of the many constituents who always write to me about animal welfare issues, but because it is a topic that many of us in this Chamber have complete consensus on. I have often said that in this Chamber, there is more that unites us than divides us, and our approach to animal welfare shows exactly that. As we have heard, 69% of UK citizens surveyed by the RSPCA said that they were animal lovers—it is a clear uniting factor. You only have to go for a walk on one of my constituency's beaches on a Sunday morning to see countless people walking their dogs.

I have always had rescue animals; I grew up with them. I have had rescue dogs, rescue cats and rescue chickens—they do not lay very well, but they are quite nice pets—and every Sunday afternoon, I go through the ritual fight with my children of "Who wants to muck out the rescue guinea pigs?" The point is that I have always been a vocal supporter of protecting our animals. We have to pay a real tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for the enormous amount of work he did during the pandemic on the pet theft taskforce. It was a great problem in North Norfolk, where people were having their beautiful pedigree dogs taken and stolen.

Not many people know this, but I am the glow-worm champion for the UK. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Yes, someone has to do it—and it is a real honour. The need for dark skies is a big issue in many parts of the United Kingdom, and Members probably do not know that glow-worms can be found in Kelling heath in my constituency, which is why I have had that honour. I have run the London marathon a couple of times and raised lots of money for local animal charities, as I am sure a lot of Members here have done. All of us in this Chamber consider animals and pets as having a significant part in our lives.

The Opposition need to recognise a couple of facts. The point has been made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig

Mackinlay) that, since we have left the EU, we have been able to strengthen our laws on looking after our animals and our pets. We are ranked the highest in the G7 on the animal protection index, with some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. Since the action plan for animal welfare was delivered in 2021, the Government have delivered time and again on their animal welfare commitments. We heard the Minister make that point about the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act. We have strengthened the Ivory Act 2018. Cat microchipping has also been strengthened—much to my delight, because when my beloved Clapton went missing, we were able to find him very quickly because of his microchip.

It is not fair for the Opposition to label the Government in the way they have this afternoon. It is very simple to understand that no matter what the Opposition have done to try to spin this, we are keeping the core elements of the Bill. We must set the record straight on that. As many have said, this is not being watered down, and it is not being simplified to push through legislation without proper due diligence. Instead of stretching the current Bill beyond its remit and its snapping, we are, as some Members have said, bringing forward single issues so that they can be properly debated and properly put through our processes. It is right not to overload the original Bill—that is proper decision making. It is proper legislating in this House to build strong, effective Bills that work for the purposes they are designed for.

I actually think the Government should be very proud of what they have done, and the Minister should be very proud of leading on this. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we are not watering the provisions down. We are bringing them forward, and we will deliver on them, as we already have on some of them, before the next general election.

4.57 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): If there is one thing I know, it is that my constituents care passionately about animal welfare. My inbox is full of emails about the importance of this topic to them. The scrapping of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and the prevarication on display today are, frankly, astonishing. I am baffled that Conservative Members cannot see how the withdrawal of the Bill makes constituents question whether this Government even care about delivering on their promises. As we have learned this week, trust matters to our constituents, and I know that my constituents care. They care about animal welfare and they care about the Government delivering on their pledges.

The dropping of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill also creates huge worries for zoos across the country, including Chester zoo in my constituency, which runs world-leading conservation research and work on animal welfare issues. It is very worried that, without this Bill, the uncertainty surrounding the legislative framework within which zoos operate will be perpetuated. This is causing it real difficulties in allocating the charity's spending. It is, in effect, in limbo. The Government need to engage with the zoo sector quickly to bring forward the central aims of this important Bill.

Chester zoo is not the only way my area is leading on animal welfare issues. Cheshire West and Chester Council was one of the first to ban permanently the practice of trail hunting on council-owned land, and the National

Trust soon followed suit. The changes introduced by the previous Labour Government have stood the test of time, from the bans on foxhunting and fur farming to the action taken to stop experimentation on great apes and the testing of cosmetics on animals.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I hope that today we can have an element of consensus and that the Government will reconsider their position. It seems strange, when the official Opposition are backing a Government Bill, to not want to progress that Bill for the benefit of animals.

Samantha Dixon: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We must ensure that we do not stop here; we should lead the way on animal welfare. The belief in protecting animal welfare should not come and go depending on what is politically convenient or fashionable at the time—it should be a matter of principle and conviction. There is no need to go round the houses with this issue, introducing what appears to be a parliamentary pick-and-mix approach. We need urgently to go from A to B as simply and as quickly as possible. I will be voting to bring this Bill back, and I encourage Members across the House to do the same.

5.1 pm

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I begin today by paying tribute to the thousands of committed animal welfare campaigners and organisations that have dedicated their lives to making the world a better place for our animal friends. One name that might not be known to people in this House is the late Brian Wheelhouse from my constituency. Brian founded the Whitehall Dog Rescue centre. He was a real earth angel whose life was to be of service to animals, and I was lucky enough to get my rescue dog Suzy from Brian. At Brian's funeral this week, I asked his family for permission to make these remarks in Brian's memory.

I am hugely disappointed to be here having this debate today, especially given that the Conservative party has made huge in-roads on improving animal welfare since 2010. In 2019, under the leadership of Boris Johnson—incidentally, he and his wife passionately care about our animal friends—he ensured that all Conservatives stood on a manifesto to bring forward the measures in this Bill. I was immensely disappointed and flabbergasted to hear that the Bill would be dropped, and I immediately set up a petition with a constituent to demonstrate that the British public also want to see the kept animals Bill become law. In just over two weeks, we have collected more than 11,000 signatures, and I thank all the organisations involved with helping to promote the video, too.

I wrote to the Prime Minister this week to highlight the petition and all the organisations that want the Bill brought back. The Bill would have led the world in furthering protections for animals by banning the cruel trade of live exports, protecting zoo animals, tackling puppy smuggling and ending the cruel practice of ear cropping.

One of the specific provisions in the Bill tackles the pet owner's worst nightmare: pet theft. That happened to me as a child when our family dog Shadow was stolen from our garden. Even today, nearly 40 years later, I wonder what happened to that wonderful, gentle dog. I pray that she found a good home. Like any theft, the emotional consequences leave a lasting mark.

[*Dame Andrea Jenkyns*]

The kept animals Bill also took a stand against puppy smugglers. For the first time, it would have effectively limited the practices of exploitative dog breeders and puppy farms. It is easy to be duped by puppy farms—12 years ago, I bought my wonderful mini schnauzer Godiva from what turned out to be a puppy farm, which thankfully got closed down later. The Bill would have brought in so many different parts of legislation, including Tuk's law on microchipping, banning primates as pets and banning the import of dogs with docked ears.

We have not got much time left, so I am trying to cut my speech down. The public want us to deliver the legislation. One Member on the Opposition Benches said that about 80% of people across the UK want us to bring in laws to protect animals. I have one question for the Government: do animals matter?

I say to the Opposition that I came to the Chamber today to vote with them. I remember, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), the Brexit times when the Opposition tried to take control of the Order Paper, and we would not have had Brexit had that happened—that was their plan. I think that the Opposition have been too clever by half, and actually they are using animals as political pawns; that is wrong. So, unfortunately, I cannot be in the Lobby with them. Had they kept it simple and tabled a normal Opposition day motion, I would be in the Lobby with them, but I cannot let an unelected Opposition take control of the Order Paper. What else would they do next?

5.5 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): As I rise to talk about this issue, I regret that it has come to the House as an Opposition day debate rather than as part of the Government's legislative programme. That, of course, is after the Prime Minister pledged his commitment to the kept animals Bill during his ill-fated leadership election last summer. It is not just me who will be meeting this news with disappointment. I am sure that many colleagues on both sides of the House will have had inboxes full of constituents asking where the kept animals Bill is and why the Government have abandoned it and their manifesto pledge to protect animals.

We all know that Britain is a country of animal lovers; it is part of our national identity. When covid struck in 2020 and lockdowns were put in place, many people across the UK felt isolated and in need of companionship. It is no surprise that public demand for pets, and dogs in particular, soared. However, of course, the supply of dogs cannot be increased overnight. There is an obvious timescale for breeding and bringing new puppies to the market, so an opportunity opened up for malicious practices to take place and puppy smugglers to take advantage.

Bad as the exploitive practices of puppy smuggling are, they rarely take place in isolation. I was recently contacted by a constituent who wanted to highlight the problems they are having with their neighbours, who they believe are running puppy smuggling from their home. Vans and cars turn up at the property at all hours, there is noise, there are unpleasant smells, and there has been conflict with other residents in the street, including

a violent assault. It will not surprise anyone to hear that my constituent also reports that a cannabis operation is being run from the same property.

Many up and down the country will find that story familiar. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who is no longer in his place, alluded to, there is increasing evidence that organised crime gangs are taking an interest in puppy smuggling. Also concerning is how the distribution networks bringing smuggled puppies to the market increasingly mirror how drugs and other illegal and prohibited substances are entering our communities. I am afraid to say that the problems from the puppy smuggling industry do not stop here. Due to the brutal and cruel nature in which puppies are bred and brought to the UK by smugglers, they are at an increased risk of developing severe behavioural issues and bringing parasitic diseases into the UK, putting all of us at risk.

Since the kept animals Bill was last debated in this place, we have had a few personnel changes on the Government Benches, but constantly changing the ringleader of the Conservative party circus is no excuse for breaking the promise that the Government made with the British people. Last month, the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), accused Opposition Members of playing political games with the Bill and said that that was why the Government had to withdraw it. But what we have is a Government, elected with an 80-seat majority, who have no confidence to take decisions, running scared of the Opposition.

It is not as though there is not enough parliamentary time for the House to debate the issue. It is clear to anyone looking in that the Government's legislative agenda is threadbare. How many private Members' Bills will it take to recreate the legislation that these Houses have already progressed beyond Second Reading—20, 30, or more? I am still relatively new to this place, but even I can see that this is a ludicrous way to do business. The Government might be more interested in fighting among themselves and waiting for the next election, but on the Opposition Benches we want to get on with supporting and delivering for the British people and protecting animals. There is only one party playing political games. When the Conservative party comes to the table, it is always the British people who lose.

For these reasons I am disappointed that the Government have withdrawn the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill from their already sparse legislative agenda. I call on right hon. and hon. Members across the House to support Labour's motion and bring the Bill to its proper conclusion.

5.10 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Like others, I am disappointed that we are not progressing with the legislation. As the Parliamentary Private Secretary on the original Bill Committee, I am familiar with it, but to such an extent that I was in agreement with the current Secretary of State's decision that the only way to deliver the legislation, which is in the manifesto that we stood upon, is to expedite the individual components. I hope we can do that. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ministerial team for their ongoing engagement and explanation of what has been going on.

It is an interesting day to have chosen for this debate. Earlier today, I attended the first parliamentary Great Get Together, which was hosted by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) in honour of her late sister, who quite rightly said:

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

Having been PPS on the Bill Committee, I know that there is consensus to get these measures through, which is why I am somewhat staggered to find that the Opposition party would stoop so low as to play politics with puppies, because that is what we are looking at. When Government Members go home tonight there will be a social media campaign that says that we have done X, Y and Z to puppies. The reality is that we are delivering the legislation that will enable us to do what we said we would do.

Labour has been in opposition a long time, which is great for this country, but it means that they have no idea how to deliver complex legislation. If the ministerial team decide that it has to be broken down to enable it to get through, I have confidence in this Minister to do that. Like most of us, I would dearly like to stop 10,000 puppies being illegally imported each year and I want the legislation to be speeded up so we can stop it as soon as possible.

I want to take the opportunity to thank the animal welfare organisations I have campaigned with since I got to this House—Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, the RSPCA and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home. Like all of us, they want to find a way to deliver this legislation smoothly, so that we can unite behind our much loved animals.

5.12 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Each week my office is inundated with correspondence regarding animal welfare, whether on reviewing the use of cages for laying hens, prohibiting the import of dogs with cropped ears or ensuring proper crackdowns on illegal foxhunting. The last Labour Government stood on a solid record—they banned foxhunting, fur farming and the testing of cosmetics on animals. Those pieces of legislation have stood the test of time.

This Conservative Government promised that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill would create “the world’s strongest protections” on kept animals and livestock, then they scrapped it. When it was dropped, the Minister stated that he would work closely with the zoo sector to realise the central aims of the Bill. So many in the sector are waiting for progress on that. The Bill would have enhanced the welfare and protection of animals in the UK, and the conservation impact delivered by British zoos. There is now uncertainty around the legislative framework that the zoos operate within. Why was the Government committed to the Bill then and not now?

I recently visited Chester zoo in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon), where I spoke to several people, including those who work on the conservation side. They do some important work. Chester zoo is a leading conservation and education charity. It has a conservation masterplan, with a target to halt or reverse the decline of at least 200 highly threatened populations of plants and animals, as well as a target to improve the landscape for wildlife. It has a conservation mission to prevent extinction. I believe it is the most-visited tourist attraction in the

UK outside London. If you have not been, Mr Deputy Speaker, I encourage you to visit Chester zoo. It is stunning. It has been asking Government Ministers to visit for a long while, but it has not had a visit. I think the zoo is keen to host them, show them around and talk to them. [*Interruption.*] The shadow Minister is stating that he has been or is in the process of going.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I have been and I am going again.

Navendu Mishra: That is comforting to know.

The dropping of the Bill was disappointing for the zoo sector. The uncertainty surrounding it and the updates to the standards has risked the strategic development and spending plans of large charities such as Chester zoo, and they would welcome increased stability in the process. They urge the Government to meet directly with them. Their experts and conservationists can help to put the UK on a legislative path that supports their mission to prevent extinction, and to do so in a timely fashion. I must stress that the zoo sector feels let down by the Government. They must engage in a meaningful manner with the sector.

The Bill would have provided protections against puppy smuggling, puppy farming, pet theft and live animal exports. I am certain that a majority of Members receive a large amount of correspondence on those issues. We will see what happens in the Lobby, but I hope more Government Members vote with us later.

Many of the emails and letters I receive on this topic contain some of the following phrases. I will pick a few:

“As a nation with proud animal welfare standards, we cannot stand by and allow this to continue.”

“I believe that the UK Government should keep its promise”.

“It is extremely disappointing that the Government has taken a huge step backwards on this important issue, and I hope you will take every opportunity to remedy the situation.”

“The commitment to end this cruel trade was in the 2019 Conservative and Labour party manifestos, and the Kept Animals Bill had broad, cross-party support.”

Many of the animal welfare measures in the last Queen’s Speech were lifted directly from Labour’s animal welfare manifesto, but they failed to grasp the full details. The reality is that the Government have a long track record of failure, and scrapping the Bill adds to that long list. It is utterly shameful.

5.17 pm

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I praise the actions of the Secretary of State and support the Government’s record on animal welfare. The measures they have taken demonstrate a genuine commitment to proper animal welfare. I shall continue to be a critic as and when necessary. However, I believe that the Government have struck the right balance between compassion and practicality on welfare. Although the Government have not presented the Bill, I am reassured that the elements that come through in secondary legislation will deliver.

I am going to do something that all Members could have done. I pledge that if I am successful in the private Members’ Bill ballot, I will bring forward a Bill on sheep worrying. That could have been done by anybody. If I am outwitted, outmanoeuvred or beaten to the ballot by somebody else, then I will do zoo regulation. I do not think any of us should dodge that opportunity if we really care about animal welfare.

[*Sir Bill Wiggin*]

We should be proud that the UK has the highest welfare standards in the world. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) is not in his place, but I did his job back in 2005-06. We have delivered on an amendment to the Animal Welfare Act 2006, to which the Labour Government then conceded, to increase the sentence for cruelty to five years. It was not until my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) brought forward his Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 that we saw that sentencing go from six months to five years, which is what it should be. There are lots of other minimum standards that are very welcome.

Opposition Members who talked about hunting and religious slaughter are partly responsible for why a wide, broad-brush Bill will never work on animal welfare. We have to be specific. There are too many extremists out there. If this was about Just Stop Oil, we would hear squeals from Opposition Members, but oh no, this is much too difficult because it really matters.

NFU Mutual estimates that dog attacks on farm animals across the UK cost £1.8 million last year. On 30 May and 1 June this year, West Mercia police reported that as many as 28 sheep had been killed at different farms in Herefordshire because of dog attacks. We must have the toughest possible deterrents, and clear rules for dog owners when they are walking among livestock. Farmers are faced with the horrendous consequences of mauling by dogs: sheep with half their faces missing, lambs left without mothers, and pregnant ewes miscarrying—not to mention dogs being shot.

This is a genuine animal welfare issue. It is not notional or theoretical, like the attempts to limit suffering of animals by banning electric dog collars, which are vital tools enabling owners to train their dogs not to chase sheep by causing a small electric shock. In 2010, the Labour-run Welsh Government outlawed the use of electric collars for training dogs; subsequently, North Wales police recorded that between 2013 and 2017, 648 livestock animals had been killed and 376 had been injured. That led to the shooting of 52 dogs, the highest number reported by any of the five forces.

What is worse is that livestock worrying is getting worse. In Wales, the cost of farm animals that were severely injured or killed by dogs in 2022 was 15.5% higher than the number in the previous year. We can see from what has happened in Wales that the ban on electric collars is not working, and I urge the Government to reconsider the ban before we see many more dogs being shot for worrying livestock. The NFU Mutual figures show that in England, the midlands have been worst affected by dog attacks, with claims totalling an estimated £313,000 in 2022. I therefore urge the Government to continue their progress on delivering proper, considered and effective animal welfare.

People watching this debate who are naive like the Zoological Society of London—for which I used to work—do not understand that if we vote to accept this motion, we will bring in a Bill that is not ready for scrutiny and will create problems in all parts of the House, whereas today we are at least united in our desire for better welfare for animals.

5.22 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I should begin by saying that I wish we had not had to have an Opposition day debate on this topic. There are plenty of issues relating to broken Britain that we could have discussed instead. However, I do think it was a constructive move by my party's Front Bench to try to make progress on an issue on which there is considerable consensus across the House and, indeed, strong feeling among our constituents. One does not have to be an MP for very long to realise that in every constituency in the country a huge number of people volunteer at animal rescue centres and take time to lobby their MPs about important animal welfare issues.

As many others have said, we are undeniably a nation of animal lovers, and it is only right that our laws reflect that. The way in which we treat animals reflects who we are as a nation, and given that assessment, I fear that at present it is not looking very good. The Minister—to whom I have listened many times as she has discussed many different animal issues—says that her Government are seeking to do the right thing by animal welfare, but unfortunately, unless the Bill's passage is completed, the fact remains that actions would speak far louder than the empty words in her letters to me, which I share with my constituents. A constituent from Galgate wrote to me recently about the delay in the Bill's progress, saying:

"This move goes against all notions of humane reaction with our fellow-creatures and is a backwards step into the dark ages".

I ask Conservative Members to reflect on how this looks to so many of our constituents who rightly care about the way we treat animals.

Perhaps optimistically, I decided to look through the case files that I have prepared on animal welfare issues over just the last couple of years. I had hoped to find an animal for every letter of the alphabet, and to be able to explain to the House how many animals people feel passionate about, but I am afraid I got no further than "B", because so many different issues were involved. Whether it is badgers and the badger cull, bears and the use of bearskins on the caps of the King's Guard, or bees and the pesticides we should be banning to protect nature—and that is just the letter B. I could have gone on and done the entire alphabet, but I am conscious of time and I know that that would not have been possible today.

I want to say a few things about animal welfare issues and particularly about hunting, because many of my constituents are concerned by the Government's failure to close the loopholes in the Hunting Act 2004. There is clear evidence of fox hunting continuing across the UK, often with devastating consequences. That is not new information; it has been on the Government's radar and has been confirmed by senior police officers for years, but the Government still refuse to act. There is huge public support for taking action, and I am confident that that would have support in the House too. Polling shows that 78% of British people want the Hunting Act strengthened.

I want to mention a constituent who has picked up another animal welfare issue—the cost of living. The cost of living crisis affects our pets as well as those in our household, and my constituent is trying to set up a pet food bank in response to the current need. That is a wonderful idea but, as with food banks for humans, it should not be necessary.

Recent polling showed that three quarters of the public would like the Government to progress more laws on animal welfare. In many ways, the Minister is delivering far more pieces of legislation in order to get the Bill through, but that will take longer. How many individual private Members' Bills does she expect it will take to get the Bill into legislation? How optimistic is she about doing that in the timeframe before the next scheduled general election?

I want to say a few words about how widely felt this issue is in my constituency. Last Friday, I visited the primary school in Winmarleigh—a very small village just north of Garstang and south of Lancaster that many Members have probably never heard of—and the children repeatedly asked me about animal welfare and cruelty to animals, but it is the same when I am out knocking on doors on the Ridge estate in Lancaster. Whether it is the rural parts of my constituency or the urban parts, and whether it is my youngest constituents or my oldest, all my constituents feel incredibly strongly about this issue. Ignoring it ignores our moral obligations and human responsibilities to animals, so I hope the Government will reconsider the Bill and bring it forward as speedily as possible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Looking at the time, and given that we really do need to start the winding-up speeches at 6 o'clock, I am reducing the time limit to three minutes. I call Peter Gibson.

5.27 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I am incredibly proud of our record on animal welfare. We are a nation of animal lovers, and that is not merely the preserve of the Conservative side of the House. Since I was elected, I have had over 1,100 letters from constituents on a range of animal welfare issues. The UK is the highest ranked G7 nation on the animal protection index and the joint leader globally.

Animal welfare has been a priority for this Government since 2010, so let us look at the record. We recognised animal sentience in law. We increased maximum sentences for animal cruelty. We launched the consultation on fixed penalty notice powers. We introduced new protections for service animals with Finn's law. We launched the animal health and welfare pathway, with new annual vet visits and grants. We implemented the revised welfare at slaughter regime, including CCTV in slaughterhouses. We raised standards for chickens. We revamped local authority licensing regimes. We banned third-party puppy and kitten sales with Lucy's law. We made microchipping compulsory for cats and dogs. We introduced offences for horse fly-grazing and abandonment. We introduced new community order powers to address dog issues. We banned wild animals in travelling circuses. We passed the Ivory Act 2018. We gave police additional powers to tackle hare coursing. We banned glue traps.

I have supported the private Member's Bills currently before Parliament that ban the import of hunting trophies and the trade in detached shark fins.

I am also delighted to have supported the ten-minute rule Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth). Known as Emily's law, the Animal Welfare (Responsibility for Dog Attacks) Bill would criminalise fatal dog-on-dog attacks in the UK, ensuring

irresponsible dog owners are held to account. Darlington recently saw a horrific dog-on-dog attack when Sasha, a mixed-breed terrier, was attacked by a German shepherd. The Bill is important in addressing that issue.

It is simply laughable for the Opposition to claim that Conservative Members do not care about animal welfare. Our record speaks for itself. If Labour cared so much about this issue, why were a Conservative Government needed to bring forward legislation after Labour had been in power for 13 years?

Labour's motion, which attempts to take control of the Order Paper, is yet another cynical attempt to generate clips and videos to pump out on social media as propaganda targeted at constituencies it lost in 2019. The voters of places such as Darlington will ask, "Why now?" The Labour party moves with the wind, but on this side of the House we stand by our commitments. I have every faith that our fantastic DEFRA Ministers will deliver on our promises.

5.30 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): My inbox is full of angry constituents who feel profoundly let down because the Government dropped the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which could have addressed things such as puppy smuggling, live exports and pet theft, about which we all care deeply.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group for zoos and aquariums and will focus on the Bill's zoo licensing measures. On Second Reading, colleagues across party lines were clear that the Bill was the right thing to do. Indeed, the zoo sector fully supported the Bill. It disappoints me that the Minister has not yet detailed how these individual Bills will come forward. If she could speak about the timetable, it would give much reassurance.

Good zoos and aquariums have, for many years, been committed to raising standards of animal welfare and boosting their conservation work. They have been leading on this and we should be proud that, through the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, our zoos and safari parks adhere to world-leading welfare standards. They are also leading the world in their conservation and research.

I urge the Minister to visit ZSL Whipsnade to see creatures that are extinct in the wild. Entire species now rely on the zoo to survive and recolonise in the wild. Or she could go to Scotland, where she will see that Scottish wildcats bred at Highland Wildlife Park have returned to the Cairngorms. Or Plymouth, where she will see the National Marine Aquarium restoring sea grasses to our seas.

In 2022, BIAZA zoos and aquariums undertook 836 conservation projects around the world and spent £28 million on conservation. They supported 90 native species projects and worked on 1,339 research projects. Conservation is the backbone of all good zoos.

The Bill set out the most significant changes to zoo licensing since the 1980s, and the measures would have strengthened the conservation, education and research of all zoos and aquariums. It would have made zoo licensing easier to enforce, and therefore guaranteed the high standards in animal welfare that good zoos and aquariums are proud to uphold, and it would have replicated them across the sector. Zoos and aquariums tell me they are unclear what happens next, so will the

[Sarah Champion]

Minister please contact the society, speak to the zoos themselves and make sure this much-needed legislation goes through, in whatever form? We would appreciate that commitment today.

5.33 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I was pleased when I heard the Opposition had put this subject on the agenda and this morning I was even thinking that I would perhaps be joining them in the Lobby. That was until I read their motion, which is obviously a deeply cynical ploy. I do not think anyone on the Government side of the House should be party to it. Playing politics with the welfare of animals is completely unacceptable.

No one in this House cares more about the issue of live exports than I do and I am determined that the Government will deliver on that manifesto commitment. We have had the clearest of assurances from the Government on that. Today, I reiterate my call: we need those single-issue Bills to come forward to this House as soon as possible. I know that is a message the Minister here will have heard. I hope we hear that across government and we can get that legislation to this House, so we can vote for it, get it through and get a ban on the statute book.

I will continue to raise that issue with Ministers at every opportunity because the live export of animals for slaughter is cruel. It causes distress, suffering and injuries and it is time it was brought to an end. In this country, the live export of animals for slaughter has been a concern for about 100 years. Many of us will remember the protests of the 1990s, but successive UK Governments were powerless to do anything about it because of single market rules. Now we are free of those rules, the time has come to end this cruel trade. If animals are reared in this country, we need to take responsibility for the circumstances in which they are slaughtered. That must mean ensuring that they are slaughtered at the closest point to where they are reared which is practical and viable.

I also want to see a single-issue Bill brought forward to crack down on illegal imports of puppies, about which so many of my colleagues have spoken today. That is another cruel trade and we need to crack down on it—again, this is a benefit of our departure from the single market and the EU. I pay tribute to the work of the Dogs Trust in highlighting that issue. I want the rules to be changed. I want visual checks to be a routine part of the process of checking on imports of dogs. I want that legislation to come forward as quickly as possible. So I appeal to the Government to bring forward the legislation. When it is here, we should table no amendments. We should get on, back these Bills and put them on the statute book.

5.36 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I rise to speak in favour of the Opposition motion and will happily vote for it when the House divides later. As has been well-established, the Scottish Government have been leading the UK in these areas of animal welfare rights and livestock movement regulations for a considerable time. We have heard today that the Bill largely related to England and Wales only, but

part 3 did extend to Scotland, as did clauses 42 to 53 and schedule 5. The Scottish Government granted their consent motions to the proposals in the Bill that related to areas of legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament.

It has been two years since the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was introduced. The SNP supported its introduction, as well as any carry-over motion, but here we are, three Ministers deep and no further forward on many of its aims. We are no further forward on banning foie gras and animal fur imports, or on tackling illegal puppy and kitten smuggling in or indeed around the nations of the UK. The SNP notes, as do my constituents, who write to me in their hundreds on animal rights matters, the abysmal failure of the UK Government to prioritise animal rights and welfare abuse mitigations.

The Scottish Government commit to the highest animal welfare standards, so we have real concerns that a Brexit Britain backslide has begun and we are in real danger of not meeting the adequate regulatory protections for both domestic and wild animals that we all know to be required. That backslide would be in stark contrast to the work being undertaken in Holyrood by the SNP, as we deliver the Scottish Government's Programme for Government. That programme has introduced and passed the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023, and strengthens the law on the use of dogs to hunt and flush foxes and other wild animals. We will also, through an independent taskforce, consider whether the SSPCA should be given extra powers to investigate wildlife crime. The Scottish Government will also review the Dangerous Dogs Act to inform future policy and legislative changes to tackle irresponsible dog ownership.

It is somewhat ironic that, when there is agreement across the nations of the UK on matters such as this, when all this collaborative work is taking place by both Governments, and when this Bill enjoys cross-party support in this House, the UK Government have just decided to pull the plug on it. As things stand, and while we wait, the smugglers find new ways to avoid detection and illegally import heavily pregnant dogs and puppies, as well as those that have suffered mutilation such as ear cropping—we have heard so much about that today. So along with organisations such as the SSPCA Lanarkshire animal rescue and rehoming centre, which serves my constituency, the Dogs Trust and Compassion in World Farming, I simply say to the Government: get on with it and get the Bill back in front of the House.

5.39 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Since being elected to this place, strengthening animal welfare protections has been a priority of mine and an issue close to my heart, not only because I am an animal lover but because my constituents of Old Bexley and Sidcup are also hugely passionate about animal welfare.

I made my maiden speech on the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, in which I championed the strengthening of animal welfare in law, and I am proud of what the Government have since achieved on animal welfare, which is more than any other party. I am also proud to work with a range of excellent animal welfare charities and organisations.

On pets, we have made microchipping mandatory for dogs and cats, which will help to reunite lost pets with their owners. We have protected service animals via

Finn's law and banned third-party sales of puppies and kittens via Lucy's law, as well as introducing tougher sentences for animal cruelty.

On wild animals, we banned the use of wild animals in circuses, introduced one of the toughest bans on elephant ivory sales in the world and announced, only last month, that we would extend that law to cover five endangered species, including hippos, whales and walrus.

But we can, and must, go further. I welcome the Government's commitment to bring forward measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill individually during the remainder of this Parliament. I particularly welcome that the Government remain committed to cracking down on puppy smuggling and banning the import of young, heavily pregnant or mutilated dogs, such as those with cropped ears or docked tails.

In 2015, the Dogs Trust, which does excellent work, set up the puppy pilot, which cares for illegally imported puppies seized at the border. The scheme has since cared for 2,256 puppies that, if sold, would have had a market value of over £3 million, highlighting the current financial incentives for smugglers. The trust found that as many as 75 dogs had had their ears cropped. The trade is horrific and puts money in the pockets of the illegal importers. I welcome that the Government are firmly committed to cracking down on that quicker than would have been possible. I urge my hon. Friends on the Front Bench to do so as soon as possible.

Given the Government have already explained that these vital animal welfare protections will be delivered quicker as single issue Bills, it is difficult to understand why Labour has tabled the motion. It is nothing more than another cynical political game. For a party that claims to be a Government in waiting, where are Labour's own policies? Does the Labour party have any, or is it scared that whatever it announces today will be changed within weeks, like nearly all its other pledges? Where are the Labour Members? This is an Opposition day, but the Opposition Benches are empty. Instead of playing political games, I will instead continue to press and support the Government in championing animal welfare and providing a voice for those that do not have one.

5.42 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am very pleased to speak in such a vital debate, as animal welfare is of immense importance to my constituents in Pontypridd and Taff-Ely. In fact, it is regularly the No. 1 issue in my post bag each month.

I am proud to represent a community of such fierce defenders of animal rights, but they are not just in my area of south Wales—research published earlier this year showed that the Welsh care more about animal welfare than any other UK nation. So I stand here today as a proud Welsh MP, who is both proud to represent my constituents, who believe tirelessly in animal justice, and proud to represent Welsh Labour, which has worked so hard to improve the lives of animals in Wales.

Of course, there are many charities I would like to mention. I recently had the privilege of visiting Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Chester Zoo and Hope Rescue, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), to hear more about the fantastic work they do. With that in mind, I want to take the opportunity to hold this Tory Government to account on their track record.

Far too many vital Bills that could have made a real, tangible difference on this issue have been abandoned by this reckless, careless Tory Government: the Animals Abroad Bill—dropped; the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill—abandoned. It is no surprise that we are here to discuss the Government's failure to keep its promises.

As for the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill, as much as I welcome the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), the fact that he has effectively legislated Government policy on behalf of the Government somewhat begs the question, what the hell is the point of them? I need not remind the Members on the Government Benches that they were elected on a manifesto commitment to ban the import of hunting trophies. Relying on their own Back Benchers to ensure the Government keep to their promises is absurd; it shows they cannot be trusted to keep their own promises, which really is a terrible look.

The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was meant to be a groundbreaking opportunity to enact world-class animal welfare legislation by clamping down on keeping primates as domestic pets, banning the import of dogs with cropped ears, banning the export of traumatised live animals for slaughter or fattening, and finally, once and for all, providing for pet theft to be a specific offence. All are enormously important policies with extremely wide support across the House and among the public. All are key components of the Government's cornerstone action plan for animal welfare from 2021. All are now abandoned—yet another devastating broken promise from this tired and weak Tory Government.

Although animal welfare is devolved, importation and exportation remain a Westminster matter. In Wales, the Senedd stood ready to consent to and vote for the Bill also applying to Wales. When it was announced just last month that the Bill was to be scrapped and that the Government intended to proceed with elements of the original Bill just split up in component parts, we had no clear timelines and there was no clear interest in allocating parliamentary time for this before the summer recess. The vital policies look set to be kicked into the long grass.

While Tory Ministers are beholden to the hunting lobby and they dither and delay, thousands of animals are suffering in misery, or will die in horrific conditions. We have been waiting for this Bill for years. This is just not good enough. It is clear that the Tories have lost interest in legislating for animal welfare. In fact, they have lost interest in legislating for anything at all. I am pleased to say that, in contrast, Labour could not be stronger. We on this side of the House stand ready to legislate. We stand ready for Government. That is what this country needs and that is what our animal welfare laws need. We need a Labour Government.

5.45 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Animal welfare is incredibly important to everybody in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea. Building on the incredible legacy of Sir David, the animal champion in this place, I have already been vocal on the issue of animal welfare. I have introduced a ten-minute rule Bill, known as Emilie's law, to try to do something about the growing and horrendous incidents of dog-on-dog attacks. Emilie's law, the Animal Welfare (Responsibility for Dog Attacks) Bill, seeks to address a key gap in the law. As things

[*Anna Firth*]

currently stand, a dog owner is not liable for any form of criminal prosecution when their dog fatally attacks another dog. I very much hope that the Government can find a mechanism for correcting this loophole in the law. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) for his support, and I was shocked to hear the horrendous story in his own constituency.

I am also a patron of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation. I am incredibly proud of this Government's record on animal welfare. I have been shocked to hear what Labour Members have been saying this afternoon. On farms, we have introduced new regulations for minimum standards for meat chickens. We have made CCTV mandatory in slaughterhouses in England. For pets, microchipping became mandatory for dogs in 2015. We have protected service animals via Finn's law. We have banned the commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens through Lucy's law. In 2019, our Wild Animals in Circuses Act became law, and we have led work to implement humane trapping standards. We have also introduced the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021, extending animal cruelty sentences from six months to five years' imprisonment, thanks to all the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who cannot speak in this debate. We also published an ambitious and comprehensive action plan for animal welfare in May 2021, which relates not just to farm animals, but to wild animals, pets and sporting animals. It has both domestic and international ambition.

Rather than backing those improvements, Labour Members are playing political games. Yet when we look at the devolved Welsh Administration, we can see that their record on animal welfare is shambolic. Let me give just one example. This year, we legislated to make cat microchipping compulsory to help reunite more lost cats with their owners. We are the only nation in the UK to have done so. The Labour-led Welsh Government have not announced any plans to follow our lead.

In conclusion, I shall be standing with this Government, and I look forward to helping them maintain their strong record on animal welfare. They have my full support and the support of all my constituents in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea.

5.48 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I wish to concentrate my remarks in the brief time that I have on the very worrying issue of dog attacks on livestock. In that regard, I commend the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) for his remarks. He was right to point out how serious this matter is for rural communities. I also applaud his commitment to introduce a Bill if he is successful in the private Member's ballot. That is an important commitment to make and one that I have also made. I just hope he has greater luck in the ballot than I have had, because that is legislation that needs to be brought forward.

I will not pretend that I am not disappointed that the kept animals Bill has fallen, because the measures included in it to address livestock worrying now face great uncertainty. It is a tragedy of the situation that we now

must depend on the luck of the draw of the private Member's ballot to see whether those measures get on to the statute book.

As anybody who represents a rural constituency will know, one of the most horrific experiences that anyone can witness in life is the aftermath of a dog attack on livestock—primarily sheep, but also other livestock. In the last few weeks alone, I have spoken to three different farming families in Ceredigion who have suffered attacks on their livestock by dogs. Together they have lost about 40 sheep completely, with a further dozen or so on life support, as it were. The photographs are gruesome. We cannot underestimate how traumatic it must be for the animals to suffer such gruesome attacks and to die in such a horrible way.

We need to make sure that the measures that were included in the Bill to address the deficiencies of the current legislation, the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act of 1953, are brought forward in haste, because that Act is not fit for purpose as it stands. Police desperately require greater investigatory powers in order to bring more instances of dog attacks to prosecution and to serve as a deterrent to other dog owners, so that they make sure that they keep their animals under control.

I am not going to pretend that the measures included in the Bill were perfect. I would have liked it to have gone further; I was on the Bill Committee and I argued that we should make it a necessity for dogs to be kept on leads when livestock are nearby. However, the Bill was better than nothing. That is why I hope, for the sake of those farming families and the sheep and other livestock in my constituency, that the relevant measures will be brought forward in haste.

Before I sit down, I plead with the Minister, when she addresses the debate, to explain whether there will be another consultation on that measure. Do we need to go through that whole process again, or is it something that can quickly come onto the statute book by means of a private Member's Bill? I know for certain that there will be MPs across the House from rural constituencies who will be keen to work together to get it into law.

5.51 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): As Members from across the House have said, we are a nation of animal lovers, and animal welfare has been a priority for this Conservative Administration and previous Conservative Governments going back to 2010. It is important to outline the success stories that the Conservative Government have delivered. We passed the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2022, which enshrined into law sentient beings. Last month, we launched the new Animal Sentience Committee, which will advise this Government.

We introduced tougher sentences for animal cruelty by passing the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021, which increases the maximum custodial sentence from six months to five years. As others have done, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on that; he cannot speak in the debate because of his role within the Department, but we must congratulate him on his efforts in bringing forward that Bill. This year we legislated to make cat microchipping compulsory, which will help to unite lost pets with their owners. Last month we announced that we had extended the Ivory Act to cover five more endangered species: hippopotamuses, narwhals, killer whales, sperm whales and walrus.

We implemented a revised welfare at slaughter regime to introduce CCTV in all slaughterhouses. We banned traditional battery cages for laying hens and permitted beak trimming only via infrared technology. We have also banned third-party puppy and kitten sales through Lucy's law, the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019. I could go on—[*Interruption.*] And I will! We introduced offences for horse fly-grazing and abandonment, a key point that I am pleased the Government have addressed. We introduced new community order powers to address many dog-related issues and banned wild animals in travelling circuses. Again, I could go on: we also banned glue traps and gave police additional powers to tackle hare coursing.

This Government have committed from the Dispatch Box that they are determined to bring forward the provisions within the kept animals Bill through individual pieces of legislation—more nimble pieces, which can work through both Houses at speed. That commitment has been given.

It is therefore incredibly disappointing that the Opposition have decided to use this debate simply to politicise animal welfare. They have even sent out a joint letter signed by both shadow Ministers, not to us as individual MPs, but to the Conservative party headquarters. It is signed by all Labour parliamentary candidates—although, looking through the list, the Labour candidate going up against me in Keighley has not even bothered to sign it. I do not quite know what that says about his commitment to the Labour party or indeed to animal welfare. However, we need to raise our game on this issue, not politicise it. I am pleased that this Government have brought forward the measures they have, and I am pleased with the commitments they have made at the Dispatch Box today.

5.55 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I begin by drawing the House's attention to the impact on animal welfare that the dither and delay on this issue has caused. In the two years since the kept animals Bill was first introduced, the Dogs Trust has cared for 485 puppies that have been smuggled into the country, often in desperate conditions. It has also looked after 101 dogs who were transported while heavily pregnant, which we know poses significant risks to their health. Scrapping the Bill has given a green light for that cruelty to continue.

The Government used to claim that the Bill, first promised in the 2019 Conservative manifesto, would bring in some of the world's strongest protections for pets, livestock and kept animals. Its provisions included ending live animal exports for fattening and slaughter, tackling puppy smuggling and restricting the keeping of primates as pets. I can see that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has asked me to correct the record on that point, and I am happy to say that the Government committed to introducing in legislation the individual facets in that Bill. It is my understanding, however, that private Members' Bills are a lottery and are introduced by individual Members, so I still suggest that that is a broken promise. Of course, the challenge with the reliance on private Members' Bills is that they are not just a lottery but a minefield.

We need to hear significant assurances from the Minister on the timings, on what will and will not be brought forward, on what elements of the Bill she considers her priorities, and on why she considers the other elements of the Bill less of a priority so that they will be phased behind those. We had a Bill that had already passed its Second Reading and was ready to go. We are told, "People tried to broaden it, so it became a Christmas tree Bill," but, for heaven's sake, the Government have a significant majority and a mandate to deliver on this matter—those excuses simply do not wash. It is for that reason, and that reason alone, that I will support the Labour motion. We need to see the kept animals Bill in statute, in full, as soon as possible.

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

5.57 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a shame that Conservative Members continue to peddle the fake narrative that they have been told to push by DEFRA Ministers and the Whips—that my party is playing political games. The motion, if they have read it, clearly demonstrates the opposite. It is about bringing back the Government's own legislation without amendment or embellishment. Let us remember that the Bill has been through Committee—through scrutiny—and passed Second Reading, and is the Government's own legislation.

This is about just doing the right thing for our nation's animal welfare. The country can judge for itself which is the true party of animal welfare, but I think we have all heard enough speeches from the Labour Benches to know. Although the Government and their compliant Back Benchers do their best to dance around the issues and deflect responsibility, we know the real reason they withdrew this Bill: leaked internal documents clearly show that they scrapped the kept animals Bill just to avoid "unnecessary tensions and campaigns" in their own party and on their own Benches. I think that we have seen that played out again today.

The truth is that the Tories are far more concerned with their own internal politics than the welfare of animals, and they have shown contempt for the electorate and a staggering inability to govern as a result. The kept animals Bill is not the first animal welfare legislation that this Tory Government have mishandled. As others have mentioned, they also bungled their "world-leading" Animals (Low-Welfare Activities Abroad) Bill, which has not come to pass—yet another casualty of a fractured party mired by infighting.

Robbie Moore: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Alex Sobel: I give way to my constituency neighbour.

Robbie Moore: The shadow Minister is making an excellent preprepared speech. I note that he and his fellow Opposition Members are agreeing to the aspirations of this Conservative Government, but what I have not heard throughout this Opposition day debate is one new policy idea from Labour; is he able to expand on any ideas they might bring forward?

Alex Sobel: The hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, is making the case for why he should vote for this motion: we are not bringing forward Labour policy; we are bringing forward Conservative policy—we are

[Alex Sobel]

bringing forward a Conservative Bill that was meant to be delivered by a Conservative Government. Conservative Members are going to vote against their own policies. There have been lots of speeches today about our having consensus in this place on animal welfare issues, and we are proving that. I am sure, however, that the hon. Gentleman and other Conservative Members will vote against the Labour motion, thereby disproving that that is the case in reality, rather than just in theory.

How many animals must have suffered from the delay we have had and the Conservatives' abject political failure? By not legislating for the provisions of their own Bill and waiting two years to admit finally on 25 May—a month ago—that they were abandoning it, they have created an unknown number of animal victims. How many animals have suffered because of this political choice?

Conservative Members can continue to argue that the thin gruel of the Government's legislation on animal welfare is a success, yet they still have not managed to ban fur and foie gras, as they promised the public in their manifesto four years ago and which has cross-party support. Just like that other flagship piece of animal welfare legislation, the Animals (Low-Welfare Activities Abroad) Bill, this good piece of legislation has been cast aside—consigned to the scrapheap. I think we can all agree it shows how low animal welfare really is on the Government's list of priorities.

The kept animals Bill was a solid piece of legislation, as I said in response to the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). It covered a wide range of issues; although it is not the most newsworthy legislation, it is vitally important. The Conservatives promised to bring in some of the world's highest and strongest protections for pets, livestock and kept wild animals.

In the Labour party, animal welfare is not a debate; it is a priority. I praise a number of colleagues who made important contributions to this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) made excellent points about pet smuggling and is right that the pet passport scheme has loopholes and that this Bill would fix them. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) was rightly horrified by the keeping of primates as pets, and this Bill is the solution. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion)—the esteemed chair of the all-party group on zoos and aquariums, which does great work in representing a global success story for the UK in conservation—rightly pointed out that the Bill would update the now woefully out of date zoo licensing standards. Since the Bill was dropped by the Government, there is no Government plan—if there is, I would like to hear it—on zoo licensing, which has been left in the wilderness.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) astutely pointed out that puppy smuggling is part of organised crime. The Government clearly do not take animal crime seriously either. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) has a world-leading zoo in her constituency; a number of other Members from the north-west also praised her zoo, and I will be visiting it shortly and am sure I will see her there. She rightly pointed out that licensing issues continue to plague zoos across the country. She

also pointed out the trailblazing work by her council on trail hunting, which others have since adopted. The hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) also made excellent points about zoo licensing, and it is great that there is so much support for that. He also made powerful points for his constituents that the Government should keep their manifesto promises; he cited a couple of powerful examples from his constituency casework.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) highlighted the high number of issues just beginning with the letter b, and I was pleased to hear about the bees, badgers and other b animals. She talked about the cost of living crisis affecting pets, too, and the need for pet food banks. There are many other issues with our beloved pets that the Government need to address. My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) reminded us of the animals abroad Bill that the Government are dropping as well, and made the wider point that a Government legislating by private Members' Bills is not a Government leading but a Government following their Back Benchers.

Peter Gibson: I had the privilege of having my number drawn in the private Members' Bills ballot a number of years ago, and I brought forward a Bill, though not about animals. I can attest to the fact that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who was Under-Secretary of State for Transport at the time, directed that Department to give me every help along the way. If the Government support a private Member's Bill, they absolutely lend their support to the individuals taking them forward.

Alex Sobel: That is a different point, on which I agree—I have been on Bill Committees with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison)—but my point is that using private Members' Bills to get the measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill through this place is not the same as the Government legislating. It is merely piecemeal legislation. There are no guarantees that every measure in the Bill will get through the House by the end of the parliamentary Session, before the next general election. The most likely outcome is that hardly any will, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), the shadow Secretary of State, but the proof will be in the pudding; at the general election, we will all see.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) is right, again, about the dither and delay. He made a number of good points, including the point that the Bill has been so long in gestation that it predates his entry to the House. A number of Members who have spoken have not been here as long as the Bill. That is why, in the motion, we propose resurrecting the Bill, and have set a date—12 July, which is soon—on which to get it moving through the legislative process. It is really quite simple: we politicians need to do our job, and do the right thing. In this case, that is to end the unnecessary suffering of innocent animals. We call on Government Members across the aisle to join us in the Lobby and give this place time to consider the Bill—a Bill that was brought to us by the Government. Let us work together to do the right thing,

and put animal welfare before party politics. I heard Government Members say that they supported the Bill; they voted for it, and even served on the Bill Committee. Why can they not join us in voting for the motion today, and give the Bill time to get through this place?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the Secretary of State, I emphasise once again how important it is for all Members who spoke to get back to the Chamber in time to hear the Opposition spokesperson, as well as the Minister. It is very discourteous not to be here for those speeches. It is incumbent on Members to follow the debate, and not spend a lot of time away from it, so that they know when the wind-ups start.

6.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who spoke in the debate. I remember my first weekend as a Member of Parliament; within just a few days, I had received more emails asking me to sign an early-day motion about hens' beaks than on anything else. That was a clear sign, if we did not know it already, of how passionately people feel about animal welfare. I am sad that today's debate, in which the Opposition are trying to take control of the Order Paper, has tried to weaponise animal welfare, rather than promote it.

Clearly, there is strong support right across the House for the Government's ambitions on animal welfare. I assure the House that this Conservative Government, and Conservative MPs, are fully committed to delivering our manifesto commitments. Some hon. Members have suggested that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was in our manifesto. That is not the case; let me get that clear. I appreciate that Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs do not spend their time reading Conservative manifestos. The commitments are there, however, and those are what we intend to deliver.

As for those who have derided the use of private Members' Bills, I point out that some of the most significant legislation on animal welfare has come in through such Bills—and let us be clear: no private Member's Bill gets through Parliament without the full support of the Government. Often, that support includes the provision of advice, and officials from the Department writing the legislation. I am delighted that we have really competent officials doing that, who have helped much legislation get through.

Ashley Dalton: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr Coffey: No.

I have heard a few things today about how manifestos need to be honoured. That is what we intend to do. It is why my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries came before the House less than a month ago to set out how that was going to be the case. I think the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), talked about not U-turning. He should perhaps give that advice to the leader of the Labour party, who has U-turned on pretty much every pledge he made to win the Labour leadership.

At some point, I think there was some clarity that the intention of the shadow Secretary of State was to propose the Bill as presented to Parliament and at the stage it had reached. Indeed, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), has just said that it was a good piece of legislation. Last December, a different shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones)—said to the House that Labour wanted to amend the Bill to make it more fit for purpose. When they were invited by one of my predecessors, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), not to push some of their amendments which were not necessary, Labour absolutely refused to do so. That is why, I am sorry to say, there is a lack of trust in what has been tabled by the Opposition.

It is important for all politicians to be honest about what we have done already on animal welfare, and what we intend to do. That is why I am highly concerned by the publicity stunt—another misleading publicity stunt—created by the Opposition today. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton stated that if the Government voted against the motion, which is simply about giving control of the Order Paper to the Opposition, we would be voting to continue puppy smuggling, puppy farming, pet theft and live animal exports. That is simply not true. I would go so far as to say that it is a falsehood, and it is those sorts of statements that bring this place into disrepute. That approach is now a regular feature of shadow Ministers' speeches.

As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Minister set out our approach in an oral statement less than a month ago, building on our track record, so that we have the highest animal welfare standards in the world. I fully recognise that previous Labour Governments have helped us make that good progress. That is why I welcome the Opposition's new-found enthusiasm for what we on the Government Benches are trying to do and have spent the past more than a decade delivering, and the manifesto commitments we have made. I have said that we will crack down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies, and we will, but I should point out to the House that that smuggling is already illegal. We pledged that we would end excessively long journeys for slaughter and fattening, and that is what we will do.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton claimed that we are letting live animal exports continue. There has not been a single animal exported from this country for fattening and slaughter since we left the EU, and we will make sure that that does not happen through the necessary legislation, but let us be clear to the House and the people listening to this debate: we can only take forward that measure because we left the European Union, something that Labour and other Opposition parties tried to block. There are other aspects of the law that we are changing; if we were still in the European Union, we would not be able to change them. We are changing retained European law.

We said that we would ban keeping primates as pets. For people who have not seen our written ministerial statements today, we have already published our consultation—which is a necessity—prior to laying secondary legislation. I fully expect that secondary legislation to pass through the House before the end of the year. Making that reality happen will enable us to bring in the necessary legislation more quickly than if we had relied on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals)

[Dr Coffey]

Bill. Of course, we also promised measures on animal cruelty, ivory, microchipping and animal sentience, which we have delivered.

The House may also recall the comprehensive action plan for animal welfare two years ago, which covered a total of 40 areas relating to farm animals, companion animals, sporting animals and wild animals, included both legislative and non-legislative reforms, and covered both domestic and international action. We have been delivering on our promises. We have increased penalties for animal cruelty: new, higher prison sentences are already being used in our courts. We recognised in law that animals are sentient beings, which my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) pointed out as being absolutely vital when he discussed his experience as a vet. Across Government, all policy decisions need to take that recognition into account.

We have already made cat microchipping compulsory. That was in an amendment tabled to the Bill; we have already done it. The Welsh Labour Government have failed to do so. We have brought the Ivory Act 2018 into force, and we have extended it to five more endangered species.

This is in addition to the wide array of reforms we have introduced since 2010, including slaughterhouse improvements, mandatory CCTV and improving the welfare of laying hens and meat chickens; companion animal reforms relating to breeding, pet selling and pet boarding; banning wild animals and travelling circuses; banning glue traps, and new powers to tackle hare coursing, horse fly-grazing and various dog issues. We continue to make progress on important issues by backing Bills that ban the import of hunting trophies, ban the trade in detached shark fins—I was pleased to see that it had already passed its Third Reading in the other place—and another that is under way to ban advertising here of unacceptable animal attractions abroad. We are also making strides to improve farm animal welfare, with the animal health and welfare pathway, and through vet visits supported by financial grants. We will continue to focus on delivering for animals without being distracted by, frankly, Opposition antics.

I now turn to some of the points raised in the debate. There were various questions about whether puppy farms are to be allowed. No, they are already banned. They were banned by legislation that we passed in 2018, and it was further tackled by the Lucy's law ban on third-party sellers. On stopping primates being kept as pets, primates in the future must be kept to zoo standards. That is in the consultation and it is how we will regulate it, so that is one of the issues. On the future Government approach to a live exports ban, if the Scottish Government would like us to continue to extend this to Great Britain, we will be very happy to do that when the Bill gets presented again.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) asked whether we will commit to tackle pet theft. He will know that it is already illegal to steal pets. However, one of his proposals was that there are some other legislative vehicles we could use and that we could check the use of those powers. I will ask my officials to check that

legislation to see if we can use such powers, but I am also looking at other possible legal vehicles to achieve that.

The hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) asked what we are doing about zoos. DEFRA maintains a close working relationship with the zoo sector, and we will continue to build on that to identify improvements. We aim to publish updated zoo standards later this year, which we have developed in collaboration with the sector and the Zoo Experts Committee, which raise standards and support enforcement. I enjoyed my visit to Chester zoo a few years ago. Actually, as a little girl, I used to go and see Jubilee the elephant. Of course, I went at the time of her predecessor, but I know there are Labour MPs in neighbouring constituencies who would like to close Chester zoo tomorrow, if they could.

On aspects of what there is to do, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin), who I think spoke eloquently. He has offered to sponsor a private Member's Bill, which I would be very happy to take him up on.

Alex Davies-Jones: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr Coffey: I am actually answering the questions that were asked during the debate rather than taking further interventions.

On other elements, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth). I know she is passionately concerned about dog attacks, as indeed is my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson). My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) spoke powerfully about the importance of animal welfare. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) asked whether, if the legislation is introduced, there will be another consultation, and the answer is no. That would not be needed, because a private Member's Bill can just be adopted and supported.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby); making such a contribution has been a really important element. There are many more colleagues I could thank, but I do want to thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay). I know that this is a particular passion of his. There were too many good speeches from Conservative Members to pull out, but let us come back to—

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 183, Noes 256.

Division No. 266]

[6.18 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy)

Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike

Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise

Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo

Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher

Streeting, Wes
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
Tellers for the Ayes:
Mary Glindon and
Navendu Mishra

NOES

Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick

Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig

Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie

Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin

Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and
Robert Largan

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)).
 That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 262, Noes 0.

Division No. 267]

[6.32 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Choche, Sir Christopher

Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evannett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura

Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth

Johnston, David
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryllyn
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Pawsey, Mark

Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain

Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Amanda Solloway and
 Robert Largan

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

Gary Sambrook and
 Tom Randall

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House notes the Government's statement on 25 May 2023 regarding the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill; and welcomes the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries' commitment that the Government will be taking forward measures from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill individually during the remainder of this Parliament, including on the keeping and licensing of primates, livestock worrying, export of livestock, pet theft and the importation of dogs, cats and ferrets.

Private Pension Schemes: Regulation

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

6.44 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured the debate. The heading refers to “private pension schemes”, but I want to refer to a particular scheme, the Nissan pension plan, although I accept that some of the issues I will raise could affect other schemes as well.

Let me start by giving some of the background. The Nissan pension plan is a defined benefit scheme that was closed in 2020. In the north-east, this issue mainly affects those who work at the Nissan manufacturing plant, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). However, many of the employees lived, and continue to live, across the north-east, including in my constituency.

As in other pension schemes, benefits under the Nissan scheme are subject to an annual increase. However, the rate of that increase depends on when the pension entitlement was accrued. The part of the pension that was accrued after 2005 is increased by up to 2.5%. The part that was accrued between 1997 and 2005 is increased by 5%. Anything accrued before 1997—this is the main part of the scheme—is subject to discretionary increases by the pension trustees.

I say that at the beginning to explain the context of how the issue I am going to raise has come about. In 2011, the trustees of the Nissan pension scheme changed the rules around the funding when individuals take a lump sum out of their pension—when people retire, it is quite common that they commute a lump sum from their pension. The trustees decided that any lump sum would initially be paid through money in the accrual pot from 1997 to 2005—the pot with the highest increase. Should that pot be used up, they would go to the next pot—the post-2005 pot, which gets the second highest annual increase. Only if that had been exhausted could the pre-1997 contributions be touched. In effect, that reversed what happened under the plan’s previous rules. The impact is that, if a Nissan pension scheme member takes a lump sum from their pension, their remaining pension will increase at a lower annual rate—if there are any increases at all; I will come to the pre-1997 pots in a minute, which have not had an increase for 23 years. This was brought about by decisions taken by the pension trustees.

The issue was raised with me by my constituent Steve Clare, who has now been inundated as other pensioners have learned what has happened to their pensions. He has formed an action group, which has members from across not just the north-east of England but the country who are part of the Nissan pension scheme. Hundreds of people are affected, and they are finding out about these changes only when they come to take their pension and realise that they are not actually getting any increase in it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Member for bringing this issue forward. He said in his introduction that this issue will affect many other people across the United Kingdom who have

pensions, and I will give an example. I recently had a young lady in my office whose pension has decreased over the last two years. She said, “Jim, I have no idea how these things work, but I know this: by the time I retire, my state pension won’t be enough. How do I know what to do?” That is the eternal question; the fact is that people have no idea what happens with their pension—they trust the provider. Does the right hon. Member therefore agree that, now more than ever, we need to ensure that providers are trustworthy—that is No. 1—and that that comes with better and good regulation, which, with respect, is down to the Minister and the Government?

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Member—it would not be an Adjournment debate without his intervention. He raises an interesting point. Most people do not understand their pension; they put their trust in the provider. They think that they are saving for their retirement and that they should have a pension when they retire—let us be honest, we have all encouraged people to pay into a pension—only to be let down by the way in which the various schemes operate. I will touch on the regulation in a minute.

I want to make two key points at this stage. First, the change to the pension scheme was not directly communicated to pension plan members. In fact, having done some research, I understand there is no legal requirement for the scheme to do so. However, the trustees cover themselves slightly on page 8 of the 2011 annual report by saying that, during the planned year, they had made changes to some factors and a calculation of methodology—it is literally two lines in the annual report. I beg anyone to understand what that meant in practice for people’s pensions. The annual report provided no further detail and, frankly, it is not worth the paper it is written on. The first time most people found out about this was when they realised the pension they had already taken was not increasing.

According to the Pensions Regulator’s website, trustees must act in “the best interests” of scheme members, as well as “prudently, responsibly and honestly.” In this case, I would argue that the trustees are not putting the interests of pensioners first; they are putting the interests of Nissan Motor Corporation above those of pensioners. The cumulative effect of what they have done is to save Nissan money it would have put into the pension scheme. Nor would I argue that it is responsible or honest to hide the changes in less than two lines of an annual report. There was no direct communication to let pensioners, or potential pensioners, know about the changes and how they would affect future years.

When I heard about this, I thought the obvious person to go to was the pensions ombudsman or the Pensions Regulator. Well, there was a bit of a ping-pong between the two of them. One wrote to me saying that the other was responsible, and vice versa. It went backwards and forwards. Frankly, my experience of them is that they are about as much good as a chocolate teapot. They are just blaming one another. It was this Member of Parliament writing to them—heaven help an individual pensioner writing to them to get any joy out of them.

It comes back to the point raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on regulation and how we control these pension schemes. As I say, my experience

of those two organisations has not been very good, so I would like the Minister to look at that point about the regulator and the ombudsman.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Constituents have contacted me on this very issue, so I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this debate. Does he agree that this is an outrageous way to treat workers and that, frankly, it reflects terribly on Nissan?

Mr Jones: It is. These people have worked hard and saved into their pension. They think they have done the right thing and, through no fault of their own, they have found themselves in this position.

I did finally get a line out of the pensions ombudsman; he said that he was not prepared to look at the case because that notification, that one line in the annual report, was good enough. I find it absolutely amazing that it could be argued that this is communication with pension members. I doubt very many people actually read their pension scheme's annual report. I am one of the sad people who do, but that is because of my trade union background. Many people do not. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) knows that I am a bit of an anorak when it comes to the pension industry. Again, the idea that that can be held up as showing that the pension trustees have informed the pensioners is ridiculous. But that was the end of the game—no more correspondence came forward from either the regulator or the ombudsman.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for securing this debate. I know how hard he has worked on this issue, and I am also grateful for his time in talking me through some of these issues. I have been contacted by two constituents who have also been affected by this. They make a similar point to him, pointing to the one and a half lines in the “annual pension meeting report”, as they term it. So it is possibly not even the annual report. They say that the impact of that change has never been explained. Does he agree with my constituent who said that this was a very underhand way of approaching pensions?

Mr Jones: It is a very underhand way. If people's pensions are going to be changed by some trustees, they should at least fully inform people of the effects. In this case, some people based their decision, especially before 2011, on what lump sum they would take on what was going to go forward. I would be interested to know whether those retiring now and accessing this scheme are being told, “In most of your pension, you won't get any increase in future.” The hon. Gentleman demonstrates another point: this affects people not just in the north-east of England, but across the country. Transparency and honesty with people about their pensions has to be achieved.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend for all the work he has done on this issue and for bringing this debate tonight. He is talking about the number of people affected and saying that they are not just in my patch, in Sunderland, or even just in the north-east; they could be spread right across the country. Does he have any idea of the number of people who may be involved and affected by this?

Mr Jones: I do not, but I know that Mr Clare, my constituent who has put this on Facebook, has been inundated with messages from people from around the country who were not aware. Partly it is the cost of living crisis—suddenly, people are thinking, “Wait a minute, why isn't my pension going up as much as it used to?” It is all right saying to people, “You should be tracking this and what you're doing” but most people do not live like that. They just assume that a credible pension scheme such as this should treat them fairly and that they would actually get this. So the number of people affected could be quite large.

Secondly, I said earlier that the pre-1997 benefits are subject to an annual increase at the discretion of the trustees. Well, there has been no discretionary increase in these pension pots in the Nissan pension scheme for 23 years. Nissan has made no additional contributions to the scheme to provide any increase. If someone's pension is mainly in the pre-1997 pot, inflation is eating it away: inflation in the cost of living now, but also in future. If they live long enough, it will basically be worthless. We have 9% inflation at the moment, but if that is not dealt with, it will eat away at the pensions of those people who expected that they would have a comfortable retirement.

In 2020, Nissan said that the defined-benefit scheme was unsustainable. Let us be honest, many defined-benefit schemes were closed. However, the issue with that is in 2020, Nissan made £68 million in profit. The company has also received many millions of pounds of public money, but it is clearly not doing the right thing by its workers.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Mr Jones: Most people did not find out about the implications until they realised that their pension was not being increased. The fact that Nissan had not put anything into the scheme means that the pensioners are basically paying for the scheme as it goes forward. Ultimately, Nissan needs to put money into the scheme, just as other organisations have had to put into their schemes, but that brings me back to the point about what the trustees are doing—they are clearly not acting in the interests of the pensioners.

This is one scheme, and I accept that there are others where this will have happened. Hard-working people are being short-changed. They trusted that the pension trustees would be looking after their interests, when they clearly are not.

I know some people will say, “Why are you attacking Nissan?” Well, I do not wish to do that. Nissan has been a fantastic employer, bringing employment and regeneration to the north-east, over the last 20-odd years. Nissan has not only employed people, but it has provided jobs in the supply chain as well. It has been an economic success story for the north-east. However, we must remember that that success has been derived from the hard work of people who are now in receipt of pensions. We should not forget that, in terms of the situation in which they now find themselves.

[Mr Kevan Jones]

The Minister will know that this will not be the only scheme that has been affected, but could she look at the ombudsman and the regulator? They are clearly not fit for purpose. In this case, we have an issue that will grow. Possibly after this debate, more people will look at their pension statements and realise how they are being short-changed. It is not fair that hard-working, loyal employees of Nissan are being made to pay for issues that are not theirs. They have worked hard and deserve their retirement. They expected a good retirement but, alas, they are not going to get it, in many cases.

7.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing the debate and I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to it.

It is absolutely vital that pension savers have confidence in the running of their pensions, as we have discussed this evening. Employers and trustees must be open and transparent with their pension scheme members, and be absolutely clear when they make changes to the benefits members will receive or how they are able to take their pensions.

Savers in defined-benefit schemes are in entirely advantageous positions, which is why the Government require specialist advice to be sought in advance of anyone wanting to transfer significant savings out of a defined-benefit scheme and into a defined-contribution scheme.

It is equally important that when members opt to make changes to the way they receive their benefits, or indeed any pensions, they can access the information and guidance they need to understand what the implications of that would be. It is extremely concerning that there seems to have been a lack of communication, as the right hon. Gentleman outlined. It is of course the case that many schemes offer members a number of choices of how to take their benefits, such as partly in a lump sum if the scheme rules and tax rules permit it. In these cases, the scheme rules detail the calculations to be used, and the trustees can change the details of the scheme rules if they are able to do so within the scheme.

Although legislation is silent on the way in which these rules and calculations must operate, there are safeguards for members. Trustees, as discussed, have a duty to act in the interest of all members rather than of any particular group, and to do so they must take into account a range of factors. They will, for example, take into account the funding position of the scheme to protect the interests of current and future members and may make changes to the shape of benefit arrangements in the pursuit of that goal provided that the scheme rules allow it. Trustees should also work closely with the scheme actuary to ensure that all members get a fair value from the commutation arrangements. But—this is the key point of the debate today—it is crucial that each member has sufficient information before deciding whether alternative arrangements, such as taking a lump sum, are the best course of action for them. If members feel that they were given incorrect or insufficient information

to make an informed choice, or if the trustees did not act according to the scheme rules, then they can take their complaint to the pensions ombudsman.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he wrote to the regulator and to the ombudsman and both referred him to the other, and he asked what redress there is for members in this situation. Let me clarify the role of the two organisations. The Pensions Regulator is the UK regulator of workplace pension schemes. It makes sure that employers put their staff into a pension scheme and pay money into it. It also makes sure that workplace pension schemes are run properly, so that people can save for their later years. Its focus is on the running of those pension schemes, trustees and scheme managers. There are duties on those parties and those working with them, including to report breaches to the regulator.

The pensions ombudsman, on the other hand, adjudicates on disputes between pension schemes and their members, as we are discussing in this case. If members of any scheme would like help in understanding options for retirement income and any documentation they have received for their scheme, I encourage them in the first instance to contact MoneyHelper, which is provided by the Money and Pensions Service, an independent, non-departmental public body.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Many dozens of my constituents are affected by the Nissan pension scheme. We have discussed in this debate the role of the ombudsman. The answer the ombudsman has given in this case is entirely unsatisfactory, and I know that all my constituents affected think so too. What was the Minister's view of the ombudsman's response in this case?

Laura Trott: I will come to that in a moment. If the hon. Lady thinks I have not answered her question properly, then she is very welcome to intervene again.

As I was saying, the Money and Pensions Service is an independent, non-departmental public body, which provides a free information and guidance service to the public on all matters related to workplace and personal pension schemes. In this case, I understand that in determining one case—not the individual case of Mr Steve Clare, but a case relating to identical issues in the Nissan pension plan—the ombudsman noted that the plan members were presented with an illustration of future benefits and options in retirement. However, if that was not the case—and certainly from the speech of the right hon. Member for North Durham that is not what appears to have happened—I ask him to provide me with all the details that he has and I will raise it directly with the ombudsman myself and provide a copy of the response.

Ben Everitt: That is exactly the case, certainly for one of the two constituents I have been contacted by. Further to that, the word they use in their correspondence to me is that they were “encouraged” to take out a lump sum. To me, that goes beyond giving information and crosses over potentially into giving advice. Given that that advice was not in their best interest, because it has affected their pension so disastrously—to the tune of more than £100,000—is there a case for looking at the regulatory side, rather than the ombudsman, in relation to the advice that has been given?

Laura Trott: It is absolutely correct that scheme members should have received an illustration, as discussed. If that was not the case, that is something we need to pursue. If instead they received advice that was indeed misleading, that should absolutely be taken up with the ombudsman and, where necessary, the regulator. Again, if my hon. Friend would like to pass me any information he has on that case, I will take it up directly with the ombudsman.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not aware of any illustrations being given, but, if they were, that illustration would also have had to explain to individuals where the lump sum was coming out of and its impact on future increases on the pension. I shall do more research and talk to people, but I am not aware that that type of detail was ever explained to people, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) said.

Laura Trott: The right hon. Gentleman is right that that should have happened; if it did not happen, that is a matter for the ombudsman. That is what I think we need to pursue following this debate. He is also absolutely right that those changes should have been communicated clearly and directly, to allow people to plan properly for retirement.

I am about to sum up, so if anyone else would like to intervene, please do. Otherwise, I just want to say that I am of course happy to discuss the matter further with the right hon. Gentleman, and indeed with anybody else who would like to take it up with me. I commend him once again for bringing this very important matter to the attention of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

7.11 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 21 June 2023

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

Veterans UK

9.30 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the support and services provided by Veterans UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms McVey. I apologise in advance if the hay fever bomb that has followed me throughout London this week disrupts my speech. Please be kind to me.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to lead this debate. I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to all those who have served our country, both past and present, as we spend this week commemorating the armed forces. We, as parliamentarians, have been aware of our obligations to look after and provide for veterans since Elizabethan times. In 1593, our predecessors passed the Act for the Necessary Relief of Soldiers and Mariners, which ordered parishes to make special provisions to help the sick and wounded veterans in their communities. That Act, now over 400 years old, forms the cornerstone of what we now call the armed forces covenant.

The covenant states that, to compensate veterans for their sacrifice,

“British soldiers must always be able to expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they...will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service.”

I was a councillor in Sheffield when the city council was among the first signatories to the armed forces covenant. I am proud that we enshrined the covenant in our working practices, placing a legal duty on ourselves to encourage integration from service life into civilian life. The covenant is a promise to the approximately 2 million veterans in this country and the 15,000 soldiers who join their ranks every year. Their service can have a profound and wide-ranging effect on them for the rest of their lives. We have an obligation to ensure that those who have served our country receive the best possible treatment, care and opportunities when they return.

There are thousands of voluntary signatories to the covenant, and the Armed Forces Act 2021 requires certain public bodies to pay due regard to the principles of the covenant when carrying out their functions, but—shockingly—Ministers have resisted efforts to apply the covenant to their own Government. Perhaps that is because they know that if the Government were to be bound by the covenant, they would fail to meet their statutory obligations.

The Minister for Veterans’ Affairs wrote:

“our veterans need to be able to access support that is human, sensitive and that works for them”,

but a significant number of our returning veterans have found the transition from serving soldier to civilian distressing, and that has actively hindered their interactions with Veterans UK. The all-party parliamentary group

on veterans has done excellent research on this matter, for which I commend it. The results of its survey on veterans’ experiences with Veterans UK were released several months ago. It received responses from 1,000 veterans: over 75% of respondents to the survey rated their overall experience with Veterans UK as either poor or very poor, and nearly 85% believed that the consideration given to their mental and physical health was poor or very poor.

Those findings are damning, but even more harrowing are the comments left by some of the respondents. One wrote:

“the process had broken me mentally to the point where my choice was walk away or commit suicide.”

Another said:

“My dealings with this organisation would lead me to believe it is set up to cause deliberate harm to veterans—it is a disgrace.”

Even a single soldier who, after years of dedicated service to their country, has been left feeling that desperate and despondent is one too many, but the depth and breadth of the respondents’ issues with Veterans UK led me to fear that the problems with this body are systematic.

I am pleased that, following the report from the APPG on veterans, the Government announced a review of the role and scope of welfare provision for veterans by the Ministry of Defence in its entirety. The Minister for Veterans’ Affairs has himself admitted that

“for too long veterans services have suffered from under-investment, and been over-reliant on paper records and outdated tech.”

None the less, the Government must not allow this review to overshadow other reports into veterans’ affairs. The armed forces compensation scheme, also administered by Veterans UK, compensates those who have suffered injury, illness or death during UK armed forces service, and undergoes a review every five years to ensure that the scheme is fit for purpose. The headline findings of that review were published in January, with the independent reviewer finding that the current process is

“overly burdensome and even distressing for the claimant due to unreasonable timeframes and a lack of transparency.”

The indifference and, in some cases, outright hostility to the plight of our veterans was highlighted by *The Telegraph* last year in a report that injured soldiers had been “laughed at” and “belittled” by officials involved in awarding payouts from the medical compensation scheme. Some soldiers highlighted that unqualified medical advisers were challenging their surgeons’ professional assessments, resulting in armed forces personnel being undercompensated for their injuries. Compensation money is a lifeline for many of our veterans wounded in service.

Millions of people are grappling with the ongoing cost of living crisis and extortionate waiting times for medical services, but these issues may have a disproportionate impact on veterans. Analysis of Government figures this week shows that 50% more veterans than last year are relying on universal credit. That is a damning indictment of the Government’s support for veterans. Staggeringly, the number of active personnel claiming universal credit has also risen by more than 50%. Not only are our serving troops forced to rely on benefits to get by, but they are also often subjected to substandard housing plagued by mould and damp. There are even reports that some soldiers are

[Gill Furniss]

unable to afford the subsidised food in their mess halls, and that a food bank on an RAF base that was established to support local communities is instead being used by service personnel who are struggling to get by. It is little wonder that after 13 years of Conservative rule, in which our forces have been underfunded and underappreciated, satisfaction with service life has plummeted from 60% in 2010 to just 42% today.

I have spoken about the difficulties that soldiers face in claiming compensation for their injuries, but surely they have quick and easy access to the medical evaluations and treatment that they may need. The armed forces covenant and veterans annual report states that:

“Looking after the health needs of Service personnel...especially where military service has caused or exacerbated those needs—is one of the first priorities of the Government when it comes to the wellbeing of the Armed Forces community.”

But on multiple key metrics, this Government are failing. Waiting times for treatment through the transition, intervention and liaison service are up by a week since last year, and waits for appointments in the complex treatment service are missing the Government's target of 10 working days by more than an entire working week.

Shockingly, the list of systemic failures faced by our veterans continues. Thousands of them were robbed of their career, their pension and their dignity as they were dismissed from the force and, in some cases, tarnished with criminal records. Their crime? Being a member of the LGBT community. Early last year the Government commissioned a report to investigate that historical wrongdoing and accepted in the terms of reference that the policy was wrong. The least the Prime Minister could do is offer a formal apology. Sadly, none has been forthcoming.

The LGBT veterans independent review has reported its findings and recommendations to the Government. As Pride Month draws to an end, I call on the Government to release the report as a matter of urgency, and to implement Lord Etherton's recommendations so that our LGBT veterans are compensated properly for their service and for the trauma inflicted on them by their own country.

Lastly, it would be remiss of me not to mention that the Minister for Veterans' Affairs promised that every veteran would receive an ID card by the end of 2023. These cards are meant to ensure that ex-servicemen and women have quicker access to the health, housing and charity services that they need. We should all support this scheme. However, of the 13,000 recorded veterans in Sheffield, only 218 have received their identity card. The Minister pledged several months ago that he would shave off his eyebrows if every veteran had not received their card by the end of 2023. I hope that he can get to grips with the roll-out in record time for the sake of our veterans, but I fear that, at the current rate of progress, he will be wearing a striking new look after the Christmas recess.

The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): Wrong Minister!

Gill Furniss: Sorry, wrong Minister.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I will start calling the Front Benchers no later than 10.35 am, and leave a couple of minutes for Gill Furniss to wind up the debate.

9.40 am

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) on securing this timely debate during veterans week.

We sometimes hear outside the House an unpleasant narrative labelling veterans as mad, bad and sad. That is simply not true. Most veterans are well trained through their service, highly motivated and huge contributors to our society. I come from a military family and know that that is the case. During my time as chairman of the south-east region for the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committees, I met many veterans who appreciated their time in the armed forces and had found good jobs once they had left. The VAPCs are there to help those who have not found the adjustment so easy, some of whom may have been invalided out of the service. We had frequent contact with Veterans UK, which also helped with our administrative support. I visited Norcross in Blackpool, where it is based, a couple of times for meetings and to see the work that it does.

I am pleased that there has been some progress on digitisation of veterans' records, because at Norcross I saw for myself the huge rooms containing stacks of shelves carrying all the paper records of veterans who needed help. Doctors' certificates and medical records all had to be sent by post or courier to Norcross. We heard of one occasion on which a van had been stolen en route, resulting in the loss of many records and subsequent months of delay while they were replaced, so that veterans could be assessed to determine the pension or compensation they should be awarded. I suspect that getting medical records is still causing an issue, and I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend the Minister could update us on that. Does Veterans UK really need original documents, or can they be scanned? Other organisations accept scanned documents. Digitisation should help, but like digitisation in other public services, it has taken far too long.

Last year, in the annual VAPC report, one criticism of Veterans UK was that veterans assessments' were still taking too long. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough mentioned that. I am very pleased that there is now an online claim service to help people to access injury and illness compensation more easily, but Veterans UK still uses antiquated manual systems to process compensation claims, which results in significant delays. An upgrade is essential and needs to be implemented quickly.

The process is too time-consuming, and the organisational culture emphasises minimising support. Plus, there is criticism that medical assessments are being made by clinicians without appropriate specialist knowledge. I urge the Minister and Veterans UK to work closely with VAPCs, which have plenty of knowledge and experience among their members, to come up with a more streamlined system that is veteran-centric. There was also a recommendation to establish external scrutiny through an independent monitoring board. VAPCs perhaps

could help with that. I hope that the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committees Bill, will go through, as it would give greater power to VAPCs to provide that necessary scrutiny as well as more help for our veterans.

I thank our serving military and veterans for all that they do. Many of us here are veterans or have participated in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, with all the knowledge that that brings. We hear at first hand about the issues that affect veterans. We will continue to champion them, both in the Chamber and behind the scenes, to ensure that they get what they need.

9.44 am

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I start by congratulating my good and hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) on securing this debate. I think that I put in a similar application. She was successful, but it is a privilege for me to speak in this debate and I thank her for it.

Lots of local groups in my constituency and across Greater Manchester support veterans, and I am grateful to all of them. I will name a couple of them during my speech, but most importantly, I want to name Stockport Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club, which I have attended several times. It does a lot of work supporting people not just in my constituency but across the borough.

I will echo several points made by my hon. Friend, but I want to highlight the fact that it is unacceptable that the Ministry of Defence has confirmed no additional funding support for veterans to deal with the cost of living increases. A recent report tells us that, in the last year, the Royal British Legion has reported issuing 20% more grants to help with living costs. We all know that mortgages have gone up, food inflation is close to 20% and the cost of living is biting hard. Veterans and some serving personnel and their families are using food banks, which is a total disgrace.

The next Labour Government have a plan to change the armed forces covenant, which is an informal agreement; We will fully incorporate the covenant in law and fulfil the important moral contract that society makes with those who serve. I do not understand why the Government cannot do that now. My local authority has signed up to the covenant, but support for veterans is often a postcode lottery. We need to change that.

A lot of support for veterans is provided by the third sector, which is welcome, but much greater Government involvement and support is needed for those organisations. According to the Office for National Statistics almost 4% of the population have previously served in the armed forces. The numbers are quite serious and we need to offer more support.

A constituent contacted me recently—I will not name him—to make a point about armed forces reservists

“not being allowed to stay in till they are 60”.

He says that the Ministry of Defence

“are doing this so they do not pay out a pension at the age of 60, but other services allow you to stay till 60. The armed forces reserves are losing highly skilled people but at the same time recruitment is at”

an all-time low.

“At present my Regt is below 50% in strength. By the MOD carrying out this type of behaviour I believe we are being discriminated against.”

He then asks me to raise that in the House of Commons, so I raise it now on his behalf. I will follow it up in a letter to the Minister and I hope to have a response that I can feed back to my constituent.

The shadow Minister and I recently attended an armed forces parliamentary scheme breakfast with the Fighting With Pride organisation. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough has already mentioned the historical injustice that affected many LGBT+ veterans and that needs to be resolved. It is less of a party political issue and more an issue of justice. We need to make sure that all political parties work together and that people of all orientations are welcome in the armed forces. We must also ensure that the people who were kicked out and dishonourably discharged get the justice and respect they deserve.

I will finish on that point and I hope the Minister will address particularly the issues about pensions and LGBT+ veterans.

9.48 am

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, Ms McVey, and I commend the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) for securing it. I echo her and other colleagues' tributes and thanks to those who serve in our armed forces, and it is fitting that we are having this debate in Armed Forces Week. I declare an interest as vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group on veterans, which conducted the survey that has been referred to.

Many veterans have been broken by the Government's failing system, which seems to hinder and hound veterans when it should help them. One told me that the process had broken them mentally to the point where their choice was to

“walk away or commit suicide.”

Another said:

“Veterans UK make it so difficult for all veterans and you feel like a criminal...there's no compassion whatsoever.”

Another described the organisation as a “disgrace”, and yet another said the organisation seeks to

“ignore, obfuscate, delay and deny for as long as they can.”

All that is happening in a country that aimed to be the best place in the world for veterans by 2028. That is a boast by the UK Government who say that they want to transform services for veterans, understand our veterans' community and recognise veterans' contribution to society. I recognise that the Minister is taking steps to address some of these issues, but it is not happening quickly enough, and the Government are far from realising the lofty goal of creating a veterans' paradise. Instead, many former servicemen and women are being plunged into hell as they struggle to make ends meet. Again, we heard from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough about veterans and serving personnel having to make use of food banks, and we should be doing all we can to support them.

There is a real sense that once someone is out of the barracks gate, the MOD washes its hands of them. Veterans UK, the MOD department administering support

[Owen Thompson]

for veterans, has been described as lacking any empathy for veterans, and the APPG survey, which had more than 1,000 responses, found that only 6% felt that they had had a “good” or “very good” service. That feedback is unacceptable.

I secured a debate on this issue in March 2022, having had contact from constituents. At that time, I had written a letter to the then Minister, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who wrote back saying there was no issue. We had the debate in Parliament, Parliament agreed that there should be a review of Veterans UK, and he said it was not necessary. As there had been a votable motion, we followed up the debate and asked when the review was going to take place, and he said it was not necessary, so I am delighted that the new Minister is taking this issue forward. Off the back of the survey, we have got the review that we waited for, but it is very telling that it did not happen straight away—the Government had to be dragged kicking and screaming. Again, I pay tribute to the Minister present for making that happen, but his predecessors went out of their way to put up roadblocks.

The failures of the system and veterans’ sense of betrayal are in danger of creating an invisible epidemic of moral injury among retired military personnel. Moral injury refers to the experience of sustained and enduring negative moral emotions of guilt, shame, contempt and anger, which result from the betrayal, violation and suppression of deeply held or shared moral values. It comes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) about the bad and mad—the sense that everyone is out to get them. Potentially morally injurious events include other people’s acts of omission or betrayal by a trusted person in a high-stakes situation. Such events threaten one’s deeply held beliefs and trust, and can cause feelings of shame and guilt. They can even lead to substance misuse, social withdrawal and self-destructive acts. Our veterans deserve so much better than that, and I commend the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) for the efforts he has made in moving forward his Bill on VAPCs.

It is interesting to note that the Scottish Government remain committed to doing all they can, within the powers they have, to provide support for veterans in Scotland, and the SNP is certainly committed to acting on the findings of the APPG survey. As a result of the survey, the UK Government have now announced that they will conduct

“a review of the role and scope of welfare provision for veterans, including by the Ministry of Defence under the Veterans UK banner”,

which I genuinely welcome. The Minister knows I am always impatient and always looking to the next thing. Having secured the review, we now look to when we can see the outcomes and when improvements can be implemented—I nudge him a little on that.

The review must have the scope and the necessary funding to change the situation. Mental health assessments undertaken while a veteran was serving in the forces should be considered by Veterans UK medical assessors when a claim is made under the war pensions or armed forces compensation scheme. There needs to be better signposting of information for veterans about war pensions and the armed forces compensation tribunal process. There also needs to be an increase in the maximum

tariffs for mental health condition compensation payments. In some circumstances, an unmarried partner can qualify for a war pension, and we want the qualification criteria further broadened. There needs to be an alternative method to mitigate the impact on war widows who remarried or cohabited before the introduction of the pensions-for-life changes in 2015.

Veterans really need to be at the heart of the review, and I cannot let this debate pass without again flagging the nuclear test veterans. We welcome the fact that they were recognised with a medal, but we need to put in place a scheme to take account of their very serious injuries, and do more to support them, as they deal with their exposure to radiation.

The Scottish Government, even with their limited powers, have gone some way to showing commitment to support our veterans. Last year, the Scottish Government contributed £250,000 to the Unforgotten Forces consortium, supporting its work in improving the health, wellbeing and quality of life of older veterans in Scotland. They also increased the Scottish veterans fund pot to £500,000 per annum, to provide greater support for veterans and their families. The Scottish Government also funded 14 new projects across a range of organisations, including employment support from Walking With The Wounded and outdoor counselling from the Venture Trust. In my constituency, Midlothian’s SNP-led council was the first in Scotland to partner with Veterans Housing Scotland to provide additional accommodation for our veterans. I look forward to seeing that partnership continue successfully.

That list could go on. We have a very proud military history in Scotland. With the limited devolved powers available, we know we have a debt to these men and women. We know that freedom is not free. Sadly, the same cannot be said for the UK Government a lot of the time. In the words of one veteran, they seek to “ignore, obfuscate, delay and deny for as long as they can.”

Our veterans deserve so much better.

9.56 am

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) on securing and leading this important debate during Armed Forces Week, reflecting our deep obligation to our armed forces, veterans and their families.

Labour is deeply proud of our armed forces personnel, veterans and their families—the whole community—for the contribution they make to our country. From the response to the invasion of Ukraine to deployments during the covid-19 pandemic, the armed forces are essential to our country’s safety and security. We thank them for all that they do.

Like others, I have had the honour of taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, to gain greater insight and understanding of service and service life. The long-standing connection between Labour and the armed forces community is built on our respect for their public service, and recognition of their sacrifices. We recognise that it is people from our communities who serve—our family, friends and neighbours—and we have a moral duty to ensure that they can access the services they deserve. Theirs is the ultimate public service.

It has been excellent to see Labour MPs this week standing up for the armed forces community in Parliament, with further celebratory events over the following days, many led by local councillors and councils, as referred to. As shadow Veterans Minister, it has been a pleasure to join Labour's Veterans' Voice events across the country, hosted by Labour MPs, prospective parliamentary candidates and councillors. Our Veterans' Voice nationwide listening campaign will help ensure that our plans for the next general election reflect the real-life experiences of veterans and their families.

What has been clear from all the events so far is that the Conservative Government are failing to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran. Veterans I have met from across the UK have told me how they feel overlooked and let down after 13 years of a Conservative Government. From veterans who need a hand up, to veterans who are doing perfectly well in life but expect more respect for their service, the whole community deserves better. Veterans UK is responsible for delivering that but, as we have heard from Members today, including the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), it is falling short of what is expected.

The previous Labour Government were proud to set up the armed forces compensation scheme, to ensure that serving personnel, veterans and their family members can receive support following injury, illness or death. On almost every visit I have been on, a veteran or a family member has explained the difficulties and frustrations with the scheme. There seems to be no plan to address the falling acceptance rates for veterans seeking compensation through the scheme, as successful claims have dropped from 65% to 47% since 2011-12, and rejections have risen from 24% to 41%. I cannot comment on the specifics of individual cases, but we know that there are many problems with the process, as the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) highlighted.

The headline findings of the current quinquennial review of the armed forces compensation scheme state that

"the process is overly burdensome and even distressing for the claimant due to unreasonable timeframes and a lack of transparency."

That situation is creating mistrust in the armed forces community, because it is perceived that there is little procedural fairness and that decision making is inconsistent. We need immediate action from the Government to improve that. On 30 January, the Minister told the House that the quinquennial review of the armed forces compensation scheme would be published "in the spring", yet we are now into summer and still have no report. Will the Minister confirm when the final report will be published in full? Further delay only further fails our veterans.

The cost of living crisis has had an enormous impact on our armed forces community, as it has on the rest of society, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for setting that out. The Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes have increased the number of grants awarded to veterans and their families to support them with rises in basic living costs, such as food and energy, and over the past year the number of veterans relying on universal credit has also increased by 50%. That means that over 50,000 veterans are now receiving universal credit. People are unable to cover their bills, and it is simply not good enough for the Government to ignore the situation. Will the Minister

explain what new steps the Government will take to support veterans into well-paid work, and will he outline how his Department is working with service charities to ensure that veterans are not forced into poverty? These are our heroes; the very least they deserve is the dignity of a secure, well-paid job that enables them to cover their basic costs.

The Government rightly recognise the gaps in Government support, and we welcome the independent review of UK Government welfare services that is being jointly conducted by the Ministry of Defence and the Office for Veterans' Affairs. It is long overdue, but for the review to be a success the Government must recognise that they have been responsible for the deterioration of veterans services over the past 13 years. From the slow roll-out of ID cards that veterans need to access services to missing important mental health waiting time targets, across the board the Government have not delivered the support that veterans deserve and were promised. The review must be shaped by veterans' experiences.

On 13 March, the Minister told the House that the welfare review would be "completed within three months", yet the following week the Minister for Veterans' Affairs said it would be "three to six months." I subsequently checked the review's terms of reference, which state:

"Full and final recommendations will be made by Autumn 2023."

I too would therefore like to nudge the Minister—perhaps a bit more firmly—to confirm on what date the review outcome will be published. Will he also outline what resources his Department and the Office for Veterans' Affairs have allocated to the implementation of the review's recommendations? The review must not just shuffle around the deckchairs; veterans and their families deserve better than the status quo. I look forward to hearing further detail from the Minister.

In conclusion, the Labour party is ready to step up to the challenge. In government, we will fully incorporate the armed forces covenant into law, thereby delivering on the promise to those who serve or have served in the armed forces and their families. They will receive fair treatment. Visa fees will be scrapped for non-UK veterans and their dependants if they have served four years or more. We will also boost specialist support and bring down waiting times for veterans' mental health services as part of our £1 billion commitment to ensure that everyone receives treatment within a month. Veterans are at the heart of Labour's plan for Government.

10.3 am

The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. May I first say what an improvement these little lecterns are, particularly for those of us who are increasingly long-sighted? It is the first time that I have appeared in Westminster Hall with one of them in place, and it is a great improvement. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) on securing today's debate. As we run up to Armed Forces Day, it really is timely.

Regarding hay fever, the hon. Lady has my sympathies; if I may say so, she fared exceptionally well in struggling with that affliction, which somehow seems to get worse the older we get. I also reassure her about my eyebrows. The Minister for Veterans' Affairs and the Minister for

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

Defence People, Veterans and Service Families are plainly different, I am happy to say. That is important because of the eyebrow issue, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans' Affairs lives in trepidation. I am happy to say that my eyebrows are safe as I gave no undertaking to shave them off.

The hon. Lady referred to the relief Act of 1593. I am pleased she did because I started my book on the military covenant, which I wrote 10 years ago, and which is sadly out of print, with the same assessment. The reason being is that it is important to take a long and historical perspective on the military covenant, which has become the armed forces covenant.

I am delighted to hear the commitment made in respect of the covenant by the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), who speaks for the Opposition, and I am particularly proud that this Government, in their early days, inculcated the covenant into legislation and that organisations are now able to sign up to it. I am especially proud of the guidance that goes with the enjoiner to sign up to the covenant, which is important in explaining to organisations what it means to sign up. I am delighted by the number of local authorities that have done so.

We are eternally grateful for the service of all our veterans, and it is only right, as they give so much to us, that we support them as best we can. The strategy for our veterans and the refreshed "Veterans' Strategy Action Plan" lay out the Government's aspiration to make the UK a truly great place to be a veteran. I would, however, like to correct a common misconception about what Veterans UK actually is. It is not the same as the US Veterans Administration, and for very good reasons. It is not a stand-alone agency responsible for providing all Government support for veterans. As veterans are civilians, the majority of their care and support comes from the full range of Departments, notably our NHS, but also from local government or from the devolved Administrations.

Veterans UK is simply the public-facing name given to the services delivered by one Department: the Ministry of Defence. Those services include the administration and payment of armed forces pensions, which are very important. I declare an interest as a service pensioner. The other services are the war pension and armed forces compensation schemes, and the delivery of the Veterans Welfare Service, Defence Transition Services, independent personal commissioning for veterans, and Ilford Park Polish Home.

Only the war pension scheme and the Ilford Park Polish Home are services delivered solely to veterans and their families, as the other services also support serving personnel or those in transition. Some 75% of armed forces compensation claims are received from serving service personnel, and that is quite important in the context of the review that has already been mentioned. If I have time, I might come to discuss exactly why that is.

Let me illustrate the scale and the number of individuals supported by those services: last year, almost 12,000 armed forces compensation scheme and war pension scheme claims were cleared, and more than 97,500 war disablement pensions were in payment to the value of £622.5 million. Under the armed forces compensation scheme, more

than 3,500 guaranteed income payments were made to veterans, and £104 million was paid out under the scheme.

In the year ending 31 March 2023, approximately 454,000 armed forces pensions were in payment to a value of almost £5.3 billion annually. In the year ending 31 March 2023, the Veterans Welfare Service interacted with 38,609 people via phone or email. It provides tailored advice according to each person's specific circumstances. When financial assistance is required, the Veterans Welfare Service helps with benefit checks, completion of application forms and signposting to entitlements, and the support available from the wider public and voluntary sectors.

I have met welfare managers and heard at first hand about the range of issues they have to deal with and the troubled circumstances of many of their customers. The help that they provide is extensive, and I have been struck by how dedicated they are to doing the best they can for the people they serve, who are frequently at a point of crisis in their lives. The workforce is fairly mature; many of them have been doing that work for many years. I assure hon. Members that they are very dedicated to what they do, but all big organisations must strive to do better. In the year ending 31 March, there were 161 formal complaints received about veterans services, compared with 2,014 instances of positive feedback from customers who wanted to give thanks for the service that they had received.

The same organisation that delivers all these services has been issuing veterans recognition cards to all service leavers since 2018. It is developing the new digital verification service that will enable veterans to verify their veteran status online quickly and easily, and apply for their veteran recognition card. That service will begin to be rolled out by the end of the year. The card will enable veterans to prove their veteran status to help them to access specialist support and services, and to maintain a tangible link to their career in the armed forces.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), I was fortunate to visit Veterans UK in Norcross, where many of these services are delivered, fairly recently and early in my tenure. As I said, the staff there were notably enthusiastic about delivering for our veterans. They are clearly committed to doing the best they can and their level of experience is immense and hugely valuable.

That is not to say that the staff and I do not recognise that there is room for improvement. Much of the frustration voiced by veterans with services delivered under the Veterans UK banner relates specifically to the armed forces compensation scheme and the war pension scheme, and particularly to the lengthy process for making claims or making a subsequent appeal. I am pleased that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Luton South, said that the armed forces compensation scheme was created by a Labour Government. I know from her remarks that she accepts that the scheme is not perfect in all regards, and that it needs fairly extensive attention.

The interim findings from the quinquennial review, which have been referred to, give some grounds for encouragement, so the hon. Lady should not be too concerned about the organisation that her party created all those years ago. The review states that "there are many elements of the AFCS which function well",

so I think we have to accept that at face value. However, it goes on to say that there are issues that need to be addressed, particularly the length of time it takes for claims to be resolved. We have very little control over some of those issues, and some are common to any such scheme, whether in civilian life or in the armed forces. However, none of that negates the fact that we have to do better. I am convinced that the processes already under way at Norcross will do just that and hopefully improve the less than satisfactory experience of many of our veterans.

One of the major reasons for the delays is that we have to get proper, full, comprehensive medical reports from claimants' medical practitioners. I can say from personal experience that busy GPs and consultants do not put returning forms very high on their priority list. Part of the reason for delays in concluding claims is beyond the direct control of Defence, but I think it is possible to bring down some of the delays. That has to do, in large part, with digital transformation.

The current process for managing claims is incredibly paper-driven, as my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley said. I have witnessed it for myself. The number of paper files crammed into every nook and cranny at Norcross is truly extraordinary. I encourage right hon. and hon. Members to visit; they will be immediately struck by the acreage of paper files all over the place, reminiscent of a bygone age. That is why we are investing around £40 million in a transformation programme to digitise existing paper-based processes, introduce automation and create a single user portal for pensions and compensation. That will provide a single electronic view of the claimant with online self-service provision, enabling them to provide and retrieve information electronically and allowing them to secure access details for their entitlement and payments.

Such a complex programme brings together multiple different IT systems. On the current trajectory, the first release of the new system is expected early next year, with further iterations being released through to early 2025. That will underpin the customer portal, which is being developed concurrently. Serving personnel will have external access to the portal from personal devices in late 2024 and veterans will have that in early 2025. Meanwhile, lived experience events with veterans are taking place to enhance understanding of the services provided by the MOD. They are designed as an opportunity to inform areas for improvement and to tell us how the MOD can enhance services, as well as share with our customers the improvements that are in hand.

We are committed to improving the customer experience for our veterans. Claims journeys are detailed on the gov.uk website to better explain the process to them. New bespoke animated presentations on gov.uk help to explain how the process works and how veterans can help to provide the necessary supporting documents with their claims, thus addressing one of the criticisms levelled in the interim findings of the quinquennial review.

In November 2022, a new online digital claims service was launched on gov.uk for those seeking compensation from the armed forces compensation scheme and war pension scheme. The service is now available to all service personnel and veterans. The new service has been well received by those using it and already accounts for more than half of new injury and illness claims made. I monitor key performance indicators for delays

in claims being concluded and, a bit like inflation, they are stubbornly flat and have been for the past several months. Since the new way of being able to file claims was introduced in December, I expect it to expedite claims and for those KPIs to be met in the foreseeable future.

The MOD is committed to ensuring that the armed forces compensation scheme delivers for those who make a claim, and there are mechanisms of assessment and accountability in place to ensure that that is the case. For that reason, the scheme is checked using the quinquennial review that I referred to, meaning that, as time passes, the scheme is updated and hopefully becomes fit for purpose. This time around, the review has been taking place alongside the improvement activity that I discussed. The headline findings were published in January and I anticipate publication of the full report before the summer recess.

In addition, and in partnership with the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View, whose eyebrows are at risk, I have commissioned a review of welfare provision for veterans, which includes, but is not exclusive to, those provided under the Veterans UK banner. The review will build on the positive work already being undertaken across Government under the strategy for our veterans. The review is being led by a senior civil servant, with the independent veterans adviser and other key stakeholders providing advice. Again, I anticipate publication of the report before the summer recess.

To turn briefly to the comments that have been made, I will not be able to do them all justice, but I am more than happy to write to hon. Members. I was struck by the support from the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for our armed forces and veterans, though I would expect nothing else. I was pleased that he articulated the support of the SNP and the Scottish Government. It is worth reflecting on the fact that Scotland more than plays its part in the defence of these islands. That is extremely welcome and is of very long standing.

I must, however, raise the point about nuclear test veterans. While I am very pleased that the hon. Member welcomes the medallic recognition, which they are due, we need to be careful about suggesting that that cohort of people have been damaged by their service. We obviously monitor all the evidence, both in this country and overseas, to pick up on anything that is emerging that suggests long-term consequences of service of this nature. So far, that has proved negative, but it is important to keep all the evidence under review, as he would expect, and I certainly commit to doing that.

The hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) was rightly concerned about the cost of living. He will be aware that the MOD has taken action where it can, for example by freezing rents. We are about to have the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body report—he will have to wait for it, I am afraid—but we will see what the recommendations are in the light of the current circumstances. I urge him to be a little patient.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point about reserves over the age of 60. I have had some correspondence on the subject, but as an active reservist over the age of 60, all I will say is that I am sympathetic to his point and I look forward to the letter that he promised. I will certainly address it as best I can.

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

The hon. Gentleman and others were right to mention the treatment meted out to members of the LGBT community between 1967 and 2000. It was truly shocking. I am extremely in the debt of Lord Terence Etherton for his work on this matter. I do not think the hon. Gentleman was at the reception held by Lord Etherton to mark the end of his review a few days ago, but it was a great experience, though a humbling one. Lord Etherton's report will be published very soon, as will the Government's response to it.

There is no question but that this group of people were badly managed and badly handled by the armed forces. It was truly shocking on occasion, and I am deeply grateful to Lord Etherton and his team for producing a very fine report that touches on actions that will span right across Government. We will never make full amends for what happened—that is not possible. People have been deeply hurt, but it is important that the Government properly recognise what happened between 1967 and 2000 and, where we can, try to bring some comfort and restoration to that group of people. I certainly give an undertaking that that will happen.

I will just highlight the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley, who takes a deep interest in these matters, for which I am profoundly grateful. In particular, she clearly has informed herself exceptionally well by taking the trouble to go to Norcross to see the problems there. I know from her remarks how shocked she has been at the 19th century way in which many of the claims are handled.

Mrs Drummond: The Minister talked about the delay with GPs and consultants. Would it be possible to, as I mentioned, use either scanned documents or the NHS digital records that nearly every one of us now has to speed up the process?

Dr Murrison: Yes, I think so. Of course, that requires compliance by GPs and consultants. The history of IT in our NHS is not necessarily a very happy one, so it is perhaps easier said than done, but where we can do things digitally, we must. We have to ensure that where it is within our power to change things, particularly in relation to digitisation of applications for compensation and processing within the MOD, we do it. That is at the heart of the transformation process. That, in itself, will bring down the length of time that people have to wait.

I will use this opportunity to pick up another issue that the interim quinquennial review highlights: the perceived adversarial nature of the process. When the Government of the hon. Member for Luton South introduced the scheme, it was never intended to be

adversarial, yet that has been the perception of many of our veterans. That is a pity, because that is not what we want. I look forward to the recommendations of the review in relation to how we can make that better. I very much hope and expect that the whole journey for our veterans will be dramatically improved.

I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough for introducing this timely debate. I assure her that Defence is absolutely committed—as I am personally—to delivering the best possible services for veterans, both serving and retired.

10.26 am

Gill Furniss: Thank you, Ms McVey, for taking the time to chair the debate; it is much appreciated. Everyone who has taken part in the debate has been very mindful of the issues. I thank them all, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond). All the contributions have been very even-handed, and it has been a great debate.

I thank the Minister for his response. No one doubts his personal passion for veterans' affairs. I know from my past interactions with him how seriously he takes any issues that are brought up with him, which is very welcome. I feel that I have to put on record that I did get the wrong Minister earlier. However, I noticed that this Minister said that the report was to be rolled out at the end of the year, so there is a chance that the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the right hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), may well look a little different in January. Let us hope that the report is rolled out before then.

I commend the bravery and courage of all who serve and have served in the armed forces. They risk their lives to keep all of us safe, and I know that we are all extremely grateful for that. The best way to thank them during Armed Forces Week is for the Government to do right by our troops, whether that is ensuring that serving soldiers are not forced to live in substandard housing, and to rely on benefits and food banks to get by, or righting the historic wrongs committed to our LGBT veterans and nuclear test veterans. We can all agree that we need to do more to ensure that all our veterans can access the compensation and healthcare that they need and that they are treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the support and services provided by Veterans UK.

10.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Housing: Rhondda

11 am

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I will call Sir Chris Bryant to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the availability and support for housing in Rhondda constituency.

It is a great delight to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms McVey; we were both in the National Youth Theatre, although you are obviously much younger than I, and so were a youth much later than I was—and remain one.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): You flatter me, sir.

Sir Chris Bryant: I do not know whether many hon. Members present have visited, but they will know the stereotypical view of the Rhondda: lots of terraced houses up the mountains and down the valleys—many identical houses, but painted with different colours, and many of them mini palaces inside. They were built as miners' cottages in the 19th century and early 20th century. One of the ironies is that in all my time as a Member of Parliament, which is now 22 years, I have never known us to have a housing crisis. Yes, a few people have faced financial problems and lost their homes, but despite the deprivation levels 66% of people in my constituency own their own home. That is very high compared with many other areas with similar levels of deprivation.

We also have very little social housing—just 12%. Compare that with other parts of the country: Cardiff, 17%; Neath Port Talbot, another next-door county, 19.2%; Birmingham, 23.5%; and Lambeth, just across the river from here, 33.5%. We have very few council houses or former council houses. There are estates such as Penrhys and Trebanog, which are now in the hands of various housing associations, but there are really very few. The commercial rented sector is therefore a very important part of ensuring that people have affordable homes to live in.

It is exceptional to me, as MP for the Rhondda, that we now for first the first time ever have a perfect storm of a housing crisis in the Rhondda. It worries me deeply. Several different elements have led to it. One is the bedroom tax. That came in in 2013, but some of the effects are still being felt today; it is pushing people out of some social housing into other commercial properties. Another is the housing benefit cap, which has now been in place for so many years that it simply has not kept up with rental rates, even in areas such as the Rhondda, where rent is much lower than in London or many other constituencies in the land.

Changes to the buy-to-let taxation system have also had an effect on many commercial landlords in the Rhondda. Those landlords would have bought only two properties at most, because they thought of them as their retirement income. They bought them on buy-to-let mortgages and expected to be able to deduct against tax a significant part of the mortgage interest. Now they

find that they cannot. It is more difficult for them to afford to keep their buy-to-let properties, and many of them are selling up. That is even before we consider the effect that mortgage interest rates are having on buy-to-let mortgages. Commercial landlords can deduct less mortgage interest than they could before, and they are finding that the sums simply do not add up. I have heard about commercial landlords saying, "I cannot sell the property, but my mortgage is costing me more than the rent I can charge."

The Welsh housing quality standard 2023, which was introduced by the Welsh Government, has added another burden to commercial landlords who have to meet that standard. Of course we are all in favour of properties meeting proper standards, but one problem is that many of our houses were built in the 19th century, long before the standards that we would expect today. The bedrooms are tiny or relatively small and do not meet those standards. They are difficult to insulate and heat, because of how they were built in the 19th century. That has posed another set of challenges for commercial landlords, who say, "How am I going to find £5,000 or £10,000? Even if I did find the £5,000 or £10,000, would I ever be able to bring that property up to the new housing quality standards?"

Then we have interest rates. If 65% of people living in the Rhondda own their own homes, that is an awful lot of people with mortgages. Many of them might be on long-term fixed-rate mortgages, but we do not tend to do 16 or 20-year fixed-rate mortgages in the UK—it is more like two, three, four or five. People are seeing significant increases in the amount that they have to pay when at the same time inflation is running at 8.7%. That poses a lot of challenges in the whole market.

There is another element. Again, it is something that was introduced by the Welsh Government, which changed the priority need basis whereby local authorities had to determine whether they had a statutory duty to provide accommodation, so it is different in Wales from in England. I fully understand the rationale behind that. I do not want anybody to be homeless. I want local authorities to be there to help whenever they can, but that has added to the situation as well.

The situation has resulted in dozens of landlords selling up. As I have said, most of them have only two properties. The idea that the landlords have vast portfolios of 30 or 50 properties is not what we have in the Rhondda. People mostly have just two. Letting agencies have said to me, "We would normally let three, four or five properties a month—maybe a bit more at some times of the year. Some of us have not managed to let a single property this year because there is no commercial property to let."

Between 2018-19 and 2022-23, there was a 65% increase in the number of families forced to leave private rented accommodation because of no-fault evictions, which are normally under a section 21 notice. Every week my office has people ringing up in absolute despair. The local authority now recommends that people stay until they are forcibly evicted, because it knows that, try as hard as it can, it simply cannot meet the need.

Between 2019-20 and 2022-23, there was a 69% increase in temporary accommodation placements. Across the whole of Rhondda Cynon Taf, the local authority, that has risen from 598 a year to 861. In addition, the total number of days that people have spent in temporary

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

accommodation is now running at 44,251 because more people than ever before, particularly families with children, are in temporary accommodation and they are staying longer—considerably longer in many instances.

The cost to Rhondda Cynon Taf, because of the temporary accommodation factor, has changed out of all proportion. In 2019, the cost stood at £514,000. Last year it was £1,633,000. In just those few years the cost has more than trebled so there is a significant additional cost. In the end, of course, temporary accommodation is not high quality. It is not the best option, especially for people who have children, a physical disability or other special needs. It ends up being more costly than providing proper social housing and leads to other social problems further down the line.

We also have another problem. Some commercial landlords are now so nervous about having people who might be in receipt of housing benefit, which has been capped, or people who have financial problems because of the cost of living crisis, that they now often insist on substantial deposits beforehand. We have heard of landlords demanding 12 months' rent in advance. There is no way the vast majority of ordinary people could possibly afford that. If they could, they might as well buy a home, because they would have enough for a deposit to do so. The good news in the Rhondda is that people can buy properties that are relatively cheap compared with many other places in the country, but only if they have managed to build up a significant deposit. Of course, many people who are in this horrific cycle of being shunted from one commercial rented property or one temporary accommodation to another simply do not have those kinds of financial resources.

There is another problem. I am delighted that RCT is able, through the Welsh Government scheme, to offer £25,000 grants for people to take property that is not being lived in and make it habitable again, but that must now meet all the new standards. It is simply not possible to smash a two-up, two-down property with small rooms into the kind of property that meets present-day standards. That is yet another problem facing the whole market.

The demand for social housing is increasing dramatically for all the reasons that I have highlighted—people being forcibly evicted, people not being able to find the big deposits that are needed, and people whose landlords are selling their properties. We now have a situation where RCT, which is doing its level best to provide accommodation for people, is finding that it has not just a few applications for every property that becomes available through its scheme, but hundreds. It is not unheard of to have 250 applications for a single property the moment it comes into the system.

In the last three years, the numbers of people applying for a one-bed flat in Maerdy have quadrupled, and they have trebled for a three-bed house in Penygraig. There was a time when certain parts of the Rhondda or RCT were more popular than others, but now every single social housing property that becomes available is massively oversubscribed, and there is no way on God's earth that RCT, try as it might, and as inventive as it tries to be, can meet the housing need.

As I said, there are now effectively no commercial rented properties available. This is not one of those debates where I want to shout at the Government,

“You’ve done terrible things—look how you’ve completely let my constituents down.” All I am trying to do is reveal to both the Government here and the Government in Cardiff Bay—because some of these issues relate to decisions made in the Welsh Government, and some of them relate to decisions made in Westminster—how an area such as the Rhondda, which has beautiful mountains, lovely valleys and some amazing housing stock—albeit that much of it is old and difficult to heat, insulate and keep up to modern housing standards—is really struggling at a time when the commercial rented sector is falling on its face.

What are the answers? We need to do something about the housing benefit cap, which has been frozen for far too long and is now completely out of kilter with reality for most ordinary properties in the Rhondda. We need to change some of the taxation for buy-to-let properties, because otherwise we will simply lose the commercial rented sector in its totality in constituencies such as mine and perhaps in many other parts of the country, and that is problematic. And of course we need to build more social housing, but I know that that solution will not come on board quickly.

The Welsh Government need to think about the priorities they have set for councils such as Rhondda Cynon Taff, because at the moment it is simply unachievable, with all the will in the world, for RCT to meet its full statutory duties. The Welsh Government also have to think about the housing standards and how they apply in valleys communities. Some people might look at a two-up, two-down terraced property from the outside and think, “I don’t know what that’s going to look like inside,” but many of them are palaces indoors, because people take phenomenal pride in them. In a community where most people own their own home, there is that pride in the street where you live and the house you live in. That builds a sense of community and a sense of communal ownership of the whole terrace, the street and the town.

I want to say to the Welsh Government that I fully understand why they do not want commercial landlords to be ripping off tenants. I argued at the beginning of my time as an MP that we do not want commercial landlords simply coming along, buying up a house, spending 50p on it and then putting somebody in because they know they will be able to get vast amounts of housing benefit over the years because the tenant will be in there. That is the Government effectively subsidising bad commercial landlords. Yet we now have the flip side of that problem, which is that housing benefit is too low, so it is difficult for commercial landlords to make any kind of money from renting their properties, and we need roughly 20% of the housing stock in the Rhondda to be in the commercial rented sector.

I passionately believe in social housing. I would love Rhondda Cynon Taf to be allowed to build more properties. As it happens, the first local authority in the country to introduce the idea of a person buying their own council property was Newport, under Labour control. However, the key then was that if someone bought their property, the local authority was able to invest that money in building more social housing. One of our problems is that we have not invested enough in social housing across the whole of the country for many years.

I am sure the Minister will be able to respond to all my problems, but if there is anything else she needs, I will send her a little report I have done, entitled “The

New Housing Crisis in the Rhondda”; it is available on my website as well. I care passionately about making sure that people have a decent home. That is one of the great things that, historically, people in the Rhondda have been able to afford, but at the moment, we have a real challenge. I hope the Minister can help.

11.16 am

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, although I have not had the pleasure of serving in the youth theatre either with you or with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). That is extremely disappointing, but I am not able to rectify that now. Nevertheless, I very much thank the hon. Member for his speech on behalf of his constituents and the way he has conveyed the sense of pride in place for his constituency, which I am sure we all recognise as Members of Parliament. He has done a great job. I have visited his constituency, and although I have not spent a lot of time there I recognise the picture he paints. I look forward to receiving his report and I will study it. On issues such as housing, which he cares so much about—as do we all—it is important that we work across our United Kingdom. I want to reassure him that we work closely with the Welsh Government through our Interministerial Standing Committee channels.

The hon. Member has raised a wide variety of issues relating to different policy areas and Government Departments. Some of them are the responsibility of the Westminster Government and some sit with the Welsh Government. I know that everyone will have heard his remarks and will have been reminded of the importance of working together. These might be separate policy areas, but ultimately, they come together in someone's home, and that is how we have to think about it. In this area, we value the strength of our Union and see its importance. Devolution both reinforces and strengthens the powers of his local authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf, supporting it with funding and enabling local authorities to make decisions close to the people they serve.

What are the Westminster Government doing to alleviate and respond to the concerns the hon. Member has raised? The most important thing is the way we support all the devolved nations via the block grant, which for the Welsh Government amounts to £19 billion just for this financial year. That grant is for them to spend on devolved matters such as housing, schools and transport. We also provide additional infrastructure investment, not only to deliver the homes we need but to nurture strong communities throughout the UK. It is important that we work closely to level up growth, opportunity and pride; that is at the heart of this Government's vision and a central mission for all of us. The people of the United Kingdom expect us to come together. This is a great opportunity to see how we are doing that and to draw on the combined strengths of the United Kingdom.

Let me focus on the economic context, which is at the heart of what the hon. Gentleman spoke about. He talked about the financial pressures on all our citizens, as well as mortgages, rents and the cost of living; all of those interact. The UK Government are taking determined steps to beat inflation. Ultimately, inflation is the enemy we must all defeat because it has a direct impact on people's ability to pay their mortgages. The hon. Gentleman

highlighted the high rate of home ownership in his constituency, and of course the rate of home ownership is affected by people's ability to meet their mortgage payments, or their rental costs if they are in the private rented sector. Help with mortgages is available for certain people via the support for mortgage interest scheme, and the Chancellor is taking significant action in that space by talking to mortgage lenders. I encourage people to talk to their mortgage lenders, which have been instructed to deal with their customers fairly, especially at this time of severe economic stress.

It is also important to recognise the support the Government have put into helping people across the UK, including those on low incomes or no income, whether or not they are homeowners. There is a high number of people on lower incomes in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and for those most in need we have put in place a generous UK-wide support package, which includes up to £900 in cost of living payments for households on eligible means-tested benefits this year, a disability cost of living payment of £150 in the summer, and an additional £300 cost of living payment to pensioners to help with the coming winter. To protect the most vulnerable, we have uprated working age and disability benefits by 10.1% from April. That equates to an additional £1 billion of funding, including the Barnett impact, to help households with the costs of their essentials. In England, that funding goes towards the household support fund. It will be up to the Welsh Government to decide how to use the extra Barnett funding.

Energy costs are an additional pressure on household budgets. The hon. Gentleman rightly raised the issue of some homes being more difficult to insulate, owing to the way in which they were constructed, and their not being up to certain current standards. We want his constituents to be warm and dry, regardless of the age of the property they live in, and the UK Government have taken significant steps to help people with their energy bills.

As the Chancellor announced in the spring statement, the Government are maintaining the energy price guarantee at £2,500 until the end of June. That will save households an additional £160 and bring Government support with energy bills since October 2022—so including the most extreme periods of the winter, when people will have needed to have their heating on—to £1,500 for a typical household. Those measures ensured that households across the UK were supported through the spring, and certainly while retail energy costs remained high. Hopefully, those costs are starting to turn downward, and we hope that continues.

The hon. Gentleman also raised a number of issues about the private rented sector—the commercial rented sector—notwithstanding the fact that his constituency contains a relatively high proportion of homeowners. The private rented sector plays a vital role in any housing market across the UK, and I recognise the fact that the Welsh Government have their own schemes. The hon. Gentleman touched on some of those, and they are obviously for the Welsh Government to administer. He talked about the impact of the empty homes grant. There is also Help to Buy in Wales, and the leasing scheme.

There are a number of ways in which any Government can help citizens, and we are always happy to talk to our counterparts in Wales. I believe I have a meeting quite

[Rachel Maclean]

soon with my counterpart in the Welsh Administration, and our officials meet regularly to discuss how the schemes work and what is the best way to get help to people who really need it.

The hon. Gentleman talked about section 21 no-fault evictions. He will be aware, as will the House, that we intend to fulfil our manifesto commitment to ban section 21 evictions. We have introduced the Renters (Reform) Bill to Parliament for its First Reading, and we are looking forward to the Bill progressing so we can begin the process of enacting those provisions. My understanding is that we are working closely with the Welsh Government so that they may align their measures, should they choose to do so, with the measures we are taking through English legislation. We want and expect the provisions in the Renters (Reform) Bill to cover Wales as well as England.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted the impact of section 21 evictions on his constituents, which he has seen through his casework and surgeries. That is why we want to bring the Bill forward. We know that one of the most significant anxieties that private renters have is the fear of a section 21 eviction—the retaliatory eviction that we hear about so often. When tenants have to report a significant problem or fault with their property, whether it is damp or mould, a broken boiler or something else that makes the property dangerous, they fear that instead of fixing it, the landlord will simply evict them and make them homeless. That adds to the pressure on homelessness services and temporary accommodation, which, as the hon. Gentleman brought to life, exists in Wales as well. That is why we are taking action to remove that section 21 power.

At the same time, we need to be completely fair to landlords who need to regain their property if tenants are abusing it. Just as there are good and bad landlords, there are good and bad tenants, if I can put it that way. If a landlord is renting their property in good faith to a tenant, and that tenant has damaged it in some way or is engaging in antisocial behaviour, it is absolutely right that the landlord can regain their property to restore that confidence that it will not be damaged. They should also be able to move back into their property or sell it on the open market if they wish to do so.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about social housing. We recognise that it is a vital addition to any housing market, which is why we in England are investing considerable sums of money to ensure that there is social housing across the nation for the people who need it. We have delivered our £11.5 billion affordable homes programme in England, and I encourage the Welsh Government to follow in our footsteps and deliver more social housing to meet the need of people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and across Wales. I thank the hon. Gentleman and I look forward to reading his report.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Tackling Loneliness and Connecting Communities

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling loneliness and connecting communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I know this is an issue you care passionately about, as do many Members across the House.

I spoke for the first time about the issue of loneliness in the Christmas recess Adjournment debate in December 2011. I was supported in that debate by the excellent Campaign to End Loneliness, and I was gifted statistics about the older population and the impact of loneliness on health. I quoted Einstein and Mother Teresa—great minds who had reflected on loneliness long before it became the globally recognised problem that it is today. Thank goodness it is, because it needs to be, and not just for the older population whom I spoke about 11 and a half years ago.

Last week was Loneliness Awareness Week, but I do not need an awareness week to be thinking about this issue. I often think about loneliness; it has become part of my general psyche, along with sport, physical health and wellbeing. For example, I was at home doing menial chores last weekend, listening to the guests laughing and singing at a joyous barbecue a few doors down. I was smiling at their fun, but I suddenly became conscious of the anecdotes I heard as the world's first loneliness Minister. For many people, summer can be just as lonely as Christmas.

The definition of loneliness reveals the reason why that might be. Loneliness is a

“subjective unwelcomed feeling of lack or loss of companionship”.

It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships we have and those we want. Just like Christmas, when adverts show families and friends together, opening the windows and hearing the soundtrack of summer can increase one's sense of isolation and loneliness. When I was a Minister, we reflected on the definition of loneliness and wondered whether we should revise it. In fact, a great deal of energy was spent on that by the very hard-working civil servants who supported the ministerial team on this issue, but we returned to the original definition, because it is very clear what loneliness is.

Many Members have come to Westminster Hall straight from the Great Get Together event being held next door in the Jubilee Room. The event, sponsored by the Jo Cox Foundation, is not only an important means of connecting people and communities, but a wonderful way to remember Jo and all her work on loneliness. Its success has been phenomenal, bringing innovative and creative thinking to how we connect people and communities throughout the year. I see that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) is present. I did not really know her sister Jo—I merely had the privilege of being part of the outcome of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness's recommendations—but I think of the hon. Lady as a friend, a football teammate

and a co-conspirator on all things loneliness. I have heard her speak passionately about Jo, the commission and the Great Get Together many times, and I predict that today will be no different.

It is important to remind the House of the statistics on loneliness. Some 47% of people over the age of 16 say that they experience some degree of loneliness, and 6% say that they often or always feel lonely. Contrary to what was discussed in the main Chamber debate that I led, it is not older people who now experience the highest levels of loneliness; people aged 16 to 24 are more likely to say they feel lonely often or always. Women are more likely to be lonely than men, and although there is no significant variability by ethnicity, there is for those who suffer poor health, who are disabled or who live in deprived communities. The main challenge of loneliness is that it can affect anyone, regardless of whether they are the chief executive officer at the top or the apprentice at the bottom. It is a subjective emotion, vulnerable to changing circumstances and life's varying events.

When the Government led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) took on board the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness's recommendations to appoint a loneliness Minister, there was a moment when we worried what our media would say. Would they mock the Government for trying to come up with policy around people's feelings? Had we gone soft? Is loneliness not something that just affects old people? As it happens, we got nothing but praise, in part because commentators understood then, as they still do now, the impact of loneliness and why there needs to be a Government-led policy approach to tackling it.

In fact, we had interest from around the world. We had ministerial delegations from New Zealand and Japan, and conversations with people from South America and Scandinavia. The world's media is very interested in what we have been doing in the UK, because loneliness can increase early mortality, disease and poor mental and neurological health. I will not beat around the bush: loneliness is expensive. I am not sure there is a definitive figure for how much it costs, but we know it affects the health service through GP appointments, admissions to accident and emergency units and social care. We also know that it has a massive impact on productivity, with one set of figures suggesting that it costs UK employers between £2.2 billion and £3.7 billion a year. Tackling loneliness is good health, social and economic policy, so it is worth doing properly.

The loneliness strategy, which I was proud to author, is a good start. We in the UK lead the world in strategic thinking on tackling loneliness, but others are catching up. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen and I regularly speak to politicians around the world about loneliness; we have become quite the double-act—I hope that strikes fear into the Minister. In recent months, I have attended a conference in Barcelona, and spoken to the Mayor of Buenos Aires about how cities can combat loneliness. From my earlier work, I keep a close eye on what the wonderful US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, is doing and saying on the issue—if colleagues have not read his book, it is well worth doing so. However, I am not afraid to admit that the strategy, as brilliant as it was and as welcome as it was back in October 2018, is probably in need of a huge refresh post covid if we are to maintain our global lead. If there is one good thing about the pandemic, it is that it shone a huge spotlight

on loneliness, but we need to get a grip of the issue and urgently revamp some of the excellent initiatives that started but withered, first, due to the lockdown rules, and then due to other priorities.

One measure I am particularly thinking of is social prescribing. There was huge enthusiasm after the launch of the strategy, and to me, as a local politician, it felt extremely positive, but the link workers were reassigned during the pandemic, and since then they have been racing to catch up amid other priorities, and the groups they previously prescribed to have disappeared.

Before the pandemic, working from home was for the few who embraced flexi-working, but now it is fairly standard, which has reduced the connectivity with the workforce for many. Transport services have disappeared from communities, isolating the elderly. We can all tell stories about our constituencies. Mine is about the 155 bus, which has ceased to exist in my villages, increasing loneliness across Burham, Eccles and Wouldham. Youth services, which were pretty patchy before, are non-existent now, leaving youngsters bereft of any connection beyond school. It is beyond the scope of this debate, but it is partly for that reason that I think we should give 16 and 17-year-olds the vote in local elections, to give them a say on the services that affect them.

The rush to build large-scale developments to address the housing shortage has resulted in a decline in community. Estates once promised community centres, green spaces and play areas, but they are now built to an identikit, soulless spec; people come and go but never commune. Finally, there have been cuts to things such as BBC local radio services, sports provision and accessible green spaces. They may be small losses to some, but they are huge to those who need them, such as the one in four people who use radio as a means of combating loneliness. The challenge for everyone, including the Minister, is that there is no one cause of loneliness, so there is no one solution. On this issue, more than ever we need—to use that often-uttered phrase—joined-up thinking.

There are some brilliant projects out there. Let's Get Chatty is a befriending initiative that started in March 2020 to support residents of Medway in tackling loneliness and isolation. The group, which has won a Pride in Medway award, has grown over the past three years, and runs "Coffee, Chat and Connect" and "Walk and Talk" sessions. Similarly, the Larkfield Community Group, at the other end of my constituency, arranges a buddy scheme, connecting a lonely person with a volunteer buddy for an hour a week to talk, listen and hopefully become a friend. Dr Huq, you have previously mentioned the banking hub in Acton, a vital community resource that helps tackle loneliness.

We have Men in Sheds, active retirement associations, the women's institutes network, the wider scout and guiding movement, disability sports initiatives, friendly benches, walking groups, more active running groups, church-run groups, refugee services, parental support groups and bereavement clubs—the list goes on and on. I am proud that many of those groups have joined hundreds of other community organisations from across Kent and Medway who have attended my over-55s advice fairs since 2015, connecting constituents with like-minded people, activities and hobbies.

I hope that colleagues will highlight and celebrate the local and national groups they know. They deserve recognition for all their hard work, but we need more of

[Tracey Crouch]

them. We also need stronger national leadership on this issue. I do not mean the Minister, who is wonderful, but we do need to strengthen the cross-Government approach of providing long-term funding to projects, and to upscale and improve the evidence base. We need to incentivise local authorities and their partners to develop local action plans to tackle loneliness and, incidentally, hold them to account on delivery.

Funding has generously been given from central Government to local councils in the past for loneliness projects, but whether they have been delivered or the success of delivery is not transparent. We must invest in the community and social infrastructure needed to build connections, particularly in areas with higher levels of deprivation. My own patch has seen mass development and yet valuable section 106 funding has never been allocated to a community hall or any type of communal facility where people can gather.

We do not even build pubs anymore. Once pubs were the centre of a community; these days, we allow them to decline into disrepair, before they are bulldozed and made into blocks of apartments with no communal space. We need to loneliness-proof all our new transport and housing developments. I have supported a recent application for a brand-new retirement community, which has everything one would want to see to keep people connected in their later lives. I see my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) here, which reminds me of “The Thursday Murder Club” retirement property. That is fiction, but it can turn into reality.

There is so much to celebrate in the UK. We started the global conversation on loneliness, thanks to a cross-party commitment to honour Jo’s legacy. Yes, we find ourselves in challenging times, but that is when those who feel acutely lonely need our strength and determination most. We have passed the pandemic; there are no further excuses. We have the chance now to grip the issue, revamp and refresh the loneliness strategy, and I hope the Minister will do just that.

2.43 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Thank you, Dr Huq. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon. This debate comes at a very poignant moment for me. I am grateful to my good friend, co-conspirator and football teammate, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), for securing it. I would also like to associate myself with the comments she made in her excellent speech, particularly around social prescribing, which we could do much more on, and the importance of the UK continuing to play a leading global role in the work on loneliness, not sitting on our laurels but always looking at new ways to drive this work forward. As the hon. Lady said, wherever I go, in this and other countries, loneliness is the one issue people will always come and speak to me about.

Last Friday was the seventh anniversary of the murder of my sister Jo. It was a day that many Members and people in this place remember with a feeling of shock and disbelief that does not get any less painful with time; it certainly does not for me. As I have said before, there is a very strong chance that I would not be

standing here today were it not for that horrific event. It is Jo’s birthday tomorrow, so this is always a difficult time of year for our family. One thing that helps to get us through is the way that every year so many people choose to celebrate Jo’s life and what she stood for in Great Get Together events across the country over what would have been her birthday weekend.

I have just come from my first Great Parliamentary Get Together since becoming an MP—a wonderful mix of MPs, peers and staff of all political persuasions putting our differences aside and spending time together, accompanied by an abundance of Batley’s finest Fox’s Biscuits, of course. In the days to come, thanks to the hard work of the Jo Cox Foundation and many other inspirational volunteers and organisations, Great Get Togethers will take place in every corner of the UK.

These events are a brilliant example of how, by coming together to celebrate what we have in common, communities can help create opportunities for connection and offer a pathway out of loneliness and unwanted social isolation. It might feel a bit depressing to think that we have to create situations where people are able to connect, but we have to accept that in recent decades our communities have changed significantly. The pace of life, technology, the internet and changing work patterns are just some of the many factors that in some ways can help us to feel better connected, but in other ways can significantly increase levels of loneliness and isolation.

Loneliness was an issue close to Jo’s heart, which, in her far too short time in this place, she was determined to tackle. From our childhood growing up in Batley and Spen, she knew the importance of social connection and community. We were very lucky to have a close, loving family and a wide network of friends, but when Jo went away to university we both experienced the dark cloud that loneliness can cast over your life. It was a tough time for both of us, and a clear illustration of the words that she spoke much later when she said,

“Loneliness doesn’t discriminate and can affect anyone at any stage in their life.”

After her murder, Jo’s work was taken up by my now friends, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and Seema Kennedy, the then Conservative MP for South Ribble, as joint chairs of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. Working with a range of brilliant organisations in the sector, it was their report that led to the appointment of the world’s first ever Minister for loneliness, who is here with us today, and the world’s first ever Government strategy for loneliness.

I remember with much fondness the launch of the loneliness report in Jo Cox House in Batley when I described myself, Rachel Reeves and Seema Kennedy as the latest version of Charlie’s Angels. It was great that we were reunited today at the Great Get Together event next door. I am hugely grateful to everybody who has helped get us to where we are now on the issue of loneliness, and I am very proud, now as an MP myself, to be co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on tackling loneliness and connected communities, working closely with the team from the Red Cross, who provides us with first-class support, and who, along with many others, including the Campaign to End Loneliness, continues to do outstanding work in this area.

As the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford said, given what we have been through during the last few years, this work is more important than ever. We

need to make sure we keep the issue of loneliness and the importance of human connection on the political agenda and alive within our communities. It is in our communities where so much of this work should and does happen.

It was through my work with Jo's foundation and the volunteer group More in Common Batley and Spen that I really began to understand and value the role of the voluntary sector and the grassroots work done day in, day out in all our communities across the whole country to address loneliness and social isolation, and the importance of the broader mission to create well-connected, compassionate communities where everyone has a sense of belonging and identity. That tackles a huge range of issues, not just loneliness. The pandemic, which led to such a terrible loss of life and enormous hardship for so many, demonstrated just how vital communities and connections in our communities are. It is a lesson that I hope we never forget as the covid inquiry begins its work.

Although I pay tribute to the many volunteers and organisations across the country, including, proudly, in my constituency of Batley and Spen, we cannot simply leave it to communities and the voluntary sector to do the work. By adopting the loneliness strategy, the Government recognised that they have a role to play and it is our job to make sure that Ministers do not take their eyes off the ball.

The current cost of living crisis, with persistently high food inflation, has exacerbated problems. When you are strapped for cash, the temptation is to stay at home and batten down the hatches. It costs money to go out and see friends for a coffee or for lunch, or even just to get the bus into town. If you are going to invite your family round, you want to put on a decent spread, but if you cannot afford to do that, perhaps you won't bother.

Although I am now looking at loneliness through a political lens, this will always be a personal issue to me, not least because through my life and career, like Jo, I have always been very people focused. I do not want to lose that just because I now work in the very different world of politics—a world that I am sure colleagues will agree is, sadly, sometimes detached from the reality of many people's lives, so I have tried to draw on my life experience during my time here, some of which I have talked about but a lot of which precedes Jo's murder.

My background is in holistic health and wellbeing, and in education, so I have tried to draw on those different chapters in my life during my time in Parliament. Early this year, I published my "Healthy Britain" report with the Fabian Society, which has been well received. I believe that tackling loneliness has to be part of a wider, cross-departmental, cross-sector and holistic approach to improving the health and wellbeing of the nation. As I said in my report,

"Health, education, transport, housing, planning, employment, culture and leisure policies can all make a dramatic difference to reducing loneliness and improving physical, mental and social wellbeing."

My report also talks about the need for a much greater focus on prevention and early intervention in many areas of health and wellbeing.

I echo the words of the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford: there is a need for renewed energy and effort on loneliness, and as part of that we need to do

much more to identify people who are isolated and to support people at risk of becoming lonely. That requires leadership. Here at Westminster, that means using legislation to ensure that everyone has access to social spaces, that they are not forced into isolation because they do not have reliable transport and, crucially, that if loneliness is affecting their mental or physical health, they can get access to a health professional and see them face to face.

As the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford said, we need to build loneliness out of our communities and build connection into them. We also need to hold the Government to account to make sure that happens. In that regard, I welcome the start the Minister has made on this work and it is great to see him here today. Today's debate, at this particularly important moment, is a welcome opportunity to refocus all our efforts on this important agenda.

2.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on raising this issue. She is very much at the forefront in doing so and we are indebted to her. We are good friends, so it is a pleasure to come along and support her in all her endeavours. This one is particularly close to her heart, as it is to mine. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). I thank her for her contribution, made with the passion she often brings to debates. We are very pleased to see her in this place, following on from her sister. Every one of us is greatly encouraged by her contributions in this House and we thank her for them.

I am blessed to represent a rural and urban community, yet rural communities often give us not only stunning views but social isolation, which in my constituency of Strangford can be found in the farming community. I did not hear the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford mention young farmers' clubs in her introduction—they should have been and I am sure that is an oversight on her part. I must mention them, as they are among the organisations that do fantastic work.

The Northern Ireland Assembly also did a good bit of work on mental health that said:

"Northern Ireland has approximately 30,000 farmers and a total farm workforce – incorporating farmers, families and others – of approximately 49,000."

Rural isolation is a big issue in my constituency and across Northern Ireland.

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Member is right. It was remiss of me not to mention that farmer loneliness and isolation is a huge issue, in particular its impact on mental health. There are some excellent examples of how other countries, such as New Zealand, tackle rural and farmer isolation and loneliness, so the hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that and to draw on the experiences of other countries around the world.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady has just done the very thing that I knew she would do—well done to her. I know that the Minister does not have direct responsibility for Northern Ireland, but it is a pleasure to see him in his place given his range of portfolios. When he speaks, I know that he will encapsulate all the requests we put

[Jim Shannon]

forward. Whenever we want to ask the Minister something, he has an open door. It is always easy to ask for something when we know we have a Minister who will respond positively.

The Northern Ireland Assembly also pointed out that:

“There are approximately 25,000 individual farms with an average farm size of 41 hectares; this is the smallest in the UK. A key characteristic of farming in Northern Ireland is that 70% of the agricultural area here is defined as ‘less favoured’; this brings challenges in terms of successful farming.”

It also brings many other challenges. Northern Ireland, where one in five adults has a mental health condition at any time, has a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental illness than England. It also has the highest suicide rate in the United Kingdom, at 16.4 per 100,000 people, compared to 10.3 in England, 9.2 in Wales and 14.5 in Scotland. Prescription costs per head for depression in Northern Ireland are £1.71 compared to 41p in Scotland. Those are not just stats; they are evidence.

Northern Ireland is telling the tale of the detrimental impact on people’s mental health that I believe is partly because so many people feel so alone. The quarantine period during covid absolutely exacerbated that. I say this in fun, but the longest time my wife and I had spent together in our lives was during covid. We are married for 35 years, by the way. So covid did bring some benefits—at least I thought so; I hope my wife is of the same opinion! Whatever the case may be, there were too many who were isolated and alone. While covid restrictions have mercifully eased, for some people the ache of loneliness has not. I am so thankful for the community and residents groups who attempted to step into the breach.

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford referred to Men’s Sheds. We have had a proliferation of Men’s Sheds, as I want to illustrate in my contribution. I recently watched a video of a Men’s Shed learning to play the ukulele. Those of us of a certain generation will know what that is, but those who are younger, like the hon. Member for Batley and Spen and others, might not. These men were from the Glen housing estate, and the camaraderie between them was clear to see. When I looked at the men in that video, I saw men who had been recently widowed or who had lost their jobs. In the Men’s Shed, there were hurting men who were healing simply by being with other men and focusing their minds on living and not just existing. That is so important.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I do not know if it is a universal practice in Men’s Sheds, but I know that in the Glenrothes Men’s Shed, one of the absolute rules is that at tea time they stop what they are doing, go and sit down with everybody and have a cup of tea. For many, that is the most important part of the day. Is that a standard feature in the Men’s Sheds in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency? If not, does he think it would be a good idea for more workplaces to adopt a similar rule?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Whenever anyone goes into a Men’s Shed there is a cup of tea and a biscuit—it might be a Fox’s biscuit or another biscuit; probably more likely to be a Jaffa Cake down where we are, but whatever it may be, it is about the camaraderie—[*Interruption.*]

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. There will be two votes in the House now, so we will suspend for 25 minutes.

2.59 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

3.24 pm

On resuming—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): We resume where we left off, so we will unpause Jim Shannon, who is in the middle of a cliff-hanger moment of his speech.

Jim Shannon: Does that mean I can start again?

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Just go from where you were, Jim.

Jim Shannon: I only jest—I would never do that.

I was referring to the importance of Men’s Sheds, and the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) had just intervened on me. It is so important to have that cup of tea, chat and social engagement. Men’s Sheds are springing up all over my constituency, as I mentioned earlier, and the rationale is clear: let men come together and learn to talk freely, to express themselves and to help each other.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): While we are talking about loneliness, there is a stigma around mental health issues, especially for men, which can lead to suicide. While we support the important work of Men’s Sheds, there are also fantastic organisations like Andy’s Man Club rocking up all over the country. Anything we can do to help prevent that stigma, we should be doing.

Jim Shannon: It is wonderful when we all hear in these debates about the organisations, individuals and volunteers who reach out to try to make people’s lives better. It is not just Men’s Sheds either. Another wonderful project that has sprung up in my constituency of Strangford is the Ards Community Network, where the wonderful Cathy Polley has secured funding for projects aimed at women who need support from others. I mentioned the Men’s Sheds; I also want to mention the good things that have come from the women’s projects. The team there provide yoga classes and mummy-daughter evenings in which women from all areas of the community can come together and learn new skills, or just have a chat with a cup of tea and a Fox’s biscuit—or maybe another biscuit—and relax. Again, it is so encouraging and helpful that so many women of different ages who may not have naturally met are now meeting and bonding. That is what it is all about: reaching out and doing more. The wonderful work in communities is only achieved with funding. In these days of austerity, community groups that put on funded events connect those who need it most—those who are struggling financially, who cannot meet their friends for a dinner out or take their children to the cinema, or who feel constrained.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen made an important point about what families do: sometimes when you haven’t got the money, you sit in the house, you do not bring your friends round and you cannot go to anybody else’s house. Those are real problems. I am pleased that in my constituency of Strangford we see the Men’s Sheds and the women’s groups thriving. The young farmers’ club, which I spoke about earlier, reaches out in the countryside. We have more suicides among men in rural communities in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That tells me of

the pressures of isolation and loneliness. Like others, there are times when on a nice day it is just me and the dog. It gives me a chance to think and to switch off. But for other people, that loneliness is all day and it becomes a real problem.

The debate underlines the message to the Minister: no one has to feel alone. We can help, and that help starts with the funding initiatives and volunteer initiatives that allow young farmers' clubs or local community groups to speak to and reach into people's lives. We are blessed to be the Members of Parliament for our constituencies. We have our ears close to the ground, we hear what people are saying, and we are pleased to recognise all those who do good work, reach out and help people. What a great day it is whenever we as MPs are able to make lives better—that is what it is really all about.

3.28 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on securing this important debate and on her work on tackling loneliness. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) for the excellent work she does through her sister's foundation—the Jo Cox Foundation—and the Great Get Together events today. It is so important, so I thank her.

I start by reiterating the importance of definitions. As has already been said, the Campaign to End Loneliness defines loneliness as a “subjective” feeling—that is really important—and states:

“It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want”.

The UK is experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. That was recognised in the recent update review of the loneliness report, which refers to loneliness as a crisis in the United Kingdom. I know that the Minister is well aware of that.

In the short time that I have in which to speak, I want to focus on loneliness among older people, which is very close to my heart. Age UK has reported that close to 1.5 million older people are often lonely. CFAS Wales—the cognitive function and ageing study—found that more than a quarter of older people in Wales reported being lonely. Before entering Parliament, I worked as a researcher in Swansea University for close to 10 years, and I worked on the CFAS project in the Centre for Innovative Ageing. One of our areas of specialism was loneliness among older people. I thank my colleagues at Swansea University—in particular, my mentor, Professor Ness Burholt, and a friend of mine, Dr Deborah Morgan—for their outstanding and groundbreaking work on the prevalence, symptoms, experience and impact of loneliness among older people, not only in Wales but internationally.

The research for my PhD on social exclusion among older people in rural areas of Wales found a correlation between levels of loneliness, people's situations in their life course and societal changes. It found that there were lower levels of loneliness during the pre-second world war period and the post-war Keynesian period, but that it has increased since the onset of neoliberalism in the late 1970s. That individualist culture still dominates our society today. I will return to that later when I look at the solutions to tackling loneliness.

As others have already said, loneliness can and does have an absolutely devastating impact on individuals' mental and physical health. It is associated with an increased risk of coronary heart disease, stroke and high blood pressure, and there are risk factors for the progression of frailty. It puts individuals at a greater risk of cognitive decline and dementia, and increases early mortality by more than a quarter.

As others have outlined, the evidence overwhelmingly shows that the decade and a half of austerity and the cost of living crisis have had a direct impact on loneliness in the United Kingdom. For instance, Age UK research reveals that more than 4 million over-60s are cutting back on social and leisure activities to make ends meet. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the cost of living crisis on loneliness?

Although my research and work experience focused on loneliness among older people, which is linked to social exclusion, loneliness knows no bounds; it can affect anybody of any age and background, and at different times in their life course. Loneliness is higher now among younger people. The incidence is higher among single or widowed females, people with mental health conditions, people who are renting and people who have lower levels of social trust. It affects working people: nearly half of people in employment experience loneliness at some time.

Loneliness is also prevalent here in Parliament. I commend the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) not only for her outstanding work as a parliamentarian—in particular, on the climate crisis—but for her honesty for saying in a recent interview:

“It's lonely within parliament, yes, definitely.”

Much more needs to be done within this bubble, as I call it, to acknowledge and tackle loneliness and isolation.

Jim Shannon: Far too often, the people who are a joy to everyone around them can be very lonely. In my time as an elected representative, I have often seen that those who are the life and soul of the party suffer most from loneliness. The hon. Lady is right to underline that the visual impression does not always tell us what is happening inside.

Beth Winter: The definition is so important because it is a subjective experience, and we need to be very aware of that.

I will turn to tackling loneliness. At the UK level, the creation of a Minister for loneliness and the strategy on loneliness is welcome. The Welsh Government's initiative “Connected communities: A strategy for tackling loneliness and isolation and building stronger social connections” is also welcome. It contains four key priorities: increasing opportunities for people to connect; a community infrastructure that supports connected communities; cohesive and supportive communities; and building awareness and promoting positive attitudes. Although the resources attached to those strategies are welcome, they are clearly insufficient and more funding is required.

Crucially, if we are ever going to tackle the underlying causes of this epidemic, as I said, we must accept that it is inextricably linked to other societal developments and changes. One example is the shift from a collectivist to an individualist society, and the resultant loss of a sense of belonging and community cohesion. The neoliberal

[Beth Winter]

approach that we live under also exacerbates levels of loneliness and there is a lot of academic research to confirm that. Austerity and the cost of living crisis make it impossible for many people to engage in social activities. There is also the rise of the digital age. I could go on. There are multifaceted indicators and causes of loneliness. If we are ever going to challenge and tackle the scourge of loneliness, we need fundamental, transformative societal change.

The Red Cross supplied us with a number of questions for the Minister, and I want to take the opportunity to pose some of them. What will the Government do to incentivise local authorities and their partners to develop local action plans to tackle loneliness, to invest in community and social infrastructure, to loneliness-proof all transport and housing developments, and to close the digital divide by increasing digital skills and confidence? The Minister may already have those questions to hand; I am interested to hear his response.

I will finish on a positive note. In my constituency of Cynon Valley—which is the best place in the world to live and I welcome anybody to come at any time—we are doing so much to retain and revitalise community connections and our sense of belonging, taking a grassroots, holistic approach. I say “we” because I feel privileged to live there and to go to these brilliant events. They range from the brilliant Men’s Sheds in Hirwaun YMCA to a thriving youth club. I do not know how it has not closed because of austerity, but there is passion and determination in the community, and we have managed to retain that youth club.

In Aberdare, Age Connects has transformed an old people’s day centre into a community hub for all ages, with a whole range of activities. It really is the hub of the community. Down the other end of the valley, Bryncynon Strategy has done a lot of life history work with older people, learning about our heritage and our mining background. It really is a way of befriending and engaging with older people. There has also been a huge revival in choirs in south Wales, so if people are interested in music, they should come to visit us.

I am always optimistic, but I do have hope for a better, inclusive society, filled with care, compassion and kindness, where we respect people and treat them with dignity. Surely we can all agree that is not too much to ask. Diolch yn fawr.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): As a point of information, before I call the last of the Back Benchers, we had a 25-minute suspension because of the two votes, so that goes on to the end of the debate. Our new finish time is 4.25 pm, so do not feel you have to squish everything in before 4 o’clock.

3.39 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq.

Loneliness kills. It does not discriminate, and it does not care how much money someone has, what career they have done or who they are. As has been outlined in the debate, without the right support at the right time, loneliness can very quickly move from a temporary feeling to a chronic state, and damage both our physical

and mental health. A study in 2015 found that feeling lonely is as bad for people’s health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Last year, another study found that only 3% of people who feel regularly lonely feel that life is worth living. Just think about that for a moment. Place yourself in those people’s shoes and imagine feeling so lonely—without people, without hope and without support—that you would rather not be alive. That is the case for millions of people across this country.

Many lonely people describe themselves as feeling trapped, without purpose and frustrated. Loneliness is devastating for our physical and mental health, and therefore has a detrimental impact on our public services as well. We had an opportunity in this country to reconnect with people, to engage with communities and to almost start again after the pandemic. If there was one silver lining from that time, it was that we all came together to reach out to those who were lonely, whether it was to help with prescriptions and shopping, or just calling a neighbour. I do not think that we will soon forget how helpless and isolating the pandemic made many of us feel, because although we were connected to everyone, we were not connected to anyone at the same time.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): To amplify the hon. Gentleman’s point, one of the things that the pandemic taught us all was the psychological impact of being lonely, because we were disconnected from our usual social networks. Does he think that there would be much value in public health messaging that, as well as emphasising the need to maintain our physical wellbeing by looking after our health and avoiding obesity, and the need to look after our mental health, started to articulate good social health, too?

Christian Wakeford: I do not know what to say, other than I agree wholeheartedly with what the hon. Member says. Far too often we talk about physical health, and we keep on talking about parity with mental health, but we certainly do not talk about social health. It is only when we get all three working that we can truly thrive not only as individuals, but as a nation.

As I was saying, I do not think that we will soon forget how helpless and isolating the pandemic made many of us feel, but we were the lucky ones. We had a job to go to. We often had family around us and processes to distract us. We were grinning and bearing it, but imagine what it must have felt like for those without any of that, who were already isolated and who became increasingly more so because of a global pandemic. They were waiting for the phone to ring, as days or even weeks went by without a knock on the door and with no one to speak to. Even it was a political canvasser who people did not want to see, that might have been their only contact for some time.

Post pandemic, however, I fear that we have missed the moment. I really hope I am wrong on that, because loneliness needs to be at the forefront of decision makers’ minds. As the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) said, from house building to transport connections, social policy, charity work and sporting elements, we need a truly holistic and wraparound solution to tackle loneliness, and we need to start it now. I do not want to make this issue party political, though, because I think we can all agree that we want to

make loneliness a thing of the past. As my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) said, we should all grasp the Government's strategy for loneliness with both hands, but I would like them to look at providing more money in the area. In the grand scheme of things, the spending costs are not that great a deal, but the social impact really is huge.

I truly welcome today's debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for securing it. It is not only timely, but very necessary. By raising this crucial issue today, we can reach out to people in our communities. We can talk again about social prescribing, as we have done in this debate. Fantastic groups in my constituency and across the country, such as Incredible Edible in Radcliffe and Prestwich, are not only doing great work in community growing, but making sure that people have the choice of being able to speak to someone. By working together, we can reduce the stigma surrounding loneliness and, ultimately, tackle it once and for all.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the first of the Front Benchers—for the SNP, Peter Grant.

3.44 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Thank you very much, Dr Huq. I am pleased to begin summing up this debate.

In 2007, I went very quickly from being a senior auditor in one of Scotland's smallest local authorities, which is responsible for about five people, to being the leader of Scotland's third biggest local authority, which is responsible for 20,000 people. About two weeks in, I had to speak to the senior management team to teach them about leadership. I thought I was a bit of a con or a charlatan then. I am now trying to sum up a debate about loneliness among two of the possible three or four people in the land who have done more than most to help us recognise what loneliness is and how it should be addressed, so I pay tribute to them. I know it is traditional, when summing up, to commend the mover of the motion and other speakers, but the contributions of the hon. Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), among others, today and to the wider debate about loneliness should be recognised. The speech by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen was wonderfully upbeat and positive, given the time of year and the subject. I thank her greatly for that.

I always have to check and write down the constituencies represented. I do not know whether anyone has realised that represented here we have Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, and that the English constituencies are scattered all over England. We also have four different political parties, and nobody has disagreed with anybody. That is something positive we can take out a debate about a still major public health crisis in all our nations. It is a social and health crisis, which can lead to tragedies and the loss of human life.

We need regular face-to-face contact as human beings. I would argue we need to have regular physical contact with our fellow human beings. Nobody should underestimate the healing value of a hug or a wee hold of the hand when somebody really needs it. Loneliness is the way that we have evolved over hundreds of thousands

of years to respond to a lack of contact in our lives. The same way that hunger is the way that we respond to a lack of food, and tiredness is the way we respond to a lack of sleep or rest. Loneliness is not a mental health illness or condition. It is the way that our bodies and minds respond to tell us that something is going wrong. Like hunger and tiredness, if we do not deal with it in the early stages, if we do not help people to deal with it, it can quickly become a significant health problem, very often connected to depression, to a loss of self-worth and all the mental and physical health conditions that can follow from that.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, loneliness and isolation are not the same as being alone. We all need time to be alone. One of my favourite quotes is from a adopted Fifer called Hamish Brown: "Solitude can be as sweet as honey, but remember you can't live on honey for ever." We all need time to be alone, but in the modern world, that is possibly one of the biggest things that people lack. Being forced to be alone is different, whether that is someone being alone in their own house, because no one will come and talk, or in a crowded room, because everybody is talking to each other, or because everyone is having a party and a barbecue next door and they are not invited. It is possible to be unbearably lonely in a big crowd, just as it is possible to be on one's own yet not feel lonely. We need to accept those things. We need to accept that different people react to loneliness in different ways, just as they react to hunger, fear or tiredness in different ways.

Among the various reminders we have had that loneliness affects everybody and appears in all sectors of society, making itself known in different ways, one thing we have to recognise is something I encounter far too often in my constituency casework: there are people who use loneliness as a weapon. There are people who will deliberately use loneliness and the isolation of a partner to prevent them from having a life. In some cases, it is sadly a prelude to depriving them of that life. Loneliness does not always happen naturally. Sometimes it is forced on somebody deliberately by a partner as a means of controlling their life.

We have spoken about some of the things that have happened recently that have probably made loneliness worse. We cannot possibly point to one thing and say, "That has made loneliness increase by 2%, 5% or 10%." The cost of living is making people become more isolated, which makes people lonely. There cannot be any argument about that. I want to suggest to the Minister that some of the things that the Government do, even if they are not intended to make people feel lonely, are having that impact. I suggest that the Government should think about that in future.

It can be very lonely going for a benefits assessment, especially in circumstances where the person is not allowed to bring someone with them, or only an approved person. One person against the system can feel very lonely indeed. Does the way that we treat asylum seekers and refugees help them to feel that they are part of a community? Does current Government policy and practice help to reduce loneliness among asylum seekers who land in a country where they do not know anybody, where they do not speak the language and where very few people speak their language? I do not think that it does.

[Peter Grant]

The financial austerity to which our public services have been exposed and subjected over the years means that local authorities have had to protect the statutory “must have” services and that a lot of the “nice to have” services have been badly and disproportionately affected. They are being so affected that we are beginning to realise that they are not just nice to have; they are a must have. It is possible for communities to survive without a library, post office, community centre or primary school, but take all those things out of a community and it starts to die, and those who are left in the community are likely to become lonely and more isolated.

The facilities I am talking about, not all of which are the Government’s responsibility, are libraries, community centres, bowls clubs—I declare an interest as a 31-year member of Leslie Bowling Club; I have not swung a decent bowl yet, but I keep on trying—small independent cafés and pubs. They were once, and in some cases still are, vitally important social centres for communities. What happens in a community when those facilities are lost? All those places appear to be there for one purpose or another, but in fact their importance is that they are places for people to go and meet people. For a lot of people in a lot of communities, the library, café or community centre is the only place that they can meet other people.

That has to be recognised when a council considers whether to withdraw funding from a community centre or close down a library, or when the Government or a local authority considers changes that will lead to small businesses, cafés and pubs closing. Do any Government or council factor in the impact on loneliness before they take any of those decisions? I very much doubt it. I suggest to the Minister that if the Government are serious about this, any assessment of any decision should include its impact on loneliness and general community wellbeing as an essential part. I have no doubt that we will get good, well-meaning words from the Minister and that he will agree with what everyone else has said, because people tend to agree on the issue. We can all agree about what needs to be done, but somebody needs to do it. We can all agree about what the bad impacts are, but sometimes decisions may unintentionally make those impacts even worse.

We have heard a lot about the impact of covid. In some ways, it pulled communities together, but it left a lot of people feeling isolated. Those of us lucky enough to live close to countryside could go out for a walk quite happily and, although we were not allowed to arrange to meet people, could meet people. For those living in the middle of a big city, it was not nearly such an attractive proposition. The increased use of remote working, remote shopping and remote everything else has a lot of benefits, but we need to recognise the downsides as well. We need to encourage people who isolated for a long time during covid and who were so scared of covid that they have not quite come out of their shell yet. There are too many people unnecessarily isolating themselves when the risk of covid has now been greatly overtaken by the risk of loneliness and all the problems that that can bring.

Let me finish by looking at some success stories. We were encouraged earlier to name drop all the great things in our constituencies. That would take me until

past 4.25 pm, never mind leaving time to let the other Front-Bench spokespeople speak, so I cannot drop any names, but I will mention some of the brilliant local cafés in my constituency, which I support the best I can. The Men’s Sheds have already been mentioned. They do a fantastic job, and there are a number in my constituency. Glenrothes Men’s Shed, by the way, is a men’s and women’s shed—at least that is where my wife says she is going every Monday morning, so I presume that they allow women. It is open to everybody, and I have never known anyone to go to the Men’s Shed and not come out feeling a better person.

A lot of community cafés, pantries and so on grew up during the covid crisis. I cannot pick out any individual facilities, but I need to mention one person, Rose Duncan, who was an absolute giant of the community effort, particularly in north Glenrothes, during covid. She very sadly passed away a few weeks ago. She gave a lifetime of service to the community in Glenrothes and previously to the community in Methil and Levenmouth, which are also in my constituency. Rose will be greatly missed, and my thoughts are with her family and friends at this time.

Social prescribing was mentioned. Why is it that we have never questioned whether it is a good idea to prescribe antidepressants, which if taken for too long become seriously addictive, but we have not argued about whether it is a good idea to prescribe a season ticket to a local swimming pool or a week’s admission to an exercise class? Bus passes are a great thing. Fife was one of the first places in the United Kingdom—I think one of the first places in Europe—to have free bus passes for elderly people. I was surprised when I discovered that I am now an elderly person. The Scottish Government have taken that scheme over, and we now have free bus travel anywhere in Scotland. It is a benefit to me and also benefits this place to the tune of £20 every time I come down here, because the Scottish Government are subsidising this place by that amount—this place is very welcome. I am quite happy to keep subsidising it because I know it could not survive if it was independent.

There are benefits of initiatives such as bus passes and making sure there are buses that people can get. As one example, I mentioned my membership of Leslie Bowling Club a wee while ago. There were three ladies there, one of whom is sadly no longer with us, who were in their 70s. They were not able to walk very far and were not fit to drive. Every week they would meet at the bus stop in Leslie and, with their bus passes, go to the bus station at the Kingdom centre in Glenrothes. They would take it in turns to pick which bus they went on and go off for an afternoon out and a coffee somewhere and then come back. It made a huge difference to the rest of their week. It made them much more active, vibrant and positive people.

Because those ladies and other people were doing that, the bus services remained viable and were able to continue, even in the early morning when people were going to work, most of whom did not have a bus pass. The whole service was made more sustainable and more viable, helping to keep essential services together. It costs public money, but the public benefits are almost impossible to measure.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman did say he was concluding. I am being told by the official that he is over the standard time, so if he could conclude we would be grateful.

Peter Grant: I certainly will, Dr Huq. I am sorry that I have taken so long.

The most important thing about loneliness over the last few years is that we are now talking about it, and that is because of the great efforts of some of the hon. Members here, and we are talking about it because of Jo Cox. Jo has a fantastic number of legacies in this place. I did not know her well, but I knew her well enough to know that she was the kind of MP we do not see often enough. It was a desperate loss for all of us when she was taken so young. Thank you, Jo, from all of us.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister, Barbara Keeley.

3.57 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I start by drawing attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as an unpaid trustee of a local charity. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for securing this debate and for her work on loneliness, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). I do mean those thanks because, as the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), just said, both Members should be thanked greatly for the work that they do. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed.

Loneliness has been classed among the greatest public health threats of our age. Millions of adults and young people in the UK regularly feel lonely and at risk of experiencing a severe impact on their mental and physical health as a result. My hon. Friends the Members for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) and for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) have talked about the impacts, but those impacts are not felt equally.

The most recent Government data from last year shows that people who live in more deprived areas are more than twice as likely to experience chronic loneliness compared with people who live in less deprived areas. The difference is even more stark among children with different economic backgrounds. Some 28% of children aged 10 to 15 who receive free school meals said they were often lonely, compared with 6% of those who did not have free school meals.

Meanwhile, research from Age UK shows that almost 1 million older people in the UK often feel lonely. My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley talked about that quite extensively. Carers UK research shows that unpaid carers are seven times more likely than the general population to say they are always or often lonely. These issues have been present for many years. Brilliant campaigners such as our former colleague Jo Cox have raised them again and again, and I am glad that that work is being carried on, but as we pass the seventh year since she established the Commission on Loneliness, it feels to me as though tackling loneliness and promoting connectivity is more pressing than ever.

Even before the covid pandemic, the way we were used to interacting was changing. Increased digital connectivity and rapid technological change has led to a change in the social dynamics that exclude many people without access to the internet. Then of course

the pandemic struck, and separation became a defining characteristic of our lives in the early 2020s. We were prevented, as many Members in this debate have said, from seeing our friends and family due to the strong desire to protect one another. Our shared spaces were closed, including libraries, museums, art centres and theatres.

The Office for National Statistics estimated that, over the covid pandemic years, the number of people experiencing loneliness rose from 5% to 7%. Research shows that the most profound disruption from the restrictions was felt by people who are most at risk of loneliness, including women, older people, people with disabilities, people experiencing unemployment and young people. Now, we have a cost of living crisis. As we have heard in the debate, that is reducing people's ability to socialise and connect. Financial instability can provoke or deepen feelings of loneliness, for all the reasons we have talked about. People are unable to get out or to invite people round. In turn, loneliness can exacerbate the feelings of stress brought on by those circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen discussed that point.

Two fifths of respondents in British Red Cross research said they had restricted how much they socialised this last winter because of the increased cost of living. Age UK research shows that more than 4 million people aged over 60 are cutting back on their social and leisure activities just to make ends meet. It is not surprising that, according to the Jo Cox Foundation, more than a quarter of people surveyed are feeling lonelier due to the cost of living crisis.

As we have heard today, the challenges facing individuals and organisations are great, but we have rightly focused on the brilliant initiatives that are finding ways to maintain and strengthen connections. In my constituency of Worsley and Eccles South, a charity called Dancing with Dementia holds weekly dance events in non-clinical spaces for people to socialise, dance and listen to a live band. Guests are then welcome to come together for a healthy lunch. The event was originally only for people with dementia and their carers but has now expanded to include anyone that feels low-spirited, in an attempt to promote connection among people who are at risk of developing dementia.

In Carers Week, I met two carers from Salford, Claire and Justine, who talked about the support they had had as carers from a project of Age UK Salford called "Empowered Connectors", a support group that aims to give family carers a wider voice and the chance to influence positive change. I am looking forward to meeting that group in the summer.

I want to mention the new food distribution charity, Salford Families in Need Meals Project, of which I am proud to be a trustee. Today, as every Wednesday, the charity's volunteers will be packing and distributing much-needed food to local people and families in Salford. Not only does the charity distribute food, but it is now seeking to connect with people, beyond the food service. I must mention Julie Larkinson, who helps by taking cooking sessions to help people find more ways to cook the food that is distributed.

Finally, it is Armed Forces Week, and I had a newsletter from Allotments for Veterans this morning. I know that veterans in my constituency feel that having that allotment

[Barbara Keeley]

space makes a huge difference to their mental health and it is very much supported by the veterans who go there.

Another charity working to connect communities in my constituency is called START Inspiring Minds. It is a mental health support project that uses art as therapy in group settings, to reduce isolation. One of those services is an arts-on-prescription service that consists of up to a year of weekly, studio-based creative workshops for people experiencing poor mental health. It encourages members to try a range of art forms to build their confidence and self-esteem, with the aim of helping people to reconnect with their local community.

That is just one example of an organisation using the arts to tackle loneliness and promote connection, and I want to expand briefly on the benefits of experiencing the arts and culture. Not only does engaging with the arts and culture help spark conversations with those around us, but arts and culture can empower us to voice our own perspectives and empathise with other people's narratives, resulting in a feeling of broader connectedness with the world around us.

Research from Imperial College London found robust evidence about the preventive benefits against loneliness for older people engaging with museums, galleries, exhibitions or community art centres. The benefits from participation in the arts are found to last for as long as 10 years, and there is strong evidence out there that makes the case for arts and culture on those grounds. I hope the Government are listening and that the Minister will do all he can to work with colleagues to support and promote visits to our museums and galleries and community art centres, and to encourage participatory art activities—it is important that it is participatory—for older people and other groups who may be lonely.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley talked about the revival of choirs in her area, and that is to be commended. The research I referred to found that choirs very much had this preventive benefit.

The organisations that we have heard about today are doing important work, but that work must not be taken for granted. This week is Small Charities Week. The 800 small charities that make up the Connection Coalition formed by the Jo Cox Foundation in 2020 have been hit hard by the cost of living crisis. A survey by the Jo Cox Foundation in February showed that more than 80% of members had concerns about the ongoing viability of their organisation over the next year. One third of members anticipated the need to cut back on the services they provide, and members also anticipated that the cost of living crisis would have a negative impact on the communities they serve, which would then increase the demand on their services.

We have reflected in the debate on the danger that our excellent small charities and voluntary organisations will go under because of the cost of living crisis. I hope the Minister will set out what his Department is doing to ensure that long-term financial support is available for voluntary sector organisations to help them deliver their vital work. Given small charities' concerns about volunteer recruitment and retention, will the Minister also update us on what he is doing to support charities and voluntary organisations to grow and develop their volunteer management capacity?

It is testament to the work of the loneliness commission, led first by Jo Cox, then Seema Kennedy, later by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and then taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen, that much has been done already to tackle loneliness. Yet a strategy and ministerial oversight, which are good things, can only go so far when vital community infrastructure is being undermined by the hollowing out of public services. Sadly, austerity measures brought in through the coalition years have had a concerning impact on the number of permanent closures of libraries, youth centres, community halls and other shared spaces. In addition, and as I have mentioned, the very charities addressing loneliness are now facing further restraints because of cost of living pressures. I urge the Minister to ensure that those vital organisations continue to be supported.

Support for mental health also to be strengthened. A couple of hon. Members have referred to mental health issues and we know that mental health services are critically overstretched. Although we have not often politicised issues in this debate, it is worth saying that under a Labour Government, mental health treatment would be revolutionised by recruiting 8,500 new mental health professionals and Labour would guarantee mental health treatment within four weeks for anyone who needs it. That is the level of commitment that is needed to start addressing the problems facing people who experience chronic loneliness. There is no quick fix to tackling loneliness, but with leadership and determination, inspired by Jo Cox, we can build towards a kinder, fairer and more connected world.

4.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on securing this important debate and I pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on tackling loneliness and connected communities, which really is fantastic in championing this important cause. The all-party group raises the profile of the issue, and the ways in which we might solve it, in a really collaborative way. Every one of its meetings that I have attended has shown Parliament working at its best. Long may that continue.

I begin by paying tribute to Jo Cox, her life and her legacy. As a West Yorkshire MP myself, I got to know her—sadly, all too briefly. I remember commenting during the tributes in the Chamber that the first time I met her was in the BBC make-up room as we were preparing for a regional politics show. I have to say that she spent about 30 seconds in the chair, while I was in there for a lot longer, but there we go.

It is great that we have had the event today, thinking about the Great Get Together. It reminds us of the phrase that Jo is remembered for so well, about how we “have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) also reminded us about when Jo said that “loneliness doesn't discriminate”. That is a really important line that we should all remember.

The Government are committed to making sure that everyone has the benefit of powerful and meaningful connections. Loneliness is a complex issue and, frankly, it can only be addressed in partnership. It has been great to hear of so many organisations around the country, such as Men's Sheds, that are doing incredible work in this field. I have seen so many in my constituency really breaking down the barriers. They are critical to tackling this issue.

Government action has been driven by three key objectives set out in the world-class 2018 strategy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford talked about: first, reducing stigma and building up a national conversation; secondly, driving a lasting shift so that relationships and loneliness are considered in organisations all over the country; and thirdly, improving evidence so that we can prove the compelling case for ongoing action.

I am always careful when we start to single out groups of people, because others think that we are forgetting about them. Loneliness can affect everyone—we need to be really clear about that—but we know from some of the evidence we already have that young people are disproportionately at risk, and they are the least likely to seek help. That is why in January we launched a communications campaign aimed at 16 to 34-year-olds that encourages young people to lift someone out of loneliness. That may be just through some small acts of kindness.

A decade ago, people did not really speak about mental health; it was a bit of a taboo. It is incredible to see the real progress that has been made in 10 years. It is now more likely that people will seek help before they get to a crisis, which is good. Loneliness is on a similar journey, but there is much further to go. Some will assume it is their own fault that they are lonely, and some may not even realise that the feelings they are experiencing are feelings of loneliness. We need to normalise thinking about loneliness, recognise its widespread impact, and boost awareness of existing support.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The Minister is spot on, but is not the way we normalise this by talking generally about our holistic wellbeing? We should really join up all our public health messaging to tackle physical, mental and social health.

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to some of the cross-Government work, but we need to join up that messaging right across society.

I decided that, during Loneliness Awareness Week, I could not stand here and talk about breaking down the barriers and the stigma of loneliness if I did not admit that I have been lonely myself. That is why I did interviews in some national papers. I have been overwhelmed by the response, not just from the UK, but from around the world. Despite the fact that awareness was raised during the pandemic, it is still unusual to see people in public life, and people more broadly, talking about their loneliness.

We want to drive a lasting shift. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford was the first Minister for loneliness. It is great to follow in her footsteps—there is not a lot of pressure on me there! We have invested over £80 million in projects up and down the country,

including song-writing workshops in Devon, dance classes in Bedfordshire, health and wellbeing projects such as online chat services in Durham, and projects supporting education, climate and the environment, such as nature walks in Lambeth. Taking that national action is really important. We have also expanded social prescribing, which really does help loneliness, but also improves public health. My hon. Friend is a big advocate of that. I am really keen that we look at how we can expand these measures even further and add them to other strategies that we are developing in Government.

In 2021, we launched the tackling loneliness hub, an online forum that brings together people who are working in this area. It allows members to develop relationships with others around the country, learn from each other and upskill themselves through events and workshops, and, crucially, share that latest research. Organisations represented include the English Football League Trust, the Co-op Foundation and the British Red Cross. I thank them all for their contributions. It is great that we now have a membership of more than 500, including from the private and public sectors, academia and charities. It just goes to show that we need a joint approach.

Building the evidence base is key, and it is important that we continue that work and share best practice. I know that hon. Members have been flying around the world and speaking to others, and the Department has received requests for meetings with representatives of the Governments of Japan, Sweden, Finland and the US. That is fantastic, because they want to develop their national strategies and build their evidence base. That work will include publishing our own research. We are convening an evidence group to bring together academic experts so they can collect population-level data, in particular.

Our evidence has grown significantly thanks to the work that has been done since 2018. We have much stronger evidence that proves the bi-directional relationship between mental health, loneliness and physical health, which my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) mentioned. We are also looking for greater insights into the risk factors for people becoming lonely, and into the affected groups, including young people, people with disabilities and other special educational needs, people from the LGBT community and those living in deprived areas. It is important that we continue to do that work, but there is still much that we do not know, which is why we are investing in programmes to better understand what works.

This year, we announced the first of the know your neighbourhood fund projects, which will create volunteering opportunities in 27 of the most deprived and disadvantaged areas. I was pleased to visit Hull to see the great work that one of those groups is doing, particularly in the care setting. It really is fantastic. The projects also include museums, libraries—which the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) mentioned—social enterprises and community centres. The know your neighbourhood fund will create thousands of opportunities to bring people together to develop their skills and build relationships, and it will properly connect some of those communities. I look forward to getting the most out of that.

There is a lot for us to learn—not just the funders and delivery organisations, but the Government, local authorities and charities—so that we know what interventions are

[Stuart Andrew]

effective and boost social connections. A number of Members mentioned the cost of living. The Department was keen to lobby the Treasury, and we were successful in securing an extra £100 million for charities. We have also allocated more than £70 million from dormant assets to focus particularly on cost of living issues.

I see volunteering, which is another part of my portfolio, as one of the solutions to tackling loneliness. That is why we are a key partner in Vision for Volunteering, and are looking at a 10-year strategy. I see the sports strategy as another way of increasing the number of people who take up volunteering.

I have the support of my colleagues; this is collective work across Government. I cannot do it alone. I have been really pleased with the engagement with Ministers in other Departments, including the Minister for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield); the Minister for children, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho); the Minister for Veterans, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), and the Minister for local government, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley).

We have made good progress, but I am keen that we do not lose momentum. We need to go even further. That is why we published the fourth annual report of the cross-Government tackling loneliness strategy with 60 additional actions for the next two years. They include providing targeted support for care leavers, unpaid carers and veterans; improving and building on the success in social prescribing across the country; supporting community infrastructure and community action to tackle loneliness in rural areas; publishing the new suicide prevention strategy, and opening school facilities out of school hours to make the benefits of physical activity more accessible and inclusive. A key focus of those commitments is sharing learning and best practice, and we will continue to do that right across Government.

There is a lot that I could say, but I sense that I am running out of time. The Government and I, as the Minister for loneliness, are keen to keep the collaboration going. It is working incredibly well, and I can sense that people want to play their part. There is a lot that we still need to do, but compared with where we were just a few years ago, where we are now is incredible. I pay tribute to every single person who has been key in developing the strategy.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): To respond to all that, I call the pioneering first ever Minister for loneliness, Tracey Crouch.

4.20 pm

Tracey Crouch: Thank you, Dr Huq. I thank colleagues for participating in the debate, either through speeches or through some of the excellent interventions we have heard—it is much appreciated.

I thank and pay tribute to the Minister, who I know is working exceptionally hard across Government to try to deliver on this issue. I also praise him for the very honest interview that he gave at the start of Loneliness Awareness Week. It is incredibly important that public figures show that we, too, are vulnerable to loneliness and that there is nothing wrong with highlighting that. It is something that Jo did brilliantly. Even though many of us have spoken about the issue of loneliness before, I have always said that Jo took that conversation and threw it into the stratosphere, which is why we are where we are today.

I thank the Front-Bench spokesmen for their excellent contributions. I particularly want to mention the contribution by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who talked about all the different areas of Government that contribute to people's lives in a really positive way. That reinforces the message that I have taken to several Prime Ministers—I appreciate that that does not necessarily imply a long timeframe—that we need to restructure the Government to create a wellbeing Department. We need to bring together different portfolios across Government into something with a powerful voice that recognises that there are policy areas out there that are very good at preventing other conditions, which become very expensive for the Department of Health and Social Care to treat.

I am grateful for colleagues' comments on lockdown, because that is a very important point. It reminds me of the only argument I had with my husband, who had rather generously gone to the supermarket on his way home from work to pick up our shopping, thus depriving me of my one opportunity to go out that day, even if it was just to connect with someone by talking to the checkout lady. That is what loneliness is—it is about connecting with other people. When we went out for our prescribed walks or exercise, how many of us manically said hello and waved at people we would not ordinarily talk to?

I thank all those who sent briefings for the debate, including the Local Government Association, the Association of Convenience Stores, the National Union of Journalists, the Cares Family and the Red Cross. I also want to add to the comments by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) and thank the Red Cross for its support for the all-party parliamentary group. Without its support, we would not be able to have the vast conversation that we are having.

Finally, I genuinely thank the tens of thousands of organisations that are out there helping to tackle loneliness. Without them—whether they are statutory bodies, volunteer groups or charities—we would not be talking about how we can reduce stigma around loneliness and improve people's connectivity, so I pay tribute to them for their work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling loneliness and connecting communities.

Housing Infrastructure: Essex

4.25 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered planning and investment for housing and infrastructure in Essex.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to debate one of my favourite subjects, which is the planning system, and how investment can be forthcoming for development to support my other favourite subject, which is infrastructure—for the rest of us, that is road and rail transport in particular.

This debate is so important for my constituents in Witham, and for the wider county of Essex, because we have seen the most remarkable change in development. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) will respond on behalf of the Government. Even after having been at the Home Office, planning is certainly one of the most difficult and contentious issues. I have had the privilege of working with her previously, and I know that she is deeply constructive.

This issue matters to my constituents. My area is covered by three planning authorities—the districts of Braintree, Maldon and Colchester city—plus Essex County Council, which also has a say on planning issues, as well as town councils and many parish councils; one could almost describe this issue as semi-controversial locally. We are one of the fastest-growing areas in Essex. We border Chelmsford city as well as Colchester city. Our county council is the penholder for minerals and waste plans, and our local parish councils have neighbourhood plans in various stages of preparation. That is on top of the five-year land supply positions, local plans and other pillars that the Minister will be familiar with, including all the planning policies, spatial strategies, the national planning policy framework and changes to national planning laws. In Essex and in my constituency, garden communities were also once on the table.

Our councils have been constantly at loggerheads with developers over five-year land supply positions. Numerous planning applications go to the Planning Inspectorate, and decisions are sometimes felt to ride roughshod over local views. The Minister is familiar with all of that. We have also had the Secretary of State call in and recover planning applications and appeals using powers under section 77 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. We have seen developments approved outside of settlement boundaries against local wishes, and some sites have been deemed inappropriate in local plans.

The Minister and her dear officials in the Department no doubt have filing cabinets just on my constituency and the various pieces of correspondence that I have sent in. However, we are constructive. My constituents have welcomed development. I do not think they should ever be described as nimbys because, quite frankly, we have built thousands of homes over the last decade. We want to see a new wave of homes because we believe in creating the pathway to home ownership.

I will give some examples. Tiptree village has grown and continues to expand; anyone visiting would not deem it to be a village. Stanway has multiple sites being developed; it was once a village, but it is now almost a

suburb of Colchester city. Witham town itself has expanded. Villages such as Hatfield Peverel are now being circled by developments. In Heybridge in Maldon, where I am going on Friday, 1,000 homes are being built. That site straddles the two constituencies of Witham and Maldon.

With all that development taking place—thousands upon thousands of new homes—the challenge is not just the house building, but what comes with it. The Minister and every single hon. and right hon. colleague will be familiar with this. Where are the roads? Where are the GP surgeries? Where are the schools? To be fair, we are getting schools through some of the developments. However, my councils and my villages are bombarded with planning applications for developments on green spaces outside settlement boundaries.

It is a fact that developers are highly resourced—they are tooled up, as the Minister and the Department will be only too aware—and can engage highly paid barristers. We have seen far too many speculative applications. Even applications that have been rejected in the past are back on the table. That has an impact on democracy, because it angers and frustrates local residents, who feel that people are riding roughshod over their views and that they cannot have a say. They wonder why their councils, councillors and perhaps even their MP seem so denuded of power. The Government are definitely aware of these issues—they are not new issues for them—so I would really like the Minister to provide some assurances.

There are five-year land-supply issues—there might be a small margin for councils if they have fallen behind or have a marginal land supply. The economic climate, with construction inflation and delays in the supply chain, has an adverse effect on councils, so we need to support them. It is not right to penalise councils in this way, with the risk of unwelcome development in communities. My local authorities are constantly raising these issues.

It would be wonderful if the Minister could provide details about what is being done to encourage developers to build out if they already have consents to build housing supply, and provide clarity on local plans from 30 June 2025. We are back in that famous cycle—the five-year land supply—and councils are struggling with the timeframe, the available windows and what they need to do.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): Who can blame people for wanting to come and live in Essex, which is why it is so attractive to developers? Would my right hon. Friend reflect on an issue in my constituency of Thurrock? We have identified sites where we would like to build thousands of new homes, but they are subject to a permanent block from National Highways, because of the impact on the M25 and the Dartford crossing, with which she is very familiar. It is all very well having the road infrastructure, but when it is taken away for national purposes, we are not able to benefit from it. We can see the position, as she can, that because of the five-year land supply, new homes will be built on sites where we do not want them, although we have highlighted perfectly adequate sites where we do want them.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Some of this speaks to planning policy with regard to neighbourhood plans and respecting the work that has

[Priti Patel]

been undertaken. I know her constituency relatively well, and am only too familiar with the Dartford crossing. Thank goodness we got rid of the tolls and everything else with a lot of joint effort.

This is a major issue, because local plans need to be fit for purpose. They should work for local communities, and national schemes should not override them. I say the same as my hon. Friend, and shall come on to infrastructure investment. I hope to see the Secretary of State for Transport at some stage, because in Essex we have a huge number of underdeveloped roads, including the A12—the A13 is in pretty good condition—and the A120, where work has been stymied because of national issues. At the same time, planning and development depend on those routes and roads receiving the investment that they need.

As the Minister will know, local plans, including neighbourhood plans, are important to the planning process, and are a blueprint for national infrastructure schemes. In the east, Transport East and the county council are working with the Government and other authorities on planning for population growth, infrastructure growth and economic growth, all of which are important and exciting things that we want to develop. A truly planning-led approach to planning and development is a win-win. People move in, and they have homes, jobs and so on. Essex, in my view, is one of the best counties in the country, and we are important for economic growth, as we are a net contributor to the Treasury. As a county, what we contribute we never get back, but we do want to see it come back from central Government, whether in sustainable planning policies or the economic growth and infrastructure investment that needs to be put in place.

The county council in Essex provides a great deal of support with regard to development and planning work on roads and highways, but there is not enough funding. At the same time we have the community infrastructure levy, section 106 and the new homes bonus, so how are we going to make this work for local communities? Parts of Witham, including the beautiful village of Hatfield Peverel and the great villages of Tiptree and Stanway, are traffic bottlenecks. The roads are untouched—they have been untouched for probably 40 years, perhaps longer—and the infrastructure contributions are simply not enough. The housing growth in Hatfield Peverel and further afield in the Maldon constituency reinforces the need for a bypass. We cannot have A12 traffic going through rural villages. That is just crazy.

Thus far, no housing scheme has produced anything close to the funding needed to pay for such schemes. I know that the Government are reviewing section 106 and the CIL process, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on that. We need to unlock all of that to get investment in our roads, in my case for the A12 and A120. For my constituency of Witham, those are the two major trunk roads with upgrade plans, but they have already faced delays. The A12 scheme has faced delays and is now progressing through a development consent order process, which is very controversial, I should say. Villages in particular are being impacted.

The A120 dualling scheme has been delayed. Under the road investment strategy, it has gone from RIS2 to RIS3. The scheme is necessary. The A120 was once one

of the most dangerous roads in the country. I think it would be useful to hear from the Minister how the planning system and her work is integrating with transport. Linked to that, of course, is healthcare and education. Those are key aspects. The all-party parliamentary group for the east of England highlighted in its levelling up report some of the real deficiencies across the east of England, including Essex, showing that funding formulas used to calculate contributions for key services—health and education in particular—are simply inadequate. Patient-GP ratios in Essex are among the highest in the country. We are struggling, yet we have more people living in our constituencies with no access to health facilities. I would welcome an update from the Minister on that area.

I would like to touch on a very particular point about planning and raise the issue of class Q regulations for urgent development on Crown land. It would be very useful to know how the phrase “urgent development” is defined by central Government. I raise this because the Home Office is using this measure to develop a large asylum accommodation in Wethersfield, in the Braintree district, which my constituency neighbours. The wider impacts for Essex are absolutely enormous. I should just add, for the record, that my part of Essex already houses the largest number of refugees in the whole county.

I would like to pay tribute to everyone who does amazing work locally. It is the local councils that are doing incredible work, but I am afraid that they are not getting the support they need from the Home Office. I appreciate that it is not the Minister's Department, though obviously she is familiar with the Home Office, but I would like to know specifically what the class Q regulations mean when it comes to taking over a site, in this case Wethersfield, and how the approach may differ from previous sites that the Government have looked at or worked on in the past. Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire was one of them.

In particular, I would like to know how there can be such an exceptional planning process that bypasses all concerns and considerations of local councils, local authorities and local residents. I should just add though that Wethersfield is a village. Residents are concerned about clause 103 in the most recent version of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, currently being considered in the House of Lords, which concerns urgent Crown development. The clause gives the Government the power to determine urgent applications on Crown land, which basically bypasses local decision making. I am not sure if local authorities across the country understand what the power will do. It will bypass local democracy, and I think that is a major issue. I would be grateful if the Minister could give an insight on that today. If she cannot, then she is very welcome to write to me on the specifics of this. I would not expect her to have the full details today.

Some of the detail on the use of class Q regulations and clause 103 will cross into our former Department—the Home Office. In particular, I am looking for assurances on how local communities can hold the Government to account, because currently their voices are being silenced. They are simply not having a say.

Democracy reigns in our country, and long may it reign, but within our local communities elected councillors need to be able to engage local residents in a strong way.

There are many other planning and development issues that I could raise. I think that I have given the Minister an insight into the Witham constituency, if nothing else. I really look forward to not just hearing from her but working with her. I think she is one of the most capable Ministers in Government, and I have had the privilege of working with her. She has an important role in Government in terms of working across other Departments on these areas of planning, and delivering something that sometimes the Government do not do enough: integrating national policies across the board, so that we can demonstrate that the Government work on behalf of, and deliver for, the British public.

4.40 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a huge pleasure to respond to my former colleague in the Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and if you will indulge me for one moment, Dr Huq, to congratulate her from the Dispatch Box on her recent honour. She is now a dame, which is incredibly well deserved. I also thank her for her kind words about my work as a Minister. If I am a good Minister, it is because I learned it all from her. I saw her work as the Home Secretary, which is definitely the most difficult job in Government.

Back to matters connected to Witham, we share my right hon. Friend's desire for the housing and planning system to work for absolutely everybody. We want to make this a country of home ownership. We are the party of home ownership, and we completely agree with her that we want to enable young people to buy a home of their own, and for families to have peace of mind that where they sleep is safe. Housing is at the heart of our efforts to level up growth across the country, including in Essex. That is the power of levelling up: it sees no community left behind. Essex is a thriving and growing area that contributes to the Treasury, as my right hon. Friend pointed out. It is one of the fastest growing parts of the country.

The Government are standing behind the ambitions of Essex and enabling it to unlock even more potential for its residents and people who would like to live there. That is why we have invested significantly in the renewal of town centres across the county. She mentioned a few of them, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). One example is the £85 million investment that we are putting into Harlow, Colchester and at Grays and Tilbury in the Thames estuary through the towns fund. A further £80 million will be invested in four levelling-up fund projects in Southend, Harlow, Colchester and Tendring. Essex is also the only county set to benefit from the creation of not one but two freeports: Thames Freeport in the south of the county and Freeport East in the north-east. I know that those will be huge economic drivers for the county.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham talked in huge detail about all the knotty issues connected to the planning system, and I fear that I will detain the House for too long if I elaborate at great length, so I will pick out a few key points. I will, however, happily respond to her invitation and meet with her, and with some of the groups that she mentioned, such as the all-party parliamentary group for the east of England, to discuss the matter in more detail. She is right in her

central observation that we cannot do this in our Department alone; we have to bring together all the different levers of Government—Government funding, the Treasury, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and transport, as she specifically mentioned.

My right hon. Friend expressed the frustration of her constituents when they see development that is not in line with the local plan. That is why we are working to strengthen the role of local plans in the system through all the measures in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. That is absolutely right, because residents feel frustration when local plans are not in place, or cannot be enacted. Speculative development then comes in, leaving local communities feeling ignored. Communities in Witham are very fortunate to have such an effective champion, so their concerns are being heard here. That is why we are making changes to the planning system through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, including to strengthen the role played by neighbourhood plans, which are a valuable means for communities to shape their surroundings.

The national planning policy framework includes important protections for neighbourhood plans where speculative applications have been submitted and conflict with the plan. For instance, if a local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five-year supply of housing sites, which is currently required, a neighbourhood plan may benefit from protections. We are consulting on proposed changes to the paragraph 14 protections in the framework, which, as my right hon. Friend will know, will extend the time period that qualifying neighbourhood plans are afforded under paragraph 14 from two to five years, in recognition of the time it takes to produce a neighbourhood plan. We propose removing the requirement that a local planning authority has at least a three-year supply of deliverable housing sites and that its housing delivery is at least 45% of what was required over the previous three years. That will enable more neighbourhood plans to benefit from those protections, and I hope her residents will find that change reassuring.

The changes will empower local communities and place them at the heart of the planning system, and will remove barriers to building more homes. I will make a few remarks on the five-year land supply because, again, my right hon. Friend has effectively said how controversial that can be and how it can lead to developments coming forward in a way that does not come under the support of local areas. We propose removing the requirement for local planning authorities to maintain a five-year housing supply when they have an up-to-date local plan. We intend to make changes to simplify the policy as well as to clarify the use of historical over-supply in five-year housing land supply calculations. We will come forward with the outcome of our consultation analysis. That will provide yet more incentives for local authorities to work closely with their communities to agree local plans.

It is sometimes reported that we have dropped house building targets. That is not the case. I assure colleagues that we are absolutely committed to building the homes this country needs—the 300,000 homes that we need to be building. We are delivering them through a plan-led system with the consent of local communities that

[*Rachel Maclean*]

commands the support of Parliament, our colleagues and local democracy, which is at the heart of what we are doing.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I welcome the emphasis on local decision making—we all share that sentiment. The proposed Purfleet development in my constituency will result in 2,500 new homes on the River Thames, 45 minutes from the City of London, and they will sell like hot cakes. That is supported by the Government through the housing infrastructure fund and the development has been gifted the public land on which to build. The community wants it and fully supports the planning application, but National Highways is blocking it. What can we do to ensure a proper joined-up approach from Government so that the homes we need are delivered, because some other Departments are getting in the way?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend raises an issue that I do not have any personal knowledge of, and it would be inappropriate for me to comment on a planning application. However, if she will allow me, I will investigate that issue and see what more I can do to unblock it in my capacity as planning Minister. If she is referring to the housing infrastructure fund, I may be able to assist her.

I will finish by raising the issue of the class Q permitted development raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham. The part 12 class Q committed development right permits development by or on behalf of the Crown for up to 12 months in response to an emergency. There are two key considerations. It must be an emergency defined as an event or situation that threatens serious damage to human welfare in a place, the environment of a place or the security of the United Kingdom. To make use of the right, the land must be Crown land. I am aware, as she is, that the Home Office has sought to use the right to provide temporary accommodation for asylum seekers. The House will need to forgive me because this is a live issue and it is subject to live legal proceedings. I therefore cannot comment on it due to fear of prejudicing this issue. My right hon. Friend has rightly brought the views of her constituents to this place, and I and other Ministers have taken note of them.

I would like to finish by thanking my right hon. Friend. It was an enormous pleasure and privilege for me to work with her for an all too brief period in the Home Office. It is a huge pleasure now to be working with her and other colleagues collaboratively to support her ambitions to ensure that Essex remains a fantastic place to live and work, and to be represented by her.

Question put and agreed to.

Ultra-processed Food

4.52 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the health impacts of ultra-processed food.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I have wanted to have this debate for some time and am grateful for the opportunity to lead it today. I have been deeply concerned about the impact of ultra-processed food on health outcomes and therefore on the NHS. I want to join the debate that others are having in the public domain. We need to ensure that we do not lose sight of the importance of addressing ultra-processed food and its health impacts.

Let me explain a little more about ultra-processed food, as it surprises me how few people know what it is. It is food that dominates the shelves of our supermarkets, much of the food advertising on television, and the multi-buy offers that customers see as they get close to the checkout. It is food that takes up half the average UK diet, with the largest consumption by children. It is food that is linked to heart, kidney and liver disease, cancer, depression and obesity. It is an underlying reason for many poor health outcomes. It is food that has been processed so much that it has little health value; the main ingredients include additives such as preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners, and artificial colours and flavours. Those ingredients destroy the integrity of the food itself, but do nothing for its nutritional value, as they are being whipped up into something more appetising with the help of emulsifiers.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she agree that there is a case for looking again at our food labelling laws, and perhaps for requiring ultra-processed food to carry a health warning rather like the warning required on cigarette packets?

Suzanne Webb: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention and will come to his point a bit further on in my speech.

Ultra-processed food tends to be high in fat, salt and sugar, and is highly addictive. There is fairly low awareness of what ultra-processed food is, but it is familiar in our shopping trolleys. It includes pizza, ice cream, crisps, mass-produced bread, breakfast cereals, biscuits, carbonated drinks, fruit-flavoured yoghurts, pre-packaged meals, sausages and other reconstituted meat products, and some alcoholic drinks—shock, horror—including whisky, gin and rum. Foods such as plain oats, cornflakes and shredded wheat become ultra-processed when the manufacturer adds sugar, flavourings or colourings. Plain yoghurt is minimally processed, but when sweeteners, preservatives, stabilisers or colourings are added, it becomes ultra-processed.

Although there is no universally agreed definition of ultra-processed foods, the above is a good description. They are all foods that we mainly love, but that are not good for us if they form part of a staple diet, and the UK is one of the biggest consumers per head of ultra-processed foods in Europe. Many of the things I have talked about are things that I have purchased myself and are in my shopping trolley half the time.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. We have a lot of these debates, and one issue with ultra-processed food is that it is ultra-addictive—people want more of it, and we cannot help ourselves—but we do not treat it as we treat other ultra-addictive things like cigarettes and alcohol, although the health implications could be just as serious.

Suzanne Webb: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. Again, we are having the same conversation and I hope to answer her question later in the debate.

Ultra-processed food makes up half of the total purchased dietary energy in the UK. In fact, when it comes to UK children, more than 60% of the calories consumed comes from ultra-processed foods such as frozen pizza or fizzy drinks. All that food is linked to obesity, which causes me great concern. In England, 64% of adults and 40% of 10 to 11-year-olds are either obese or overweight. Those figures are taken from the Dimpleby report. They are staggering.

Figures from 2019-20 show that 1.5 million years of healthy life are lost to diet-related illnesses every year. Tackling obesity costs the NHS about £6.5 billion a year and is the second biggest cause of cancer. To put it starkly, it is a ticking timebomb. Some might say that the ticking has stopped and the bomb has already exploded.

Some 100,000 people have a stroke each year. There are 1.3 million stroke survivors in the UK, thanks to the advances of medicine and medical interventions such as blood pressure tablets, statins and so forth. Children who have high levels of ultra-processed food consumption have been shown to have high levels of cholesterol, increased weight and tooth decay. Obesity has been brought to the fore due to covid. Living with excess weight puts people at greater risk of serious illness or death, with risks growing substantially as body mass index increases.

The cost of all that to the NHS is significant, from prescription drugs and GP and out-patient appointments to the orthopaedic impacts on limbs of weight bearing. Of course, the greatest impact is on NHS hospital admissions. Tackling obesity is one of the greatest long-term health challenges that this country faces. Ultra-processed food is one of the main routes to all obesity issues, because the food is mainly high in fat, salt and sugar. It is marketed aggressively, to the detriment of our health, feeding a growing obesity crisis and feeding our arteries full of fat.

The food supply chain endorses and promotes products that are linked to serious health outcomes, marketing products for which the motivation is profit over health. Certainly at the cheaper end of the market, ultra-processed food does not provide a fully nutritious meal. The marketing and branding of ultra-processed food is relentless. Have we ever seen a high-profile marketing campaign for anything that falls off a tree or comes out of the ground? The answer is no. Instead, we see highly aggressive campaigns selling us the dream of so-called delicious meals. In reality they are highly addictive foods and, without moderating consumption, contribute significantly to poor health outcomes.

I am slightly disappointed that the Government are not proceeding with the plan to ban two-for-one junk food deals. That plan, which has been delayed, would have prevented shops from selling food and drink high

in fat, salt and sugar through multi-buy deals. However, at a time when household budgets are under continuing pressure from the global rise in food prices, it would not be right to restrict those options. The principal issue for health outcomes is not so much two-for-one deals anyway; it is the food itself, and we should not lose sight of that. Buying multi-deals does not matter; it is the product itself that matters. That is what we should focus on: trying to eliminate addictive products that are creating poor outcomes for our children.

A good step forward would be an advertising watershed—a 9 pm watershed has been mooted—that would restrict the TV advertising of foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, not forgetting those online. Current advertising regulations do not go far enough in protecting children from a significant number of unhealthy food adverts. I think that we have all seen the continual adverts for pizzas when we watch family programmes, certainly at the weekend. Those should not be allowed. Half the time, I am moments away from going online to order a couple of those pizzas, but I don't do that any more.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Don't order a couple—just order one.

Suzanne Webb: Jim, it would be two.

Children and young people are not sufficiently protected from exposure to adverts for unhealthy products. It has been pointed out to me that Government research shows that TV and online advertising restrictions on food that is high in sugar and salt could reduce the number of children with obesity by more than 20,000. I therefore urge the Minister to look at that and bring the timeline forward. I think at the moment it is going to be 2025, but we could and must move faster. There should be a watershed for adverts for both ultra-processed food and products high in fat, sugar and salt, sooner rather than later.

A bigger light must be shone on the manipulative marketing tactics that companies use to lead us into consuming and over-consuming foods that are bad for our health. My office manager and my comms guy are advocates of disgusting microwave burgers, which further strengthens my resolve on the matter. When I first looked at the product that they are addicted to and that they shove in that microwave, I thought, "What is not to love?" It says that it is 100% beef—it tells me three times that it is 100% beef—and with that look, I was hooked. I thought, "I want one of those," but then I read the side of the packet. It is in fact a composition of beef fat, soya protein, salt, wheat flour, stabiliser E451, dextrose, sugar, egg white powder, yeast extract, something called hydrolysed soya protein, barley malt extract and flavourings. It is 44% beef, so not quite the 100% beef that was advertised. In fact, it is a concoction of emulsifiers, preservatives, colourings and other things, which made it look like the tastiest 100% beef burger in the world. The beef was 100% beef, but it was actually only 44% of the burger itself. That is incredibly misleading. I nearly went out and bought it myself.

The obesity crisis is not helped by the overly aggressive marketing of highly addictive food. Let's face it: if advertising did not work, companies would not do it. That is what encourages us to go out and buy such products. We saw it in the cigarette market. Changes

[Suzanne Webb]

were needed to advertising, starting way back in 1965, when the poor health outcomes from smoking were being understood. It was many years before one of the biggest health interventions, which was the ban on smoking in public places in 2007. I was one of those smokers many, many years ago. I think I gave up before it was banned in public places, but I can tell hon. Members that smoking is highly addictive, and it was sold to be highly addictive.

When I worked in logistics, the company pushed out the cigarettes into big lorries, which took them to the centres to sell. Even there, packs of 200 cigarettes were handed out to employees as an incentive at the end of the week: “Well done—they have done a great job.” People were allowed to smoke in their offices, although I believe that at the time they were not supposed to. Unhealthy food is now being peddled and pushed in a similar way. We really have to think about that. Something very akin to what happened with cigarettes is happening with ultra-processed food.

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend is very generous in giving way. Does she agree that if we are to urge that ultra-processed food should carry with it a label warning, that warning should be in a typeface large enough to be read without the use of a magnifying glass, so people know what they are buying before they purchase it?

Suzanne Webb: I do not have the answer to that one. I will leave it to a conversation between the Minister, me and others whether that is the way we need to go with what the labelling looks like. Whatever the decision, I agree that it needs to be clear that that food is not 100% beef—that it is, in fact, 56% manufactured food and a tiny percentage of nutritious food. Something needs to be done to highlight that.

Many people will be saying that they did not know that the foods I have listed were ultra-processed. Let us take those lovely fruit yoghurts. I have been eating them for years and had not realised how processed they were. The simple fact is that you just need to buy plain yoghurt, put some fruit and oats on top and it is a really tasty product.

The impact of the intervention to ban cigarettes in 2007 was estimated by the *British Medical Journal* to be 1,200 fewer hospital admissions for heart attacks in the year following the ban. In the three months after the ban, there was a 6.3% drop in the volume of cigarettes sold in England. I believe it was around that time—it might have been a few years before—that I gave up smoking. The interventions at the time were working.

Is that what we need to do now? The Minister will be pleased to hear that I am not a fan of the nanny state, but I am a fan of the watershed and that is what is on my wish list. As for the regulators, they need to focus less on the ingredients in our food and more on how the processing of the food sold to us has an impact on our health. They need to address misleading health claims and confusing nutritional information that dominate many products found on supermarket shelves. Indeed, that leads into the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) about how labelling what is in the product has to be clearer.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Member for being so generous with her time. She says she is not a fan of the nanny state, but we would not market cigarettes and alcohol to children, because we know the harm they do to them. Children are not allowed to buy vaping products, because of the harm they do to them. Yet we have this ticking time bomb. I think she said that 40% of children are overweight. Surely that is a group of people we need to take care of. Maybe adults can make their own choices, but we are talking about children here.

Suzanne Webb: I thank the hon. Member for that powerful intervention. I believe that before we get into nanny statedom, those manufacturers need to step up and wake up to what they are selling. They are peddling a false dream. This is not about wrestling with one's conscience; they need to think about the impact of what they are selling to people. That is what they have to face up to first. I believe I am coming on to that further on in my speech.

We have talked about misleading health claims. Children are regularly exposed to products that extol their own virtues but are in fact the opposite: rich in saturated fats, trans fatty acids, added sugar and salt. If a manufacturer were to put labelling telling us that that was what was in their product, I do not think any of us would go out and buy it. We are being sold something completely different from what is actually in the product.

We should not forget emulsifiers, which hold ultra-processed foods together and improve appearance and texture. In other words, emulsifiers make a product taste and look like the food we want it to be. There is growing evidence of their impact on an increased risk of cancer—notably breast cancer—and cardiovascular diseases. Meanwhile, aspartame—I do not know how to pronounce it—is the most controversial ultra-processed food; a sweetener 200 times sweeter than sugar. When I gave up smoking, I used fizzy drinks to help me through that process. Hon. Members will guess that I am now near enough addicted to those fizzy drinks.

Carol Monaghan: It is a horrible sweetener.

Suzanne Webb: It is, hence my sparkling water, which I was rushing out for. In May 2023, the World Health Organisation said it was concerned about the long-term use of aspartame as it increased the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart diseases and mortality, although the UK's Food Standards Agency has accepted that it is safe.

Much of this food is our everyday pleasure, so I am not advocating that we tell people what to eat and not to eat. I am hugely conscious of the cost of living pressures and the ways that people are trying to make changes and save money. Consumed in isolation and moderation, this food is fine. The problem is when it takes over our lives—and it has.

The key challenge is to get supermarkets to put healthy products on multi-buys, encourage a promotional spend shift to healthier food products and focus on making food more affordable. Promotional deals are easy ways to make profit for the supermarkets, peddling products that, to them, are low cost but high margin, and have no nutritional value. There is no doubt that modern living and work patterns mean that we find it difficult to find time to cook unprocessed foods instead of purchasing ultra-processed foods, as they are quicker

to cook, ready to eat and cheaper. I do not think that there is anyone here who has not left Westminster on a Wednesday night and probably just picked up a ready meal because it is the quicker and easiest thing to do.

I am pleased to have read that the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, which provides recommendations on dietary guidelines, is carrying out a scoping review of the evidence on processed foods and health. It aims to publish its initial assessment in the summer of 2023. TV medic Dr Chris van Tulleken has also been vociferous on ultra-processed foods, and long may that continue. The facts are there. It is a serious crisis when one in three children are obese by the time they leave primary school.

I want to see the private sector lead by example, with manufacturers stepping up, taking responsibility and stopping packaging and promotional techniques that lure customers towards ultra-processed food with no nutritional value. We need to address the potential loopholes and displacement from marketing regulation of food that is higher in fat, sugar and salt when selling the dream of a 100% beef burger when, in fact, it is not. Regulators need to focus more on how the processing of food impacts our health outcomes. Will the Minister consider introducing the important advertising watershed sooner rather than later? We cannot afford to delay. The obesity figures speak for themselves; the cost to the NHS speaks for itself. Also on my wish list is considering introducing a reduction target to keep focused on ensuring that ultra-processed food consumption levels in the UK are at a healthier level.

I am deeply concerned about the impact that such food is having on health outcomes and the impact on the NHS. We need to continue the debate, as the simple fact is that 64% of adults in England and 40% of 10 to 11-year-olds are either obese or overweight. That is staggering. To me, we are not far off from the time for urgent intervention like we had in the cigarette industry. An article was written on Monday, independent of my securing this debate, in which I read someone saying very similar things. The obesity crisis is truly shocking and cannot be ignored. The role of ultra-processed foods in that is significant, as is the role of the food supply chain. The food supply chain needs to step up and play its part in the fight against obesity before the Government need to intervene and start to tackle the ultra-processed foods like they did with tobacco—to basically get in there. The Government will have to intervene at some point if the industry do not get a grip.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I will start to call the Front Benchers at 5.33 pm, with five minutes for the SNP and Labour, because it is only a 60-minute debate. If we do speeches within five-and-a-half minutes, everyone will get in.

5.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is indeed a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) for raising the issue. She comprehensively set the scene and, with the interventions, added to the understanding of why the debate is so important. My research for today mimicked some of the research carried out for the debate on fatty livers a number of weeks ago, and the links are clear. I noted during that debate that my good friend the Minister of

State, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), noted that there is no definition of “ultra-processed”. That is an important starting point so that we can begin to address the problems of a highly ultra-processed diet.

The hon. Member for Stourbridge referred to diabetes, and others have as well. I am a diabetic today because for a long period of time—probably a number of years, I suspect—I was the person who bought a Chinese five nights a week with two bottles of coke. That was the way I was; that was the way I lived. It saved me going home to get something to eat, and I ate in the office. Added to that was probably a fair level of stress, and all of a sudden I was almost 17½ stone. I never realised just how the weight had crept up, and I went to see my doctor. My doctor always says “I’ve got good news and bad news for you.” I said, “Well, tell me the good news first.” “The good news,” he said, “is that you’ve got a heart like an ox. But the bad news is that you’re a diabetic.” That is a fact of life.

That was my lifestyle. I was to blame; I will not blame anybody else for that. I am not blaming the Chinese people who sold me the Chinese, nor the shop that gave me two bottles of coke, because it was something I did and I realised what was happening. I am now on medication, so that has helped to administer and control my diabetes. The point that I am making is that we have to be careful what we eat. What we eat is what we are, and, indeed, what we become.

As has been noted, the UK is at the top for ultra-processed foods in Europe. When I say that, I include packaged baked goods, snacks, fizzy drinks, sugary cereals, ready meals containing food additives, dehydrated vegetable soups and reconstituted meat and fish products. They often contain high levels of sugar, fat and/or salt, but lack vitamins and the fibre that I, as a diabetic, need. Those were all noted in the BMJ report on ultra-processed foods in 2019.

Such foods are thought to account for around 25% to 60% of the daily energy intake in many countries. Previous studies have linked ultra-processed foods to higher risks of obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and some cancers, but firm evidence is still scarce. There is some evidential base to be arrived at.

Results in the BMJ report showed that a 10% increase in the proportion of ultra-processed food in a diet was associated with significantly higher levels of overall cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease and cerebrovascular disease, with increases of 12%, 13% and 11% respectively. I am my party’s health spokesperson, so I am very conscious of health issues. In contrast, the researchers found a significant association between unprocessed—or minimally processed—foods and lower risks of all reported diseases.

Results from another test showed that higher consumption of ultra-processed foods—more than four servings per day—was associated with a 62% increased risk of all causes of mortality, compared with a lower consumption of fewer than two servings per day. In her introduction, the hon. Member for Stourbridge referred to ordering a couple of pizzas. I was not responding to her facetiously, but the point I am making is that, yes, it is easy, and, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, when people start, they want to keep on eating, and that is a problem.

[Jim Shannon]

For each additional daily serving of ultra-processed food, mortality risk increases by 18%. It is clear that more research should be done, and I join colleagues who have spoken—including the hon. Member for Stourbridge—and of all those who will speak afterwards to ask the Minister, who always responds very positively and helpfully, and our Government, to get the information and begin the public awareness campaign that must follow those results.

The health of our nation is the wealth of this nation—this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and we must take the necessary steps to make people aware of the dangers of their diet choice, because it is a choice. Hopefully today is the next step, perhaps maybe the first step, in that journey to better health.

5.18 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) for securing this important debate on a subject that is really close to my heart.

Most people are now aware of the health impacts of HFSS diets, yet it is increasingly clear that the primary cause of diet-related disease is not a diet that is high in fat, salt and sugar, but rather one that is high in UPF. However, as has been said, I wonder how many people know what UPF is and what it stands for, even though it represents 60% of the average UK diet.

To put it simply, if a food is wrapped in plastic, has at least one ingredient that we would not usually find in a standard home kitchen, or has a health claim on the packet, it is likely to be UPF. Much of it will be familiar as junk food, but there are also plenty of organic, free-range and “ethical” ultra-processed foods that might be sold as healthy, nutritious, or useful for weight loss.

Home-made chips, lasagne and cake are not the same as their UPF equivalents. The processing is what is important—so we do not have to all give up cake, as long as we make it ourselves. When we think about food processing, most of us think about the physical and chemical things done to food, but the definition of ultra-processing includes its purpose: to create profitable, convenient, hyper-palatable products. Those indirect processes—marketing, legal challenges and lobbying—all make the issue of how to tackle the health impacts of ultra-processed foods more complicated.

The evidence on ultra-processed food is robust. It is not just a couple of trials; hundreds of papers and high-quality data show the wide-ranging health impacts. Many people are unaware of how artificial the designs of ultra-processed foods are. They typically contain little, if any, whole food. The food’s structure is destroyed by industrial processing, meaning that UPFs are usually soft. They are therefore easy to eat quickly, which means that people eat far more calories per minute and do not feel full until long after they have finished eating. UPFs contain drastically reduced levels of phytochemicals, which are essential for dietary health and cannot be replaced through supplementation. There are also extensive environmental effects. The monocultural food system necessary for the production of UPFs is a leading cause of declining biodiversity and the second-largest contributor to global emissions.

If they are so bad for us, why do we eat them? Highly processed foods are on average three times cheaper per calorie than healthier foods. People from households with lower financial security or food security report consuming fewer fruit and vegetables, less fish and more sugar-sweetened soft drinks than those who are more financially secure.

The rise of UPFs is an emergent property of today’s commercialised and commodified food systems. Many people feel food systems have become more profit driven, with natural and fresh food less accessible. For example, buy-one-get-one-free offers in supermarkets often tempt us to buy more but, in 2015, supermarket promotions in Britain were the highest in Europe, with around 40% of our food expenditure going on promoted products.

Lord Hague recently wrote a fabulous article that argued that it now seems extraordinary to us that tens of millions of people used to smoke cigarettes without realising the serious harm they could cause. I suspect that when people look back a few decades from now, they will have a similar sense of incredulity about the food we eat.

One in 20 UK cancer cases is down to excess weight, which is the second largest preventable cause of cancer after smoking. Diet-related disease is the leading cause of early mortality, with the primary cause being high-UPF diets. Two in five children in England face ill health as a result of the food they eat. Those children are five times more likely to develop serious and life-limiting diet-related conditions in adulthood.

We must re-design our food system to put health first. That our diets should be made up mainly of real food seems simple. Individual responsibility is important but, to facilitate it, we must ensure that as many children as possible finish school with the knowledge and ability to cook healthy and nutritious food for themselves. I am arguing for a proactive approach to public health that equips people with the tools and information they need to make informed, healthier choices. We must also increase the powers of local authorities to empower their communities to address their unique health challenges by, for example, tackling the flood of unhealthy food and drink advertising in outdoor areas, especially near areas where children congregate.

The levy on sugar and soft drinks has been an enormous success. The sugar removed from the national diet as a result is estimated to be equivalent to the weight of 4,000 double-decker buses, without leading to a fall in sales. Fiscal measures can incentivise—

Carol Monaghan: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady’s flow. Sugar may have been removed from soft drinks, but other things have gone in. We have already heard about aspartame, which is a particularly horrible sweetener. We know that the levy has taken a huge amount of sugar out, but it has not had any impact on obesity, particularly childhood obesity, so maybe we need to look at other things too.

Jo Gideon: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. If I had my way, fizzy drinks would be banned from all schools and would be hugely discouraged wherever they are sold, but at least the money raised from that tax helps to educate people that we need to look at what we are drinking and eating.

I will not take up more time, but I want to make the case that we have good reason to look closely at the food that finds its way on to the nation's plates, and we should take ways to tackle the health impacts of ultra-processed foods seriously, renew our commitment to halving childhood obesity by 2030, reduce diet-related inequality and create a long-term shift in our food culture.

5.24 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I could not miss the opportunity to progress my argument about the importance of tackling obesity, and today's debate, which was so aptly brought to this Chamber by my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb), provides just that opportunity to discuss the ultra-processed food that has an impact on everybody's diets.

I welcome the premise that if we want a wealthy nation, we need a healthy nation, as I am sure everybody in this room would agree. Obesity and related conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, are the most prominent health impacts of poor diets, which are driven by high levels of consumption of products that are highly processed and contain unhealthy levels of fat, salt and sugar. The term "ultra-processed foods" comes from the NOVA food classification system, which was originally developed by researchers in Brazil. Ultra-processed foods typically have five or more ingredients and, as we have heard, tend to include many additives and ingredients that are not typically used in home cooking, such as preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners, and artificial colours and flavours. Such foods generally have a long shelf life. This is how I define the term: if there is a word that someone cannot pronounce when they look at the contents list on a package, the food is ultra-processed.

The vast majority of ultra-processed foods are high in fat, salt and sugar—HFSS, which is the well-established term to refer to foods that negatively impact on people's health. It has been known for decades that products high in fat, salt and sugar have a negative impact on the health of the nation, and the nutrient profiling model underpins the existing and planned legislation to improve the food system. That includes now-delayed measures to protect children from seeing junk food adverts on TV and online, and to prevent two-for-one offers. My plea to the Minister today is: can we look at the timescales again? They are far too distant in the future and, as I say, the health and wealth of our nation is far too important.

A recent report by the Obesity Health Alliance argued that obesity is the new smoking. That comparison was reinforced by the announcement of £40 million to pilot ways to make the newest and most effective obesity drugs accessible for eligible patients. There is acceptance that obesity is a disease and should be treated with drugs, in the same way that lung disease is treated with drugs. Following that argument through, immense effort has gone into stopping smoking measures and reducing exposure to cigarettes, so immense effort should now be put into reducing everyone's exposure to foods that are more likely to cause obesity—that is, ultra-processed foods.

The health and economic impacts of obesity are devastating. Obesity is a force multiplier on fatty liver disease, cardiovascular disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer, which puts ever-increasing pressure on the

NHS. The combined cost of obesity to the Treasury—that is, through the NHS, the Department for Work and Pensions and the economy as a whole—is predicted to reach £58 billion a year, and I fear that that is probably a very conservative projection. Those who are obese cost the NHS twice as much as those who are not, and it has been estimated that those who are obese take four extra sick days a year, which equates to 37 million sick days across the UK working population. Those stats are clearly very concerning, and there needs to be a collective effort to tackle this widespread problem. If action is not taken now, we will embed ill health and low productivity in generations to come.

A few weeks ago, BBC's "Panorama" highlighted just how harmful ultra-processed foods are and how they contribute massively to diet-related ill health. However, as we have heard, they are among the most profitable foods that companies can make. This may sound unlikely, but there is willingness among food manufacturers to reformulate their products. However, they want a level playing field. We have a proven model in the soft drinks industry levy, so let us use that as a basis for the reformulation of ultra-processed food and provide manufacturers with a level playing field, because no company is willing to step out of line and lead the way. If consumption of ultra-processed food continues at the current rate and the obesity rate continues to rise, our nation will be economically poorer and very unhealthy.

I will be bold and state my belief that this country is addicted to ultra-processed foods, similar to the way it was addicted to smoking in past decades. We tackled smoking addiction by intervention; it is now time to tackle ultra-processed food addiction by intervention, too.

5.30 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Dr Huq. As many Members know, the subject of food and nutrition is close to my heart, and not just because I enjoy eating good food. I chair the all-party parliamentary food and health forum, which is discussing holding a joint meeting with the all-party parliamentary group on obesity on this very subject. I am therefore really grateful to the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) for securing the debate. I know that the Minister's closing remarks will be of interest to the Members here, to people throughout the nations, and to both all-party groups.

There can be no doubt that ultra-processed foods have created a looming health crisis that has cost implications for the future of our public services, particularly our NHS. With more than half the calories consumed by the average person in the UK coming from ultra-processed foods, and with research from *The BMJ* linking these foods to early death and poor health, we really cannot afford to be complacent.

As we have heard, ultra-processed foods usually contain ingredients that people would not add when cooking food themselves. Many would not recognise the names of these ingredients, many of which are chemicals, colourings, sweeteners and preservatives. Research suggests that these additives could be responsible for other negative health effects, with several studies showing links between larger amounts of ultra-processed foods and cardiovascular disease and death, and the more of them a person eats,

[*Martyn Day*]

the greater the risk. The words of Professor Tim Spector, professor of epidemiology at King's College London, are alarming. He said:

"In the last decade, the evidence has been slowly growing that ultra-processed food is harmful for us in ways we hadn't thought. We're talking about a whole variety of cancers, heart disease, strokes, dementia".

Let that sink in. Quite frightening.

Buying processed foods can lead to people eating excess amounts of sugar, salt and fat, often unaware of how much has been added to the foods they are buying and eating. Scotland, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, has the highest obesity levels in the OECD countries, so we have a bit of work to do. Public Health Scotland found that children from the most deprived backgrounds were almost three times as likely to be at risk of obesity as those from the least deprived. According to the Scottish health survey, in 2021 two thirds of adults were overweight, similar to or marginally higher than the rates recorded every year since 2008. We are not making much progress in tackling the issue. Men have consistently shown higher prevalence of being overweight than women each year since 2008. One third of children are overweight, and I have no doubt that diet, and overprocessed foods in particular, is a major factor.

I want the UK Government to implement a sustainable food strategy that targets products that are high in sugar and ultra-processed foods. Our colleagues in Holyrood published the Good Food Nation Bill and passed it unanimously, enshrining in law the Scottish Government's commitment to Scotland being a good food nation, where people in every walk of life take pride and pleasure in and benefit from the food they produce, buy, cook, serve and eat each day.

Education and consumer knowledge are important tools in the fight against ultra-processed foods, but accessibility and price are also key. A few weeks ago, in another debate, I pointed out that for many living in poverty, eating healthy food is a secondary consideration to eating at all. Access to healthy food should be a right, not a privilege.

Carol Monaghan: We have talked a lot about children, and there are a few issues there. Children who are obese are less able to exercise, which continues the cycle, and of course this is made more difficult in areas of deprivation. Some Members know that I coach gymnastics locally. We see children, some of them very young, who struggle to exercise because they are overweight. We need serious action.

Martyn Day: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I agree entirely; the only thing I would add is that not only is it important for children to exercise, but when they do they develop habits that stay with them for their lifetime. We have to crack the children issue at an early age.

On a positive footnote—I will get hell for this when I get home—I am pleased to say that our household contains a 19-year-old who has much healthier eating habits than I had as a 19-year-old male, all those decades ago. If I ask him before going to the shops what he would like, I am invariably told, "Raspberries, strawberries and grapes," whereas I would have asked for chocolate bars and cans of fizzy juice.

Carol Monaghan: They are expensive.

Martyn Day: They are, I know. That leads in nicely to my next point, which is that the situation is not helped by food inflation: 70% of households are now worried about food and drink costs. This is frightening and does not help us to tackle the food crisis. The impact of deprivation on nutrition, diet and obesity rates is deeply concerning. With unhealthy food often cheaper and more accessible than healthier alternatives, it is little wonder that the UK is one of the biggest consumers of ultra-processed foods in Europe.

We must act now, before it is too late. While many of the policy levers are devolved, several key factors, such as advertising, are determined here. I call on the Government to prioritise children's health and to protect youngsters from junk food advertising on TV and online. Health inequalities cannot be separated from poverty, so we must also tackle the underlying causes of that, which includes ending poverty, supporting fair wages, and improving physical and social environments, as well as public education.

5.36 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I commend the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) for securing this crucial debate and for all the work that she and others in the Chamber today are doing on this important topic. We have had a small but perfectly formed debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon); the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who recently led for the Government on these issues and maintains a keen interest in these matters, which is good to see; and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who leads on health issues for the Scottish National party. I also thank the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for their interventions. All made crucial points.

Ultra-processed foods are defined as foods that tend to include additives and ingredients that are not typically used in home cooking. They include, but are not limited to confectionery, fried snacks and processed meats. Typically, they are produced to be convenient, quick to eat and appealing. Diets that revolve around UPFs can lead to poor health outcomes, as we have heard, and leave less room for more nutritious meals. We know that balance is essential to a healthy diet, so for most people, cutting out UPFs entirely is not a realistic option. What matters is supporting people to make informed, healthier choices and addressing the wider social determinants that influence their ability to lead a healthy, active life.

That action is important because rising obesity rates pose a profound threat to public health. I would argue that the Government have, unfortunately, responded to this threat wrongly by delaying the ban on junk food advertisements targeted at children and then scrapping the health disparities White Paper. Those are retrograde steps. Instead, the Government have announced a series of pilots, most recently built around the weight loss drug semaglutide, but the reality is that drugs of that sort, while useful for acute cases, are not long-term population-level fixes; they address the extreme end of the problem rather than the cause. My first question to the Minister is: beyond those pilots, what action are the

Government taking to tackle rising obesity rates across the United Kingdom? The Government pledged to tackle childhood obesity in their 2019 general election manifesto, but cases have increased, so does the Minister recognise that more needs to be done to improve public health?

I am proud that my party has already committed to establishing at the heart of the next Labour Government a mission delivery board that will ensure that all Departments with an influence over the social determinants of health work in tandem to reduce inequalities and to ensure that health is part of all Government policies. The work will not stop there, though. Under the next Labour Government, every child will benefit from fully funded breakfast clubs and a broad and balanced national curriculum containing a wide range of physical activities. We will end the promotion of junk food targeted at children by implementing the ad ban which the current Government should have introduced—the watershed about which the hon. Member for Stourbridge spoke so passionately. We know that poverty is a key driver of obesity, so we will work tirelessly to tackle child poverty and to ensure that families can afford to feed their children and keep them well.

This is Labour's vision—positive, ambitious and led by what works—but we cannot afford to wait until the next general election for action on obesity, so I hope that the Minister accepts that more needs to be done and that he will set out how the Government will develop their strategy to tackle obesity, reduce health inequalities and improve access to good, affordable food now. The Labour party stands ready to support him in this action, but it must come sooner rather than later.

5.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) for securing this debate, which is timely and deals with an incredibly important issue, which I am very interested in. I recently met Dr Van Tulleken and the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, and we are working on this at pace, so I welcome the debate.

One of the great challenges with ultra-processed food is defining what it is. The most commonly used definition, as we have heard, is the NOVA definition, which includes foods that are clearly less healthy, such as sugary drinks, confectionery, salty snacks, cakes and other products that are high in calories, saturated fat, salt and sugar. A diet high in those things increases the risk of excess weight gain and obesity. We are committed to tackling obesity, and have a programme of measures to do that. We have introduced calorie labelling in cafés and restaurants, and since last October we have introduced location restrictions on less healthy foods to reduce pester power. An advertising watershed will be introduced in 2025. That requires numerous steps, and we are taking them.

For children and young people, we are spending £150 million a year on healthy food schemes, such as school fruit and veg and nursery milk, through our Healthy Start scheme. We are also putting in £330 million a year for school sport and the PE premium. In addition,

there is a £300-million youth investment fund in facilities to encourage an active lifestyle, and we are spending about £20 million a year on the national child measurement programme, which aims to nip problems in the bud. Only a few weeks ago, the Prime Minister made an announcement on funding a £40-million start in the use of new weight loss drugs for those living with obesity.

Maggie Throup: Are the Government still committed to halving child obesity by 2030?

Neil O'Brien: Yes. We are working with food businesses and we have set out direct measures to further progress reformulation, which is crucial to helping people to make healthy choices. The soft drinks industry levy decreased the amount of sugar in soft drinks by 46% between 2015 and 2020, and the voluntary sugar reduction programme has delivered a nearly 15% reduction in average sugar levels in breakfast cereals and a 13.5% reduction in yoghurts and fromage frais. Together, these policies are expected to accrue health benefits of about £60 billion, producing savings for the NHS.

Although a significant amount of work has been published, there is no universally agreed definition of ultra-processed food; nor is there an evidenced position. We do have definitions of products that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and that is the basis on which we regulate and control those foods. The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition provides the Government with robust, independent advice on the science and the underpinning evidence base. SACN is clear that there is evidence that a diet high in calories, fat, salt and sugar is bad for people's health. The question then is what ultra-processing adds to that impact. Is it something about the ease of eating these foods, or what it does to someone's physiology? Are the products in some way addictive, or is it something else entirely?

Some people say, "Why don't you just adopt the NOVA definition?" but the breadth of the NOVA definition is such that it includes foods that our current dietary guidelines encourage as part of a healthier diet. Shop-bought wholemeal bread, baked beans, or wholegrain breakfast cereals such as bran flakes and Weetabix would be captured by it, so clearly there is work to do to reach the right definition. Some of the foods that I have mentioned can make a positive contribution to nutrient intakes: for example, fortified breakfast cereals or bread and pasta made from fortified wheat flours are the largest source of dietary iron in all age and sex groups and provide, on average, between a third to a half of our calcium intake.

Defining the problem is not completely straightforward. To make progress so that we can start to regulate or do anything else, we need to have a clear definition. However, even though how to define these things is not totally obvious, that does not mean that there is not a problem, that we will not take action, or that we cannot find a solution. We all know it when we see it—I particularly admired the definition of my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) that having an unpronounceable ingredient is a pretty good sign—but we need to be precise and follow the scientific evidence.

That is why SACN is carrying out the scoping review of the evidence on processed foods and health, which includes reviewing existing processed food classifications and the ability to apply NOVA to UK diets and our

[Neil O'Brien]

national diet and nutrition survey. SACN aims to publish its initial assessment this summer, so we are moving quickly. We are also in touch with other countries in the same position, and I know that France and Canada are doing similar work. As part of the review, SACN will consider whether there is sufficient evidence to undertake a full risk assessment. Only after an in-depth risk assessment and the identification of robust supporting evidence would we consider updates to Government dietary advice.

The Eatwell Guide, which most Members present will know about, summarises dietary recommendations and shows how much of what we eat overall should come from different food groups to achieve a healthy, balanced diet. It recommends that we consume less often, and in smaller amounts, food and drinks that are high in saturated fat, salt or free sugars. Foods such as crisps, biscuits, cakes, ice cream and sugary drinks are all shown outside the main Eatwell Guide image to highlight that they are not necessary. Those foods also meet the NOVA definition of ultra-processed foods.

The Eatwell Guide and associated messaging is promoted through a range of channels, including the NHS and gov.uk websites, and the Government's national social marketing campaigns, such as Better Health. We know from our national diet and nutrition survey that most people in the UK are not meeting the dietary recommendations depicted in the Eatwell Guide. Aligning diets more closely with existing dietary recommendations will deliver considerable population health benefits and healthcare savings.

Obviously, one of the things that we are doing to achieve those benefits is supporting people with the cost of living so that they can afford to do it. Support for the cost of living, which we have provided through both energy price support and direct measures for poorer households, has been worth £3,300 for the average household over last year and this year—one of the most generous support packages anywhere in Europe. We are absolutely conscious of the challenges around the cost of food at the moment, caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Even as we focus on the cost of living, we are still very much focused on obesity, because it accounts for a significant cost to the NHS and the economy. That is what we are doing with our existing programme on obesity and healthy eating. We know that there is more to do, and we will do more. Our major conditions strategy has a call for evidence that runs until 27 June,

seeking people's views on how the healthcare system can support people to lead healthier lives, including supporting them to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. We know that diet has an important impact on health. My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge has raised important concerns about ultra-processed foods, which we are looking at.

Our existing policies support less consumption of many of the foods that would be classified as ultra-processed because they are high in fat, salt and sugar. We know that they are a problem, and that is why we regulate in the way we do. It is vital that we take a considered and robust approach to the emerging evidence on what ultra-processing is doing. That is what we are doing, and we will not hesitate to take action if the evidence suggests that it is needed.

5.49 pm

Suzanne Webb: I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their powerful contributions. We are all aligned on this issue. I wholeheartedly agree with the Minister that there has to be a considered response. It was touched on that we face a looming crisis. I believe that it is already a crisis; the bomb has ticked and now has actually gone off. We need to address the obesity crisis not just for our people and our children, but because of the impact that it is having on our NHS. The cost to our NHS is significant.

There is also significant cost to our own life outcomes. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for sharing his story. I have my own story, but do not have not the time today to share it. My cholesterol was way off the Richter scale at about nine—whatever that means. I have halved it by changing my diet and cutting out any food high in fat, sugar or salt. I have a way to go, but, my goodness, it has worked very well.

I believe that regulators need to step up and make manufacturers take responsibility for the health outcomes of their foods. It is their food after all. They need to step up, act and take responsibility now, even before the Government consider when and if they need to intervene. I hope the manufacturers listen to what is being said in this place and in the public domain and take action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the health impacts of ultra-processed food.

5.51 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 21 June 2023

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Sports Grounds Safety Authority Public Body Review and DCMS Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I wish to inform the House that the Government have today published the report from the independent public body review of the Sports Ground Safety Authority (SGSA) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport response to this review.

The Government launched a full organisational review of the SGSA in February 2022. The review of the SGSA was an independent review and formed part of the Public Bodies Review Programme which delivers against the commitments made in the declaration on government reform to increase the effectiveness of these organisations, to ensure they are set up in the best possible way to deliver and to ensure that government works better for the citizens it serves.

The review sets out clear and comprehensive recommendations, which will enable us to undertake a programme of reform which will build on the existing strengths and expertise of the SGSA, thus ensuring that the safety of spectators across sports and the live events sector remains of paramount importance.

We have published a full response to the review, which sets out our response to each of the recommendations. The Government accept all of the review's recommendations but recognises that reform requires careful consideration and further detailed work, including legislative change before implementation. The programme of work set out in the response will ensure that any changes do not compromise the excellent work already carried out by the SGSA and instead build on the organisation's strengths and expertise.

The SGSA is regarded as a world leader in sports ground safety and we are hugely grateful to the SGSA for taking part in this review. We would also like to extend our thanks to David Rossington for dedicating much time and consideration to this review, and for producing a clear and well-evidenced report.

[HCWS870]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Sustainable Farming Incentive 2023

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The sustainable farming incentive is an important element of our new and improved offer for farmers through the agricultural transition. It pays farmers for actions that support food production and can help improve farm productivity and resilience, while also protecting and improving the environment. This includes actions relating to soil health, hedgerow management, providing food and habitats for wildlife, and managing pests and nutrients.

When adopted at scale by farmers, these actions will make a significant contribution to our statutory environment and climate targets, and also support our objectives to maintain food production and improve farm productivity. This includes our aim published in the environmental improvement plan of between 65 to 80% of landowners and farmers adopting nature friendly farming on at least 10-15% of their land by 2030.

We are taking an agile, incremental approach to rolling out environmental land management schemes as we phase out land-based subsidies. This involves working with farmers and acting on their feedback to refine our policies and schemes, as we recently set out for upland and tenant farmers. This is essential when delivering a complex and important programme of reforms.

As part of this approach, we have made a number of improvements to the 2023 offer based on learning from our pilot and the initial rollout of the scheme in 2022.

Today we are confirming the final details of the sustainable farming incentive 2023 offer, as well as the final detail on the SFI management payment, and how those already in the scheme agreements can access the offer this year. From August this year, we will accept applications for a total of 23 paid-for actions in the scheme. The application process is straightforward and quick, and we will pay farmers every quarter starting in the fourth month of their agreement. This builds on the prospectus published in January setting out significant detail across our new farming schemes.

We are introducing twice as many new actions this year as we originally planned and making the scheme even more flexible for farmers. As we introduce more actions, farmers will be able to upgrade their agreement to add more actions and add more land.

The offer includes a management payment to cover the costs of taking part in an agri-environment scheme, which particularly benefits smaller farms. It also includes an extra payment for farmers on common land to recognise the costs of managing agreements involving multiple parties on commons.

For tenant farmers, along with other improvements we have made in response to Baroness Rock's review, there are short—three year—agreement lengths that do not require landlord consent, and those on shorter, rolling tenancies can join the scheme and leave without penalty if they lose management control of the land.

To allow a smooth transition to our updated offer, we have closed applications to the existing scheme (SFI 2022) until the new offer opens for applications in August. Those in our pilot, or already in an SFI agreement, can access the new offer and we will write to all agreement holders to advise them. This is part of our commitment to ensure that those who enter our schemes early are not made worse off by improvements we make as the transition progresses.

[HCWS872]

Animal Welfare

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The UK has some of the highest animal welfare standards worldwide and since 2010 animal welfare has been one of the Government's priorities.

We have raised standards for farm animal welfare, including by introducing CCTV in all slaughterhouses. We have significantly enhanced companion animal welfare, including by revamping the local authority licensing regime for commercial pet services including selling, dog breeding, boarding, and animal displays. We have brought in valuable new protections for wild animals, including by passing the Ivory Act 2018, one of the toughest bans on elephant ivory sales in the world.

In our 2019 manifesto, we set out an unprecedented package of welfare improvements, many of which we have already delivered. For example, we have increased the penalties for those convicted of animal cruelty; we have passed the Animal Welfare Sentience Act 2022 and launched a dedicated Committee; we have made microchipping compulsory for cats as well as dogs; and we have announced the extension of the Ivory Act to cover five more endangered species.

In 2021, we published our ambitious and comprehensive action plan for animal welfare. This set out an array of future reforms for this Parliament and beyond, including a ban on the import and export of shark fins, which just last week passed its Third Reading in the House of Lords.

As the Minister updated the House on 25 May, we will be taking forward the measures in the Kept Animals Bill individually during the remainder of the Parliament. As a first step, yesterday the Government launched a four-week public consultation seeking views on a new licensing scheme for privately owned primates in England and new draft standards for the care and management of these primates. The needs of these creatures are extremely complex and by requiring all privately owned primates to be kept to zoo-level standards, we will ban primates being kept as if they were pets.

Following the consultation, we will introduce the secondary legislation this year, quicker than would have been possible had we continued with the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. This will deliver on another commitment from our manifesto and our action plan.

The Government remain fully committed to delivering the remaining manifesto commitments and maintaining our strong track record on animal welfare, both in the course of this Parliament and beyond.

[HCWS871]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

New Loan Guarantees to Support Ukraine

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): Today I have laid a departmental minute which describes a new liability the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is undertaking to support the economic stability of Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental

minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement, except in cases of special urgency.

This departmental minute sets out details of a new liability undertaken by the FCDO. The liability is a commitment to guarantee up to \$3 billion of additional lending by the World Bank to the Government of Ukraine. This new commitment to Ukraine, which would likely be split into several separate guarantees, will create a contingent liability of up to \$5.6 billion (£4.6 billion) (once interest payments are accounted for). Once existing UK guarantees to support Ukraine are accounted for, the maximum amount which could be demanded from the UK in a single year would be approximately £402 million. The guarantees will be denominated in USD. I have separately notified the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee, Foreign Affairs Committee and International Development Committee.

The FCDO will guarantee both principal and interest repayments from Ukraine to the World Bank. A UK pay-out would be triggered if the Government of Ukraine misses a repayment by 180 days.

The exact length of the liabilities will be linked to the financial terms agreed between the World Bank, and the Government of Ukraine. The World Bank's lending is expected to have a maturity of 29 years and a seven-year grace period during which only interest payments are due.

The war has placed huge pressures on Ukraine's economy. The international finance community, including development banks such as the World Bank, is playing a key role in providing rapid financial support. Ukraine's IMF programme is helping to mobilise combined donor support worth \$115 billion over the next four years—up to 2027.¹ This package is promoting macroeconomic and financial stability, hailing a shift from ad-hoc unpredictable funding to effective multi-year assistance. The UK's latest set of loan guarantees will form a part of this package and will help enable the World Bank to continue providing reliable and significant financial support at a critical time.

The exact length of the liability created by this commitment will be linked to the financial terms agreed between the World Bank and the Government of Ukraine.

HM Treasury has approved this new contingent liability in principle with the FCDO. It is also normal practice that any contingent liabilities should not be incurred until 14 sitting days after Parliament has been notified of the Government's intention to incur a contingent liability. If any Member of the House has questions or objections, please do get in touch.

A copy of the departmental minute has been placed in the House Library.

¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2022/12/21/Ukraine-Program-Monitoring-with-Board-Involvement-Press-Release-Staff-Report-and-Statement-527288>

[HCWS873]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Visiting in Care Homes, Hospitals and Hospices Consultation

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): In collaboration with my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince), and my hon. Friend the Minister for Mental Health and Women's Health Strategy (Maria Caulfield), I am making this statement for the benefit of all members of Parliament to bring their attention to the Government consultation on visiting in care homes, hospitals and hospices.

Ensuring that care home residents and hospital and hospice patients maintain contact with loved ones is vital to the health and wellbeing of people receiving care or treatment. Friends and family also provide invaluable practical support and advocacy for those receiving treatment. However, the Government have heard from Members across both Houses, members of the public and campaigners of continued instances of loved ones being denied contact following the lifting of restrictions introduced during the covid-19 pandemic.

Restrictions were implemented during the pandemic to help prevent the spread of covid-19 in health and care settings. While those restrictions were in place at the time to keep people safe and control the risk of transmission from a virus that was not yet well understood, we recognise how detrimental it was for loved ones to have been kept apart and to not have had friends and family advocating on behalf of patients and care home residents. We constantly sought to enable safe visiting wherever possible and made it clear that end-of-life visiting should always be possible. Our guidance is now clear that visiting should be encouraged and facilitated in line with efforts to return to normal.

The Government recognise the efforts that so many health and care settings have made to implement guidance and facilitate visits. NHS England has guidance in place which sets a minimum expectation for visiting in inpatient, outpatient, diagnostic service settings and the emergency department, that hospitals should facilitate a minimum of two visitors to visit patients for at least one hour per day, ideally for longer. Compliance with this guidance is now a requirement in their standard contract for all providers of NHS services.

However, we know that some restrictions continued beyond the lockdown periods and continue to hear of instances where loved ones are unable to see each other for prolonged periods or provide support when someone is attending hospital. We understand the harm this can cause to the health and well-being of those receiving care as well as how distressing this is for their friends and families visiting and, in many cases, providing vital care to loved ones.

The Government are therefore announcing a consultation today that sets out our proposals for going further to tackle this issue. The consultation document outlines the current position, including current Government guidance and data on visiting in health and care settings, as well as further details on current regulations, the Government proposals, the questions for respondents, how to respond and next steps.

Current regulations

The Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014 (CQC Regulations) set out fundamental standards which must be upheld by all Care Quality Commission (CQC) registered providers. CQC assesses health and care providers against the fundamental standards and other requirements set out in CQC Regulations. Providers are required to comply with certain fundamental standards of care which implicitly cover visiting.

Although visiting is not explicitly mentioned in the current CQC regulations, it is considered best practice that visiting is not normally restricted, and that any restrictions should be reasonable, proportionate and time limited. CQC has enforcement powers to protect people who use regulated services from harm, the risk of harm, and to protect people's rights and welfare.

In addition to the fundamental standards, other legislation may allow individuals to take legal action against their providers, set out in further detail in the consultation document.

Policy intention and proposal

DHSC wants to ensure that visiting is protected and that it remains a priority. We are therefore considering putting visiting on a statutory footing. It is important that any visiting requirement is workable, reasonable and proportionate. We therefore propose to do this by introducing secondary legislation to amend CQC Regulations to include a specific visiting requirement. This could be done either by introducing a new regulation specifically for visiting, or by amending an existing regulation to include visiting, such as "person centred care" or "dignity and respect".

We want the legislation to have as far reach as possible and our proposal is therefore for the new visiting requirement to cover CQC-registered health and care settings. This would include NHS and independent providers—both acute and mental health—care homes and hospices.

This consultation relates to visits from family, friends and volunteers such as befrienders and includes accompanying patients attending outpatient or diagnostic appointments and emergency departments at hospitals. It is not about access to visiting professionals, and any change made regarding visiting would not override pre-existing statutory arrangements regarding visiting professionals, such as the entitlement for people detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 to meet independent mental health advocates (IMHAs) in private if they wish to.

Through this consultation we will hear directly from those most likely to be affected by this policy proposal and will gather the evidence required to determine what action should be taken on visiting in health and care settings.

[HCWS874]

WORK AND PENSIONS

DWP Estate: Decommissioning of Temporary Jobcentres

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): Jobcentres provide an essential service for those looking for, or wanting to progress in, work. This Department continues its commitment to

provide local personalised support for customers and families and remains committed to striking the right balance between providing these essential services and delivering value for money for the taxpayer.

As part of its transformational programme, the Department has also committed to improving its estate to provide a better space for colleagues and customers, which will improve the opportunities, services and environments of many of the Jobcentres we are retaining.

In the written statement of 8 February 2023, the Department announced the decommissioning of 20 temporary Jobcentres (Phase 1). These temporary Jobcentres (or the expansion of space in established Jobcentres) were put in place in direct response to the anticipated pressures on the labour market during the pandemic. The Department secured time-limited funding to rapidly introduce this additional space to deliver a temporary expansion to the existing network of 639 established Jobcentre sites and provide more work coaches to support claimants. The temporary expansion of the Jobcentre estate enabled us to drive forward our plan for jobs, helping people back into the labour market, right across the UK.

The Department re-affirmed its commitment to reducing its Jobcentre estate back to pre-pandemic levels by decommissioning temporary Jobcentres, or the additional space in established Jobcentres, in a phased approach, where the increased capacity is no longer needed. Several of the temporary sites, where they offer better, more suitable accommodation than our existing offices—and provide better value for money for the taxpayer—will be retained. Established Jobcentres will move into these buildings.

In the written statement of 17 May 2023, the Department announced the decommissioning of a further 19 sites—phase 2. It also detailed subsequent phases would follow. The Department is today announcing a third phase of decommissioning, which consists of 36 sites, listed below. Subsequent phases will follow throughout 2023 and 2024 and Parliament will be kept updated.

The Department continues to support and update colleagues affected by these changes in a timely and sensitive manner. Furthermore, the Department continues its ongoing engagement with relevant stakeholders on the planned changes.

Letters are being sent to each MP with changes in their constituency to explain what this means for their local Jobcentre, its staff, and their constituents.

The decommissioning of these temporary Jobcentres will not reduce our levels of service, or access to face-to-face appointments. Customers will return to being served by their established Jobcentre and there will be no reduction in the number of work coaches supporting customers as a result of the decommissioning.

This Department remains committed to updating Parliament on our work to ensure both our staff and customers are operating in buildings and environments fit for the future.

The 36 temporary Jobcentres to be formally decommissioned are:

<i>Location</i>	<i>Address</i>
Bellshill	New Lanarkshire House, Dove Wynd, Strathclyde Business Park, Bellshill ML4 3FB

<i>Location</i>	<i>Address</i>
Birmingham	Unit 40-42 Greenwood Way, Chelmsley Wood Shopping Centre, Birmingham B37 5TP
Bury Manchester	Millgate Shopping Centre, Clerke Street, Bury BL9 0QQ
Cardiff	NSU2 Capitol Shopping Centre, Queen Street, Cardiff CF10 2HQ
Chelmsford	39 The Meadows, Chelmsford CM2 6FD
Chester	32-38 Foregate Street, Chester CH1 1HA
Chesterfield	7 Steeplegate Chesterfield S40 1SA
Chichester	Units 2 and 3, Southern Gate Office Village, Southern Gate, Chichester PO19 8GR
Coventry	Coventry Building Society Arena, Judds Lane, Coventry CV6 6GE
Crawley	1 Forest Gate, Brighton Road, Crawley RH11 9PT
Derby	Barclays Business Centre, Sir Frank Whittle Road, Derby DE21 4RX
Derby	20 Albion Walk, Derbion Shopping Centre, Albion Street, Derby DE1 2PR
Dudley	237-238a High Street, Dudley DY11 1PQ
Edinburgh	11-15 North Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1SB
Folkestone	14-16 Sandgate Road, Folkestone CT20 1 DP
Kirkcaldy	29 The Mercat, Kirkcaldy KY1 1NU
Liverpool	Liverpool Innovation Park, 360 Edge Lane, Building 2 Bayliss Suite, Liverpool L7 9NJ
London Aldgate Tower Hamlets	Ground Floor 100 Lemon Street, London E1 8EU
London Ealing	54 The Broadway, Ealing, W5 5JN
London Mitcham	The Grange, 1 Central Road, Morden, SM4 5PQ
London Wembley	498 High Road, Wembley, HA9 7BH
Manchester Stretford (the additional space will be decommissioned and potentially, repurposed - the established Jobcentre at Arndale House will continue to provide Jobcentre services)	Arndale House, Chester Road, Stretford M32 9ED
Middlesbrough	27-33 Dundas Shopping Centre, Dundas Street, Middlesbrough TS1 1HR
Newton Abbot	10 Courtenay Street, Newton Abbot TQ12 2DT
North Shields	Kings Court, Earl Grey Way, North Shields NE29 6AR
Nuneaton	Unit 2, Ropewalk, Chapel Street, Nuneaton CV11 5TZ
Peterborough	Northminster House, Northminster Road, Peterborough PE1 1YN
Sheffield	Block 3, Pennine Five Campus 3 Tenter Street, Sheffield S1 4BY

<i>Location</i>	<i>Address</i>
Southend	101 -109 High Street, Southend on Sea SS1 1LQ
Stoke on Trent	1 Smithfield, Leonard Coates Way, Stoke on Trent ST1 4FA
Swinton	51-53 The Parade, Swinton Square Shopping Centre, Chorley Road, Swinton M27 4BH
Thornaby (Stockton-on-Tees)	Dunedin House, Columbia Drive, Thornaby TS17 6BJ

<i>Location</i>	<i>Address</i>
Watford	78 St Albans Road, Watford WD17 1AF
West Bromwich	5 Lombard Street, West Bromwich B70 8RT
Woking	6 Church Street West, Woking GU21 6AZ
Worthing	105-109 Montague Street, Worthing BN 11 3BP

[HCWS869]

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**not later than
Wednesday 28 June 2023**

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