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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 27 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

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Prison Overcrowding

1. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he plans to meet the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales to discuss overcrowding in prisons. [905631]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I regularly meet the senior judiciary, including the Lord Chief Justice, to discuss priority issues across the justice system, including prisons. We are delivering 20,000 additional modern prison places, the largest prison build programme since the Victorian era, ensuring the right conditions are in place to rehabilitate prisoners, cut crime and protect the public. We have already delivered 5,200 of these places, including at the brand new HMP Fosse Way, which opened last month and which I look forward to visiting later this week.

Mr Sheerman: The Secretary of State, for whom I have great respect, surely knows that there is enormous unhappiness in the prison estate. Recent polls show how low morale is and how many people working in our prisons doing that difficult job are fearful for their safety. Will he meet me and perhaps even the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), to talk about how we can find a way forward for the young people—there are perhaps 1,000 of them—in prison under joint enterprise? That would help him with prison overcrowding and bring justice to so many young lives.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and will be happy to meet him to discuss that. I am glad that he paid tribute to prison officers, who do spectacularly important work. One thing I am proud of delivering is body-worn video cameras for all of them, because that is so important for de-escalating volatile situations and potentially gathering evidence so that they can see justice done.

Joint enterprise is a sensitive issue. I know that the hon. Gentleman takes a proper interest in it, but it is the legal doctrine that ensures that the getaway driver does not avoid culpability, that the lookout of the armed robbery is also culpable, and that the person who supplies the murder weapon, knowing that it will be used in that offence, also cannot escape liability. The Court of Appeal has considered this at some length in the case of Jogee,

and we have to be very careful before seeking to recalibrate it. However, I am happy to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman at a time of his choosing.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am sure that the Lord Chancellor, as well as thanking the current Lord Chief Justice for his work, will welcome the appointment of Dame Sue Carr as the first woman Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales and look forward to working with her, too. Does the Lord Chancellor agree that one of the real areas of concern and pressure on prisons is the growth in the remand population? In January, before he was appointed to office, the Justice Committee produced a report on remand, from which some recommendations were accepted and some were not. Will he revisit some of those recommendations and see what more we can do to bear down in particular on the growth in remand for people who after all have not yet been convicted?

Alex Chalk: Those are excellent points. Let me begin by joining my hon. Friend in welcoming Dame Sue Carr, whose appointment has been hugely welcomed across the political spectrum, across the legal sector and beyond. I also pay tribute to Lord Burnett. I think I speak on behalf of everyone in the House in saying that there is nothing but regard and respect for the contribution that he has made.

On remand, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It is worth reflecting that, compared with the pre-pandemic period, there are between 4,500 and 5,000 more of those people in custody. As he rightly pointed out, they have not been convicted of any crime. Technology, such as electronically monitored tags, can be of assistance. It is for the bench or the Crown Court judge to decide whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that, if released on bail, that person would commit further offences or fail to surrender, but I know that the courts will want to bear the technological options in mind.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Minister.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Over the past 10 years, more than 3,000 prison places have closed and community sentences have halved, and the three new prisons planned will not open before 2027 at the earliest. No wonder we have a prison capacity crisis, with the Government having to commandeer police cells and judges being told to jail fewer people. How can the public have faith that they will be protected and that crime will be punished when that is the Government's record?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. It is worth reflecting that the second biggest programme in Government after High Speed 2 is in prison building. I invite her to go and look at Five Wells or Fosse Way, or at the work taking place at Millsike. Those are modern, safe, rehabilitative, productive prisons. We make no apology for investing in our prison estate because, if we can bear down on the things that prevent individuals from getting back on the right side and putting crime behind them, that is good for society, good for the individual and good for the taxpayer.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are 10 minutes in and still on question 1. I want to make sure that we get everyone in.

Legal Aid Means Test Review: Domestic Abuse Victims

2. **Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the legal aid means test review on access to legal aid for victims of domestic abuse. [905632]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk):

We are determined to ensure that domestic abuse victims secure access to justice and the protection of the law. The changes we are making to the legal aid means test mean that more than 2 million more people in England and Wales will be eligible for civil legal aid each year. Domestic abuse victims in receipt of universal credit will not be means-tested when applying for protective orders, effectively fast-tracking access to legal support and the protection of the courts.

Paul Holmes: I welcome the new policy, which means that domestic abuse victims who cannot access joint assets controlled by their abuser will no longer have those disputed assets counted towards their eligibility for legal aid. Does the Lord Chancellor agree that this will help to secure access to justice for survivors when their abusers try to continue to control them after they have split?

Alex Chalk: I agree wholeheartedly. My hon. Friend puts it well. Disputed assets such as the family home are by their nature illiquid and inaccessible. Worse still, they may be controlled by the abuser. By ensuring that those assets are not taken into account when deciding whether to grant legal aid, we are helping to ensure that victims of DA can access that vital legal support and, with it, the essential protection of the courts.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Extending legal aid eligibility to 2 million extra people is great, but eligibility is not the same as access to legal aid services, which have been collapsing in the last 18 months. We have seen a 20% reduction in housing legal aid providers, 21% less mental health support, 27% less welfare support and 30% less immigration and asylum support. There is a crisis in access to fair justice. What is the Secretary of State doing about that?

Alex Chalk: I am delighted to say that we are expanding access to legal aid to more than 6 million more people in total. Let me pay tribute to legal aid lawyers, who have an exceptionally important role in ensuring that individuals have access to justice. What we will not do on the Government Benches is demonise legal aid lawyers. I was in practice as a legal aid lawyer. Charlie Falconer has admitted that he regrets that the Labour Government demonised “fat cat” lawyers. It was not true then, and it is not true now. We will support legal aid lawyers.

Rape Charge Rates

3. **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the level of rape charge rates. [905633]

13. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the level of rape charge rates. [905644]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk):

Through the rape review, we are making strong progress in our ambitions to increase the number of referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service, CPS charges and Crown court receipts for adult rape cases back to 2016 levels. Incidentally, 2016 levels are ambitious, given convictions in that year were 30% higher than in 2010. According to the latest quarter of data, we are on track not just to meet but to beat each ambition. Adult rape prosecutions continue to rise, up 44% in the last year, meaning that more people are being put on trial for this devastating crime than in 2010. There is further to go, but it is important and welcome progress.

Christian Wakeford: Is it any wonder that women do not come forward when they have been raped? Not only is there a 1% chance of the perpetrator being charged, but women have to wait nearly three years for a result. Recent figures from Rape Crisis show that victims and survivors of rape and other serious sexual offences wait the longest to have their experiences heard in court, with an average wait of 839 days from report to completion in court. The delays are having a devastating impact on victims and survivors, leading to deteriorating mental health and wellbeing and survivors attempting to end their life as a result. The Government have given up on protecting women and girls, have they not?

Alex Chalk: I regret that language. As a matter of fact, convictions are at or around the 2010 level. If the hon. Gentleman wants to suggest that rape was decriminalised in 2010, he is welcome to, but it is completely untrue. The number of prosecutions is higher this year than it was in 2010. Of course we must continue to invest in supporting victims—that is why we have 800 independent sexual violence advisers to accompany those victims on what can be a difficult and traumatic journey. How many were there in 2010? There were a handful.

Ruth Jones: There were 580 rapes recorded by Gwent police for the year ending March 2022. Given that, as we have heard, across England and Wales only 1.3% of rape cases result in a charge, will the Secretary of State tell me how many Gwent cases resulted in a successful prosecution and what is being done to increase prosecution rates?

Alex Chalk: The statistic that the hon. Lady just cited is completely wrong. Let me make a couple of points. The number of rape convictions is at or around the level it was in 2010. The number of cases passed by the police to the CPS for charge is up 130%. The number of cases charged is up more than 90%. The number of cases received in the Crown court is up more than 120%. Of course there is more to do. Of course work needs to take place, but the system is recovering very well. People are getting justice and those rapists are being convicted, punished and disgraced. Finally, the sentences they receive are around a third longer than the sentence they received in 2010. That is just deserts for wicked rapists.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right that support for victims has been essential in increasing the number of cases taken to court. As he said, the numbers have risen significantly in the last 12 months. Could he outline what more he is doing to speed up the time taken to get a case to court, because that time waiting can leave victims not only distressed but potentially walking away from a case that would otherwise come to court?

Alex Chalk: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to make those balanced and fair observations. To try to assist victims, there are a few really important things. Rolling out section 28s ensures that individuals can get their account recorded on tape; that is done whatever then happens in the court process. The independent sexual violence advisers and the independent domestic violence advisers, whom I have talked about, make an enormous difference. Through the victims code, we want to ensure that individuals get the support they need from victims' services, have the opportunity to go on court familiarisation visits, make victim personal statements and are kept updated by the officer on the case as it proceeds. All those things are critical to ensuring that victims are not spectators of the criminal justice system, but participants in it.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): The section 28 achieving best evidence video interviews to which my right hon. and learned Friend refers are there to support vulnerable witnesses and to help to secure not only a charge but a conviction. However, yesterday, during a Justice Committee evidence session, we heard from senior King's Counsel that there were incidents where such cases were being de-prioritised because of the backlog in the criminal courts, on the basis that in essence the evidence-in-chief had already been taken. Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware of that issue? If not, will he look into it further and report back to the Committee?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for raising that important point. As he knows, listing—prioritisation; which case gets called first—is a matter for the independent judiciary, but he raises important issues. I would be happy to look at them and to discuss them with him, if appropriate, in due course.

Prisoner Transfers: Albania

4. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of arrangements on prisoner transfers agreed with Albania. [905634]

7. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of arrangements on prisoner transfers agreed with Albania. [905637]

22. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of arrangements on prisoner transfers agreed with Albania. [905654]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Our prisoner transfer agreement with Albania came into force in May 2022. Between January 2021 and December 2022, 1,441 Albanian foreign national offenders were returned to their home country from custody and the community. To build on that, we announced

a new arrangement with the Albanian Government in May 2023 to speed up prisoner transfers, with an additional 200 of the most serious offenders able to be sent back to serve their sentences in Albania—good news for the rule of law and good news for the British taxpayer.

Giles Watling: I am very grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his work on Albania, illegal migrants and returning offenders. We pay £40,000 a year to maintain a prisoner in their cell and we do that for foreign prisoners, too. Will my right hon. and learned Friend seek to make more arrangements with other countries to return their offenders, thus saving the taxpayer money?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is an expensive business to incarcerate people. The UK has over 100 prisoner transfer agreements. We are working hard to ensure that existing PTAs work as effectively as possible and deliver value for money for the taxpayer by removing FNOs to their home countries. My Department also has ambitions to secure PTAs with new countries. We are engaging with our counterparts in target countries to advance that. I will update the House in due course.

Marco Longhi: May I, too, thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for the difference the agreement with Albania is making in reducing arrivals? Germany, a member of the ECHR, refuses to even allow claims from Albanians. Will the Secretary of State therefore consider derogating from the ECHR, as German appears to have done and as we did over prisoner voting, to further build on that success?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. In the five months to the end of May, Albanian small boat arrivals were down by 90% on last year, and we have returned 1,800 illegal migrants and foreign criminals to Albania. Thanks to changes in our asylum system, we have gone from accepting one in five Albanian asylum claims to accepting just one in 50, in line with other European countries such as Germany.

Rob Butler: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for the progress that he is making in the removal of Albanian prisoners from our jails. I know from my time in his Department that they make up a sizeable proportion of the foreign national offenders whom we have in custody here. Does he agree that, at a time when our prisons are so close to capacity, the return of foreign prisoners to their own countries is important to ensuring that our hard-working and skilled prison officers can focus their work on the rehabilitation of offenders who will eventually be released into their local communities here in the UK?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I am glad that he has raised the issue of rehabilitation because, as he says, when prisons can run a full regime, the opportunities for rehabilitation are optimised. I recently visited HMP High Down to see prisoners being trained in a brand new, purpose-built warehouse. They are learning the skills that they need for life on the outside and that work is bearing fruit. The percentage of prisoners in work six months after release has doubled in the last year, and that means a better chance for them to go straight and a better chance for the community not to have to suffer from crime.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): If the Secretary of State were doing a good job of returning foreign prisoners, we would expect to see overcrowding coming down, but on a recent visit to Wormwood Scrubs prison I found, increasingly, that two people were occupying a one-person cell without a shielded toilet, and that time out of cell was between one and two hours a day. If the Secretary of State is proud of his record, will he collect and publish those statistics? At the moment, his Department is refusing even to collect the time out of cell figures.

Alex Chalk: Those statistics are not published, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for going to HMP Wormwood Scrubs, because I think it is important for Members to visit prisons.

When it comes to the additional numbers in custody, the key element is the number of people on remand, which, as I have said, has risen by between 4,500 and 5,000 since the period before the pandemic. That is important, not only because those people have not necessarily been convicted of any crime and all Members should have some concerns about people being in custody for a long period, but because some have been recalled. Of course we will work to drive down the number of foreign national offenders, but, as I have said, the principal issue that we are facing at present is that of remand prisoners.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, I thank the Secretary of State for his answers. I know that our Ministers and our Government always maintain the highest human rights standards, and the highest standards in respect of prison conditions. Can the Secretary of State assure me that, when it comes to the transfer of Albanian prisoners, those high standards will be maintained in respect of both prison conditions and human rights?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this matter. Yes, we will be robust, but we will also be fair, and being fair means ensuring that basic standards relating to human behaviour and the way we treat our fellow human beings are upheld. When, as part of our robust arrangements with Albania, 200 of the most serious offenders—each costing us about £40,000 a year—are transferred there, that will happen in a dignified and appropriate way, and they will be serving in conditions with which both the hon. Gentleman and I will feel comfortable.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The UK Government are reportedly paying jailed Albanian offenders £1,500 to return to their country of origin as part of an early release scheme. Can the Secretary of State tell us how many of those whom he has sent back have been eligible for that money, and how—given that one of them has told the BBC that he plans to come back to the UK within days or weeks of his release—he can be sure that this scheme is an effective deterrent?

Alex Chalk: Let me begin by saying that I know the hon. Lady is standing in for the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), and we wish him an early recovery. I will write to her about specific numbers but, on the issue of early removal, it is absolutely right that, if

individuals who have served a requisite period in our jails can be sent back to their home countries, we should send them there, because of the cost to the British taxpayer but also because the capacity is needed to run a full rehabilitative regime. This policy is not controversial across parties and we are committed to upholding it.

Imprisonment for Public Protection Sentences

5. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of imprisonment for public protection sentences on the criminal justice system. [905635]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): The number of IPP offenders in custody has fallen from 6,000 in 2012 to 2,916 at the end of March this year. That includes 1,561 who had been released but were then recalled. The Government are committed to helping IPP offenders to progress through their sentences, under the revised IPP action plan published in April, and towards safe release.

Chi Onwurah: At age 17, my constituent Danny Weatherson was convicted of shoplifting, with a recommended term of 15 months. Seventeen years later, he has only just been granted parole, in a justice system that seems too under-resourced to progress his case. Imprisonment for public protection is a complex area, and many who serve such sentences undoubtedly do present a threat to the public, but does the Minister agree that discussions on reform should take place on a cross-party basis, with the voices of victims and justice campaigners heard, and that a functioning probation system is a prerequisite?

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the tone in which she asks about this issue. Obviously, the role of the Parole Board and the probation service is vital, and the Parole Board is regularly looking at cases. I welcome what she said about continuing to look at this matter, and the Government welcome the Justice Committee's recent report, which was an important opportunity to take stock. The Lord Chancellor will speak further on this matter in due course.

Criminal Court Case Backlog

6. Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the backlog of criminal court cases. [905636]

16. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the backlog of criminal court cases. [905647]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The Government remain committed to reducing the outstanding case load in the Crown court and are working with partners across the criminal justice system to do so. For two years in a row we have removed the cap on the number of days the Crown court can sit, in order to increase capacity. We are recruiting up to 1,000 judges across all jurisdictions this year, on top of the 1,000 we recruited last year. We have also extended the use of 16 Nightingale courtrooms and opened two permanent super-courtrooms in Manchester and Loughborough so that there are more courtrooms available across the court estate.

Simon Baynes: Will the Minister give the figures for the backlog in north Wales, where my constituency of Clwyd South is located, and for Wales overall? Will he also comment on any particular factors that are affecting those figures in Wales?

Mike Freer: As of December 2022, the outstanding case load in north Wales was 337 and the outstanding case load in Wales was 2,106—a 34% increase from pre-pandemic levels. As with every region, the outstanding case load in Wales has been impacted by the pandemic and the disruptive action by the Criminal Bar Association. As I have said, the Government remain committed to reducing the outstanding case load in the Crown courts, working with partners across the system.

Mark Pawsey: The Government have introduced the use of pre-recorded evidence in rape trials and are trialling an extension for other cases to allow parties to provide information while memories are fresh. My attention has been drawn to a case that predates the roll-out, in which those involved had to wait three years to give evidence. What assessment does the Minister have of the effectiveness of pre-recorded evidence in speeding up the justice process?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend raises a good point. On the roll-out of pre-recorded cross-examination—known as section 28—to victims of sexual and modern slavery offences in all Crown courts in England and Wales, this has been available to children and vulnerable adults since November 2020. It is particularly important with those vulnerable witnesses to ensure that their evidence is taken while it is fresh. The impact of that on speeding up cases is important. Rolling it out across the whole estate may mean that the impact of that evidence is diminished. That is why it is part of a programme—not just section 28 video recording, but the work we are doing on capacity and judicial recruitment. It is a package.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister has considered the Magistrates Association report “Inaccessible courts: a barrier to inclusive justice”, which shows that magistrates courts in England and Wales have serious accessibility failings. It says that impacts on the efficiency and fairness of the justice system and undermines efforts to recruit a more diverse magistracy. One in five magistrates courts do not have level access. In 30% of courts, magistrates with a disability cannot sit in some or all of the courts in the complex. A third of courts do not have accessible toilets for them, and half do not have hearing loop systems installed or operating. Just what has happened to all that cash the Government claim to be investing? It certainly is not addressing the basics.

Mike Freer: The Government are committed to improving the whole court estate, not just magistrates courts. On diversity, we are investing £1 million. On the accessibility of our physical estate, I have taken a particular interest in ensuring that those magistrates who have specific needs are supported. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that investment in our court estate will continue to address all the issues that we face.

Prison Officer Numbers

8. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that there is an adequate number of prison officers. [905638]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): We are committed to recruiting 5,000 additional prison officers across the public and private estate by the mid-2020s. We have seen recent improvements in recruitment, with 655 additional full-time equivalent officers appointed between December 2022 and March 2023 alone.

Andrew Selous: At risk of being potted, kettled or attacked with toothbrushes that have razors fastened to the end, the work of a prison officer is not for the faint-hearted, yet their role is essential to keeping us free. We have just celebrated Armed Forces Week, and rightly so—I say that as a former veteran—but it troubles me that we do not have a similar week to celebrate the work of prison officers. We do not do enough to recognise their service to keep us all safe and free, across society. Can we change that, please, and urgently?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right about the paramountcy of safety for our brave staff, which is why we have been investing in security, body-worn cameras, PAVA spray and so on. He is also right that prison officers are often hidden heroes in our society, and they do not always get the recognition they deserve. As it happens, this evening is His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service staff awards, which I am looking forward to attending, and I am keen to find more ways to publicly recognise these incredible people for what they do. His suggestion of a Prison Officers Week is interesting. More generally, I hope all colleagues will take the opportunity to visit their local prisons and to speak directly to prison officers.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): According to the Prison Officers Association, the turnover rate among officers is still very high. What discussions has the Minister had with the POA about not only recruitment but retention?

Damian Hinds: I have spoken to the POA about recruitment and retention, as the hon. Gentleman would expect. We have recently seen about a 1 percentage point improvement in the resignation rate, which is significant, but we have to make sure that all aspects of the job are right. Of course it is about pay and conditions, but it is also about things such as safety and making sure prison officers have the right support for what can be, mentally, a very difficult and straining job.

Court Process: Sexual Assault and Rape Victims

9. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support victims of sexual assault and rape in the court process. [905639]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): In the rape review action plan, we committed to expanding our victim support provision throughout the court process for victims of these dreadful crimes. We are more than quadrupling funding for victim and witness support services from 2009-10 levels, increasing the number of independent sexual violence advisers and

independent domestic violence advisers to 1,000. We completed the roll-out of section 28 measures in September 2022, and we continue to deliver our enhanced specialist sexual violence support programme in selected Crown courts.

Selaine Saxby: Can my right hon. Friend confirm what measures are taken for sexual assault and rape victims in remote, rural or coastal communities, where trials may take place a long way from their home?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is a champion for rural and coastal communities in all aspects. The Government take seriously the experience of victims across the country, no matter where they live. In addition to the measures I have just set out, the Crown Prosecution Service supports victims of crime from remote and rural areas, with victims being able to claim back travel expenses when they need to travel far to attend court. We recognise the challenges of rurality, which is why the MOJ's sexual violence service design and delivery team has regular engagement with the National Rural Crime Network and is a member of the NRCN's domestic violence working group.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): This week, it has been three years since the harm panel's report found a serious risk of harm to victims of domestic abuse and their children in the family courts, yet we have seen that nothing has changed. Heartbreakingly, the experiences of victims in the family courts all read the same: the mother criminalised, the children ignored, the father excused. One 10-year-old girl disclosed to the guardian assigned to her case that her father had sexually abused and assaulted her. The guardian dismissed this and, instead, read a book to her, saying that her mother had made it up and her father had done nothing wrong. With no definition of rape or consent in statute in the family courts, when will the Government put a stop to this national scandal?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her question. She will be aware that Lord Bellamy, whose portfolio covers the family courts, is looking at this issue carefully. Although it is not in my portfolio, I understand that two of the three limbs of the report she mentioned have already been implemented, and we anticipate implementing the final element later this year.

Violence against Women and Girls

10. **Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to reform the criminal justice system to help tackle violence against women and girls. [905641]

12. **Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to reform the criminal justice system to help tackle violence against women and girls. [905643]

20. **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to reform the criminal justice system to help tackle violence against women and girls. [905652]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Tackling violence against women and girls is a driving mission of this Government, and we are delivering on it in three ways. First, we have created and are creating new offences, such as revenge porn, and coercive and controlling behaviour, so that abusers have no place to hide. Secondly, we are increasing penalties so that offenders are not just convicted and disgraced, but punished in a way that fits the crime and protects victims. Thirdly, we are supporting victims by quadrupling the funding for victim and witness support services.

Catherine West: Today, tragically, 300 women in Britain will be raped. Under this Government's watch, in three of those cases there will be a charge. Under this Government's watch, charging numbers have plummeted. What are the Government going to do about it?

Alex Chalk: What we are not going to do is come up with statistics that are completely untrue. This is incredibly important, because people listen to what the hon. Lady has to say and it is simply wrong to send a message out that people are not being prosecuted. Let me make one thing crystal clear: more people have been prosecuted for rape in the last year for which statistics are available than was the case in the last year of a Labour Government. That is an important point. If I may, I will read out something so that she understands this, because people are getting justice all the time. It relates to one of the new Nightingale courts that we have set up, in Cirencester. Let me tell her what happened when two victims spoke out as their rapist had been sent to prison for 25 years recently. Victim B said:

"I would just like to say how happy I am with the whole criminal justice system. I wasn't sure whether to go"—to the police—

"due to being scared and thinking nobody would believe me. If there is anyone out there with the same situation I encourage them go forward as soon as possible".

Of course there is more to do, but people are being convicted, people are being put on trial and rapists are being punished.

Alex Davies-Jones: The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is vital. It finally introduced a full statutory definition of domestic abuse and banned the horrendous cross-examination of victims by their abusers. However, the Act also rolled out controversial polygraph lie detector testing of high-risk domestic abuse perpetrators. Will the Secretary of State meet me and other members of the all-party parliamentary group on perpetrators of domestic abuse to discuss our concerns that polygraphs are pure pseudoscience and have no place in otherwise vital legislation?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady raises an important and sensitive issue. She is right to say that polygraph results have to be handled with care. That said, that testing has been shown to be one of a number of important risk management tools in monitoring the compliance of high-risk sexual offenders with their licence conditions. In the way it is used by the probation service, polygraph is 80% to 90% reliable when indicating deception. However, she raises this important point and of course I would be happy to meet her to discuss it further.

Liz Twist: It is two years since the Government's rape review, which the Secretary of State referred to earlier, but too many rape victims are still being failed by the criminal justice system, at every stage of the process. Although it is good to hear those positive reviews, too many women are not experiencing this. So what more are the Government going to do to step up the work to ensure that dealing with rape is a priority?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to talk about this issue, as indeed are all right hon. and hon. Members. All I respectfully plea for is some balance in the way we discuss this sensitive issue. Let me say something on the recovery that has taken place. The number of cases passed by the police, after having investigated the matter, to the Crown Prosecution Service for consideration of charge is up by more than 130%; the number of cases where the CPS decides to charge is up by more than 90%; and the number of cases that come to the Crown court is up by more than 120%. I am not suggesting that the job is done—of course it is not, and we need to support victims. That is why we invest in independent domestic violence advisers and independent sexual violence advisers; why we ensure that section 28 is rolled out; and why we have the specialist sexual violence support services in court. That is why we do all these things, and will do more: it is because we want to ensure justice for victims of this appalling crime.

Employment Tribunals: Average Waiting Times

11. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in average waiting times for employment tribunals. [905642]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): Following a merger of IT systems, there is no current data on average waiting times, but the outstanding caseload has reduced from 48,000 in February to 41,000 in March this year because of an increase in the number of sitting days. As well as the increased sitting day allocation, we continue to support and reform the employment tribunals process and to make progress in reducing the backlog.¹

Chris Elmore: Members of my trade union, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, who submitted claims for a protective award in 2020, after being made redundant without consultation, are still waiting for the employment tribunal to hear their claim. They are owed thousands of pounds in respect of failure to consult before redundancy and it cannot be just that, three years on, they are still no closer to receiving compensation. Will the Minister look into the case, to ensure that their collective claim can be dealt with by the Tribunals Service as soon as possible, because it is not acceptable that it has not been dealt with three years on?

Mike Freer: The tribunals are operationally independent, of course, but I would be more than happy to investigate the case that the hon. Gentleman mentions and see whether there are any issues causing the delay.

Prisoner Transfers: Albania

14. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will take steps to negotiate prisoner transfer arrangements similar to those agreed with Albania with other countries. [905645]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Our prisoner transfer agreement with Albania came into force in May 2022. To build on that, as I have mentioned before, we announced a new arrangement with the Albanian Government in May this year to speed up prisoner transfers to Albania of the most serious offenders. The Government will energetically pursue bilateral agreements with EU partners and wider-world partners wherever possible.

Mr Hollobone: Will the Secretary of State confirm that out of a prison population of 85,000, about 10,000 prisoners—12%—are foreign national offenders? He said earlier that we have over 100 prisoner transfer agreements, but only a handful of them are compulsory, where we send prisoners back whether they want to go back or not. Can we have more compulsory prisoner transfer agreements with countries that have a large number of nationals in our jails?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue consistently—he was raising it when I first came to the House in 2015, and he is absolutely right to do so. Yes, we will continue to work on the issue. At the risk of stating the obvious, those agreements have to be agreed to by the other nation, but I can assure him that those matters are getting very close focus and attention.

Sentencing Hearings: Offenders' Attendance

15. **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): If he will bring forward legislative proposals to require offenders to be present for their sentencing hearing. [905646]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I am pleased to be able to say that we are committed to bringing forward legislation to enable offenders to be compelled to attend their sentencing hearing. Offenders who rob innocence, betray lives and shatter families should be required to face the consequences of their actions and hear society's condemnation expressed through the sentencing remarks of the judge.

Ian Byrne: I have recently tabled an early-day motion to put it on record in the House formally the pain that the wilful absence of an offender at a sentencing hearing causes bereaved families. Will the Secretary of State explain why provisions cannot be included in the Victims and Prisoners Bill to change that? Will he meet me and Cheryl Korbel to discuss when legislation will be brought forward and how bereaved families can be at the heart of shaping a change in the law, to ensure that no bereaved family who has to suffer in the fight for justice will face that situation at sentencing ever again?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this case and for rightly identifying the anguish, pain and insult that families feel when a cowardly defendant refuses to attend court. On his specific question, he will understand that there are issues of scope and all sorts of things as to whether legislative measures can be included within certain Bills, but of course I will be happy to discuss that with him. The central point, however, is that there is a cross-party belief that there needs to be some legislative progress—we are committed to that as well.

1. [Official Report, 3 July 2023, Vol. 735, c. 2MC.]

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have listened to what the Secretary of State has said, but the Government have had 13 years to compel criminals to attend courts to hear their sentences. The Government's failure to do that has meant that in the last year alone the killers of Olivia Pratt-Korbel, Zara Aleena and Sabina Nessa have all avoided hearing their sentences, and avoided hearing the impact that their callous crimes have had on the families left behind. Will the Government urgently make this simple change, and stop cowardly offenders from evading their sentencing hearings?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady raises an important point by referring to those three cases. What concerns me is that one defendant's actions could be copied by others, who take the view that that is somehow a way of getting away from the consequences of their actions. She makes it a political point—we are in the House of Commons, so I totally understand that—but I could equally make the point that the legislation was not changed pre-2010 either. We have seen the anguish caused by these actions, so let me make the point that I want to know that when an offender is sitting in a cell, trying to get to sleep when the rest of the world is getting to sleep, the judge's words of condemnation are ringing in their ears. There are victims who find it hard to ever recover, so why should that defendant ever be able to sleep soundly in their bed?

Asylum Seekers' Access to Justice: Illegal Migration Bill

17. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the Illegal Migration Bill on access to justice for asylum seekers. [905648]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): The Illegal Migration Bill will break the business model of people-smuggling gangs, deter migrants from making dangerous channel crossings and restore fairness to our asylum system. The Bill will provide a robust but fair legal framework to remove illegal migrants swiftly while ensuring that proper opportunity to appeal remains. I am working closely and regularly with Cabinet colleagues on the implementation of the Bill.

Marion Fellows: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Illegal Migration Bill would prevent UK courts from granting an interim remedy to delay the removal of an individual while their judicial review claim is heard. Is that not a fundamental attack on the rights of an individual to access the courts? Does he really believe that an asylum seeker will be able to participate effectively in a judicial review if they are already in Rwanda?

Alex Chalk: This is a fair country and we will always take what proper steps we should to ensure that individuals' rights are upheld. I respectfully say this: as well as considering those migrants who come across the channel, the hon. Lady needs to think about those migrants on the north coast of France who are thinking about whether to put their lives into the hands of people traffickers. We need to send a clear message that they should not do so. I also say respectfully that she should

think about the rights of the British people who are having to fund a great deal of this. We will be fair, but we will also be firm and make no apology for either.

Topical Questions

T1. [905656] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Since the last oral questions, I have brought forward measures in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill to tackle strategic lawsuits against public participation—so-called SLAPPs—to give courts the power to dismiss lawsuits aimed at gagging campaigners and journalists who oppose financial misconduct. In the past week I have met victims and their families, including Georgia Harrison, to discuss new measures to tackle intimate image abuse, and Farah Naz, the aunt of tragically murdered Zara Aleena, to discuss compelling offenders to attend their sentencing hearing. I visited Snaresbrook Crown court, and HMP High Down where I opened a brand new DHL logistics workshop, which is supporting prisoners to learn the skills they need to turn their lives around.

Anna Firth: According to the Government's own statistics, 18% of knife possession offences involve juveniles, which is of great concern to my constituents in Southend West. What consideration is being given to increasing the sentence for those supplying a knife to an under-18, which is currently only six months? Should that not be the same as possession of a knife, which is currently four years?

Alex Chalk: We keep all these matters under review and my hon. Friend will know well that the role of a knife in the commission of criminal offences is already reflected in the criminal justice sentencing rules. For example, the starting point for a murder that is committed with a knife that is brought to a scene is considerably higher than it is in other circumstances. We also wish to ensure that knives do not get into prisons, which is why, as part of our £100 million security investment programme, we have funded enhanced gate security in 42 high-risk prison sites. On the issue of sentencing, we keep all matters under review, and I would be happy to discuss that with my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my congratulations to Dame Sue Carr on her historic appointment?

When he was Chancellor, the current Prime Minister let the murderous boss of Russia's mercenary Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, bypass sanctions so that he could abuse our courts to silence a British journalist who was exposing his crimes. Why did the British Government side with this Russian war criminal over the British press?

Alex Chalk: No, no, no—that is to completely misrepresent the situation. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have one of the most robust systems of sanctions; whether in an individual case money can be released is at the discretion of an arm's length body. Of course the Chancellor was not seeking to do that, and to suggest that, I am afraid, is discreditable.

Steve Reed: What is disappointing is that the Government's proposed reforms in the economic crime Bill would still allow warlords to use these tactics to silence journalists in the British courts, but there is another area of concern as well. Will the Secretary of State confirm—because this is an area of doubt—whether the reforms he is proposing would prevent wealthy tax dodgers from silencing journalists in court, as the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) threatened to do when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Alex Chalk: I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming the measures on SLAPPs, because it is very important to ensure that those people do not use their financial advantage to try to snuff out freedom of speech, legitimate investigative journalism and all the things we want to see in a free and fair society. By common consent, the measures we are introducing will make a very significant difference. We remain open to going further and to considering further matters, but we need to take it in stages. We are looking to manage the balance between freedom of speech and people's right to access justice. These are important steps and have been widely welcomed, so it is right to see how they bed in.

T3. [905659] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What measures is my right hon. Friend taking to protect children and young people from vile internet trolls who seek to encourage them to self-harm?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight this issue. We yesterday tabled an amendment to the Online Safety Bill that would create a new offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm, whether by verbal or electronic communications, publication or correspondence. That fills a gap in the law and, together with the broader regulatory measures in the Bill, it will help to protect people from such content. It remains our intention, however, when parliamentary time allows, to expand the offence to cover encouragement or assistance given by means other than such communications, which are currently out of scope of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Anyone's Child has a mass lobby of Parliament today, calling for reform of the UK's failed and outdated drugs laws. Will a Justice Minister be meeting anybody from Anyone's Child to hear their case for supporting, not punishing, those who take drugs and their families?

Alex Chalk: I do not have plans to do so, I confess, but if the hon. Lady is to have those conversations, I invite her to consider writing to me afterwards; if there are matters we can take up, I would be happy to do so.

T5. [905661] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): And so another migration Bill winds its way slowly out of the House of Lords, and when it becomes law, an army of human rights lawyers will try to frustrate it. Will the Government reflect that, if only we had had the courage to get out with a derogation from the European convention on human rights and the refugee convention, we might have solved the small boats crisis two years ago? Now my constituents are victims of that, because

the Government want to put 2,000 migrants in RAF Scampton, and the same human rights lawyers in the Refugee Council will oppose it on the grounds that it is inhumane to put them next to hangars ridden with asbestos. Why do we not just get out of the convention?

Alex Chalk: No one is a more doughty defender of the people in his constituency who are concerned about matters relating to Scampton than my right hon. Friend. This is principally a Home Office matter, as he knows, but the points he has made will have reverberated not just in this Chamber but, I am sure, all the way down the road to Marsham Street.

T2. [905658] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): One way of reducing reoffending is to ensure that returning citizens can get into employment when they leave prison. Given that a number of former prisoners experience employment discrimination, is it not time to ban the box?

Alex Chalk: We have already taken important steps to recalibrate disclosures so that they have to take place only when absolutely necessary, but the hon. Gentleman is right about employment. A prisoner who gets into employment is 10% less likely to commit an offence. I am delighted to see, through the huge efforts of employment advisory boards, employment advisers and employment hubs in custody, that the proportion of offenders in employment six months after release has doubled in the past year. A lot of work has been done, but of course there is further to go.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Earlier, the Minister was asked about the backlog of criminal court cases and answered at length regarding Crown courts. On behalf of magistrates and magistrates court staff, can we have an update on the situation with magistrates courts, please?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The magistrates have continued to make good progress in reducing the backlog, and that is a testament to the work they do on our behalf.

T4. [905660] **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): According to probation unions, recent restructure and staff shortages are making it extremely difficult to keep tabs on some of the most dangerous individuals in our society. That is adding to the already endemic workforce retention issues. Probation workers are struggling under the pressure, as many leave the profession, leaving newly qualified and less experienced staff to take the reins. Why are calls for immediate Government intervention being ignored by the Department, and will the Minister sit down with probation unions this week as they launch their campaign, Operation Protect?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): The work that our probation service does is incredibly important and, like the work of prison officers, it often goes unseen. There have been recruitment challenges throughout society, as the hon. Lady will know, but we have been focusing particularly on recruiting into probation. I am pleased to report that, over the past couple of years, we have exceeded our target, which was already stretching to 4,000. In regions such as London, where recruitment has been particularly difficult, we have had encouraging signs, including, for example, 144 new trainee

probation officers starting in London in 2022-23. Their ongoing training and professional development will be incredibly important over the next few years.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I wonder what conversations the Lord Chancellor can have with the Chief Coroner about the poor performance of the Somerset coroner's office, where the waiting time went up from 23 weeks to 31 weeks in 2022 against a decrease in the rest of the country. That involves worse things for individual constituents. Mrs Deborah Cox has been waiting nearly four years for the coroner to get on with the job of providing an answer. That is deeply distressing for families, and I wonder what can be done.

Mike Freer: My right hon. Friend has shown great interest in the work of coroners. They have judicial independence, but I am more than happy to raise his concerns with the Chief Coroner to see if any specific issues in Somerset are causing concern to his constituents.

T6. [905662] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): People who are released from prison into homelessness are much more likely to reoffend, but MOJ data shows that the community accommodation service tier 3 programme has had no meaningful impact on reducing the proportion of people leaving prison who are homeless on release or three months after release. Why does the Minister think the scheme is failing, and what will the Government do to fix it?

Damian Hinds: What the hon. Gentleman said is just not the case. He is absolutely right that securing accommodation on release is incredibly important—we have just had a similar conversation about employment, but accommodation underpins so much else, including the ability to get into work—but the tier 3 accommodation that he mentions had, by February of this year, already supported more than 5,000 people who would otherwise have left prison without a home to go to.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Further to the Minister's comments about the progress made in magistrates courts, may I thank him for recently meeting members of the Cheshire bench who came to Parliament? Will he update the House on the decision to pause the additional sentencing powers granted to magistrates in 2022? Does he agree with me and members of the Magistrates Association that restoring those powers could free up about 1,700 extra Crown court sitting days each year?

Mike Freer: The change in sentencing powers was no reflection on the magistrates, whose work is highly valued. The Department continues to keep the sentencing powers under review. I give my hon. Friend the commitment that the issues raised in that meeting with his local bench are being progressed through the Department.

T7. [905663] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): A constituent who is a victim of domestic abuse recently attended court for the trial of her abuser. An officer from the Crown Prosecution Service told her that they did not know whether the case would be called that day; that if it was not, they did not know when it would be called; and that if she dropped the charges, the CPS would arrange a lifetime injunction

preventing her abuser from contacting her. An injunction might afford my constituent some protection, but it would not deliver justice or prevent other women from being attacked by the same abuser. Will the Secretary of State investigate such unacceptable practices, which seek to reduce backlogs by persuading victims to withdraw from their right to the justice that they deserve?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that people should have the opportunity to see justice done, and justice is done not simply by getting an injunction—important though that may be—but by ensuring that an abuser hears the clang of the prison gate in appropriate circumstances and if that is what the court orders. I do not know specifically what happened in that case, but I can say that, under the victims code, individuals have the opportunity to raise issues with the CPS. Supposing that they were seeking to drop a case, there is now a victim's right to review—to say to the CPS, "Look again at this." Equally, there is the opportunity for court familiarisation visits or special measures applications. That is all about ensuring that, where they want to, victims have their day in court and see justice done.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): My understanding of the law presently is that if someone is driving a motor vehicle and they kill an individual, their blood can be taken without their consent, but the blood cannot be tested unless the defendant gives their consent, and if the defendant refuses to give consent, that is accepted as guilt in the eyes of the law. That meant that Claire, the mother of six-year-old Charlotte-Sky, who tragically lost her life in Norton Green due to John Owen, who was on drink and drugs, waited over a year before she got her day in court and justice. Will the Lord Chancellor back my campaign for Charlotte's law to be introduced?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend has been a doughty champion on this issue and he continues to raise it. I suggest that he and I have a conversation in due course.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): When my constituent reported her rape to the police 14 months ago, she also revealed that the rape had been videoed by the perpetrator. The police are now in possession of the mobile phone that this has been recorded on, but she is still waiting for her justice and her day in court. Could the Minister say how long my constituent might expect to wait to get justice?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will appreciate that I am unable to comment on the specifics of a case, and it would probably be inappropriate to do so in the Chamber, but if she would like to write to me with the details that she cannot share on the Floor of the House, I am happy to look at them.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Waitrose is based in my constituency, and in recent meetings with the partners and with other supermarkets, it has raised with me the scourge of shoplifting. Organised gangs operating with impunity across the UK are engaging in retail crime. They are often inflicting violence against workers using weapons, and they are costing supermarkets a

fortune. Can we do more work on the deterrent effect of greater sentencing, and may I urge the Minister to look at whether the provisions of the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021 could be rolled out in England too?

Alex Chalk: Let me make a couple of points. First, increasing the number of police officers means that there is more resource to try to ensure that the people who commit this crime—and it is not a victimless crime, by the way—are brought to book. Secondly, I am proud of the fact that we have doubled the maximum sentence for assault on an emergency worker, so that defendants can be properly punished where they have assaulted police officers, ambulance staff or potentially people who work in supermarkets, though I would query whether they are in scope.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): One of the concerns raised with me by several victims of domestic abuse has been their experience of victim blaming in the criminal justice system. Can the Secretary of State outline what steps his Department is taking to tackle victim blaming and provide better support to survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence?

Edward Argar: Significant work is under way across the system to tackle victim blaming and disproportionate attention on victim credibility. As part of that, we developed Operation Soteria, which ensures that officers and prosecutors are focusing their investigations on the behaviour and offending pattern of suspects, rather than on subjective judgments of victims' credibility. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady if she would like to discuss this further.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the Lord Chancellor confirm that it remains the Government's intention to update and modernise our human rights law as necessary, but to do so while firmly remaining in adherence to the convention on human rights?

Alex Chalk: Yes, that is correct. Having carefully considered the Government's legislative programme in the round, I can inform the House that we have decided not to proceed with the Bill of Rights, but the Government remain committed to a human rights framework that is up to date, fit for purpose and works for the British people. We have taken and are taking action to address specific issues with the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention, including through the Illegal Migration Bill, the Victims and Prisoners Bill, the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021 and the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, the last of which addressed vexatious claims against veterans and the armed forces. It is right that we recalibrate and rebalance our constitution over time, and that process continues.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Rhianon Bragg, who was held hostage by her ex-partner, has faced multiple errors and omissions in her treatment as a victim. Given the catastrophic failings she has experienced in the criminal justice system, and with a parole hearing on 12 July, will the Secretary of State now review this case in full and support Rhianon's call for an entire audit of the process from the victim's perspective?

Alex Chalk: I am afraid that I did not get the first part of the right hon. Lady's question, but if she writes to me, I will come back to her.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I recently visited Aylesbury Prison, where I was very impressed with the excellent work that is being done at the establishment as it has transformed from being a young offenders institution to a category C adult jail. One particular challenge, though, is the prevalence of psychoactive drugs such as spice. What progress is my right hon. Friend making on combating this appalling and deadly substance?

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, both for the particular interest he takes in his local prison and for using his much broader experience across the system. He is right to identify the issue with keeping drugs out of prisons. Different substances come and go to some extent, but particularly for spice, the investment we have made in drug trace machines for post—I think there are now over 100 of those—has been very important.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Ministry of Justice has been trying to sell Reading jail to a commercial developer for some time, but our community hopes that it can instead be turned into an arts hub. Can the Minister update me on that sale, and will he meet with me and constituents on this important matter?

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He and I have met, along with the other MP for Reading, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Sir Alok Sharma). As he is aware, a sale is progressing, and of course there is commercial sensitivity attached to that, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that assurances for purchase will be required by solicitors and all required due diligence will be undertaken. I will be happy to talk with him further.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Louise and her family are facing unnecessary and quite challenging delays in the local coroner's service in Cheshire. This seems to be happening far too often at the moment. What more can Ministers do to speed up that process?

Mike Freer: As the coroners are independent judicial office holders, we can continue to raise particular cases to find out what specific issues are holding back those cases. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the details of that case, I will ask the Chief Coroner to investigate.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Today, Inquest and 40 other justice organisations launch a campaign for a national oversight mechanism to systematically learn the lessons of inquests, inquiries and investigations from Grenfell to deaths in custody. Do the Government support that initiative?

Mike Freer: I am more than happy to look at any specific proposals to see how we can improve the process of inquests and inquiries. Of course, my door is open if the hon. Gentleman wishes to have a more detailed discussion.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am never one to miss an opportunity—thank you very much.

Does the Minister believe that there is a greater role for youth justice agencies to be involved at early stages, eliminating the need for repeated court dates if arrangements can be made with victims of crime and the offender support network to agree a mechanism of reparation and rehabilitation to reduce small offence cases in court? Do it simply—that is really what I am asking.

Alex Chalk: As always, the hon. Gentleman raises a really important issue. There can be some cases where reparation is exactly the right way to proceed, but it is

case-specific. For some victims, peace and closure comes from meeting the defendant and understanding more about what prompted the crime, but other victims simply do not want that at all. It has to be taken on a case-by-case basis, but I will just make this point: one of the unnoticed things that has happened over the past 10 years is that the number of children in custody has gone down. We are diverting people from custody wherever possible so that they can have a crack at a decent future.

Illegal Migration Bill: Economic Impact Assessment

12.38 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the publication of the impact assessment on the Illegal Migration Bill.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): The Illegal Migration Bill is critical to stopping the boats. Its intent is clear: if someone comes to the UK illegally, they should be detained and swiftly returned to their home country if safe, or relocated to a safe third country such as Rwanda. The impact assessment published yesterday makes clear that inaction is simply not an option. The volumes and costs associated with illegal migration have risen exponentially, driven by small boat arrivals. Unless we act decisively to stop the boats, the cost to the taxpayer and the damage to society will continue to grow.

The asylum system currently costs £3.6 billion a year and £6 million a day in hotel accommodation, but that is not the true cost of doing nothing. As this impact assessment shows, the cost of accommodating illegal migrants has increased dramatically since 2020. If these trends continued, the Home Office would be spending over £11 billion a year, or £32 million a day, on asylum support by the end of 2026. In such a scenario, the Bill would only need to deliver a 2% deterrence in arrivals to enable cost savings.

The figure of £11 billion is an extraordinary amount of money—nearly 10 times the amount of money the taxpayer spent on the asylum system as recently as 2021—and anyone opposing this Bill needs to explain how they would pay those costs. Given the Labour party's opposition to this Bill, it represents another £11 billion black hole in its fiscal plans.

The impact assessment suggests that passing this Bill could directly save the UK taxpayer over £100,000 for every illegal migrant deterred from making a small boat crossing. It also finds that the Bill could lead to a much wider set of benefits—including reducing pressures on local authorities, public services and the housing market—that could not be monetised, meaning that the savings will in fact be much greater.

The British public are clear that they want to stop the boats. That is why we must keep using every tool at our disposal to do just that and to secure our borders, and why this Bill must become law.

Yvette Cooper: I was going to ask if the Immigration Minister had seriously signed off this garbage of an impact assessment, which no self-respecting Minister could possibly think was serious, but actually the nonsense he has just said is even worse and even less coherent. This is not an impact assessment. According to the Government's own guidance, it is supposed to include the

"costs, benefits and risks...and a consideration of a range of options."

However, we have something that does not even include some of the most basic options to assess, such as speeding up the asylum system and making savings that way. Instead, it says that this impact assessment

"does not attempt to estimate any costs of implementing the Bill...or estimate the volumes of individuals that will be impacted by the Bill."

Really, what is the point of it, given that the document itself admits that people "may not be deterred" by any of this, and it cannot answer the most basic questions? I have never seen anything more clueless and chaotic.

The impact assessment does provide evidence of the scale of Conservative failure. The cost for one person in the asylum system for just one night has gone up fivefold in four years. That is just the cost of Tory mismanagement. It has gone up faster than mortgages or energy bills, and it has even gone up faster than the price of cheese. It is all Tory Home Office mismanagement. It shows the shocking fact that people are now staying in the asylum system for four years, and there is no alternative to try to speed up the system or to look at that.

The Government do say that it will cost £169,000 per person to pay another country to take asylum decisions for us. So far, the Government have sent more Home Secretaries than asylum seekers to Rwanda, but how many people are they actually budgeting for? The Prime Minister says he wants to send everyone, so can the Minister tell us where the billions of pounds it would cost to send everyone to Rwanda this year will come from, and if not, can he tell us how many he is really budgeting for and what in fact is going to happen to everyone else instead?

The impact assessment says it costs £7,000 per person to keep someone in detention for 40 days. That is more than double the current average cost of keeping people elsewhere in the asylum system, so where are the hundreds of millions of pounds for the detention plan going to come from, and where are these detention facilities going to come from? The Minister has not attempted to cost speeding up the system and he has not attempted to cost what we really think will happen, which is that tens of thousands more people will be in indefinite detention or indefinite asylum accommodation. The Treasury bailed out the Home Office by £2.4 billion last year. How much is it going to be this year?

The Government have crashed the economy, and now they have crashed the asylum system too. We have an impact assessment that shows the Home Office does not have a clue and the Treasury does not have a grip, and the Prime Minister who claims to be Mr Fix-It is instead Mr Muck-It-Up. The country deserves better than this.

Robert Jenrick: The right hon. Lady misses the point entirely. The impact assessment bears out the cost of the current broken system and makes it clear that there is no option but to completely overhaul our asylum system and make it fit for the decades ahead. The reality, as those of us on the Government Benches see it, is straightforward: if people continue to cross in small boats, the cost to the taxpayer in one form or another will continue to increase and that is a completely unacceptable outcome—but it is the one that can be expected with Labour's recklessly naive approach to border security.

When the right hon. Lady said that this document was "garbage" and "clueless", I thought she was referring to her own five-point plan to tackle illegal migration, because we cannot grant our way out of the problem,

[Robert Jenrick]

we cannot simply arrest our way out of this and do nothing to dismember and dismantle the business model of the gangs. We cannot provide a safe and legal route to every single person eligible for refugee status or every economic migrant who views this country as a better place, and we certainly cannot reheat the tired old policies like the Dublin convention that she looks back on through her rose-tinted spectacles. Even members of the European Union have moved on from that, but not the Labour party. She cannot even bring herself to call these unnecessary and dangerous journeys what they are under British law: illegal.

The truth is that Labour's do-nothing approach to stopping the boats is the fastest route to more crossings, greater taxpayer spending and more pressure on our communities. Left unchecked, the cost will spiral to £11 billion by 2026. That is the cost of a Labour Home Secretary; that is the cost of Cooper. Only the Conservative party will truly tackle the root cause of the problem, not just the symptoms. We are determined to secure our borders and stop the boats, and the British public can rely on us to do so.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Opposition seem to think that the Rwanda scheme is purely about displacing people who have entered illegally from Kent to Rwanda. In fact, it is about deterring them from coming in the first place and instead encouraging them to use the safe and legal routes that are now in the Illegal Migration Bill, because it will become a lottery whether someone ends up on a plane to Rwanda or in a hotel in Kent. Given that the French authorities admitted to the Select Committee on Home Affairs that when the Rwanda scheme was first announced there was a surge in migrants approaching the French authorities about regularising their position in France rather than hazarding the channel crossing, what discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the French and Germans, who have expressed interest in a Rwanda-type scheme, about having a joint multinational scheme to get this thing up and running?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a view expressed by some, mainly on the left, that the UK is somehow an outlier in pursuing a policy like Rwanda. I can tell him, having spoken to our European counterparts and Home Affairs and Interior Ministers in north Africa and beyond, that leaders across the world are looking to the UK not as an outlier but as a leader in this field. They are looking to the Rwanda policy as one of the most innovative and comprehensive approaches to a problem that everyone is facing. In an age of mass migration, with millions of people on the move, it is right that the UK leads. We will invest in border security, and that is the difference between us and the Labour party. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) does not want to invest in border security; we do. We will pursue the Rwanda policy, we will secure our borders, and other countries will follow our lead.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Tory Illegal Migration Bill has almost completed its journey through Parliament and only yesterday did the Home Office deign to publish this ludicrous economic impact assessment, which is as revealing in what it omits as what it includes. There is nothing about the backlog they have created; it is all about the boats.

We know the cost of this cruel Tory ideology is £169,000 per soul deported, costing more than if people were allowed to stay. We know the figures for asylum processing claims, which are estimated to take four years, but we do not know the set-up costs for the wildly expanding detention estate or those left in immigration limbo or the staffing in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to deal with this.

The Government say that this will save money, because victims of modern slavery will no longer be entitled to support. How despicable. This is an egregious waste of public money in a cost of living crisis, and it fails to recognise the value of human potential. We have just celebrated the Refugee Festival in Scotland—an incredible experience that celebrates the contribution of those who come to our shores for sanctuary. It is increasingly evident that the only way that Scotland can uphold our humanitarian values is by regaining our independence. As Winnie Ewing would have it, stop the world, Scotland wants to get on.

Robert Jenrick: I am delighted that the hon. Lady celebrated Refugee Week. I do not know if any refugees came to it, because the SNP does not house refugees in Scotland. The point is that we are proud of our record as a country. Since 2015, under a Conservative Government we have welcomed into the United Kingdom more than half a million people seeking genuine sanctuary from war and persecution—individuals coming from Hong Kong, Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan. SNP Members continuously pose as humanitarians, but we all know the truth is that at every single opportunity, they fail to live up to their fine words. If they cared about this issue, they would welcome asylum seekers into their own part of the UK, but they do not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When it works, it will be a bargain, won't it?

Robert Jenrick: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Border security is the first priority of any Government. We understand that, and that is why we are investing in it and ensuring that we can stop the boats. I am only surprised that the Opposition care so little about our national security.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Two weeks ago, when the Home Secretary gave evidence at the Home Affairs Committee, I asked her when the impact assessment for the Illegal Migration Bill would be published. While I welcome the fact that it has been published today, or last night, it is after the Bill has completed all its stages in the House of Commons and is three quarters of the way through the House of Lords. That is wholly unsatisfactory for Parliament to

undertake its role of scrutinising Government legislation. At that Select Committee sitting, the Home Secretary also said:

However, I would also say that to my mind it is pretty obvious what the economic impact of the Bill will be. We will stop spending £3 billion a year on our asylum cost. It is a Bill that will lead to the cessation of 45,000 people in hotels and £6 million a day. To my mind, those are savings that we cannot ignore.”

The Home Secretary told the Home Affairs Committee that those savings would happen. Can the Minister help me by pointing to where those savings are in the impact assessment? I am struggling to find those figures in the document that the Government have produced.

Robert Jenrick: The document makes it abundantly clear that, were costs to continue to rise on the current trajectory—we are in an age of mass migration and the numbers of individuals looking to cross, for example from north Africa to Europe, are extremely high so there is reason to believe that numbers will remain high for a sustained period—by 2026, which is just a few years away, the system would be costing an additional £11 billion. We cannot countenance such waste of taxpayers’ money. As we have seen in other parts of the world such as Australia, where systems of this kind have been implemented, by delivering this system and ensuring a genuine deterrent effect, we will ensure that we save the taxpayer that money. But, more important than merely saving money, we will save the British public the stress and the strain on public services, housing, integration and community cohesion that tens of thousands of illegal migrants bring to our country. That is a prize worth fighting for, and that is why we are delivering this Bill.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): May I just say to my right hon. Friend that in the past week we have seen arrests and convictions in Essex? One example was over the tragedy that befell the Vietnamese a few years ago, but another was a new gang that has been identified that is trafficking people to work in modern slavery locally, in Grays. Although the British public want us to stop the boats, the British public are also generous in spirit, and what they really want is to make sure that this country is not being taken advantage of. The responsibility to tackle that lies with the machinery of Departments, our criminal justice system and our law enforcement agencies. If they can all get a grip, will that not be a better solution than sending people to Rwanda?

Robert Jenrick: Our policy with respect to Rwanda is not the totality of our approach; we are also, as my hon. Friend has just noted, investing significantly in law enforcement at home and abroad. We have increased the number of illegal working raids by 50% just this year alone. We have signed two landmark deals with France and a memorandum of understanding with Italy. We have signed a returns agreement with Georgia. I have recently travelled to Belgium and met my counterparts there, where we spoke about that horrific incident with the Vietnamese individuals who died in the back of an HGV. We agreed to further deepen our collaboration and law enforcement co-operation. She has my assurance that we are working around the clock and tackling this issue from each and every dimension, and that is why I believe that the UK has the most comprehensive plan to tackle illegal migration of any country in the western world.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister is proposing, according to the document, to spend eye-wateringly large sums—£169,000 per person—to process claims in Rwanda. He wants to spend that money to treat people with great cruelty. How can that possibly be justified?

Robert Jenrick: I usually have the utmost respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but he is wrong in each respect of that question. First, the figure that he quoted is a gross figure, not a net figure. Secondly, that figure does not relate to the Rwandan partnership, but is an indicative figure based on the Syrian resettlement scheme. We chose not to publish the commercially sensitive nature of our relationship with Rwanda for good reason, because countries and partners working together in good faith should not publish details that we said we would not. His last point, that individuals will be treated with great cruelty in Rwanda, is categorically untrue. I wonder whether he has been to Rwanda—I certainly have. It is a country that is safe and where we have a good working relationship. The High Court exhaustively analysed Rwanda’s safety and the treatment that it would propose to give to those coming from the United Kingdom, and the High Court concluded that the scheme was appropriate and in accordance with our legal obligations. We will shortly hear from the Court of Appeal, but I very much hope it will uphold the High Court’s judgment.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What is nonsense is to deny that it makes economic sense to offshore. Nobody is going to spend thousands of pounds to a people smuggler just to be detained and sent back to Rwanda. In terms of deterrence, will the Minister accept that if someone is fleeing chaos in Syria or Iraq, they will not be deterred to come if they are going to be put up in a cosy, warm, former airman’s bedroom in RAF Scampton, rather than a hotel in bracing, cold Skegness? Is not the solution to get the Bill through and pass it into law and for the House of Lords to stop its silly games?

Robert Jenrick: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, although not necessarily his comments about Skegness. The point is that we have to look at each and every one of the pull factors to the United Kingdom. The approach that we are now taking to accommodating asylum seekers is not an outlier within Europe. I have spoken to my counterparts in almost every European country in recent weeks, and they are all considering options such as barges and sites such as former military bases. Many are considering tents. Many are bailing people to no fixed abode with vouchers and essentially leaving them to sleep on the streets. We have to ensure that the UK is not perceived to be a soft touch, and I will never allow that to happen.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Who would have thought that a policy designed for shallow political purposes would turn out to be an expensive embarrassment? It is not about what is in this assessment; it is about what is not. Where is the estimate of the savings if the Government chose competence over posturing and efficiently cleared the 160,000 backlog of asylum seekers? Where is the impact assessment for the effect of these proposals on the victims of modern slavery? Has

[Tim Farron]

the Minister made any assessment at all of the likelihood that people will still come to our shores by small boats but simply not claim asylum, slipping underneath the radar and ending up in slavery and criminality? Where is the comprehensive assessment of this ridiculous policy?

Robert Jenrick: On the hon. Member's penultimate point, we have gone to great lengths to ensure that individuals do not arrive on our shores without our knowledge. That happens in only a tiny number of cases because of the good work of our small boats operational command. We meet individuals and ensure that they are properly security checked before they flow into the system. That is the right thing to do.

The costs to the UK taxpayer of the current levels of asylum seekers are extremely high. Then, as the impact assessment says, there are non-monetised costs such as the effect on the housing shortage and public services, and the challenge to community cohesion and integration. It is for all those reasons and others that we must get a grip on this challenge. I do believe that border security is worth investing in. The hon. Member may not, but I do, and I think that the British public do as well. They want us to secure our borders and they are willing to see us invest in that.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): May I again caution my right hon. Friend against the Gerald Ratner approach to Government policy? Will he answer this direct question: how long did it take on average to process an asylum seeker's claim five years ago, how long does it take today, and why?

Robert Jenrick: The last time my hon. Friend asked me a question, he said that we would not be able to produce a barge to house asylum seekers. Actually, days later we signed the agreement to do that, and that will be coming forward, so he knows that when we say things, we mean them and we will deliver.

With respect to the time it takes to process asylum claims, it is too long. However, that is the product not just of management within Government and the Home Office, but the sheer number of people crossing every year. I have spoken to my opposite numbers in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy, and every one of those countries is struggling with backlogs of cases as much as we are—more so in some cases—because the asylum systems across Europe are being placed under intolerable pressure by the number of people making these dangerous and unnecessary journeys. That is why we have to instil deterrence, and the Rwanda policy gives us the ability to reduce the numbers and restore sustainability to the system.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Instead of effective measures to tackle the people smugglers and speed up the processing of asylum claims to reduce the backlog, the Bill means that the Minister's Department will need to requisition more and more accommodation, as it is doing with the Stradey Park Hotel in my constituency. In spite of promises of job opportunities from Clearsprings, his Home Office contractor, all 100 staff have had the devastating news today that they face redundancy. What will the Department do to help those staff and those who are in similar circumstances because of the Bill?

Robert Jenrick: The best thing that the hon. Member could do is support the Bill when it returns from the House of Lords to enable us to get the flights off to Rwanda so that we imbue the system with the deterrence that it requires. The impact assessment that we laid yesterday makes it clear that if we do nothing, the costs to the system will spiral by £11 billion a year. She, like other Labour Members of Parliament, writes to me day in, day out complaining that the way in which we accommodate asylum seekers is too rudimentary. They say it is not specialist enough, that we should be spending more money on asylum support, not less, and that a hotel is not good enough and needs to be more luxurious. We have the Labour leader of Westminster City Council saying that individuals being housed in a hotel in Pimlico were being poorly looked after and that they should have their own single ensuite bedrooms. How out of touch with the British public can they get?

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Local residents in the Kettering constituency are appalled that two local hotels—the Rothwell House Hotel in Rothwell and the Royal Hotel in Kettering—are being used as asylum seeker accommodation. I am convinced that the answer is to get the Illegal Migration Bill through and to stop people crossing the channel in small boats. Is it not the case that we are spending £3.6 billion a year and that that will rise to £11 billion in just three years? Is it not the case that doing nothing is simply not an option?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He and his constituents see every day the harm that doing nothing could cause, with the loss of more than one valued hotel in his constituency. We want to stop this once and for all, and the dividing line is between those who want to deal with the symptoms of the problem by tweaking the system and managing failure and those of us who want to transform the system, stop the boats, secure our borders and ensure that we have a sustainable system for an age of mass migration.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We can tell that we are in the dying days of the Government ahead of a general election, because they always resort to dog-whistle rhetoric. Nobody on either side of the House wants open borders. We want a secure border around the United Kingdom, but what we do not want is more unworkable propositions from the Government. They have brought forward Bill after Bill after Bill, and none of it has worked. The impact assessment shows that this Bill will not work either. There is no attempt to estimate the total costs or benefits of the proposals. It uses the word “uncertain” 24 times in 40 pages and does not cover the costs that we need to know. Will the Minister tell us how much this will cost and where the money will come from?

Robert Jenrick: The difference here is that if we do nothing, we will see the British taxpayer spend billions of pounds. [Interruption.] That is not on us; that is on the Labour party. We are not doing nothing; we are taking forward the Rwanda partnership, which is one of the most innovative and novel approaches to tackling this issue of any country in the world.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): May I extend my most sincere thanks to the Minister for his words today in response to the urgent question? I have been

very loud about exactly this matter in the Chamber since I was first elected, and this is without question what the British people voted for back in 2019. Does he agree that the Labour and the Lib Dem response of simply saying, “Oh, speed up the asylum system,” equates to saying, “Just let them all in”?

Robert Jenrick: I could not agree more strongly with my hon. Friend. There is a naivety to the Labour party’s position. If Labour Members think that they can solve the problem just by granting people asylum quicker, doing a few more arrests and trying to reinvent the Dublin convention, which even European leaders have moved on from, they do not know what we are dealing with. Just the other day, the shadow Immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), supported a proposal to loan Ukraine the small boats that we have seized to help its citizens deal with the recent floods. Does he have any idea what these boats are like? They are the most unseaworthy craft that I have ever seen, produced by the most evil and ruthless people smugglers and human traffickers. That suggests that Labour Members do not understand the problem. If we are to beat the people smugglers, we need to take robust measures, and that is what we are doing.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Minister is claiming that, without the Bill, the cost of the current system will rise to £11 billion—by the way, that figure is not in the impact assessment. Will he confirm that his calculation is based on the idea that per-person accommodation costs will keep rising at the same pace as they have over the last few years as a result of his Department’s failure to get a grip both on the asylum system backlog and, as I have said before, on the rip-off merchants who are scamming the Home Office for billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money on dodgy contracts?

Robert Jenrick: I will always hold the providers to account for the quality of the service they provide for the taxpayer. I take that very seriously, as I have said to the hon. Lady in the past, but I am afraid that, like the shadow Home Secretary, she is missing the point. The more illegal migrants who come to the country, the greater the cost to the taxpayer. If we want to tackle the problem, we need to break the business model of the people smugglers. Tinkering around at the edges and trying to manage the system better, which seems to be the Labour party’s approach, will never work.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Residents in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke are rightly outraged to see hotels used, people losing their jobs, levelling-up projects undermined and the hospitality and retail sectors destroyed. This is the right scheme because, like the successful Australian scheme, it will act as a deterrent to people coming to this country, therefore bringing down the need for hotels and the burden on the Home Office.

Sadly, the only plan we hear from the shadow Home Secretary is to process people quicker. That is amnesty in another name. We are currently accepting 70% of them, and the right hon. Lady will not even commit to getting down to France’s level of 18%. Is the truth not that the shadow Home Secretary may belittle the scheme but she does not say whether she would scrap it

if she were Home Secretary? Ultimately, Labour is getting ready for another embarrassing flip-flopping U-turn.

Robert Jenrick: I do not know whether the shadow Home Secretary would scrap the scheme—I have heard all sorts of conflicting reports in that regard—but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that this a world-leading partnership. Time and again, I speak to Interior Ministers throughout Europe who look to it as an innovative approach. I would not be surprised if other countries follow us once we have operationalised it.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): For the Minister’s information, Motherwell and Wishaw has been welcoming refugees for more than 100 years—Lithuanians, Vietnamese, Congolese and Syrians. Please do not make that mistake again.

The economic assessment says:

“By setting an annual cap this should reduce the inflow of people entering the UK and therefore reduce the cost associated with processing asylum claims”,

with secondary benefits—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not feel well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): If it is okay with the hon. Lady, I will move on and I will come back to her if she wishes me to.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend apologise for the delay in producing this impact assessment? Will he also explain to the House why the four countries of Scandinavia have been able to reduce the number of asylum applications from 239,000 in 2015 to 28,000 last year? Why have they been able to do that when we cannot? Why is our asylum process still taking longer than it ought to? The rate at which asylum applications are being dealt with is currently at its slowest ever.

Robert Jenrick: First, I am sorry that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) is feeling unwell, and I hope she recovers quickly.

With respect to my hon. Friend’s question, I can report good news: we are making good progress on the pledge we made at the end of last year to eliminate the legacy asylum backlog. The number of caseworkers is rising rapidly and we are on course to achieve our ambition to double them. Productivity is increasing. We will see those results flow through very rapidly. That is the right thing to do, although it is not the totality of the response to this challenge, because the reason we have a backlog in cases is the sheer number of people crossing. We published the impact assessment yesterday. I hope my hon. Friend will read it and it will inform any further discussions we have in this House following their lordships’ deliberations.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The impact assessment illustrates the cost of the Government’s decisions. Nobody else is to blame. The Government have had 13 and a half years, but we are in this mess. On 25 May, when I asked the Minister about dealing with asylum claims, he told me that increasing the pace of dealing with asylum claims would likely increase the number of people coming across on small boats. He also said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck):

[Clive Efford]

“the faster the process, the more pull factor”.—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 439.]

Where are those statements borne out in the impact assessment?

Robert Jenrick: The point I made then and have made again today is that the Labour Party’s policy is merely focused on the symptoms of the problem. It is saying that, if we can grant the decisions faster, everything will be fine. That will not resolve the problem; in fact, it is dangerously naive. We are dealing with the most evil people smugglers and human traffickers, and highly determined economic migrants. That is why we need a much broader approach. At the heart of it has to be deterrence. The Rwanda policy is part of that. That is why we have brought forward the Illegal Migration Bill. The sooner we get it on the statute book, the sooner we can implement it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend is clearly right that this is a multifaceted approach. We need to break the business model of the evil people smugglers, but also speed up the process of dealing with those people who have genuine asylum cases, and then remove those who do not. Will he join me in sending this signal: if someone enters this country illegally, we will remove them to Rwanda where their case will be considered and, if they have a case, they can return.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to build a system whereby the UK is a generous and welcoming country to those in genuine need of sanctuary. That is why we have pursued the resettlement schemes that we have in recent years, and we want to do more in future. The Illegal Migration Bill envisages that through its clause on safe and legal routes. For those who come here in breach of our laws, breaking into our country in an irregular manner, we will pursue the most robust approach. They will be returned home if it is safe to do so, or to a safe third country such as Rwanda. That is a sensible and robust approach that will help us to create a sustainable migration system.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The Minister was correct when he said that the system was broken—broken by this Government, which is why we are paying £6 million a day to house people fleeing conflict and persecution. Liverpool, as a city of sanctuary, has extended its support to people fleeing persecution, not illegal migrants, to the sum of 2,800. Will the Minister agree that it is unacceptable for the Government to expect us to rehouse 237 people from Afghan hotels with five months’ notice? Will he agree to meet me and other Liverpool MPs to discuss this matter and solve it urgently?

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to discuss that with the hon. Lady, or she can speak to the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who is leading on the resettlement of Afghans. I respectfully disagree with her. Those individuals who came across in Operation Pitting under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude, have in some cases been in hotels for approaching two years. That is not right for them or for the country. We need to help them now into sustainable forms of accommodation.

That is why we have established a generous new scheme. We are working with local authorities, with dedicated triaging teams going into the hotels and helping those individuals into vacant service family accommodation, the private rental sector and social housing. I strongly encourage her to work with her local authority to do the same in Liverpool.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Immigration Minister is right that the current level of illegal migration is unsustainable, due to not only the billions of taxpayers’ money being spent but the pressure on public services and housing and, therefore, on our environment. Will he assure me that, in addition to the Illegal Migration Bill, we will always uphold the decisions of this Parliament and the British courts above those of the European Court of Human Rights?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s support for the action that we are taking. This Conservative Government brought forward the Illegal Migration Bill, a robust measure that is probably the most significant change to our immigration legislative framework since the second world war. We believe that it is in accordance with our international law obligations. We are determined to tackle this challenge, and we will do whatever it takes to do that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I hope the Minister is prepared to correct some of his earlier claims, because Glasgow remains the local authority with the most dispersed asylum seekers per head of population; it has more than any other local authority in the country. If he does not believe me, he would be very welcome to come and meet some of the asylum seekers and refugees at the Maryhill Integration Network, people who trained as accountants, nurses and teachers. They do not want to cost the taxpayer money; they want to become taxpayers. But his failed immigration processing means they are not having their claims processed in time. Will he come and hear some of their genuine stories about why they had to flee their home countries in the first place, and the contribution that they could and want to make now?

Robert Jenrick: First, I agree that Glasgow is taking in a large number of asylum seekers. It is just a pity that nowhere else in Scotland is. That is the approach the SNP Government have established. Only last week, we approached the SNP Government to suggest that the vessel that has been housing Ukrainians in Leith be used to house asylum seekers. The SNP Government said that they did not think that that was a good idea—Ukrainians were welcome, but asylum seekers were not welcome. That is emblematic of an approach that is rhetorical and never backed up by reality. I would be happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, but the truth is that the SNP is letting them down.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Much of the media reporting this morning focused on the £169,000 cost of transporting an individual and processing them in Rwanda, but what are the alternative costs of ongoing open illegal migration, leading to problems with accommodation, access to public services, lack of infrastructure, increasing house prices and social integration? Could the Minister tell us more about the costs of those, please?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Not only is maintaining a system without taking robust further steps like the Rwanda policy likely to be extremely expensive—that is detailed in the impact assessment—but there are non-monetised costs as well, which are hard to calculate with certainty, such as the impact on scant social housing and housing more broadly, the cost to public services and the fact that many of these individuals come to the UK speaking poor English. Many require great support by the British state to help them to integrate and build successful lives in this country. That is a very challenging situation. We have to be honest with ourselves about that. We need to take action to stop the boats, so we can ensure that the finite resources we have as a country are not directed at young men who are in a place of safety such as France, but can go to the people who really need it most in and around conflict zones: families and those people we would want to resettle in the United Kingdom.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The Prime Minister claims he is ready to take tough financial decisions, such as not giving our NHS heroes a pay rise, leaving them struggling to pay ever-increasing mortgages and the cost of living caused by those on the Government Benches voting measures through and crashing our economy just a few months ago. The Rwanda scheme is set to cost even more billions than the already crashed asylum system, delivered by those on the Government Benches over there. So how can the Minister truly sit there and justify spending £169,000 to send one single asylum seeker to Rwanda? I accept that the Government are working with local authorities on housing in the private sector—deregulated housing in the private sector that cannot be given to any of our people. That is what he is doing. You cannot justify what is going on here. You've crashed it and you go on to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady is experienced enough to know that she does not address the Minister directly like that, but through the Chair.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady is wrong on a number of counts. First, the impact assessment does not say that it costs £169,000 to send somebody to Rwanda. The figure is an indicative one based on the Syrian resettlement scheme, as I said in answer to a previous question. The partnership with Rwanda is rightly commercially sensitive, so she is wrong to draw the inference that she does. With respect to accommodating asylum seekers, we want to ensure we bring those costs down and we want the best possible relationships with local government to do just that. But the truth is that the driver of those costs is the sheer number of people crossing the channel every year. Unless we take decisive action, I am afraid that will continue to rise. That is why she should support us when the Bill returns to the Commons.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Clearly, the best way to reduce the costs of illegal migration is to increase deterrence, in particular with the Rwanda plan. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is doing everything possible to ensure that once the Court of Appeal has made its decision we can get on with the flights to Rwanda immediately?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Deterrence has to be at the heart of our approach, whether domestically in terms of making it harder to live and work illegally in the United Kingdom, or internationally with the work we are doing upstream. The Rwanda policy is a critical part of that. The Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and I meet every week to ensure we are ready to operationalise the policy as soon as we have the ability to do so. We will await the judgment of the court. Of course, we hope it will uphold the very strong judgment we received from the High Court earlier in the year.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Government's failing asylum seeker policy also impacts on local areas in the UK where large numbers of asylum seekers are accommodated. The Government promised not to increase the number of asylum seekers in the north-east, but the Minister told me in a letter this week that that would not stop a large barge being sited on the Tees. Is Teesside getting hundreds or thousands more asylum seekers, yes or no?

Robert Jenrick: I am surprised by the hon. Gentleman's approach because he voted against every measure we brought forward to tackle this challenge. As a result, more people will come to the United Kingdom illegally on small boats. I suspect he cannot even bring himself to call these individuals illegal migrants. We are taking the tough steps we need to tackle this issue. We are also looking at new ways to accommodate people. Barges and vessels are options being pursued by the Irish, the Belgians, the Dutch and the SNP in Scotland.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): The Minister spoke earlier about investing in border security, but it was only in April that Border Force were on strike over pay and conditions. He also spoke earlier about humanitarian approaches to migration, yet I still have constituents in Ilford South whose families are in Afghanistan fleeing the Taliban and facing every day being murdered by the Taliban. The Government have failed to bring those people safely to this country. We then turn to the impact assessment on the Bill, which exposes what it is: an absolute dog's breakfast. It is designed for one thing only: to try to win an election. It is nothing to do with serious migration policy. It is not properly costed. It is total nonsense. Mark my words, Madam Deputy Speaker, I doubt a single flight will go to Rwanda. It will be an incoming Labour Government who will, yet again, have to clean up this Government's incompetent mess.

Robert Jenrick: Let's see about that, shall we? I think we have the right policy. It is one we are pursuing. As soon as we have the ability to do so through the courts, we will get those flights off to Rwanda. On the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that the UK is cruel or inhumane, I could not disagree with him more strongly. The facts bear that out. The fact that we brought more than 500,000 people to this country, including from places such as Afghanistan, on humanitarian visas shows that we are one of the world's leading countries in that regard. One of the challenges we have, to be frank with him, about helping some people we would like to help from Afghanistan, or those who fled to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan to come to the UK, is the fact that so many people have come across on small boats from a place of safety such as France that they are

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putting intolerable pressure on our system. The sooner we stop the small boats, the more we can do for people who really deserve our help.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The impact assessment confirms that the Government's Rwanda scheme, which I have criticised previously in this House for its senseless cruelty, will also come at huge expense to the British taxpayer. Does the Minister accept that there is both a more humane and financially prudent alternative to the Government's plans, and that should begin by allowing asylum seekers to seek paid work, which the Lift the Ban coalition estimates would lead to the Government receiving more than £366 million in tax and national insurance alone?

Robert Jenrick: I do not support allowing asylum seekers to work in this country. The approach that we are taking under the Illegal Migration Bill means that individuals who come here will be processed swiftly—in days and weeks, not months and years—and then either returned home or sent to a safe third country such as Rwanda, so that issue will not be relevant. Let me also point out that the hon. Gentleman recently opposed the proposal for a number of asylum seekers to stay in his constituency, despite having said that it was a place of sanctuary.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Excessive cost for nil result—does not that assessment sum up not just the Minister's flawed Home Office plans, but the incompetence at the heart of the whole sinking Government?

Robert Jenrick: No. As I have said on many occasions, the approach we are taking is to introduce one of the most creative and robust systems of any country in the western world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I recognise that the Minister and the Government have a big illegal migration issue to sort out, but the economic impact assessment does not paint an accurate picture. Without foreign staff our NHS would collapse, and without the support of grandparents to help with children our workforce would collapse. The assessment does not do justice to the fact that we as a nation are infinitely richer thanks to those who choose to come here to work and raise their families, and who make the choice to be the best of British alongside those of us who were born here.

Robert Jenrick: The difference is that the people to whom the hon. Gentleman has referred come here legally. We welcome people who come here legally—as visitors on tourist visas, as workers on work visas, as NHS workers on NHS and social care visas—but it is very different if people break into our country, flagrantly breaching our laws. No other country in the world would tolerate that, and neither should we.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That brings us to the end of the urgent question.

Alison Thewliss: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Immigration Minister told me earlier:

"I do not know if any refugees came to it"

—Refugee Week—

"because the SNP does not house refugees in Scotland."

That statement seems to me to be as insulting as it is inaccurate, and I would like some clarification of it.

Let me say first that it is up to the Home Office, not the Scottish Government, to decide where people are dispersed. Glasgow supports about 5,000 asylum seekers, Scotland took well over its population share of Ukrainians, and every single local authority in Scotland took people as part of the Syrian resettlement scheme. The Minister also mentioned the luxury cruise ship in Leith that was contracted by the Scottish Government to house Ukrainians. The Ukrainians on that ship were afforded comprehensive wraparound support. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether he would offer refugees the same comprehensive wraparound support on that basis, because if he would not, I would understand why the Scottish Government would be nervous about it.

Robert Jenrick: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps it would be helpful if I sent the hon. Lady a copy of the letter that I wrote to the Scottish Government recently, which debunks many of the points that they had raised with regard to the vessel in Leith. If there is still time, the hon. Lady could ask them to change their mind, because if they are willing to accommodate Ukrainians, surely, given how strongly they feel about asylum seekers, they would want to do the same in this instance.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not entirely sure—

Alison Thewliss *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Let me speak.

I am not entirely sure that anyone is asking me to do anything. It seems to me that we are slightly prolonging the exchanges on the urgent question, and I have to say that it is not for the Chair to adjudicate on two different points of view. I hope that if the hon. Lady wants to come back to this, there will not simply be a further exchange of views on what has already been said. A point of order should be directed at me, to ask me to do something, but the hon. Lady clearly wanted to put some points on the record. She has done that, the Minister has responded, and I think the House will now want to move on. I urge the hon. Lady, if she has something further to add, to ensure that it is relevant to the Chair. Otherwise, she might consider that she has put her points on the record.

Alison Thewliss: Further to the point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for what you have said, and I will be brief. The Minister implied, at the Dispatch Box, that Scotland does not take refugees. This is clearly a point of accuracy, because that comment was inaccurate, and I ask, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether the Minister could withdraw it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, that is not a matter for the Chair. The hon. Lady has made her point. If the Minister felt that he had said anything inaccurate, or had inadvertently misled the House, he would be expected to correct the record at the first opportunity. I think we will leave it at that, because this has been quite a long extension of the previous exchanges.

Schools (Gender and Parental Rights)

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

1.35 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the promotion of social transition practices in schools; to require schools to inform parents if their child has indicated an intention to pursue, or has commenced, social transition; to provide for a right for parents to access information about lessons in schools; to make provision about the teaching of the concept of gender identity in schools; and for connected purposes.

The issue that I bring to the House today needs a Bill, the very necessity of which is both grotesque and revealing of an absurdity: the turning of a blind eye to the real-world effects that seemingly good-faith legislation has had on our education system, on schools and on society as a whole.

So that we can all be clear about what the proposed Bill refers to, let me start by defining the terms that it mentions. “Gender identity” is the theory that, although we may be biologically male or female, the more important characteristic is what we actually feel like on the inside. “Social transition” is the conscious act of self-rejection of our biological reality.

Cases of that happening used to be one of the clearest examples we had ever seen of an exception that proves the rule, but I am sickened to say that, under all our noses, members of society who are either politically or educationally tasked with helping to bring up our children have turned raising the next generation into a science experiment, with consequences that break my heart.

In schools today, it is rapidly becoming taught that it is a normal and common experience not to feel at home in our own bodies, and that the reason we feel like that is likely to be because we, as a person, are simply trapped in the body of the opposite sex. In some schools, one in 15 children now identify as something different from their actual biological sex.

The exceptions that proved the rule are now becoming the rule. We have started to blur the lines of basic reality, and have turned what was already an extremely complex world for children to get to grips with into a more complex one. To paraphrase Douglas Murray, there is just about nothing more formative to our grip on reality than the realities of sex. The first, most basic, most instinctive thing we become aware of when we are growing up or even meeting someone new is simply that there are boys and there are girls. In dismantling that, we dismantle the world and pull out a foundational block of society. Who knows where the Jenga tower may fall? But one thing is certain: the tower will fall, and we should all be ashamed that we would doom our children to such a fate.

Social transition practices in schools have now become the norm in every classroom in the country. They are promoted as a normal and healthy response to natural feelings that children experience during the difficult period that we used just to call “growing up.” There is not a single child in our schools today who has not been exposed to these practices. They include the policing of language by mandating the use of a child’s preferred pronouns—referring to a boy as “she” or “her” instead

of “he” or “him”, or vice versa—and the use of body alterations to reflect a transition to the opposite sex, which primarily take the form of surgical castration for boys, double mastectomies for girls, Frankenstein-esque genitalia being created from grafts of skin, and drugs to pause or halt puberty. Teachers, students or even parents who do not oblige are punished and ostracised. In Canada, calling a child by their “wrong pronoun” is already a crime.

The common consensus is that this gender-based ideology came from adolescents who are more inclined to adopt so-called progressive and liberal values, but that could not be further from the truth. The origins of gender ideology came from rogue academics in the 20th century who have since been discredited, laying the groundwork for future socialist thinkers to start making more and more wild claims about the nature of our societies.

George Bernard Shaw was one of those who opened Pandora’s box by coining anti-family rhetoric and promoting the rejection of societal gender norms. In 1928, Shaw wrote:

“The social creed must be imposed on us when we are children... It is quite easy to give people a second nature, however unnatural, if you catch them early enough.”

Those are chilling words, yet here we are, voluntarily following his playbook.

This did not come from our children spending more and more time in the echo chamber of social media; it has been clinically and systematically imposed on them from the top down. Gender ideology is a political ideology—one that is being, effectively, promoted in schools, and that therefore constitutes political indoctrination, which, under section 406 of the Education Act 1996, is strictly prohibited.

Any who would argue that gender identity is protected by the Equality Act 2010, and can therefore be discussed in schools, would have grossly misinterpreted the Equality Act, as gender identity is not a protected characteristic. There is a reason why we are careful what topics we broach with children and teach them at young ages. Why have we forgotten that?

If it were at all possible, it gets much worse. The public are rightly shocked when they learn just how graphic and extensive sex education lessons have become in our schools. Five-year-olds are being taught to identify different genitalia in class. Nowhere in the guidance on sex education lessons does the Department for Education discuss nine-year-old children being taught about masturbation or witnessing dolls simulate sex acts, or 11 to 12-year-olds being taught that they can feel pleasure from anal or oral sex. Does this depravity know no bounds?

Not only are these topics being broached, but pre-pubescent children are being encouraged to explore their own bodies in this manner. It borders on criminality when adults are suggesting that children as young as eight should engage in adult activities. We have a duty to safeguard our children, preserve their innocence and protect them from the complexities of adult life until they reach an appropriate age, when they are mature enough to engage with topics and fully understand them.

What is happening in our schools is unacceptable, and there is a need for immediate action. Classrooms should be a safe harbour. Inclusivity has become a

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double-edged sword, cutting through the very fabric of childhood. Every child has the right to innocence and immunity from the sexual perversions of adults.

When teaching sex education—a topic where a bridge should stand between parents and teachers—a barricade has formed. Parents have been left in the dark and even actively blocked from seeing the material taught to their own children. We must act now and hope that the damage already done will not be too long-lasting.

The Bill I propose today will prop up existing legislation aimed at protecting our children and put an end to this dark chapter. Social transition in children will be forbidden. The promotion of social transitioning and the discussion of social transitioning practices will be prohibited from appearing in any aspect of a school curriculum. Local authorities, governing bodies or headteachers shall immediately inform parents or carers of any child who indicates intent to socially transition or who has commenced the process of socially transitioning. Moreover, when the parents of a child who has considered socially transitioning have been informed, the relevant safeguarding policies shall be adhered to and the relevant safeguarding leads shall be notified.

Parents will be entitled to the right to consultation, the right to withdraw their children from sex education and the right to have access to the materials used as part of that sexual education. Schools will only be allowed to use published, citeable resources that are reliably available for public and regulatory scrutiny. The Bill will uphold and reinforce the provisions laid out in the Education Act 1996 and will forbid the promotion of gender identity. Where gender identity is taught, it will be taught alongside opposing views to allow for a fair presentation of political beliefs.

Relationships and sex education lessons and personal, social, health and economic education lessons were brought in to sensibly and safely inform our children about topics necessary to keep them safe from harm. Let us get a grip of the legislation and deliver on the original intended purpose. Our children are not guinea pigs; it is high time that this House took charge and stopped allowing ideologies passed down from mad scientists that treat them as such. My proposed Bill will protect children, reassure parents and offer certainty to teachers. I wish with all my heart that it was not necessary, but it is needed—and it is desperately needed.

1.45 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I would like to make it clear to the House that I was not intending to speak in this debate when I came to work today, but I and a number of colleagues were so appalled by the Bill's contents—as we were by that speech—that we felt it was important to send a clear message from this place, particularly to young LGBT people and their families, that this nasty Bill does not represent the views of Parliament.

Trans and non-binary people have always existed. Gender dysphoria has been an internationally recognised condition for decades. Coming out as trans or non-binary is never easy and often extremely difficult. That is why, historically, so many trans people have suppressed their gender dysphoria, leading to high levels of mental

illness and, all too often, sadly, suicide. Better knowledge and a much wider acceptance of gender non-conformity in recent years, particularly among the younger generation, have thankfully made it easier for trans and non-binary young people to come out. Of course, that can pose challenges to schools, but schools have become very experienced at handling social transitioning with sensitivity and professionalism.

This Bill would turn the clock back to an age in which the very existence of trans and non-binary people—a tiny minority—was simply not acknowledged. It would force young people to continue living in the gender assigned at birth, even when, as in the vast majority of cases, they have the full support of their parents to transition and live in their chosen gender. Parents would face the impossible choice of forcing their child to continue living in the gender they no longer identify with—with all the negative, often devastating, impacts on that child's mental health—or removing them from school and educating them at home. There is no evidence that the way schools currently deal with this very small number of cases is not working.

For young LGBT people whose families are not supportive of their sexuality or gender identity, the consequences of this Bill would be even worse: it would, in effect, force schools to out LGBT students. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children says that young people should never, ever be outed against their will, except when serious safeguarding concerns require it. One third of homeless young people are LGBT people who have been rejected by their families. The Albert Kennedy Trust, a charity that does fantastic work with homeless young LGBT people, has seen a 70% increase in referrals in the last three years, and half of LGBT young people report that they would be worried about coming out to their families because of hostility from one or more family member.

This Bill is not about the welfare of young people, and it is not about the smooth running of our schools; it is about a cynical but completely transparent attempt, by a conspiracy theorist who is too right-wing even for today's Conservative party, to stoke the culture wars on the backs of our most vulnerable minority and their families. It is despicable. I urge colleagues in this House to give it a resounding thumbs down.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Perhaps the Serjeant could make sure that everything is okay in the Division Lobbies.

The House having divided: Ayes 34, Noes 40.

Division No. 272]

[1.48 pm]

AYES

Ansell, Caroline	Crosbie, Virginia
Bacon, Gareth	Docherty, Leo
Baillie, Siobhan	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Benton, Scott	Fletcher, Nick
Blackman, Bob	French, Mr Louie
Bridgen, Andrew	Girvan, Paul
Bruce, Fiona	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Green, Chris
Chope, Sir Christopher	Grundy, James
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Gullis, Jonathan

Hart, Sally-Ann
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Mackinlay, Craig
 McCartney, Karl
 Mills, Nigel
 Paisley, Ian
 Robinson, Gavin

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Vickers, Martin
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jim Shannon and
Mr Philip Hollobone

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Amesbury, Mike
 Begum, Apsana
 Blake, Olivia
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Colburn, Elliot
 Creasy, Stella
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Farry, Stephen
 Fletcher, Mark
 Gibson, Peter
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Hardy, Emma

Holmes, Paul
 Johnson, Kim
 Kearns, Alicia
 Lucas, Caroline
 Mearns, Ian
 Mundell, rh David
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Richards, Nicola
 Roberts, Mr Rob
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Trickett, Jon
 Webbe, Claudia
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Winter, Beth
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Cat Smith and
Charlotte Nichols

Question accordingly negated.

Opposition Day

19TH ALLOTTED DAY

Mortgage and Rental Costs

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):
 I inform the House that amendment (a), tabled in the name of the Prime Minister, has been selected.

I call the shadow Chancellor to move the motion.

2.4 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House is extremely concerned that, under this Conservative Government, average mortgage costs will be increasing by £2,900 per year, with a typical household in the UK paying over £2,000 more per year than in France and over £1,000 more than in Ireland and Belgium, and that renters face huge increases in rent payments; condemns the Government for its slowness in acting to support millions of homeowners and renters and so alleviate the impact of its policies; calls on the Government to bring in mandatory measures, as the current voluntary measures could lead to around one million homeowners missing out on support, and to immediately adopt measures to ease the mortgage crisis and halt repossession by guaranteeing support from lenders for struggling mortgage borrowers and strengthening the rights of renters; in particular calls on the Government to require lenders to allow borrowers to switch to interest-only mortgage payments for a temporary period, to lengthen the term of their mortgage period, to reverse any support measures when requested and to make mandatory repossession restrictions; and further calls on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to instruct the Financial Conduct Authority to urgently issue guidance that the credit score of borrowers should be unaffected by any temporary switches to interest-only mortgage payments or lengthening of their mortgage period and to introduce a renters' charter that would end no-fault evictions immediately.

Throughout Britain, families are experiencing the harsh, rolling impacts of the Tory mortgage bombshell. Last autumn, the Tories' mini-Budget crashed the pound; they trashed our economic institutions and left our country's reputation in tatters, with higher mortgage rates as the consequence. The current Prime Minister and the latest Chancellor have not turned the situation around. For families across Britain, things are getting worse, not better. The Prime Minister is now lecturing the country to "hold our nerve". It is easier to hold your nerve when you do not have to pay the price of the Tory mortgage bombshell.

What are the consequences? Millions of households will be hit by the bombshell, paying, collectively, a total of £15.8 billion more in mortgage payments by 2026. That will be an additional £240 per month, on average, for those re-mortgaging. In the constituency of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), the figure is higher still, with 9,700 households there facing payments, on average, of £280 per month more—or £3,400 per year. People can hold their nerve all they like, but how does the Minister think that is going to pay the mortgage or the rent?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a good introduction. Is it not the case that all this money that will be lost by households does not go to help anyone but the Tories' friends in the banks, who, of course, have presided over those neo-liberal policies that trashed our economy?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will come on to the ways in which we can better protect people, but many banks are doing the right thing and trying to support their customers. It is important that all lenders take the action that is needed, which is why we need the Government to make that charter a requirement, not a voluntary agreement.

These devastating increases in mortgage rates will damage people's plans for the future and deny many their dreams. In plenty of cases, they will mean more lives and hopes ruined. Citizens Advice said this week that many of its clients with mortgages have seen their finances "fall off a cliff", with more and more people struggling to afford the essentials, such as food and heating. But it is not their fault: they have done nothing wrong.

For James, from Selby, the Tory mortgage bombshell is going to cost him and his family £400 more each month. That is nearly an extra £5,000 a year, but he cannot find that money and so he and his family have no choice but to sell their house and downsize. He has just told his children that they are going to have to start sharing bedrooms because they cannot afford to live in their home. Can the Minister explain why James and his family are having to pay the cost of this Tory Government's failures?

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making excellent remarks. Does she agree that this situation is having a devastating impact not only on people with mortgages, but on renters, because landlords are passing on the costs to them? Does she agree that we need no-fault evictions to be scrapped immediately?

Rachel Reeves: I very much thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is absolutely right: the people being hit are those who are having to re-mortgage; those who are on floating rates and are just seeing their payments automatically go up; first-time buyers who want to be on the housing ladder but, because of this bombshell, are not able to get on it; and renters, who are paying the higher mortgage payments of their landlords. She is right to say that we need Labour's renters charter, in order to do a number of things, including ending no-fault evictions.

Families facing the increasing squeeze from their rising mortgages are now having to confront that stress and anxiety day in, day out. For many, this will mean that their family holidays are cancelled this year; they will watch hard-earned savings drain away; and they will decide that they can no longer afford to spend money on days out with friends and family. For others, it could be much worse, with them not moving up the housing ladder, but slipping down it, through no fault of their own. The scale of the impact of all of this is devastating.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady and the Labour party for bringing this debate forward. Every one of us, including my constituents, is dealing with the same problems. Some people contacted me last week to say that their mortgage rates are going up from £400 to £800, while others have said that theirs are going up from £600 to £1,200. It is just impossible to find that amount of money. Does she think that perhaps

the Government—I look to them when I say this—should be looking at mortgage tax relief? That is one direct method of helping people to retain their houses and their dream of home ownership, and to survive this crisis.

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman speaks powerfully and I recognise those stories of people seeing their mortgages double because of what is happening. I will come on to the solutions proposed by the Labour party, but it is important that money is not injected into the economy at this time. If that happened, interest rates would go up even more, crippling the hopes and opportunities of exactly those we want to help. I will come on to the solutions that we propose shortly.

Over the next few years, 7.5 million families will be hit by the Tory mortgage bombshell, month after month after month. That is why it is essential that greater mortgage flexibility and support from lenders must be mandatory, not voluntary as the Government have put forward.

Consumer champion Martin Lewis warned the Government about mortgage market issues last year, and he now says "the timebomb has exploded", yet under the Government's scheme, 1 million households are missing out. What is the Government's response to them? Tough? It is up to the discretion and the goodwill of their lender? That is not good enough.

Although it is welcome, as I said, that many lenders are stepping up and doing the right thing, the scheme cannot be voluntary. That is why, when Labour set out our mortgage package last week, we made sure that that would be compulsory, across the board, and required of lenders. That is right: required of lenders. Without that clarity and confidence, families are rightly anxious about what comes next and how it will affect them.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, highlighting the real situation facing many of our constituents as we sit here today. In my constituency, 9,000 families will see a mortgage increase of up to £1,400, on top of struggling to put bread and butter on the table and keep up with energy costs. All we hear from the Prime Minister is that they should hold their nerve. Frankly, that is rich coming from somebody who is never going to be in that position. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that rather than finding solutions, what this Tory Government and the Prime Minister are demonstrating is that they are completely out of touch with people's real problems today?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully on behalf of the people of Bradford East, a constituency that I know well and that I know will be badly affected, not just by the Tory mortgage bombshell but by the cost of living increases as well.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My constituent's mortgage has gone up from £1,950 to £3,000. She spent an agonisingly stressful time waiting for that deal to come through, but if she had made the deal today, it would have been £3,500. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is too much stress for one family to take?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People who live in Hornsey and Wood Green, where house prices are high, will see a big increase in their

payments. When rates go up from below 2%, which is what many people were paying, to above 6%, there will be huge increases. It is through no fault of my hon. Friend's constituents, or any of our constituents, that they are in that position, which is what is so frustrating.

I remember a time—you may as well, Madam Deputy Speaker—when the Tory party used to preach personal responsibility, yet this Government are taking no responsibility for the devastation that they have caused. Where is the apology for the Tory mini-Budget? Where is the apology to those paying hundreds of pounds more a month in mortgage payments, or to those at risk of losing their homes? There is nothing.

Let us just imagine for a moment that a group of people working in an office, a supermarket or a factory burn the place down. Everyone else who works there is told that they have to pay to clean up the mess and that that payment will carry on for years. The next day, the arsonists turn up to work again, expecting to be paid as normal and, not only that, they are furious if someone even brings up the incident of the fire with them. That would be preposterous and outrageous, and yet it is precisely what the Government are doing. “Inflation? Oh, that was nothing to do with us. It was all global events. It was those public sector workers asking for a pay rise. It was the Bank of England. It definitely was not anything to do with us.” That is what we hear from this Government. Well, we know what the Tories did last autumn was totally outrageous. The country will not forgive or forget the scale of the harm that the Tories have caused to the economy and to families up and down our country.

The Government say that this is happening everywhere, so let us look at what is happening in Europe. The latest data comparing interest rates among our European neighbours show that a household in Britain, with a £200,000 mortgage, is now paying over £2,000 per year more for its mortgage than in France, over £1,000 a year more than in Ireland or Belgium, and £800 more than in Germany. That impact on families in Britain reflects the choices made by this Tory Government.

To make matters worse, after 13 years of the Tory Government being in power, average real wages are still lower than they were in 2010. Many families have faced one financial pressure after another. Energy bills are twice as high as a year ago. The weekly food shop is astronomical. On top of all that, higher mortgages and higher rents are the last thing they needed. No one is reassured by the suggestion from the Prime Minister that he is “100% on it”. After 13 years in power, it is clearer by the day that the Tories are the problem, not the solution.

The truth of the matter is that we have the highest inflation in the G7, with core inflation rising and interest rates rising too. We are in a weaker position than many as a consequence of Tory choices that have left our economy lacking resilience and security in the face of shocks, including global ones. Banning onshore wind, closing our gas storage facilities and scrapping the home insulation programme have all contributed to higher bills, higher costs and less security.

A patchwork Brexit deal full of holes is making goods such as food more expensive, with the prospect that that could get worse at the end of this year, with new import checks and costs. What is the Government's

latest idea? One of the Chancellor's economic advisers called last week for the Bank of England to “create a recession”, adding:

“They have to create uncertainty and frailty.”

Will the Minister tell us whether the Chancellor agrees with that advice from his advisers? If not, why is taking advice from them?

A Labour Government would be built on the firm foundations of economic responsibility, with strong fiscal rules. We would negotiate a bespoke British food and farming agreement with our trading partners, while staying out of the single market and customs union. We would lift the ban on onshore wind and reform antiquated planning rules, working in partnership with businesses and trade unions to invest in the jobs and industries of the future, protect our energy security and reduce our energy bills. That is what is needed to get our economy on sustainable and stable path, so that families are not grappling with a cost of living crisis created by this Tory Government.

If ever there were proof that the Government do not have the answers that our country needs, it is what is happening on housing. The Conservatives once claimed to be the party of home ownership: not any more. Home ownership is falling. It is not because of just their failure to require lenders to provide mandatory support for mortgage holders, although that would certainly help today. Incredibly, the Prime Minister has scrapped house building targets in the face of pressure from some of his councillors and Back Benchers. The consequence of the Tory Government's policy is now to push the prospect of home ownership for young people and families starting out in life even further away.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making excellent points, particularly about young people being priced out of the property market. Does she agree that we need to overhaul the housing system to include better rights for renters and more council housing?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend makes a really important point, because the Tory mortgage bombshell is experienced whether people have a mortgage or not. Renters are seeing huge increases in their rents—on average 10% in the last year—in Liverpool and around the country. That is why Labour's renters charter is so important right now.

Treasury Ministers remain ignorant or indifferent to the plight of the renters whom my hon. Friend spoke about. A Labour Government would bring in a renters charter, ending no-fault evictions, and introduce a four-month notice period. Renters right now are exposed to their landlords passing the higher costs of their mortgages on to their tenants. Yet it is not clear whether the voluntary package, which the Chancellor described yesterday, includes buy-to-let mortgages. Will the Government tell the House and the country what they think the consequences of that will be? Labour would rebalance the housing market towards first-time buyers and towards renters. We would bring in a comprehensive mortgage guarantee scheme, stopping overseas investors buying whole developments off plan, and introduce our tough private renters charter.

The Tory mortgage bombshell could not come at a worse time for family finances—right in the middle of a cost of living crisis. Our country is being made to pay

[Rachel Reeves]

the growing price of Tory economic failure. People cannot afford this Tory Government. We have seen mistake after mistake, wrong decisions taken for the wrong reasons, and the Government never standing up for working families and refusing to take responsibility for the problems that they have created. The only thing that the Tories have to offer is desperate excuses for the state of the country after 13 years of their Government.

At the next election, people will be asking this question: are me and my family better off after 13 years of Conservative Government? The answer to that is a resounding no. The last thing that our country needs is this Tory mortgage bombshell. The country needs security for working people. That is what Labour will deliver. We are on to the third Prime Minister of this Parliament. If this Government had any decency, they would call a general election and let the people decide who they want to stand up for them and lead our country.

2.21 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“welcomes the Government’s drive to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt; particularly welcomes the Government’s new Mortgage Charter which has been agreed by 85 per cent of the residential mortgage market and will provide support to mortgage holders through new commitments and flexibilities to help borrowers who are anxious about rising interest rates; notes the extensive package of cost of living support to help families with rising prices, worth an average of £3,300 per household including direct cash payments to the eight million most vulnerable households; and further believes that Labour’s policies to manage the economy would be inflationary, lead to higher interest rates and put more pressure on mortgage holders and renters.”

After two decades of low inflation, the world has been confronted with a bout of fast-growing prices, and we are not alone. As a result of rising prices, central banks around the world, including in the United States, Japan, New Zealand and the European Union, have been raising interest rates in order to force down the rate of price rises. As all Members will be aware, last week, the Bank of England’s independent Monetary Policy Committee raised rates to 5%. Let me say at the outset that the Bank of England and its Monetary Policy Committee has the full support and confidence of this Government, and will continue to do so as it takes whatever action is necessary to return inflation to the 2% target in the medium term. As the Chancellor was clear when addressing this place yesterday, he will not take action that undermines the Bank of England’s monetary objectives.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that the latest data on mortgage rates specifically shows that, since the mini-Budget, they have increased faster here in the UK than in the US. That gap in mortgage rates means that someone here with a mortgage of £200,000 will be paying £1,000 a year more than in the US. What is the Minister’s explanation for that?

John Glen: I am here to account for what has happened in the UK. Obviously, there are differences—[*Interruption.*] If I may answer. There are differences across the EU and the US. What I am telling the House, which is quite

transparently clear, is that inflationary pressures are affecting all economies at the moment, and it is my responsibility to account for what we are doing as a Government.

Imran Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I wish to make more progress.

Where there are non-inflationary measures that we can take to relieve the anxiety faced by families, we will do so and we will do everything we can to address the situation. That is why, on Friday, the Chancellor met the UK’s principal mortgage lenders, alongside senior representatives from the Financial Conduct Authority and UK Finance, to agree new support for those struggling with their mortgage payments.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Can he give an answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who asked whether the mortgage charter, which the Chancellor announced yesterday, will cover buy-to-let mortgages? Why exactly has the Chancellor not made that mandatory?

John Glen: I will come on to set out in detail what arrangements we have made. As the Chancellor set out pretty clearly yesterday, we will hear in the next couple of weeks the details of that agreement, which includes a growing number of lenders—it currently covers 85% of lenders in the country.

Imran Hussain *rose*—

John Glen: I wish to make some more progress and then I will take some interventions in a moment.

At that meeting on Friday, the Chancellor secured agreement from lenders to a new mortgage charter, which we published yesterday. It sets out what support customers will receive. We are proud to say that, over the weekend, more lenders signed up to the charter, and we encourage further lenders to join that 85% of mortgage market providers.

The charter provides support for two groups of people in particular. The first group is those who are worried about their mortgage repayments. If they want to switch to an interest-only mortgage or extend their mortgage term to reduce their monthly payments, they will be able to do so with the option of switching back to their original mortgage deal within six months without a new affordability check or affecting their credit score.

For most people, the right course of action will be to continue to make payments on their current mortgage. Keeping up full repayments means that they will pay less interest overall. But this new measure means that people will be able to opt for a lower-cost approach for six months with full reversibility, giving them the peace of mind of knowing that they can try out a new approach and still change their mind later on.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way. He is being very generous with his time.

With not all the mortgage market covered by the charter, there is a worry that around 1 million households could miss out on the support. Can the Minister guarantee

that the measures that were outlined will be available to everyone struggling with their mortgage payments, not just those who happen to have a mortgage with one of the banks that is on the list of those that have cosy chats with the Chancellor?

John Glen: I hope that more and more lenders will be added to those 85% of providers. The details will be known in the next few weeks. This comes on top of the FCA's rules around lenders having to take an individual approach to the circumstances of their customers, especially those trying to find a way through when they fall into difficulty.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I wish to make a bit more progress. I will come back to the hon. Lady in a moment.

This measure will take effect in the next few weeks and it means that a homeowner with £100,000 outstanding on their mortgage over 15 years can change their payments—with no impact on their credit rating—by extending the mortgage term by 10 years, which could save them over £200 a month, or by moving to interest-only payments, which could save them more than £350 a month. A further measure for this group of customers means that, if they are approaching the end of a fixed-rate deal, they will have the chance to lock in a new deal with the same lender up to six months ahead. However, they will still be able to apply for a better like-for-like deal with the same lender, with no penalty, if they find one when their current deal ends.

Emma Hardy: I understand why the Minister wants to have a voluntary charter, but does he agree that what we are actually seeing from the banks—this was raised on the Treasury Committee—is that they are very quick to raise interest rates on mortgages, but not so quick to raise them on savings? The difference between the interest rates being raised on mortgages and those being raised on savings is around 50%, which is completely unfair. When the Chancellor meets the banks, will he also add to the conversation the unfairness that exists when it comes to interest rates on savings? That is why I am reporting back to the Minister on the need to mandate this—because we cannot always assume that the banks will act in the interests of their customers.

John Glen: I thank the hon. Lady for her point. As the Chancellor said yesterday, he did raise that with lenders on Friday. We will continue to work closely with them on those disparities where they exist. My colleague the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is responsible for the relationship with financial services institutions, will also be attending to this issue. It is right that, with interest rates rising, banks should be looking to put as much of that rise as possible on to the savings rates that they offer to consumers.

Imran Hussain: Time and time again the Minister seems to be ducking the central issue in this debate, which is that the charter the Government have proposed will not cover millions of people and will not provide support. Why will he not instead subscribe to the Labour position today and require all lenders to do it, so that everybody can get support? Answer the question Minister.

John Glen: I appreciate the passion with which the hon. Gentleman presents his point, but we have made an agreement with the FCA and with lenders, and in the next couple of weeks the details will be available for consumers and mortgage holders up and down the country. As I say, we have already moved from three quarters to 85% of lenders and I expect others to join in due course. We will continue to have dialogue with the FCA and to look at further ways to help consumers.

The purpose of our intervention is to provide people with more flexibility and optionality to find the best deal for their circumstances. Mortgage arrears and defaults remain at historically low levels, with less than 1%—I think it is 0.86%—of residential mortgages in arrears in 2023, a lower level than just before the pandemic.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): We heard the shadow Chancellor outline the utopian elements of her compulsory scheme. Can the Chief Secretary outline which scheme goes further—our scheme, which is not mandatory but delivers 12 months before repossessions happen, or the Labour Party's mandatory scheme?

John Glen: My hon. Friend makes a wise point, and I will come on to talk about some of the other measures in a moment. For those families involved, it is extraordinarily distressing to lose their home, so we will do all that we can to support people who find themselves in such a challenging financial position.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I am going to finish answering the previous point.

As part of our strong regulatory framework for mortgage holders, banks and lenders already provide tailored support for anyone struggling, and they deploy highly trained staff to help those customers. Support offered includes temporary payment deferrals and part interest, part repayment, as well as extending mortgage terms or switching to interest-only payments. To supplement that, we agreed as part of the mortgage charter on Friday that, in the extreme situation in which a lender is seeking to repossess a home, there will be a minimum 12-month period from the first missed payment before there is a repossession without consent. I believe that that goes rather further than what the Opposition were suggesting.

Barbara Keeley: This crisis is already having an impact on renters too, and the Chief Secretary is not touching on that in his speech. I have a constituent on a rolling private tenancy who is worried sick that her landlord is going to evict her. She is worried about ending up in a hostel with her teenage daughter. She works full time and pays her way. That situation is shared by so many. Does the Chief Secretary not agree that there should be support for renters, and that the way to achieve it is to back Labour's renters charter, including the halt to no-fault evictions and a four-month notice period for landlords?

John Glen: I do not accept that, but I do accept that there are challenging situations for our constituents up and down the country. That is why this Government have intervened and are working in this way with lenders to find a constructive package of interventions to meet the situation those constituents are in.

[John Glen]

Anyone who is worried that they could be in those difficult situations should know that they can call their lender for advice without any impact whatsoever on their credit score. Lenders will also provide support to customers who are up to date with payments to switch to a new mortgage deal at the end of their existing fixed-rate deal without another affordability test, and provide well-timed information when their current rate is coming to an end. Taken together, those measures should offer some comfort to those who are anxious about the impact of high interest rates on their mortgage and provide support to those who get into extreme financial difficulties.

Catherine West: May I return briefly to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley)? Last time I asked the Economic Secretary to the Treasury about the number of renters estimated to be impacted by this situation, he did not have an answer. Do Ministers on the Treasury Front Bench have an answer today on how many renters will be affected by this crisis?

John Glen: The interventions we have made provide significant scope for assistance. To find an accurate number would be very difficult, but we will continue to work with industry and with lenders to find maximum flexibility and interventions to support them at this difficult time. While we roll out those measures, tackling inflation remains the No. 1 priority of the Prime Minister and the Government. Inflation makes every person in this country poorer and it has to be tackled head-on.

Notwithstanding that, I am fully alive to the fact that some people remain in real distress. I assure hon. Members and their constituents that we will always stand ready to help where we can. That is why at the Budget we announced that the energy price guarantee would be extended for a further three months. That extension was funded in part by the energy profits levy that this Government introduced last year, recognising that profit levels in the sector had increased significantly due to those very high oil and gas prices, caused by global circumstances—including, of course, Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Alongside holding down energy bills, freezing fuel duty, increasing universal credit and raising the national living wage and pensions, we are giving up to £900 in cost of living payments to households on means-tested benefits. Taking those measures together, the Government are already supporting families with one of the largest support packages in Europe, worth £3,300 per household on average.

The Government's approach makes targeted interventions to protect the most vulnerable, while maintaining a laser-like focus on tackling inflation. I believe that that stands in sharp contrast to some of the policies offered by opposition parties. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a £3 billion mortgage protection fund, which would simply pour fuel on the fire of inflation, making it harder to bring prices down. That would be such a damaging move that it is apparently even too extreme for those on the Labour Front Bench to contemplate.

However, I would say that the Labour party is not without its own flaws when it comes to offering unfunded inflationary policies. The media reports that the right

hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has had his wings clipped by the Leader of the Opposition for his excessive spending proposals, but in reality the shadow Chancellor is only slightly delaying Labour's £28 billion spending spree to the second half of the next Parliament—an amended timetable, but the same reckless policy.

We said that we would halve inflation, not because it was an easy thing to do, but because it was the right thing to do. History and the best economic insights that we have today tell us that the best way to beat inflation is to stick to our plan, backing the Bank of England's monetary policy decisions. We will stick to the plan, because it is the only way we can give relief to families and reprieve to businesses. As we have done before, we will face down these economic challenges while supporting the most vulnerable and setting us up for economic growth.

Since a Conservative Government came into power in 2010, the UK economy has grown more than those of major countries such as France, Italy, or Japan, and about the same as Europe's largest economy, Germany, which is now in recession. We have halved unemployment, cut inequality and reduced the number of workless households by 1 million. We have protected pensioners, those on low incomes and those with disabilities. We will now overcome this inflationary period, and offer a helping hand to those who need it as we do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I think I will have to give some firm guidance about time limits. My initial guidance would be six minutes, just so the first speaker on the Government side is aware.

2.39 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) raised the spectre of those commentators who are suggesting that we crash the economy into recession as a way of tackling inflation. Others have commented on that over the past week or so. The more that I think about it as a serious proposal, the more hideously grotesque it appears that, in the midst of all this, there are people out there, swarming around with daft ideas, suggesting that poverty and penury are actually an economic tool.

The Minister spoke in support of his Government's amendment (a), which starts by welcoming

"the Government's drive to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt".

Inflation is not halving; it has stayed at 8.7%. Core inflation has gone up to 7.1%, real gross inflation is at 18%, and the debt to GDP ratio has hit 100%. I know that politics is politics and that there are things Ministers will have to say, but if they bear little resemblance to reality, they are unlikely to be believed.

I am thinking of some of the very early contributions to debate. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes), who is no longer in his place, referred to other people's plans. I think it is just extraordinary to listen to Tories being critical of anyone who simply thinks that people having a warm, dry and affordable house for themselves and their family is anything other than a rather sensible ambition.

According to Moneyfacts, the average two-year fixed-term mortgage is now sitting at 6.23%, not far off the post-mini-Budget peak of 6.6%. Although it is true that, on Friday, the UK's biggest lenders signed a deal that included, as part of this new mortgage charter, a commitment to give homeowners a 12-month grace period before their home is repossessed—I welcome that and the other measures—the deal actually forms a rather limited relief package that certainly will not offer help to everyone who needs it. That came after the Bank of England raised interest rates to 5%—the 13th consecutive rise, and a larger-than-expected increase—meaning that we now have the highest interest rates in 15 years.

I support 100% the operational independence of the central bank, but I wonder whether that was the right approach. We all know that there is a lag between interest rates going up and the impact of driving inflation down being demonstrated. I wonder whether we are repeating a mistake that we have seen many times in this country: interest rates not rising quickly enough at the beginning, and continuing to rise too late at the end, turning a bad situation into a recession, or making a recessionary situation worse than it need be.

The pledge on forbearance is one of the main measures in the agreement struck with lenders. The lenders that have agreed the pledge include NatWest, Lloyds, Santander and Barclays, which, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, control 75% of the market—that figure has increased to 85%. As we have heard today, as well as in yesterday's statement, that agreement does not cover all the lenders, nor does it cover all mortgage-holders, some of whom are in very specific circumstances. We heard from a colleague yesterday about people who have residual Northern Rock mortgages and are tied into specific deals. It would be helpful to find out, for example, whether they will be able to take advantage of the opportunities that the charter allows for. The SNP welcomes what has been said so far, but it is clear that the mortgage charter will offer limited relief to the millions of households across the UK who are facing soaring mortgage costs.

Let us look at the detail. As I said, the average two-year fixed-term mortgage is now sitting at 6.23%, not far off the 6.65% peak. The average five-year fixed-term mortgage is at 5.86%. Those rises mean that, at the two-year rate, repayments on a £150,000 mortgage—not far off the £184,000 average price of a house in Scotland—are now £990 a month, compared with £660 a month on the average rate available in December 2021, before the hike in borrowing costs began. From £660 a month to £990 a month is a 50% rise in two years. That is a huge amount of money: it amounts to an increase of £3,900 a year compared with December 2021. We know that wages have not kept pace with inflationary costs, and that the people who are struggling with this have also been struggling with soaring energy bills over the past 18 months. People are really hurting.

I feel for people who have done the right things: those who are earning reasonable wages but are not rich, who managed to save a 5%, 10% or 15% deposit, and who capped their mortgage at maybe three times their earnings and did not borrow excessively. I do not know anyone in the real world who has a spare £3,000, £4,000 or £5,000 a year to sling at the increase in their mortgage costs after facing all the other inflationary pressures over the past year.

For many, the measures announced will be of limited relief. We know, for example, that lenders will be quite selective about who they allow to take the interest-only option. David Hollingworth, associate director at L&C Mortgages, noted:

“Going interest-only can work but only for the right kind of borrower, someone with a good financial history of repayments, someone with plenty of equity in their home who is just looking for some breathing space.”

That does not cover a lot of our constituents, who may not have a lot of equity at all and may, for one reason or another, have found themselves missing a payment here or there because of other pressures.

The president of the Resolution Foundation highlighted that the approach of consecutive UK Governments to managing the economy and the housing market has led to lower levels of home ownership, with those who own their homes feeling “intense pain” as a result of rising interest rates. He said:

“There is a group of several million people who could be seeing their mortgage costs rise by about £3,000 in a year and that is a lot for a middle-income household to bear. So it is going to be tough for them. Conservatives believe in the property-owning democracy”—

although they are doing rather a good impression of trying to destroy it. He went on:

“We’ve seen tragically a narrowing of homeownership over the last decades. That in turn means that if you’re trying to use interest rates, mortgage rates to drive disinflation, you’ve got a smaller group to operate on and they feel more intense pain.”

The Resolution Foundation also noted that more than four in 10 low-income households are spending more than 40% of their income on mortgage repayments. That is extraordinarily stark. When one considers that something in the order of 116,000 households are coming off fixed-term deals every month—perhaps the Chief Secretary to the Treasury can confirm that number—those people who are already spending more than 40% of their income on housing costs will find things extremely tough indeed if they are hit with a 10%, 15%, 20%, 30% or 40% rise in their mortgages this coming year.

The Resolution Foundation also warned that 31% of low-income mortgage holders say that their fixed-rate mortgage will come to an end between now and the end of the year, and that a large number of that group are already spending more than 40% of their income on their mortgage, as I said. It was critical of the fact that the Bank of England does not have a duty to consider the implications that its actions might have on the housing market or mortgage holders. I have asked the Government a number of times recently about reviewing whether an inflation target is the right primary target for the central bank, and whether the tools that the Bank has are appropriate. I wonder whether we should have a growth target, for example.

In New Zealand, considering the impact of rising rates on the housing market is part of the central bank's remit. The housing market is such a big part of Britain's economy that I am sure the Bank of England will have considered the impact of rate rises, but it is also clear that its job when setting interest rates is to focus entirely on getting inflation back to 2%, and it has no obligation to look at the impact on the housing market. I wonder whether we should review the targets that the central bank has and the tools it is given.

[Stewart Hosie]

We know that soaring mortgage costs do not just impact on mortgage holders; the costs of increased mortgage payments are also passed on to renters. In Scotland, we have offered some protection through the rent cap, but such a measure has not been introduced down here. It is interesting that Matt Downie, the chief executive of the homelessness charity Crisis, has said that hundreds of thousands of people could be left unable to cover their rent and at risk of losing their homes:

“Low income renters face a catastrophe—they can’t rely on housing benefit as it’s been frozen since March 2020 and is completely inadequate. There isn’t nearly enough social housing to go round and over a million households are on waiting lists for the few genuinely affordable homes we do have.”

The mortgage crisis and the inflationary crisis have thrown into stark relief the absence of a proper housing policy, particularly from this Tory Government, the size of waiting lists and the costs associated, even now, with getting a rental. Official figures this week showed that private rental costs rose at an annual rate of 5% in April—the sharpest pace on records dating back to January 2016—while rents outside London surged at the fastest rate on records going back to 2006. The Institute for Fiscal Studies also warned that interest rates hitting landlords’ borrowing costs were part of the reason for the very large increases in rents.

The pain is being felt across the board—well, almost across the board—for renters and mortgage holders, on top of all the other inflationary pressures we have seen. The message should be clear to the Government: whether you are a mortgage holder or a renter, holding your nerve will not pay the bills; holding your nerve is not a policy to fix these problems.

2.52 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I rise to oppose the motion in the name of the official Opposition and to support the Government amendment. The Labour motion is narrowly worded. Yet again, it tries to invoke hysteria and crisis and to undermine those we serve, and it completely misses the facts. We cannot allow the electorate, especially young people, to be indoctrinated by the sort of nonsense contained in the Opposition’s motion, which claims that it is all the Government’s fault.

These are the facts. First, on mortgage rates, the impact of the global financial crisis under Labour back in 2007 meant that the base interest rate fell to its lowest level for 300 years. Starting at 5.7% in July 2007, rates had fallen to 0.5% by March 2009, with a further fall to 0.25% in August 2016. There was a very slight rise back to 0.5% in November 2017, and then in 2021, as covid-19 loosened its hold on us all, globally we were met with persistent inflation caused by a worldwide supply chain crunch and, of course, Putin’s war. Those are the simple truths.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Suzanne Webb: I am going to make progress, because the Minister was very generous in taking interventions, and I want to ensure that everybody gets to speak.

The Bank of England, not the Government, pushed the rate up to 0.25% in December 2021, to 0.5% in February 2022 and then to 0.75% in March 2022—the highest it had been since the summer of 2018. That has continued, and we are now at 5%. I must agree with the Chancellor that there were flaws in the Bank of England’s economic forecasting. As the Governor himself has said, the Bank’s forecasting has not been accurate. It was for the banks to assess the financial competence of those applying for mortgages in the first instance. Banks would have understood that interest rates were artificially low—the lowest in 300 years of history—and that at some point they would naturally go up again, and they did. It took the huge global fiscal shock of a pandemic and a war in Europe to push interest rates up to where they are now, but such interest rates were common under Labour before it crashed the economy in 2008. We should not forget that.

If we look at the rates before the economy crashed and before Labour bled our economy dry and left no money, it keeps the interest rates “crisis” that Labour likes to talk about in perspective—or, to put it more succinctly, as the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) said in the note he left to his successor in 2010,

“Dear Chief Secretary, I’m afraid there is no money. Kind regards—and good luck!”

That about says it all, and I will never tire of repeating it to remind people what they could be voting for.

Now for more facts. The employment market is strong. I recently visited my local jobcentre in Stourbridge. Those who worked there told me that the local job market is buoyant and that young people in particular are finding jobs. According to the International Monetary Fund, the OECD and the Bank of England, the prospects for the UK economy are bright. Even on mortgages—the subject of this debate—defaults remain at pre-pandemic levels, and the proportion of disposable income spent is almost half what it was in the 1990s. Banks around the world are raising interest rates to fight rising inflation caused primarily by Putin and a global pandemic. This is a global problem. Interest rates are higher in the US, Canada and New Zealand.

I absolutely cannot allow the Labour party’s economic incompetence to go unchallenged. Black hole after black hole after supermassive black hole is unearthed by my colleagues and I, as Labour seeks to twist and turn into whatever position of opportunism it favours in any given week. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has uncovered another casual £3 billion from the shadow Chancellor’s U-turn on the digital services tax. That is in addition to another black hole 10 times the size—£30 billion, simply gone—from Labour’s plans to scrap business rates without replacement. Naturally, I look forward to whatever reply my right hon. Friend receives, but I doubt it will be forthcoming.

Perhaps the Opposition could tell us how Labour’s £90 billion of unfunded spending commitments would lead to lower inflation and interest rates—I await that with interest—or how Labour’s plans for £28 billion of borrowing would lower inflation and interest rates. The Institute for Fiscal Studies certainly does not think it would, and neither do I. We should also be mindful of not dragging language to the extreme. In Labour’s language, everything is a “crisis” these days—cost of living crisis, energy crisis, mortgage crisis. It cheapens the term and undermines all we serve.

I support the Government amendment, although I do not think we needed to use the word “charter”. I think this is just banks doing the right thing for their customers, nudged by a fiscally responsible Government. I will finish as I started, by saying that we cannot allow the electorate, especially young people, to be indoctrinated by the sort of nonsense contained in the Opposition’s motion, which tries to claim that it is all the Government’s fault. It is not. I will be supporting the Government amendment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The next speaker will have six minutes, but after that I will have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

2.58 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Every day I hear from constituents, as many of us do, who are facing hardship as the cost of living crisis spirals out of control. It is truly extraordinary that in Britain today, people across our communities are having to worry about whether they can afford to heat their homes or feed their families, which is a major worry that we will see again as the weather cools down and we come into autumn and winter this year.

We now face another crisis, courtesy of a Conservative Government who seem entirely clueless as to a solution: a mortgage bombshell that leaves homeowners wondering whether they can even keep a roof over their heads. Let us be clear about the scale of the mortgage bombshell. In Halton, there are currently 9,600 households with an average mortgage payment increase of £1,600 a year. I hear from constituents who have lost mortgage deals and simply do not know what to do. Young people trying to buy their first home have been cruelly disappointed; for many, the dream of their first home will not be realised any time soon. That is another way this Government are failing young people. Others tell me that their mortgage costs are rapidly becoming unaffordable.

Worse still are the heartrending stories I hear from constituents who are about to lose their homes altogether. In Halton, the waiting list for social housing is huge, with over 4,000 households on it. Halton Borough Council is doing everything it can to help those in desperate need of a home, but as in so many other parts of the country, its services are stretched to breaking point.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Time and again I meet people in my surgery who can barely afford to feed their family, let alone afford rent hikes. Does my hon. Friend agree that people in communities across the country cannot afford to pay the price of a Tory Government?

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and she is absolutely right. Places such as my constituency, with some of the highest rates of poverty in the country—which I will come to shortly—are finding it particularly difficult.

There are homeless children from my constituency living in hotels out of the area, who are struggling even to continue to attend their local schools. Recent figures from the End Child Poverty coalition show that 30.9%

of children in Halton are living in poverty, but at Widnes food bank donations are now falling below demand. That food bank is purchasing food using monetary reserves. Food inflation has adversely affected the ability of people who had previously donated food to do so—what a disgrace in this modern age. This is at a time when rising numbers of people in my community need to turn to food banks because they cannot afford the essentials that we all need to survive. The situation is becoming unsustainable.

I have been contacted by an increasing number of constituents whose landlords are being forced to sell up as they cannot afford their own mortgages. Nearly 200 households in my constituency are classed as priority homeless, and less than a handful of social housing properties become available each week. There is little point in telling those people to look into private renting, as local housing allowance falls even further behind the spiralling cost of rent. In Halton, local housing allowance for a three-bedroom home is £593 per month, but the current lowest private rents are £750 per month. Local housing allowance for a two-bedroom home is £498 per month, with the current lowest private rents at £650 per month. More and more of my constituents face the nightmare of homelessness, and more and more cannot afford the essentials needed to survive.

What is truly shocking is that this did not have to happen in this way. Last autumn’s mini-Budget, founded on unfunded tax cuts and pushed through without proper scrutiny, was an exercise in economic recklessness that has left hard-working people having to shoulder yet another burden. There is also the impact of inflation, of course, and the fact is that this Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor—I challenged him on this at the time—did not take inflation seriously enough. We know the impact that inflation is having on the cost of interest rates and, therefore, mortgages. The Government have created this catastrophe, and they need to take more urgent steps to address it.

Labour’s five-point plan could help to ease the crisis. I urge the Government to consider the measures that we are putting forward—requirements that would cover the whole mortgage market, unlike the Government’s charter with selected banks. Local housing allowance must be increased if we are to stem the tide of evictions that threatens to completely overwhelm housing services across the country.

This is Government incompetence, plain and simple. It is hurting hard-working people, and it is high time that the Tories stop thinking about how they can grab cheap headlines and instead focus on doing more to really help the many people who are about to lose their homes. The fact remains that this country is worse off under the Tories—people feel worse off themselves. We are seeing failings across public services of a sort I have never seen in my lifetime, and the fact is that this Government need to go now.

3.2 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It was Margaret Thatcher who said that

“inflation is the biggest destroyer of all—of industry, of jobs, of savings”.

As ever, she was right. That is why the Prime Minister put halving inflation as his top priority at the beginning

[James Wild]

of this year, along with growing the economy, because if inflation is not squeezed out of the system, everyone will become poorer.

Like central banks across the world, the Bank of England is raising interest rates to combat high inflation, and it is worth noting that rates are actually higher in the United States, Canada and New Zealand. However, the combination of high inflation and interest rates means that people are facing higher mortgage payments, which is causing concern for my constituents. In North West Norfolk, 24% of homes are owned with a mortgage or loan, compared with a national average of 30%—I declare an interest as one of those homeowners—and those families facing higher monthly payments are having to make difficult choices about their household spending, as indeed are people who are renting. That is why the Government are right to have put in place £94 billion-worth of support, a package worth on average £3,500 per household—one of the most comprehensive in Europe.

However, it is equally the case that the Government should not take action that would add to inflationary pressure: for example, by borrowing an extra £28 billion each and every year, as the Opposition are committed to do. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the effect of such action would be to increase inflation and drive interest rates even higher. That is the damaging reality that Labour's plan would lead to. Instead, along with the cost of living support package—I welcome today's news that 95% of the disability payments have already been made—we need to take action to ensure that banks and building societies treat people fairly and introduce new protections.

As such, I support the measures in the new mortgage charter. It will help people who are worried about making their monthly mortgage payments by adding an option to switch temporarily to an interest-only mortgage, or to extend the term in order to reduce their monthly payments. The Chancellor gave the example that on a £200,000 mortgage that could lead to a saving of £350 a month, which is material. Importantly, people will be able to switch back to their original term within six months.

People who are approaching the end of a fixed-rate deal will of course be concerned about the rates in the market. Those people will have the opportunity to lock into a rate earlier, and then to change that at any point up to the new deal coming into effect. We have heard about repossessions. Where constituents have fallen behind with mortgage payments, it is incredibly worrying for them to think that they might lose their home. There are already strong protections in place to ensure that that is an absolute last resort, but in the current circumstances it is right to strengthen those protections. Now there will be a minimum period of 12 months from the first missed payment before any such action can be taken—double the period that the Labour party has proposed.

We in this House should be responsible and offer practical support, and the best advice for anyone who is worried about meeting their payments is to talk to their lender. Two weeks ago, I was in my local branch of the Nationwide building society, talking to the team there about the cost of living advice that they are giving to help my constituents. I welcome the fact that Nationwide is one of the lenders that has signed up to the charter.

I hope that the rest of the market will also do so and, importantly, will tell customers about the new flexibilities, in order to reduce any concerns they might have.

Curbing inflation is not easy, but it is vital to relieve pressure on family budgets. In his column in *The Sunday Times* this weekend, the respected commentator David Smith looked at the prospects for inflation and the need for monthly consumer prices index increases to be smaller than a year earlier. He pointed out that from May to December last year, CPI rose by 4.7%, driven by higher energy costs caused by the illegal war in Ukraine. In the year prior to the pandemic, the increase in the same period was just 0.6%. He noted that a rise of just under 2% in CPI from now until December would deliver an inflation rate of 5% by the end of the year. I hope he is right, because getting inflation down must be the priority, and the target remains to halve it by the end of the year. That is what businesses and families want.

Throughout covid, the Government supported people, and in the face of current higher costs, support for the most vulnerable continues. Now, with the additional measures in the charter, people will see their mortgages better protected in the face of higher interest rates. That is the practical action that this Government are taking. The alternative put forward by the Opposition parties—more borrowing and more spending—would simply make inflation higher and everyone poorer.

3.7 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): In advance of today's debate, I read the contents of yesterday's statement by the Chancellor on the mortgage charter. The answers he gave went from bad to worse, and beyond. Besides not answering many of the questions put to him, those he did answer—I use the word “answer” loosely—were answered nonchalantly. Then, when he agreed with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that it was all the fault of a lack of productivity, above all in the public sector—that nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers, border staff, local government staff and the other 5.8 million people who work in the public sector are causing misery and problems for themselves—I realised that the nonchalance was simply a cover for incompetence at best, or ineptitude at slightly better.

Mrs Hamilton: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Dowd: I will not, because I do not want to take up too much time at this stage.

Clearly, the Chancellor has lost the plot. What about the productivity of the Government—the most unproductive Government in my lifetime? There was no mention of that in his statement. In that exchange, the issue of supply-side responses was also referenced. If either the Chancellor or the right hon. Member for Wokingham had read page 12 of the Library's briefing yesterday, that would have confirmed to them that supply-side pressures and bottlenecks are easing and the cost of shipping has come down to pre-pandemic levels, but of course, that is a fact that the Government do not want to listen to.

My initial assessment proved to be correct as the debate wore on. In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) about the reasons why many people in Europe are paying significantly less in mortgage payments than in this country, the Chancellor defaulted to the answer he

gave to the previous question from my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins). He went from turgid to orotund and then back to turgid, with a little bit of circumvention in the middle. I thought I was listening to the Radio 4 programme “Just a Minute”, but without the humour.

The fact is that having a roundtable with the banks is all very well and good—a bit of finger wagging, a wink and a nod here, knowing looks there—but while the Chancellor looks for a solution or tells the banks in no uncertain terms that it is an issue that needs to be resolved, he is doing little to ease the pressure on millions of our constituents who have a mortgage, and there are millions of them. He said it needs a solution, and of course it does—I think we can all agree, without any contradiction, with that pearl of wisdom from the Chancellor. My cat Gilly knows there needs to be a solution. The only problem is that the Chancellor did not present us with one—unless, of course, that part of his statement was left out of *Hansard*.

I will not go into too much detail about how the current mortgage crisis sits alongside the cost of living crisis, the mental health crisis, the health crisis, the housing crisis and the many other crises inflicted on the country by the Conservative party—they have been covered on other occasions, including yesterday and today—but there are many thousands in my constituency, and millions across the country, who will be paying thousands of pounds more in mortgage payments as those fixed-term deals come to an end. What about the thousands of mortgage prisoners, many in my constituency, who have been hit even harder without Government intervention?

I want to bring to the attention of the Minister, and vicariously to the attention of the Chancellor, an article in the *Financial Times* today by Helen Thomas—I hope she will forgive me if she feels I am cherry-picking from the article, which I am not. She makes excellent points, and these are issues that have to be addressed by the Chancellor sooner rather than later. She says:

“This crisis should prompt longer-term questions about the peculiarities of the UK market”—

meaning the mortgage market—and that

“with little lending at above five years fixed and essentially none above 10 years, the UK looks an outlier even in Europe”.

In her final paragraph, Ms Thomas says:

“This interest rate shock will prove uncomfortable for many. But it should also prompt fresh debate on what might create a less dysfunctional mortgage market in the future.”

The question for the Chancellor is whether he is up to the challenge in effect laid out in that analysis. Were any of those points raised in his roundtable with the banks on Friday, and what commitments did he get from the banks in relation to easing the pressures on my constituents? Crises are years in the making, and the longer this Government stay in power, the longer this crisis will continue, so it is time for the Tories to go.

3.12 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): During the French revolution, the Queen of France supposedly said, “Let them eat cake”, after being told that her subjects were starving with no bread. Today, as the country faces a mortgage meltdown, our multimillionaire PM tells people that

“we’ve got to hold our nerve, stick to the plan and we will get through this.”

I am not sure whether he is looking to model himself as a modern-day Marie-Antoinette, but whether or not that was his intention, his gall is quite beyond belief. I will leave it to others to say that the Prime Minister is guilty of projecting

“an extraordinary, Orwellian, meaningless, evasive word salad”

when he speaks. Nor will I say that the PM is

“as much of a mendacious, narcissistic sociopath as his previous boss”.

These things are much better delivered by Ben Elton himself.

However, I will say that we are past crisis point. The Bank of England has raised the base rate 10 times since December 2021, from 0.1% to 4% as of February. Meanwhile, figures from the Office for National Statistics show that average weekly earnings have fallen in real terms in the year to December 2022 by 3.1%, which is one of the largest falls in growth since comparable records began in 2001.

Scottish homeowners are suffering for Westminster’s failure. As a result, independence becomes ever more necessary for ordinary Scots, so that they can stop paying the price for UK Government self-inflicted messes. Stronger direct action is needed to protect vulnerable homeowners from soaring mortgage costs. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), I welcome the limited action that has been taken so far, but a purely voluntary scheme that stops repossession for 12 months and allows for lower payments for six months is not enough to protect many householders from this disaster.

My constituency of Midlothian is especially vulnerable to this Westminster-triggered chaos. Midlothian’s population is growing, placing increasing demands on services that aim to tackle poverty. Just under a quarter of Midlothian’s children—4,400—were living in poverty going into the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Midlothian has higher rates of economic activity and lower rates of unemployment than the Scottish and UK averages, but we also have lower average wages across some groups, in common with many other former coalfield communities. The falling value of real wages will hit many residents hard, and the higher than average house prices in Midlothian suggest a vulnerability to economic downturn and other cost of living pressures, particularly mortgage hikes. The average price of a house in Midlothian in October 2022 was £243,500, compared with the Scottish average of £193,730. This combination of higher house prices and lower wages could spell disaster for many.

The Chancellor’s mortgage charter is really a sticking plaster on a broken arm, and my constituents deserve better. These residents have been forced to stretch their budgets to get on the housing ladder in the first place, and are now utterly vulnerable to rising costs and labour market turbulence. It is hard to believe that the Tory party was ever seen as a bastion of high finance and fiscal propriety. Del Boy and Rodney could do a better job. In Scotland, we are fortunate that we have an alternative way out of this mess, and now more than ever we need to make sure we cast this PM and his ultra-rich cronies into the dustbin of history by forging ahead with independence.

3.16 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The Tory mortgage bombshell is the latest Tory-created crisis to hit hard-working families, adding to the litany of errors over the last 13 years made by an economically arrogant, incompetent and ignorant Tory party. According to the financial data provider Moneyfacts, the average two-year fixed residential mortgage rate has risen to 6.23%, up from 6.19% just last Friday. This is the highest since last November, when the property market was thrown into utter chaos after the Tory mini-Budget, otherwise known as the Budget that broke Britain. Because of the mess they have created, banks are now withdrawing mortgage deals, and the average household is facing a hike of almost £240 a month more on their mortgages.

In my constituency, this latest hike in interest rates will impact nearly 7,500 households, with an average increase in payments of £1,300 a year. As Opposition Members have stated already, these increases come at a time when families are already living hand to mouth. The sad reality is that Conservative Members just simply do not get it. Mortgage payments are up—by £1,300, if not more—while energy prices are up by thousands of pounds per household, supermarket food prices are up by 15% this year, council tax is up by 5% and car insurance is up on average by 43%. Again, they just do not get it.

The Prime Minister probably does not understand much, but who can blame him when he is sitting in his private plane, wearing his £3,000 suit and sipping coffee out of his £180 mug, with his head stuck in the clouds. Meanwhile, back down here on earth, in places in the real world such as Bradford West, hard-working families are being forced to skimp on daily necessities such as three meals a day and are on the brink of collapse. The UK economy's ever-worsening crisis is not a recent misfortune. It is the consequence of a total abdication of economic prudence by the Tories over the last 13 years. The poor state of the UK economy today cannot be solely pinned on a global crisis. We need to call it out loud and clear that our ailing economy has been orchestrated by a string of Tory self-inflicted policy errors.

Every country faced economic impacts due to the pandemic, but our economy bounced back at the slowest rate of any G7 nation, with our GDP at the beginning of 2023 0.5% lower than at the end of 2019. Every country faced the economic impact of the global financial crisis, but reckless Tory austerity since 2010 has resulted in more than £0.5 trillion of lost public spending and a weaker economy. All the G7 nations faced the effect of rising energy prices caused by the war in Ukraine, but the UK's over-reliance on energy, coupled with the Tories depleting our ability to generate our own energy, has left us the most poorly equipped to deal with rising energy prices.

The Tories' disastrous 13 years in charge will be remembered for crashing the economy, poor growth, sky-high inflation, worsening living standards and the disastrous management of Brexit. Each of those alone has battered hard-working families, who have been plunged into poverty, but the combined litany of self-inflicted, delinquent and scandalous errors has left the UK a whole lot worse than in 2010.

We must hold the Conservatives to account, and the worst thing is they were warned. Martin Lewis, the

finance expert, has said he warned the Government about mortgage market issues last year. He said about the current mortgage shock:

"Yet now the time bomb has exploded and we're scrambling about what to do."

That is what the Tories do: they sleep at the wheel, then try to deal with the wreckage after the crash, and then blame everyone else.

On action on mortgages, it was Labour's announcement that forced the Government to take urgent steps. However, Labour has called for mandatory measures to be placed on banks so that no one is left without support; the Government measures are completely voluntary and do not cover all of the mortgage market, with some 15% of the market for main residences missing out and no buy-to-let coverage.

Recently, the former Prime Minister fell off his tightrope. Now the Tory party has got rid of the clown, it is time to get rid of the circus. Give us a general election.

3.21 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The rise in interest rates last week to a 15-year high will be profoundly worrying for many of my constituents, particularly the many homeowners with a mortgage, but also those privately renting who are worried that their landlord might now put up their rents at a time when it is very difficult to find a genuinely affordable home to rent in my constituency. It is estimated that there are 8,900 households in my constituency facing an average increase in their annual mortgage payments of £5,400. In the neighbouring Conservative-held seats of Harrow East some 7,800 households face an estimated annual mortgage payment increase of £6,200 and in Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner 9,500 households face an average annual increase in mortgage payments of some £7,000.

Harrow has one of the highest rates of home ownership and owner occupation in London. Families move out to Harrow because family homes have traditionally been more affordable than in inner London, and we have excellent schools and very good transport links. The Tory party's mortgage bombshell threatens the dreams of too many Harrow families—dreams of owning and investing in their own homes, of being able to always afford the rent for the home they live in, of being able to provide a stable and secure place to bring up their children and to look after older family members and still to be able to afford a good quality of life with good holidays and trips out. Those ambitions are much tougher now for even more families in my constituency because of the Conservative mortgage bombshell. In short, close to 18,000 households in the London Borough of Harrow face an average increase in mortgage payments of between £450 and £580 a month.

Those figures are devastating for family finances. Ever more mortgage deals have been withdrawn by the banks. Moneyfacts data suggests that the typical rate on a two-year fixed rate loan have increased to almost 6%, double the rate of a year ago, and the independent Resolution Foundation estimates that by 2026 some 6.5 million households across the country will have been affected by the post mini-Budget rise in mortgage rates. It is not just homeowners who are going to be hardest hit: charities and property experts are

understandably warning that the rapid rise in borrowing costs is not just having an impact on owner-occupiers but is contributing to record rent increases.

I am fortunate in Harrow to have a community that is determined to do what it can to help those in real need. Harrow food bank, London's community kitchen, My Yard Harrow and Soul Kitchen Harrow provide an impressive and dedicated offer to families in dire need. They should not have to do that, but energy bills and food prices are already high, and if mortgage costs continue to feed through into rent increases, the pressure on lower-income families will be even more profound and disturbing.

Conservative Members like to claim that what is happening here is part of a global crisis or is just down to the Bank of England's incompetence. There are of course global factors in play and it is also true that the Bank of England has questions to answer, but the disastrous mini-Budget last year and 13 years of economic failure have left our economy far weaker than it should have been, and the mortgage crisis is clearly worse in the UK than in other European countries. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer said, mortgage rates in Germany, France, Ireland and the Netherlands are typically lower than here.

I strongly support the plans set out by my right hon. Friend. She has forced the Chancellor to take some action, but it does not go far enough to help those renting and those facing fast-rising mortgage costs. Mandatory action is required to support mortgage holders. It should not be up to the banks and those offering mortgages to decide whether they want to do the right thing; they should be forced to comply and to help, and we must certainly end no-fault evictions straight away.

The British people deserve better than they are getting from the Conservative party. Homeowners in Harrow should not be suffering the ever-increasing burden of higher mortgage costs. Ministers could do more to help. They should not be leaving 1 million people unprotected; they should back Labour's plan today and then they should call a general election.

3.26 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Ever since I was first elected in 2015 I have seen the pressures of the cost of living increase in my constituency. I meet regularly with the manager of our local food bank, and every time she tells me that the number of parcels it is delivering has reached a new record, that the challenges that result in people needing emergency help are becoming more complex and intractable, and that some Government policy decisions have directly contributed to a step-change in the level of need.

We have long seen spiralling private rents, unacceptably low pay and punitive changes in the benefits system creating terrible pressure on household finances, but the past nine months have seen a further increase in cost of living pressures, which are causing even previously comfortable household finances to buckle and break. People have seen their energy bills rocketing, the cost of essential food creeping up week by week, and unfeasibly high childcare costs. Now, thanks to a Prime Minister and Chancellor who have delivered more damage per day in their short tenure than any of their predecessors

ever did, many of those same people are now staring down the barrel of imminent unaffordable mortgage increases.

In my constituency, 9,400 households will face a mortgage cliff edge this year, and they are expected to face an average payment increase of £6,300 a year as they negotiate new mortgage deals. This is a cause of profound distress and anxiety. Some of my constituents are worried that they stand to lose all that they have worked for—the material security that underpins their family life.

What is the Prime Minister's response to this calamity and the profound distress it is causing? "Hold your nerve", he says. That might be appropriate advice for one of his investor pals looking at some spreadsheets that are having a rocky ride, but it is a totally tone-deaf response to my constituents who are looking at their bank accounts and finding that the amount of money coming in simply will not cover all the bills they are required to pay. A voluntary agreement that covers some, but not all mortgage providers and offers only short-term measures is also of little comfort to my constituents and mortgage holders across the country, who will be left anxiously waiting to find out whether their provider is one of those offering support and worrying about what they will do when the mitigation measures come to an end and the cliff edge is still there.

The Government's measures, cobbled together under pressure, simply do not touch the sides of the problem. They are voluntary for the banks and do not cover all mortgage providers. While the focus of the Government's piecemeal plans is homeowners, there is nothing at all to protect private renters. I am seeing a huge increase in the number of my constituents who are facing section 21 eviction notices—a practice that the Government promised to outlaw years ago—linked to increasing rents. Some of that is due to the increased mortgage costs faced by buy-to-let landlords, who are excluded from the Government's measures and are passing their own increased costs directly on to their tenants, but some of it is simply unscrupulous landlords taking advantage of the current economic climate to hike up rents once again.

I speak with private renters in my constituency every week. They are beside themselves with worry due to the insecurity of their tenure and the risk they live with that at any moment they could face a devastatingly unaffordable increase in their rent. The legislation that private renters urgently need has been yet another casualty of the chaos and uninterest of this Government and their contempt for the public they are elected to serve. It is not for the want of time—this House has regularly been concluding its proceedings early in the day in recent weeks—but due to the lack of political will to drive forward urgently needed legislation, and that is shameful.

Labour has set out a comprehensive plan to ease the Tory mortgage penalty that would provide meaningful help to homeowners, whatever their mortgage provider, and protections for private renters. Without such a robust package of support, communities across the country face a catastrophic increase in housing insecurity and homelessness, destabilising families, affecting mental health and wellbeing, making it harder to hold down employment and causing deep hardship. My constituents urgently need more leadership, more urgency and more meaningful action from their Government. If this Conservative Government are too weak, out of touch

[Helen Hayes]

and preoccupied to act—and they certainly are—it is time they stepped aside for a Labour Government who will be committed to delivering the change our country so desperately needs.

3.31 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I will start by saying how serious this mortgage crisis is for many of our families. If we reflect on how the Government Benches are empty compared with the Opposition Benches, it demonstrates the seriousness with which the Government take this issue. No wonder the Prime Minister said, “Hold your nerve.” The contributions from Government Members on this issue, which affects millions of people, again demonstrate their lack of empathy and the lack of seriousness with which they take this important situation.

We are in this mortgage crisis because of the mini-Budget. Imagine for a moment if that had not been a mini-Budget, but a full Budget—what other crises would we now face after 13 years under Tory Government, when they have broken this country for millions of our residents and constituents? Overnight, damage was inflicted, with increased payments for millions of mortgage holders. Mortgages were withdrawn overnight and house sales were cancelled. Mortgage rates went up and payments went up for millions of our constituents. In my constituency, 7,700 households are affected by that decision, with an average increase of £2,700 a year. Many of those households are run by key workers—the very workers we were clapping. Today, we are slapping them in the face by saying, “We will not help you with a decent wage increase. We will not help you with mortgage increases. We will not help you with the cost of living crisis.” That is the reality we are facing.

People should not be fooled by the words of Government Members when they say this is a global crisis. Look at their 13 years in office. Where are we with mortgage rates now? Under the previous Tory Government, where were we with mortgage rates then? They were at 15%, and we had record reposessions. This is a repeating of history and of what the Tories are good at: making sure that the poor get poorer and the rich get richer. That is what they stand for. I challenge Government Members to tell me—I see one shaking their head—how many of their constituents and households are affected by this mortgage increase and what the average increase is. I will give way to the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) if he knows the answer.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I cannot speak in this debate—sorry.

Tahir Ali: My heart bleeds for those people. The Government have denied millions of workers in this country a decent pay increase, which would have allowed them to deal with the cost of living crisis. But no, what does the Prime Minister of this country say? He asks the public to hold their nerve. This is not about nerve; it is about the basic fact that life has become unaffordable for millions of people as a direct result of the Government's failed approach. Instead, the responsibility falls on ordinary hard-working people. Meanwhile, the Government continue to sit back and watch the chaos unfold.

What about the renters? Yesterday, the Chancellor failed to mention renters in his speech at all, showing the Government's complete disregard for this mounting issue. Renters face an unsustainable increase in rents as landlords deal with mortgage costs. Renters cannot continue like this. The Government are not in a position to help ordinary hard-working families. They should give way and call a general election.

3.36 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), who made an outstanding speech.

We are living in through a Tory economic crisis made in Downing Street and paid for by the British people—Members on the Treasury Bench would do well to listen. After 13 years of this Government, this country is left with the biggest fall in living standards since records began. We have weak growth, low pay and the highest inflation in the G7, and Brexit is continuing to cause harm to our economy through reduced productivity, trade and investment. If that was not enough, people are now being hit by the Tory mortgage bombshell, which is having a devastating impact on households across the country.

Many people have told me that they are at breaking point, especially as this bombshell comes after the pandemic and the cost of living and energy crises. The Prime Minister's patronising advice at the weekend that people should just hold their nerve shows how out of touch he is with the mortgage struggles of people across the country, including my constituents. Battersea is one of the 25 worst-affected constituencies in the country, with 9,300 households facing an annual mortgage payment increase of £8,400. Average house prices in Battersea are already 15 times the average salary, and the increase in mortgage costs will put owning a home even further out of reach for many.

Under the Tories' watch, housing affordability has got worse and worse, with the ratio of house prices to earnings reaching record levels in England. It is not just homeowners who are suffering; almost 2 million private renters will be hit by rent increases as landlords pass on those higher costs to them. That is even more worrying for low-income renters, who cannot rely on housing benefit to help meet that wage shortfall. As we already know, local housing allowance is not sufficient and currently does not cover much of the rent. We can wonder why the Government are not doing more to lift up LHA payments.

The Government are not offering any support for renters. The Chancellor failed to mention them once in his statement yesterday, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury also failed to mention renters in his speech.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): No, he didn't.

Marsha De Cordova: Well, he did not mention a renters charter and ending no-fault evictions—that is what he should have talked about.

The Government need to follow Labour's lead by bringing in a renters charter to end no-fault evictions and introduce four-month notice periods for landlords. Why would they not? They will try to blame global

factors for their mortgage crisis, but the cost of borrowing is higher here than in any other developed economy. Homeowners are paying thousands of pounds more than Europeans for new mortgages, as interest rates soar. Research shows that even before the latest hike, a new mortgage cost a typical household over £2,000 more a year than in France.

There is no question about who is to blame: the Tories. Why? Their disastrous kamikaze Budget last autumn crashed the economy, the pound and our global reputation, and continues to haunt millions of homeowners, who are shelling out extra on their mortgage payments. The Government have failed to act quickly and decisively against the mortgage cost rises. The Prime Minister was warned that they should take action, but they were missing in action and failing to do anything. Labour has a five-point plan, but the Government have only managed to come up with sticking-plaster solutions in the form of a voluntary agreement, when Labour suggested a mandatory one. The Chancellor's plans do not go far enough. The Government could have applied much more pressure on the banks. Why will the Prime Minister and the Chancellor not apologise for their Government's failure to control inflation, which led to the Tory mortgage penalty?

This country is buckling after 13 years of this Tory Government. Labour will bring back credibility and financial security to our economy and to households, to ensure that the people of this country can have better. We are done with 13 years of this Tory Government. We need a general election now.

3.41 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Tory mortgage bombshell can trace its roots back to the disastrous mini-Budget and the so-called growth plan last September. Coupled with 13 long years of Tory failures, it left our country in a mess and thousands of families in an extremely vulnerable and precarious position. Last September, a mortgage adviser in Merthyr Tydfil contacted me and told me the effect of the mini-Budget and how devastated he and many of his customers were to see hundreds of pounds added to mortgage payments every month. The shadow Chancellor was right that we can never allow the Tories to forget that.

After 13 disastrous years and an even more disastrous few months, the UK has the highest inflation in the G7 and a mortgage crisis that is worse than in other countries—typically, mortgages are £100 higher than in other European countries. In Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, approximately 6,400 households are affected by the Tory mortgage bombshell, paying on average an additional £1,300 per annum, on top of the cost of living crisis, all caused by the economic failures of the Conservative party.

Recently, I raised in the Chamber the plight of our local food banks, which are struggling to cope under so much pressure from demand and reduced donations, as people across our communities are feeling the pinch and are less able to donate. The Tory mortgage bombshell will only make matters much worse. Indeed, the added stress placed on families with their homes under threat is just unforgivable.

Citizens Advice is an agency that works hard to support the most vulnerable. I work closely with our local citizens advice bureaux on promoting events to maximise income. They have been telling me for some time how their workload has increased massively, particularly on debt advice. We learned from Citizens Advice this week that its clients with mortgages have seen their finances fall off a cliff, as the shadow Chancellor said. Every month, the amount they need to spend on things such as housing, bills and food is over £100 more than their income. The situation is not sustainable and causes anxiety, stress and deep worry for so many of my constituents and many thousands more across the country.

The previous Prime Minister has apologised for her mistakes, which led to a spike in interest rates following the disastrous mini-Budget last Autumn. However, the Minister should do the same. This whole rotten Government should hang their head in collective shame for the misery they are causing so many.

The Tory mortgage charter falls short in a number of key areas. Not all the mortgage market is covered by the charter. There remains a huge worry that more than 1 million households could miss out on support. The Government must outline the measures they intend to take to ensure that help will be available to everyone struggling to pay their mortgage. Perhaps the Minister can address that in his wind-up, and confirm that support will be available to all, not just to those who happen to have a mortgage with one of the banks on the Chancellor's invite list for his cosy chats.

All too often, this Tory Government have been too slow to act. Renters are not even mentioned in the latest charter. In his statement on Friday, why did the Chancellor make no mention of the impact of this crisis on people who are renting? It is time for the Minister to outline whether he agrees that one way to provide support for renters is to back Labour's proposal to halt no-fault evictions.

The Conservative party likes to think of itself as the party of home ownership, but with housing affordability lower than ever in recent years, that claim lies in tatters. There is very little or no assurance given to those looking to take their first step on to the housing ladder that they will not be held back by issues in the mortgage market caused by the Tory mortgage bombshell. The Government simply cannot brush things away and put the cost of living crisis down to global factors. The latest data on mortgage rates specifically shows that they have increased faster here in the UK than in the USA since the mini-Budget and, as we have heard, the gap in mortgage interest rates with our nearest neighbours means someone with a £200,000 mortgage will pay over £1,000 a year more in the UK. The reality is that the Government have no explanation for that, apart from that they have been grossly incompetent.

It is time for the Government to step aside, put an end to the misery faced by millions of families, call a general election, let Labour get on with governing and get this great country back on its feet.

3.45 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Many households who are already contending with the cost of living crisis are now set to face a further squeeze on their budgets thanks to the Conservatives' mismanagement of the economy.

[Kate Hollern]

It is shameful to see so few Members on the Conservative Benches. The hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb), who is no longer in her place, said the Labour party was scaremongering. I wonder if that is what she will tell the 9,000 families in her constituency who are facing a £2,400 a year increase in their mortgages. Perhaps she just does not understand the impact of the financial disasters created by those on the Conservative Benches. Some 7,500 families in Blackburn are set to see their mortgages rise by £1,300 this year. The Resolution Foundation estimates that 6.5 million households will be affected by the post-mini-Budget rises in mortgage rates by 2026 and does not expect two-year fixed-rate mortgages to fall below 4.5% until 2027. That is a long time to hold your nerve.

The UK currently has the highest inflation in the G7. As with the energy crisis, the mortgage crisis is worse in the UK than in neighbouring advanced economies. And there is another crisis looming. Economists warn that there is a real risk of job losses and a sharp recession, as the latest economic forecasts project just 0.2% growth this year. We must not forget how we got here. The Conservative's disastrous mini-Budget and 13 years of failure have left us dangerously exposed on inflation. During Prime Minister's questions last Wednesday, the Prime Minister insisted that the best way to cut costs for homeowners would be to reduce inflation. On assuming office last year, his core commitment was to cut inflation to 5% by the end of this year. Of course, we all remember the Ready for Rishi campaign last July. He promised to reduce inflation. Conservatives did not believe him then and we do not believe him now. With inflation falling by only about 1.3% to 8.7% over the last six months, it looks increasingly unlikely that the Prime Minister will achieve that and fulfil his promise. The Government's measures do not go far enough and leave too many people exposed.

In his statement to the House yesterday, the Chancellor stated that the charter has been signed by lenders covering 85% of the mortgage market—let us just forget the other 15%. Given that the charter does not cover the whole mortgage market, more than 1 million households could miss out on support. The Minister must guarantee that the measures he outlined will be available to everyone struggling to pay their mortgage, not just those who happen to have a mortgage with certain lenders and not just those who are up to date on their payments, because for months people have been falling behind, jumping from crisis to crisis under this Government. The Government are offering insufficient support to millions of renters. The Chancellor did not even mention them in his statement to the House yesterday. Has he made an assessment of the impact on local housing allowances? Has he made an assessment of the impact on the DWP? Or do the Government just accept that landlords will pass increased costs to tenants? An already broken rental market will suffer more without intervention.

Families are finding themselves on a cliff edge after months of increased bills and a cost of living crisis. It saddens me to see such a situation after more than a decade of austerity. Given what we have in our pockets and how we are able to pay our bills, it seems to us that, across the board, we are far worse off than we were back in 2010. No matter how many times the Prime

Minister says, "Hold your nerve", that will not pay the bills. How do you hold your nerve when you are struggling to feed your kids? How do you hold your nerve when you risk losing your home? I think the people of this country have held their nerve for long enough, and I think it is time for a general election.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There are three more speakers before the winding-up speeches, which I expect to start at about five past four, and I expect two Divisions after that. I ask any Members who have taken part in the debate and are not present to make their way to the Chamber now.

3.51 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I thank the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), for bringing this important debate to the House.

In my constituency, 9,500 people will now be forced to pay £2,400 more a year, and that sits firmly at the Government's door. Across Britain, people are being hit hard by the Tory mortgage bombshell, and the banks are now withdrawing mortgage deals. After 13 years of Conservative Government, does it not just say it all that millions of people face that Tory mortgage bombshell and the threat of losing their homes? Unlike this Conservative Government, however, Labour will not stand by as millions face a mortgage catastrophe made in Downing Street. I commend our five-point plan, which will ease the effect of the Tory mortgage bombshell, and urge Ministers to get behind it.

We will allow borrowers to switch to interest-only mortgage payments for a temporary period. We will allow borrowers to lengthen the term of their mortgage period. We will require lenders to reverse any support measures when the borrower requests that. We will require lenders to wait for a minimum of six months before initiating repossession proceedings. We will instruct the Financial Conduct Authority to issue, as a matter of urgency, consumer guidance stating that the credit score of borrowers making temporary switches to interest-only mortgage payments and lengthening the term of their mortgage period should not be affected. I am particularly pleased to note that Labour would introduce a renters charter ending "no-fault" evictions with four-month notice periods for landlords. That is how we will give working people the certainty and support that they desperately need.

After the 2010 election and the global financial crash of 2008, we heard many times that the financial situation was down to the Government of the day. Conservative Members crowed from the treetops. Today, they say that everything is due to the macroeconomic climate and global economic challenges. I say to them, "You cannot have it both ways", because as things stand, they are in office but not in power. I was elected to this place in April 2019, and the last four years have not been the easiest for our country. We need calm and sober leadership, we need decency and respect in our politics, and we need a real plan to protect jobs, homes and livelihoods for people in Newport West and across the country.

Last week, my constituent Jolene came to my surgery to talk to me about her fears for the future: fears about how she will pay her bills, how she will pay her mortgage,

and how she will save her home. Jolene is now a full-time carer for her children, who have additional needs, but her husband is a full-time HGV driver who is working as hard as he can. The cost of living has hit them hard, and in the last few months their mortgage payments have risen from £520 to £750 a month; Jolene believes that they will go up again. Like thousands of other people across the country, she is sliding further and further into arrears, and is desperately concerned about how she will be able to look after her children, both now and in the future, and hold on to her home. What is the Minister's message to Jolene? This morning I met another constituent whose monthly mortgage payment has rocketed from £400 to £1,100. Who can possibly budget enough to cope with such shocking increases?

I am sorry to say to the Minister that nothing we have heard from the Government in recent days gives me any confidence that they have a plan to do right by our people. Some 9,500 people in Newport West will now be forced to find money to protect their homes in the middle of a cost of living crisis. That sits at the door of the Conservative party and its ill-fated autumn mini-Budget, which did nothing but spook the markets and let down those most in need of a Government who were on their side.

Only Labour has a plan to build a stronger economy that will see us less exposed to inflation over the long term, to give our people the support they need and to finally restore economic credibility after 13 years of failed Conservative Government. The people of Newport West deserve that—and so do people in all corners of our United Kingdom.

3.55 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I would like to speak in favour of the motion. Time is pressing, so I will touch briefly on the scale of the problem facing the UK.

It is fair to say that many families—indeed, up to 7.5 million—face a very difficult challenge at present because of the increase in interest rates and the effect on mortgages. As we have heard, it has been calculated that that increase means around £2,400 extra on household mortgages every year, which is £1,000 more than the increase in mortgages in the United States.

The situation affects both buyers and renters, because landlords put up rents as well, but the Government are proposing only a voluntary scheme, which obviously falls well short, and about 1 million families are likely to be missed by this inadequate measure. Earlier, the Shadow Chancellor set out a much more effective scheme, which I obviously commend to the House.

Given the lack of time, I will move on swiftly and speak about how the Government's mortgage bombshell is affecting local residents in Reading and Woodley. This crisis is making what is already a difficult housing situation far worse for local people in our part of Berkshire. We have had high house prices and rents for some years, given the shortage of supply and many other related housing matters.

To give colleagues a taste of the situation locally, terraced houses in Reading town centre can sell for as much as £300,000, so these are quite expensive properties. There is also a real shortage of property and a large waiting list for local authority properties. For a family house, the price may be as much as £600,000 or £800,000, so we are already talking very large amounts of money.

As I said, renters face additional problems. We have an issue with dangerous cladding not being removed in some cases, as well as issues with leaseholders and landlords. There are, therefore, serious problems in our area, and that is on top of the national problems facing families, which I mentioned earlier. Colleagues from across the House have also mentioned the 20% rate of food inflation and the UK inflation rate being the worst in the G7.

I would like to point out some of the problems facing individual constituents. Without giving away too many personal details, perhaps I could just give a flavour of the problems involved, and I hope the Chief Secretary will reflect on them. One constituent—a gentleman called Peter—is in a good job. He has a young family, with two children, and they live in a three-bedroom house. They face an increase of £800 a month in their mortgage, and they simply do not know how they will cope.

Another constituent, Donna, who lives in a flat in Reading town centre, faces a £400-a-month increase. Again, that is an absolutely incredible increase in what she has to pay for her home. Sadly, she is one of many residents locally who have been affected by the cladding scandal and by delays in removing various types of dangerous cladding. She is already under enormous pressure because of the emotional stresses and strains of having a flat with cladding problems. In addition, she now faces this enormous extra increase in her payments. She is self-employed and has a small business. Imagine how this feels to her. This truly is a dreadful crisis.

I realise that time is limited, and I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) can get in shortly, but I ask the Chief Secretary to report back to the Chancellor just how dire the situation is and how it is affecting people up and down the country—both my residents and those of colleagues from across the House. I also urge him to think about the five-point plan outlined by the shadow Chancellor, which has been well researched and well received across the industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Alex Cunningham is the final speaker.

3.59 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I well remember 1979, when mortgage interest rates soared under Thatcher's Tory Government as the Bank of England base rate hit 17%. Those who were buying homes at the time knew all about it. My wife Evaline and I, both in relatively well-paid professional jobs, had moved home a couple of years before and, like many others, had maximised our mortgage to secure the house we wanted for our growing family. Little did we know that the cost of our mortgage would almost double in a couple of years.

My elder son John says he remembers Evaline and I regularly sitting at the table to go through our finances, often robbing Peter to pay Paul, while realising that Peter would still have to be paid with plenty of interest on top. Yes, the anxiety goes well beyond mortgage holders; it affects the whole family. Like many homeowners today, we contemplated selling up and moving to a smaller home, but the reality was that we would not only have lost our new home; we would not have been any better off.

[Alex Cunningham]

I have huge sympathy for people today who are seeing their mortgage costs go through the roof, largely because the Tories crashed our economy by making some extremely daft decisions when our economy was still trying to cope with the double whammy of Russia's illegal war against Ukraine and our exit from the European Union. We had it tough when our costs doubled, but today's Tory mortgage bombshell is so much worse.

Moneyfacts data suggests that the typical rate of a two-year fixed-rate mortgage has increased to almost 6%, almost double the rate of a year ago, and the Resolution Foundation estimates that 6.5 million households will be affected by the post-mini-Budget rise in mortgage rates by 2026. Other huge consequences emanate from the Government's decisions. This week, economists warned that there is a real risk of job losses and potential recession. The latest forecast for economic growth suggests that the UK is struggling to get out of the slow lane, with growth of just 0.2% forecast for the year.

On Sunday, I watched the Prime Minister ducking and diving under quite simple questioning from the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg, and it sickened me that he had the nerve and the gall to tell mortgage holders to hold their nerve. He lives just down the road from me, and I wonder if he would like to sit down with a few of my constituents whose fixed-rate deals are coming to an end within the next few weeks. One of them faces an increase from just short of £800 a month to £2,600 a month. I would like the Prime Minister to outline how that constituent should hold their nerve and retain their home.

That same constituent, like everyone else, is not only seeing their mortgage go through the roof. They must also cope with a near 20% increase in food prices, which according to the Office for National Statistics is the greatest hike in 45 years. That can be added to the extra burden of council tax increases across the country, as local authorities collect the Government's social care levy because the Tories have so drastically underfunded social care in recent years.

What are the numbers on Teesside? In Stockton North, 8,900 families face an increase of £1,400 this year. The pain is the same across the Tees valley, with 11,900 families in Stockton South paying £1,800 more, 9,000 families in Darlington paying £1,400 more, 7,200 families in Middlesbrough paying £1,200 more, 9,300 families in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland paying £1,700 more, and 8,000 families in Redcar paying £1,500 more.

The Tory mortgage crisis has other wide-ranging impacts. The Government's failure to build sufficient homes over the last decade has led to limited supply and forced prices up, making it more difficult for people to get on the housing ladder. We also see developers putting some projects on hold and scaling others back. The Government's housing figures, published today, show that affordable housing providers have stalled or stopped schemes, as they are experiencing what they say is a "perfect storm" of build cost inflation, rising labour costs, material unavailability, building remediation issues and a duty to support tenants through the cost of living crisis. Developers cutting the number of homes they are

building will have an inevitable impact on jobs not only in the building sector but across the supply chains that support it.

We could go on forever about the excess profits being made by the banks, as they cash in on higher interest rates, but that appears to be fine by the Government. Now that times are good again for the banks, they need to do so much more. They should concentrate on helping their customers instead of their share price and their bottom line. I wish I could be confident that they will all act, but I am not. It is down to the Government to take action to compel them to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now come to the wind-ups.

4.4 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank everyone who has contributed to this afternoon's debate. I cannot help noticing that the vast majority of them are Opposition Members, so I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Halton (Derek Twigg), for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), for Newport West (Ruth Jones), for Reading East (Matt Rodda) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham).

We did hear a couple of speeches from Conservative Members. I thank the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) for her speech, but she forgot something. She forgot to tell us that 9,000 households in Stourbridge are going to be facing an increase of £2,400 a year in their mortgage payments. She was followed by the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), and he forgot something too. He forgot to tell us that 8,000 households in his constituency are facing an increase in mortgage payments of £2,800 a year because of the Tory mortgage bombshell. Just in case it slips the Minister's mind when he stands up to make his own speech, he should tell us that 10,500 households in Arundel and South Downs will be facing increases of £5,200 a year. Those figures show the level of pain among mortgage holders and that will only grow in the coming months.

We should remember that those who have bought their own homes have done nothing wrong. They have done what generations did before them: they have worked hard, saved for a deposit and taken pride in having a home of their own. The security that comes with that has for many turned to dread, as month after month they receive a letter from their lender telling them that their bills are going up by hundreds of pounds a month. In my constituency, 6,800 households face paying an extra £1,800 a year for their mortgage, and that comes on top of the extra that people are already paying for energy, food and everything else.

The Resolution Foundation says that the average figure across the country is £2,900 a year more, but we must remember that that is an average. Depending on where someone lives—we have heard this through the debate—the real figure could be higher. In Uxbridge, for example, it is £5,200 a year. In Selby, it is £2,700 a year. And it is not just mortgage holders who are

affected, but renters too, because the people they rent from are seeing their mortgages rise as well. Last year, private sector rents rose by more than 10%, and the proportion of people's income being used to pay rent is rising too.

The inflation and interest rate figures we saw last week showed an economy and a plan that has been blown off course, because this was not the plan that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor had—this is not how it was supposed to be. Their plan was to bury last year's disastrous Tory mini-Budget under 10 feet of concrete. If it was to be remembered at all, it was supposed to be thought of as a bad dream, from which we had all mercifully woken up, but their preference was for it never to be spoken of again. Their hope was that they would steady the ship, possibly get some small amount of economic growth and then offer tax cuts either this autumn or next spring, after which a general election would be called.

After 13 years of policy failure, that was all they had left. They certainly could not run on their record, because nothing is working better now than it was when they inherited it in 2010. They certainly could not run on hope for the future, precisely because their record is so poor and no one would believe them. But even the plan they had has turned to dust, because reality has intervened—their own economic mismanagement has intervened. Their plan turned to dust because the Tory mini-Budget was not the end of something; it was the start of something. The instability that it created has carried on and on, and the price is still being paid. The Prime Minister set out a target to halve inflation, but last week core inflation went up, not down. Once again, it was higher than expected and, once again, it was the highest in the G7.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. What is the Labour party's view on forecasting and the Bank of England? It would be interesting to hear that, because it has been commented that forecasting by the Bank of England is not as accurate as forecasting in other countries, meaning that it is not as easy for outside investors to predict future interest rates. What is the Labour party's view on that and, in particular, what is its view on requiring the Monetary Policy Committee in the UK to do a dot plot on future interest rates, as Federal Reserve governors do, to help with any confusion about forecasts?

Mr McFadden: We are not going to join the chorus of Government Members attacking the Bank of England. I thought the hon. Gentleman was rising to raise the issue of the 15,000 households in his constituency that are facing an increase in mortgage payments of more than £3,000 a year.

We all wanted to see a recovery, but we do not have a recovery. We have deepening financial difficulties for millions of households. The Government were desperate to say that the worst was over, but for anyone remortgaging over the next couple of years, the worst is not over—it is still to come. Most people on fixed rates have not refinanced yet, and the rolling financial thunder of mortgage renewals will continue month by month, as households receive those letters from their banks and building societies. That is the reality of the Tory mortgage bombshell.

The Chancellor and the Prime Minister were supposed to be the fix-it crew, but things have not been fixed at all. Borrowing costs are even higher now than in the wake of the disastrous Tory mini-Budget last year. Let me be clear with Treasury Ministers: if they are doing worse than the last Prime Minister and the last Chancellor, they are not fixing anything. That begs the question, what is the point of them? They have nothing left to offer. They are caught between telling the country not to risk it with Labour, with their little dossiers full of made-up pledges, and then adopting pale imitations of our policies, whether on the windfall tax, the NHS staffing plan or the voluntary mortgage proposals that they announced on Friday. Time after time, they have no ideas of their own; all they have left is a pale imitation of what we have already proposed.

We wanted a mandatory plan, and that is what is at the heart of our motion today. The truth is that the Tory party has shredded its own economic credentials—the Tory party of sound money, which saw debt top 100% of GDP last week; the Tory party of low taxes, which has lifted the tax burden to the highest level in living memory. There is literally no point to this Government. They are running out of options and they are running out of road.

We are not speculating about what might happen in the future. We are talking about a real crisis, with a real cost of living squeeze on real people, right now, and it has all happened on their watch. After 13 years, they have run out of excuses and run out of people to blame. From Brussels to the blob and now the Bank of England, there are no scapegoats left. Their sense of entitlement to rule is matched only by their total unwillingness to accept any responsibility for anything that happens while they do rule. The Prime Minister says he is “on it”. What a reassurance to working people! I do not know what he is on—usually, a helicopter—but I know it is not working.

The Government cannot fix the problem, because they are the problem. The answer for the country is not another iteration of a Tory project that has already failed over and over again. It has failed on the cost of living crisis. It has failed on public services. And it is failing on mortgages, too. It is time for change, but the Tories cannot offer it. It is time for recovery, but they have failed to deliver it. It is time for an election and a new start, and the sooner they come, the better.

4.14 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): I am afraid that, with the exception of my colleagues, that was an unedifying parade of clone speeches that would wear out an average plagiarism detector. When I look at Opposition Members and hear their contributions today, I find it personally dispiriting. As the Minister responsible for financial literacy, I clearly have a great deal more to do.

As my hon. Friends have rightly observed, we are not alone in our fight against inflation. Countries across western Europe and, indeed, the rest of the world are seeing the same trends, driven largely by Putin's illegal war in Ukraine and the aftermath of the covid pandemic.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Andrew Griffith: I will give way in a moment. Let me say this in all seriousness: the only bombshells that we should be talking about are those that are falling on the Ukrainian people, and it cheapens the Opposition that we hear again and again the slogan of the week, and what we do not hear about is the broader geopolitical and macro environment in which this country finds itself. The British people have a much greater awareness of these matters than those on the Opposition Benches.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister mentions global factors, but last week the Bank of England noted that since its last decision, the swap rate—the key rate that influences mortgage interest rates—had increased almost twice as much in the UK than in the US and more than three times as much in the UK as in the euro area. Does the Minister agree with the Bank of England?

Andrew Griffith: I am grateful that we have belatedly found some international comparisons. The hon. Gentleman will therefore understand that we are seeing exactly the same rises—sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less—across most of the developed western economies. That is why this Conservative Government are taking action. We have helped people through these difficult times by giving the average household—*[Interruption.]* Do Members know how much? We are giving the average household £3,300 at a cost of £94 billion to the Exchequer. That is one of the largest support packages anywhere else in Europe. I will happily give way if any Labour Member wishes to challenge that.

When it comes to our generosity, this Government have increased the national living wage and pensions by record amounts, because this is a Government who will always put the vulnerable first. In addition to the explanations given by the Chancellor in this place yesterday, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, in his fantastic remarks earlier today, set out in some detail our support for those struggling with their mortgage payments in these difficult times. The Chancellor's new mortgage charter provides peace of mind about extending an existing mortgage or moving on to interest-only payments for six months, giving those who are worried about mortgage repayments some valuable respite. Vitally, it also gives genuine security to those who are at risk of losing their homes because they fall behind on mortgage payments.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): But the charter is not mandatory, is it? How will that help the 10,100 constituents of Weaver Vale faced with that mortgage Tory tax bombshell? How will it help them if it is not mandatory?

Andrew Griffith: I will happily respond to the hon. Member. Not only did Opposition Members oppose the very powers in the Financial Services and Markets Bill that we passed last night that would give the Treasury the ability to direct the regulators—an ability they now somehow seem to want to reinvent—but the exercise of those powers would inevitably take time. What we are hearing from the Opposition is not just a package that in many respects is deficient compared with what the Chancellor and this Government have brought forward, but a path to implementing that package that—rather than taking days, hours and weeks as our mortgage

charter will—would take a much more significant period of time. They offer more delay, less help for people and fewer paths to deliver.

Catherine West: The topic of the debate is mortgage and rental costs, but the Minister has not covered the rental side. The last time he came to the Chamber he was asked how many renters are going to be in distress due to this situation. He was unable to answer, because he had not done the assessment. Will he promise to go back to the office and do an assessment on how many renters are affected?

Andrew Griffith: All households are impacted by the higher cost of money that we face. That is why we are focused on supporting all households, supporting those who are the most vulnerable and bringing forward at pace our measures to support the mortgage market. That is also why, since taking power, this Government have restored the overall health of our financial system. It is important that the House understands that mortgage arrears and defaults are today at historically low levels. Less than 1% of residential mortgages are in arrears, a level below that which we saw during the pandemic and significantly lower than under the last Labour Government.

Stewart Hosie: In the last hour it has been reported that two-year UK gilts are at 5.24%, a 15-year high, above the post-mini Budget peak, and markets now see a 70% chance of those rates going over 6% by the end of the year. If it is all going so well, why do the markets not believe the Tories?

Andrew Griffith: I always make a point of not commenting on the markets, in whichever direction they move. The responsibility of Government is to act and the responsibility of this Government is to deliver. We will control what we can control and the markets will do what they do.

The mortgage charter lays out that there will be a minimum 12-month period—I believe that is double the Opposition proposal, but I am happy to take an intervention on that—from any first missed payments before any repossession action is taken. It is important that our constituents understand that these measures offer comfort to those who are understandably anxious about the impact of higher rates on their mortgages and provide support for those who would get into financial difficulties. More broadly, the mortgage market itself remains robust and, because of the actions the Government have taken over the past 13 years, the average homeowner remortgaging in the past year had close to 50% loan to value, indicating that most have considerable equity in their homes.

Help for mortgage holders, but help for savers too: this Government are committed to ensuring that people are supported to save and can access a wide range of competitive savings products. The current range of options available to savers includes some of the highest rates that we have seen in recent years on both instant access accounts and the more relevant fixed-term products, which represent a better apples-to-apples comparison with fixed-term mortgage rates. The top instant access savings rates currently on the market offer around 4.2% and the top one-year fixed rate is much closer to the mortgage rate at about 5.8% annual equivalent rate.

Tackling inflation remains the Prime Minister's and this Government's No. 1 priority, and it will remain so until it is tamed. Allowing inflation to go on at the current rate or to grow higher would be the biggest threat to our collective economic security. While we continue on our fight to fight inflation, we will also do what British public expect; we will look at how we can grow the economy over the long term, improve productivity and ensure that no communities are left behind. We continue to take forward supply-side policies to increase the productive capacity of this economy and encourage workers back into work, including rolling out the largest ever expansion of free childcare. All that will set us up for greater productivity.

Let us contrast that with the Lib Dem plan to pile on to inflationary pressures an unfunded £3 billion a year. That is eclipsed only by Labour's £28 billion a year—*Interruption.* / Labour Members do not want to hear it; they are talking among themselves. The IFS said that Labour's £28 billion plan would cause interest rates and inflation to rise. Paul Johnson said that

“additional borrowing both pumps more money into the economy, potentially increasing inflation, and also drives up interest rates.”

That really would be a Labour mortgage bombshell.

In this barmy weather, those thinking of taking a summer holiday should remember that Labour's economic policy has more flip-flops than the average surf shop: national insurance, corporation tax, the pensions cap, North sea gas, and, yesterday, shelving reform of high street business rates. The fact is that no Labour Government have ever left office with unemployment lower than when they came to power. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) reminded us, the note left by Labour's Chief Secretary to the Treasury in 2010 said, correctly: “I'm afraid to tell you there is no money left.”

This Government are taking action on the economy. We are taking the tough decisions to bear down on inflation, we are supporting the vulnerable, we are helping the economy to grow, and, as the amendment states, we are helping mortgage holders with our new mortgage charter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To inform the House, I shall put the main Question first. Should it be negated, I will then put the Question on the amendment.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 213, Noes 288.

Division No. 273]

[4.26 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie	Blake, Olivia
Ali, Rushanara	Bonnar, Steven
Ali, Tahir	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Brennan, Kevin
Amesbury, Mike	Brock, Deidre
Anderson, Fleur	Brown, Alan
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Brown, Ms Lyn
Bardell, Hannah	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Barker, Paula	Bryant, Sir Chris
Beckett, rh Margaret	Buck, Ms Karen
Begum, Apsana	Burgon, Richard
Benn, rh Hilary	Byrne, Ian
Black, Mhairi	Byrne, rh Liam
Blackford, rh Ian	Cadbury, Ruth

Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant</i>)	Hollern, Kate
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Hopkins, Rachel
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hosie, rh Stewart
Chamberlain, Wendy	Howarth, rh Sir George
Champion, Sarah	Huq, Dr Rupa
Clark, Feryal (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Hussain, Imran
Cooper, Daisy	Jardine, Christine
Cooper, rh Yvette	Jarvis, Dan
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Cowan, Ronnie	Johnson, Kim
Coyle, Neil	Jones, Gerald
Creasy, Stella	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Cruddas, Jon	Jones, Ruth
Cryer, John	Kane, Mike
Cunningham, Alex	Keeley, Barbara
Daby, Janet	Kinnock, Stephen
Dalton, Ashley	Lake, Ben
Davey, rh Ed	Lammy, rh Mr David
David, Wayne	Lavery, Ian
Davies-Jones, Alex	Law, Chris
Day, Martyn	Leadbeater, Kim
De Cordova, Marsha	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Debbonaire, Thangam	Linden, David
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Lloyd, Tony (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Dixon, Samantha	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Lucas, Caroline
Dodds, Anneliese	Mahmood, Shabana
Doogan, Dave	Malhotra, Seema
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant</i>)	Maskell, Rachael
Doughty, Stephen	Mc Nally, John
Dowd, Peter	McCabe, Steve
Eagle, Dame Angela	McCarthy, Kerry
Eagle, rh Maria	McDonald, Andy
Eastwood, Colum	McDonnell, rh John
Edwards, Jonathan	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Efford, Clive	McGovern, Alison
Elliott, Julie	McKinnell, Catherine
Elmore, Chris	McLaughlin, Anne (<i>Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant</i>)
Eshalomi, Florence	McMahon, Jim
Esterson, Bill	McMorrin, Anna
Evans, Chris	Mearns, Ian
Farron, Tim	Miliband, rh Edward
Farry, Stephen	Monaghan, Carol
Fellows, Marion	Moran, Layla
Foord, Richard	Morden, Jessica
Foxcroft, Vicky	Morgan, Helen
Gardiner, Barry	Morgan, Stephen
Gill, Preet Kaur	Morris, Grahame
Glendon, Mary	Murray, Ian
Grady, Patrick	Murray, James
Grant, Peter	Nandy, Lisa
Green, Sarah	Newlands, Gavin
Greenwood, Lilian	Nichols, Charlotte
Greenwood, Margaret	Nicolson, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant</i>)
Griffith, Dame Nia	Norris, Alex
Haigh, Louise	O'Hara, Brendan
Hamilton, Fabian	Olney, Sarah
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette	Onwurah, Chi
Hanna, Claire	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Hardy, Emma	Osamor, Kate
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Oswald, Kirsten
Harris, Carolyn	Owatemi, Taiwo
Hayes, Helen	Pennycook, Matthew
Healey, rh John	Perkins, Mr Toby
Hendry, Drew	Phillips, Jess
Hillier, Dame Meg	Pollard, Luke
Hobhouse, Wera	Powell, Lucy
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Qureshi, Yasmin

Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Navendu Mishra

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr 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*)
 Bowie, Andrew
 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
 Chishti, Rehman
 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
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 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
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark

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
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 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
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 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, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 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
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Stuart Anderson and
Jacob Young

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
 Dinanage, 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
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 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
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon

Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 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
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 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
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)).
 That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 198.

Division No. 274]

[4.42 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriye, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr 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*)
 Bowie, Andrew
 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
 Chishti, Rehman
 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
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert

Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 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
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian

Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stuart Anderson and
Jacob Young

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 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
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Champion, Sarah
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley

David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glendon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 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
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 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
 Mahmood, Shabana

Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek

Twist, Liz
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia

Williams, Hywel
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Navendu Mishra

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 welcomes the Government's drive to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt; particularly welcomes the Government's new Mortgage Charter which has been agreed by 85 per cent of the residential mortgage market and will provide support to mortgage holders through new commitments and flexibilities to help borrowers who are anxious about rising interest rates; notes the extensive package of cost of living support to help families with rising prices, worth an average of £3,300 per household including direct cash payments to the eight million most vulnerable households; and further believes that Labour's policies to manage the economy would be inflationary, lead to higher interest rates and put more pressure on mortgage holders and renters.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I rise to seek your advice. Following the ten-minute rule Bill of the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) this afternoon, a number of right hon. and hon. Members of this House have been accused of being in support of grooming children. I have looked at the Metropolitan police's website, which specifically says:

"Grooming is when a person builds a relationship with a child, young person or an adult who's at risk so they can abuse them and manipulate them into doing things. The abuse is usually sexual".

That accusation has been retweeted by the Member for North West Leicestershire. I seek the House's and indeed your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, as to what action Members can take to ensure that there is some sort of sanction on that—I believe—unparliamentary behaviour.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not want to comment on whether there is an appropriate sanction, because I am the Chair of the Committee on Standards, but the tweet that the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) referred to says that several Conservative Members

"voted against the motion and in support of the grooming and mutilation of children".

I suggest that that is incitement of violence against those Conservative Members and Opposition Members who voted against the motion. It is probably also actionable, and if any Conservative Members want to pursue that course of action, I will stand with them.

I wonder how we ensure that we protect the privileges of this House, namely freedom of speech. I would protect the freedom of speech for the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) to be able to say what he did in debate, though I thought it was absolutely abhorrent and despicable. It also chills my bones, as I suspect it does yours, Mr Deputy Speaker, because it feels as if a new section 28 is being introduced by the back door for trans people, just as we used to have for lesbian and gay people. How do we ensure that freedom of speech is guaranteed for the whole House and that we are not abused for doing our job properly?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for her point of order and the forward notice of it and Sir Chris Bryant for the further point of order. While we do have privilege to speak as we wish in this House and rules to ensure that that freedom is used responsibly, what a Member says or retweets outside the House is not a matter for the Chair. Nevertheless, Members should remember that moderation is desirable outside the Chamber as well as within it, especially when criticising Members for their conduct in parliamentary proceedings. I am sure that this is not the last we will hear of this particular matter.

Repurposing Russian Assets to Rebuild Ukraine

4.57 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House condemns Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine; stands in solidarity with Ukrainians in their resistance to Russia's invasion of their sovereign state; recognises the enormous damage that Russia's invasion has caused to Ukraine's infrastructure, economy and institutions; commends the recent commitments made by the Government to support Ukraine's recovery during the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2023; and calls on the Government to present a Bill before this House within 90 days to allow frozen Russian state assets held in the UK to be repurposed for Ukraine's recovery.

Some of the most horrifying images from the start of the Ukraine war came out of Bucha, a city just outside Kyiv. Bodies of innocent Ukrainians were strewn across the street, some with their hands tied behind their backs, and dozens were buried in mass graves beside burned-out tanks representing Russian aggression. Today, much of the damage wreaked on Bucha has been repaired. Walking down its streets, it is almost impossible to imagine the atrocities committed just one year ago.

Rebuilding has become a motif of Ukrainian resistance. By April, Ukraine had cleared debris from 2,100 km of road, rebuilt 41 of the 330 destroyed bridges and renewed 900 railway points. But as Putin's barbaric war continues, there remains so much more to do.

Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine began not last year but in 2014. However, for the past 16 months since the start of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainians have been continually bombarded from the land, the sea and the air by a dictator determined to destroy everything that their country represents: its freedom, its vibrancy—which I have seen on two occasions—and its spirit. Yet in the face of Putin's barbarism, Ukrainians have defended their country with courage and a fierce determination to defend the values that they cherish. Ukrainians have shown themselves to be free and proud people who refuse to be controlled or subdued.

Since the invasion began we have seen that Putin will seek to destroy that which he cannot control. We should be under no illusion about the sheer scale of the destruction that Putin's war has brought to Ukraine, nor about the high price paid by ordinary Ukrainians. The statistics speak for themselves. The United Nations estimates that almost 10,000 civilians have been killed. Millions more have been displaced from their homes. Over 150,000 buildings have been destroyed or damaged, including homes, schools, hospitals and many businesses. Tens of thousands of kilometres of road have been rendered useless.

Landmines and munitions are strewn across the country. Vast swathes of farmland have been ruined, forests have been burned down and national parks have been destroyed. Millions of Ukrainians have been forced into poverty, and parts of the country are facing a humanitarian crisis. In total, the World Bank estimates that up to \$600 billion will be needed to fund Ukraine's recovery and construction. That is around three times the size of Ukraine's GDP, and the figure is rising by the day.

Beyond the physical damage, we must remember the profound psychological impact of the invasion on the Ukrainian people. A people who were full of optimism

for the future are now having to come to terms with the loss of loved ones and the destruction of their homes and livelihoods. Where once there was hope there is now uncertainty and fear, with the war making it impossible to plan for the future. Although Putin has succeeded in bringing about destruction, Ukrainians have resisted through a sense of strength, defiance, innovation and ingenuity. What they have achieved, frankly, is astounding.

In the early part of the invasion, Putin tried everything he could to destroy Ukraine's energy sector. In raid after raid, energy resources were the targets of bombs. At one point, almost half the power generation was destroyed. Yet only months later, Ukraine's electricity grid is once again fully operational, and even exporting power to Europe. Streets that were reduced to craters have been rebuilt. Bridges that only months ago were destroyed are standing once more. Homes that were reduced to rubble are now rising again. Across Ukraine, people are doing whatever they can to get on with their lives and rebuild their broken livelihoods.

However, with all the ingenuity and strength in the world, Ukraine cannot take on the job of national reconstruction on its own, nor should it be expected to do so. Our greatest strength in support of Ukraine against Russia is our unity, as I said yesterday. Labour will continue to stand united with the Government, our allies and our partners until Ukraine wins. Likewise, we will stand with Ukraine as it begins the long and difficult process of rebuilding its proud country and forging the bright and ambitious future that Ukrainians deserve.

The Ukrainian people deserve justice for the suffering they have endured and they deserve to see Russia held accountable for its actions. Ukrainians have already paid the ultimate price for Putin's imperialism and they deserve to rebuild their country without having to bear the burden of the cost. That is why the Labour party believes Russia must pay for Ukraine's recovery. It is not just a matter of justice; it is also a matter of deterrence. If Russia is not held accountable for its actions it will only embolden it against others, and other aggressors will be emboldened. The message will be sent that the international community is not serious about preventing future wars. That is why it is vital we show Russia that there are consequences for aggression. We must make it clear that the world will not tolerate its actions.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful point. I sympathise with what he is saying, but I am also if not concerned then questioning about some of his calls. The way I hear it is that he is calling for reparations. After the first world war, huge reparations were put on Germany and we know where that ended up. The German populace felt that they could not cope with the reparations, and that led to the second world war. The right hon. Gentleman is calling for Russia to pay. Can we make sure that that does not affect the people of Russia, so they do not create another conflict?

Mr Lammy: This is a debate about repurposing. The hon. Gentleman might remember that after the first Gulf war, oil revenues were used to rebuild much of Kuwait. That is the central point that this debate is about. There is a consensus globally on the issue, with the Canadians,

the United Nations and US Senators making progress in this regard. The debate is about repurposing. We have to be very careful to get the balance right. It is clear that we cannot leave Ukraine to do this on its own, so the question is: do we have the will to make this happen?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am grateful to the Opposition for selecting this subject for debate. I cannot be here to make a full contribution, but I just want to ask the right hon. Gentleman a simple question. During a recent debate in this place, we pretty much came to a consensus that the first stage is to look to repurpose the frozen assets: \$300 billion-plus of national assets and maybe \$50 billion of individual assets. They are sitting in our hands. They are not the same as reparations; they are funds that are in very clear existence. A lot of international lawyers think it can be done. I just wondered what the right hon. Gentleman thought.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is right. He is right about the football team we both support—it is not the only thing he is right about, but he is right about that—and he is right that more than \$300 billion of Russian state assets have been frozen by our global partners, with £25 billion here in the UK. The central point is that those assets are frozen, so the question is, what are we going to do now?

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful contribution. I think there is large consensus in the House on this issue. I just want to draw attention to the facts. We actually do not know how much money has been frozen, either Russian state money or money relating to sanctioned individuals. There is a figure I have seen from the Bank of Russia which suggests £26 billion and figures from the Government that suggest £18 billion. Does he not agree that it is imperative the Government should openly tell us how much money has been frozen, who it comes from and where it sits, so that we can follow the money and ensure that justice is done for the Ukrainians in their country?

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend has been so assiduous on these issues over many, many years. She is absolutely right that we cannot have the necessary quality of debate without transparency. That is what we need. I do not think that that ought to be a matter of dispute between us and the Government; I should have thought that it was something on which we could agree. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us whether those figures can, in a transparent fashion, be put in the Library and made available to the Foreign Affairs Committee, so that we can all work on a common basis.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) has provoked me into intervening. Would we not be better served in the House if the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation not only disclosed the full measure of the assets that we have frozen, but came to the House once a month to tell us what sanction waivers it had written that have allowed oligarchs with fortunes in this country to live high on the hog in their well-tended mansions, paid for with money that has been stolen from the Russian people? The Minister himself came

close to agreeing with us in the Foreign Affairs Committee that our sanctions regime is in danger of being undermined by the Treasury writing sanctions waivers left, right and centre.

Mr Lammy: I agree with my right hon. Friend, who has raised these issues time and again. The concern is, of course, that there is not the appropriate ministerial oversight, that this place is being kept in the dark about fundamental, key issues, and that in the end the money of taxpayers in all our constituencies will fund these waivers. That is why the House should have both transparency and the opportunity to challenge and question those who make these decisions on our behalf. I hope that that is what Ministers are doing, but it does appear that this is happening without ministerial oversight.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I agree entirely with the thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's speech. Does he agree that the possible lacuna in the tracing of Russian assets is in Companies House and shell companies? Does he agree that we need to amend the regulations surrounding Companies House to provide proper verification of the people in charge of those companies, and allow Companies House to liaise more closely with the fraud authorities and report suspected fraud?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That has been a standing issue that the official Opposition have taken up. We do think further reform is necessary at Companies House, and we were slightly concerned that that was not supported by the Government in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I too have been provoked, by the intervention from the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). He was right to say that the reform of Companies House and greater transparency about beneficial ownership are vital, but that will give us information only about companies, as opposed to trusts. Last week Lord Agnew of Oulton, a Conservative peer, successfully moved an amendment that would have provided some visibility in who controls trusts. We know that Abramovich, for instance, has transferred a large amount of his money into trusts controlled by his children, including a daughter aged about nine. If we do not have transparency, we cannot follow the money, and we cannot ensure that the assets of sanctioned individuals are really being held so that they can be repurposed to help the people of Ukraine.

Mr Lammy: I am, again, grateful to my right hon. Friend—first for raising the issue of transparency, and secondly for raising the issue of Lord Agnew's amendment and endorsing the point that has already been made. I hope the Minister will tell us whether the Government might give that amendment some support, so that we can benefit from the satisfaction we should gain from this debate. I recognise that it is an Opposition day debate, and we are using our time as an Opposition to bring these issues to the forefront because it has been many months since the Government said that they wanted to act, but the debate is being held in a spirit of the national interest, and I hope everyone can recognise that.

The question, then, is “Who should pay for Ukraine's recovery?” The Labour party's view is that the answer is Russia, and one way of ensuring that this happens

[Mr Lammy]

is repurposing Russian state assets that have been frozen in the United Kingdom. The Government have said at least since October 2022 that they are supportive of seizing Russian state assets to fund Ukraine's reconstruction, but in the eight months since, no specific proposals have been forthcoming. From the very beginning of Putin's invasion, Labour has worked with the Government to ensure that our sanctions framework is as effective as it can be, notwithstanding the issues that have been raised from both Back Benches today.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If I am honest, Ministers have been a bit flip-floppy about this issue. The Foreign Secretary was remarkably snooty about it in the House only yesterday, when he said that I am apparently an idiot because I do not understand international law. Some of us have been arguing cross-party in favour of trying to seize Russian state assets and repurpose them for the rebuilding of Ukraine. I thought that that was the accepted, long-term destination of the Government, even if they had not quite managed to get there. I think that the objection the Foreign Secretary has is around the State Immunity Act 1978. We would need to amend it to be able to proceed, but that is perfectly available to us.

Mr Lammy: That is, of course, central to the work my hon. Friend has been doing in his Seizure of Russian State Assets and Support for Ukraine Bill. I think the House could come together to amend the State Immunity Act. I do not want to comment on the Foreign Secretary, except to say that, in my experience, if he has had an overnight flight, he can be a little prickly, but we will not hold it against him.

Since the beginning of the invasion, more than £25 billion of Russian state assets have been frozen in the United Kingdom, and more than \$350 billion of Russian state assets have been frozen by our global allies, and those vital assets could be used to help fund Ukraine's recovery. Since February last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and I have been pushing the Government on this issue relentlessly, and I pay tribute to the great work of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), who tabled his ten-minute rule Bill specifically to speed up the Government's efforts in this area.

Each time, the Government's response to Members of this House has been that the Government support repurposing Russian state assets but that it is complex. We fully accept that, but we do not accept—and I do not think, given its mood, that the House accepts—that this issue is insurmountably complex or that we should not try to meet this challenge.

We accept the concern that, on the whole, it is not good for any Government to seize another state's assets and that the right to property is fundamental to the rule of law, but there are exceptions to that rule. For example, the law reserves the right to fine people and deprive them of ill-gotten gains. In the same vein, we recognise concerns that repurposing Russia's central bank reserves could violate Russia's sovereign immunity but, again, there are exceptions to that rule. We believe that Russia's continued refusal to comply with international human rights law or to follow the orders of the International Court of Justice are good grounds for such an exception.

Simply put, we believe that Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents a wholly exceptional act, from which exceptional countermeasures can flow, and we are not alone in that belief. As the Minister will know, the Canadians have had legislation in place since December last year to repurpose frozen Russian assets, and it is a similar common law jurisdiction to ours. The European Union is working at pace to ensure that Russian central bank reserves can be repurposed by the summer. Last month, United States politicians laid a Bill that would allow for state assets to be repurposed. Finally, we must remember that the UN General Assembly has voted on this very issue, adopting a resolution that calls for Russia to pay war reparations to Ukraine and for states to transfer Russian state assets into a central bank account to be repurposed. This begs the question: why, then, are the Government lagging behind our international allies in this area? We believe we must rise to this challenge, and we must rise to it now.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I apologise for interrupting the right hon. Gentleman again.

Sovereign immunity applies in international law to foreign judicial processes. It is clear in international law that sovereign immunity does not apply to administrative or legislative processes, such as Bills. It is quite possible for us to pursue this by tabling legislation, as America has, to secure that process in the courts. Sovereign immunity applies only to judicial processes, so it would be wholly feasible in legislative terms.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Very few countries now consider sovereign immunity to be an absolute immunity, and there have been many exceptions. Meeting damages, particularly those awarded by international courts and tribunals, is one such example. The State Immunity Act also expressly restricts sovereign immunity.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that Russia's continued refusal to abide by international law provides us with exceptions, and we should now table legislation to make it clear that there are exceptions.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point about the importance of rebuilding Ukraine. All of us who were at the Ukraine recovery conference will have noted the key point that about \$400 billion-worth of rebuilding is needed, coming from both the public sector and the private sector with huge support from the World Bank, and so on. Does he agree that part of this is not just getting Russian assets to play their part, very important though that is, but thinking about some of the softer aspects of rebuilding, including the work of organisations such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, to make sure that Ukraine emerges from this horrible invasion into a much better world, in all senses—a stronger democracy, less corruption and more for us all to be incredibly happy about?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right. President Zelensky committed to that at last week's Ukraine recovery conference, and we need to support him. Democracy is forged in people-to-people contact. That was the case before the war—I remember meeting civil society in

Ukraine and, frankly, they were very clear that there was work to be done—and it will most definitely be the case after the war.

Sir Chris Bryant: That prompts another thought in my little head. Quite a lot of people on social media have criticised the idea of doing any reconstruction of Ukraine now, saying that we should wait until the end of the war. I hope the shadow Foreign Secretary will agree that that is a preposterous suggestion. People need homes, schools, playgrounds and hospitals now and, actually, quite a lot of rebuilding is already ongoing. We need to give that a rocket booster to make sure it can happen at pace.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right, and it is why I wanted to mention in my speech that work is happening in Ukraine now, which is extraordinary. We should be behind that work, in defiance of Putin's imperialism.

We will continue to work with the Government to ensure that Ukraine gets the support it needs to win this war. From the start of this invasion, we have been united on providing Ukraine with the military, economic, diplomatic and humanitarian support it needs. We commend the Government for the commitments they made to support Ukraine at the Ukraine recovery conference last week. We welcome the International Monetary Fund's announcement of \$15 billion to support Ukraine over four years, and we welcome the announcement of £250 million of extra funding from British International Investment. However, just as we pressed the Government to move further and faster on sanctions, in a constructive spirit, at the start of the full-scale invasion, today we are urging the Government to come forward with a legislative plan to repurpose Russian state assets for Ukraine's recovery.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The right hon. Gentleman is a lawyer. Is he aware that one of the biggest arbitration cases ever is before the United Kingdom commercial court? It concerns the seizure by Russia, a month before it went to war in Ukraine, of several hundred civil commercial aircraft. That case is going to cover many billions of pounds, both here and in the US. When we consider what measures we take against Russia, should we not consider that act of expropriation by the Russian authorities?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman puts before the House an important case, which we should look at very closely, as it will be of concern to all of us in relation to how we move forward in these areas. It has been some time since I practised law, although I was pleased to be made an honorary doctor of laws by the University of Glasgow last week.

The UK has a part to play in supporting Ukraine not only today, but for tomorrow and in the decades to come. We believe that we can go further. The frozen Russian state assets held in the UK could have a transformative impact on the future of Ukraine. Let us imagine the good that £26 billion could do if we reappropriated it with the sole purpose of securing a positive future for the people of Ukraine. Russia forfeited its rights to these assets when Putin embarked on his barbaric and illegal invasion, and the least we can do is join our international allies in repurposing these assets for the benefit of Ukrainians. The Government have had more than a year to come up with this legislation, but there

has been no plan, no action and no progress. We call on them to treat this matter with the urgency we believe it deserves and to come up with the required legislation within the next 90 days. That gets us to a place where in the autumn we could come together as a House to make this happen—if need be, this could be in the next Session of Parliament. Labour will support the Government in any way we can to make sure that this succeeds, and of course we will hold them to account if they should fail.

5.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): Let me start by thanking the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for the tone and substance of the debate, and indeed other colleagues who have participated. We are united in our outright condemnation of Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine, which is a fundamental violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty. He drew a moving counterpoint between the terror and destruction of Bucha, and the remarkable appetite and spirit of rebuilding and reconstruction that is a motif of the Ukrainian people. That spirit of courage and determination was on magnificent display last week at our very successful Ukraine recovery conference.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the capacity of Ukrainians' innovation and their ability to make running repairs on all of their national infrastructure, including, most importantly, their electrical grid. That spirit of innovation and ingenuity will surely see them have a bright future, as and when Ukraine begins the rebuilding effort. That should not wait for the end of any conflict, but should be concurrent with the conflict. That was one of the main messages last week.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the fact that unity is our greatest strength. The Government agree with that, and thank him and his colleagues very much for the consistent support they have outlined for our common efforts. We are right behind the efforts of the Ukrainians to rebuild their country now. The World Bank has estimated that rebuilding will cost £400 billion. Last week, there was a galvanising effort, where more than \$60 billion towards Ukraine's effort was outlined. It was a remarkable conference in terms of its convening power and the contributions from President Zelensky. As the Prime Minister said:

"Russia must pay for the destruction that they've inflicted. So we're working with allies to explore lawful routes to use Russian assets."

Those assets will pay for the damage Russia's invasion has so recklessly caused.

That is also why, on Monday 19 June, we published new legislation to allow us to keep sanctions in place until Russia pays up. We are keeping up the pressure through our sanctions regime, with an unprecedented package targeting over 1,600 individuals, 130 of whom have more than £18 billion frozen. We believe in transparency and in keeping colleagues informed, so I will place an update in the House of Commons Library, showing the total value of assets frozen, to ensure that colleagues have the latest figure.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I do not think anybody can quarrel with the words the Minister has expressed, but I would like to urge him into action. Today, Lord Alton of Liverpool is moving an amendment in the House of

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

Lords that would ensure that when somebody is sanctioned, there is a duty on them to disclose all their assets. If they fail to fulfil that duty, the agency could pursue them, as a criminal offence would have been committed, and seize the assets. That is a tiny window that we are opening, which would start to create the reality of seizing rather than freezing assets. Will the Government support that amendment? There will probably be a vote on it within the hour.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for drawing my attention to that amendment. I cannot make a pronouncement on the Government position on it, as I have not read the amendment, but we will observe it and take note.

Liam Byrne: Will the Minister clarify the press release issued by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on 19 May? It said that

“consistent with our laws, Russia’s sovereign assets in our jurisdictions will remain immobilised until Russia agrees to pay for the damage it has caused to Ukraine.”

Will the Minister confirm whether it is now, in effect, the Government’s strategy to use frozen Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine?

Leo Docherty: That legislation, which is a statutory instrument made using the affirmative procedure, gives us options in the future to extend sanctions, up until the point where Russia has paid. It gives us tremendous leverage into the future and has great utility.

We have maximised the impact of our sanctions by co-ordinating with our key international partners, at huge economic cost to Putin’s war machine. Russia’s economy posted a deficit of nearly \$50 billion in 2022, the second highest in the post-Soviet era, and with our partners we are choking off Putin’s access to the key technologies he needs on the battlefield.

As I have mentioned, we are the first member of the sanctions coalition to lay legislation, which we did on 19 June, explicitly enabling us to keep sanctions in place until Russia pays for the damage it has caused. That builds on the commitment made by the Prime Minister and G7 leaders that sovereign assets will remain immobilised until Russia pays up. It also goes further, giving us maximum flexibility to act as the situation requires.

Our commitment does not stop there. As criticism of the war grows within Russia, we are introducing a new route for those under sanction to request that their frozen funds be used for Ukrainian reconstruction. Let me clear: there is no negotiation, no quid pro quo and no access for those individuals to their assets while they remain under sanction. However, if they wish to do the right thing and use those funds to help right the wrongs caused by Putin’s invasion, there will be an approved route for them to do so.

Sir Chris Bryant: One sanctioned individuals who said, before he was sanctioned, that his assets could be given to the reconstruction of Ukraine was Roman Abramovich. The sale of Chelsea football club happened last May and I understand there is £2.3 billion sitting in a bank account. I am mystified as to why that money has not yet been handed over to the foundation. I have exchanged texts with the person who set it up. He said

he is ready and he does not understand why he is not getting the money—he has not even been told why he is not getting the money.

Leo Docherty: That is a non-governmental body. There are ongoing discussions with regard to the focus and the use of those funds—whether it be in Ukraine or outside Ukraine to benefit Ukrainians—which has drawn out the process, but we are seeking to expedite the matter at pace.

Sir Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again, but discussions between whom? If Government Ministers are party to those discussions, what is the concern that people still have?

Leo Docherty: It is not a Government discussion; it is a discussion within the new organisation that will disburse and utilise those funds. We will keep colleagues updated as and when that situation is resolved.

Sir Chris Bryant: As I understand it, the Minister is saying that the members of the foundation itself are rowing with each other about to how to proceed, but surely that would not prevent the money being handed over by the Government.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Member should not put words in my mouth. Details remain outstanding. A discussion is under way within the institution with regard to the focus and the utility of these funds. As and when that is clarified, I am sure that we will be able to keep colleagues updated. I remain grateful to him for his interest.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way again. Before that exchange, he was speaking about the ability of sanctioned individuals to voluntarily give some of their money to the Ukrainians. Can he reassure me, first, that this will not become a mechanism whereby sanctioned individuals can get themselves out of sanctions and continue to launder their money into the UK, and, secondly, that this is not a mechanism that will, in effect, buy them immunity from prosecution should they have committed an offence here in the UK?

Leo Docherty: I am very happy to give the right hon. Lady an absolute assurance that it is not a mechanism for circumvention or for granting immunity. It is to ensure that those funds, if volunteered, can benefit Ukrainians.

We are tightening the net on those who are hiding assets in the UK. Under powers to be introduced by the Treasury, individuals and entities designated under our sanctions regime will be legally required to disclose assets they hold in this country. Failure to do so could result in financial penalties or the confiscation of assets.

We will legislate to require those holding assets in the UK on behalf of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the Russian Ministry of Finance or the Russian national wealth fund to disclose them to the Treasury. Our action will increase transparency on where those assets are held and limit opportunities for sanctions evasion. Taken together, these new measures mark a further strengthening in the UK sanctions approach against Russia, as Putin and his cronies continue their

illegal war and as Ukraine embarks on its counter-offensive. This marks important progress, but I assure Members that our efforts will not stop there.

Many hon. Members will be aware of the active debate with our international partners on the use of sanctioned assets. As the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers have made clear to this House repeatedly, no country has yet found a legally tested solution to turn this commitment into reality at scale, despite various pieces of legislation having been laid or passed by our international partners.

We are at the forefront of a united effort, with our international partners, to see frozen assets repurposed for Ukrainian reconstruction. Nothing is off the table, and a cross-Government taskforce is considering all proposals carefully, including those that our partners may bring forward.

Liam Byrne: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being characteristically generous. We might as well cut to the nub of the debate. Is it his ambition to bring forward to this House a Bill that fulfils the ambition of the Opposition's motion?

Leo Docherty: It is our ambition to find a legally workable route to repurpose Russian assets. As yet, no country has found one. We are working with partners to do so. As the House will appreciate, we must assure ourselves of the safety, robustness and legality of any proposal in this regard. If there is no legality, there can be no utility. That is why we continue to engage with every available option. The process will require creativity and innovation. I assure hon. Members across the House that we will continue to consider every lawful option to use sanctioned Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for his generosity. Can he perhaps explain what the Canadians are doing? It is my understanding that the Canadians have seized the assets. Would he consider being a kleptocratic state or perhaps being an aggressor state, as has been suggested, as concepts that could bring seizing state assets within the rule of law? There are two issues there.

Leo Docherty: Our Canadian friends have legislated, but they have not yet found a legally watertight route to seizing those assets. The right hon. Lady speaks about other concepts that are of interest, and we will certainly consider them as we move forward.

Sir Chris Bryant: Will the Minister give way again?

Leo Docherty: Well, it is a debate, so I am very happy to give way.

Sir Chris Bryant: I am very grateful to the Minister. I am sorry, but what is the legal impediment, to his mind?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman knows a great deal about international law, so he will know that ideas such as these will be tested internationally and that if they are not watertight, they have no utility. It is not legally straightforward; this is entirely new ground and therefore it requires a robust legal framework. I think he would probably admit that it is unclear that one exists as yet. However, as ideas come forward, we are interested in testing them.

We are steadfast in our commitment to ensuring Ukrainian economic stability. We have committed to providing approximately £4.2 billion of fiscal support to Ukraine and, along with our G7 partners, we are committed to helping it to emerge from the war with a modernised economy that should be entirely resilient to Russian threats.

Let me conclude by saying that the recovery conference last week, which I referred to at the start, marked a further milestone in support for Ukraine and in ensuring that Russia pays for its actions. With our partners, we will keep up the pressure, while standing by Ukraine's side until it wins and rebuilds.

5.41 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Where will we find half a billion dollars to rebuild Ukraine? The international community, certainly; the World Bank, almost certainly; the EU and/or the US, definitely—but we should certainly shine a very bright searchlight on the ill-gotten gains of the Russian elites who stood by and watched Putin, who relies on the co-dependency they create, systematically destroy the natural and built capital of Ukraine for reasons so spurious that they would be comic if they were not so egregious and deadly for the innocent people of Ukraine.

Let us not forget where the playgrounds of those Russian elites were. They were in Paris, in Manhattan and in Mayfair, and elsewhere in London, where their inexplicable wealth sloshed around the property markets, casinos and car dealerships of this city. The Londongrad laundromat was a clear and present threat to national security, but in the tension between national security and the Tories' access to wealthy Russians, national security came off second best.

London is the most notorious safe haven for looted funds in the world, with much of the money hidden via London in offshore trusts in British overseas territories. Even after years of campaigning by SNP Members and other stakeholders, it took Putin's barbarism against the people of Ukraine for the Conservatives finally to stop accepting Kremlin-linked donations and to impose sanctions on Putin and his cronies. It is clear now what lies behind this Government's pedestrian approach to pivoting from freezing assets to seizing them: the sheer value of Russian assets held within the UK. In this instance, as in many others, when I say the UK, I of course mean London.

Contrast that with Estonia, whose Government have declared they will present a blueprint for how Russian frozen assets can be legally seized. Their goal is to use the funds to pay for Ukraine's reconstruction. The Estonian Prime Minister, Kaja Kallas, said last month that her country plans to offer a legal rationale for the expropriation of the €20 million in Russian assets that it has frozen. What it is to be a small EU nation that can act nimbly and remain in touch with its populace.

However, a country does not have to be a small EU nation to do the right thing. In Canada, the Frozen Assets Repurposing Act aims to allow Canadian courts to take the frozen assets of foreign officials whose misrule creates forced displacement and humanitarian needs. It essentially foresees new powers to seize and sell assets of sanctioned Russian oligarchs while repurposing the proceeds to help with the rebuilding of Ukraine. In Switzerland, should an oligarch fail to demonstrate the

[*Dave Doogan*]

lawfulness of their wealth, the law on asset recovery would allow for the confiscation of frozen assets without the need to commence a separate civil proceeding. The European Commission has also followed suit, presenting in May a new directive on asset recovery and confiscation. The proposal seeks to modernise EU rules on asset recovery through a series of measures, including an asset recovery and management office with the power to trace and identify criminal assets, ensure that frozen property does not lose value, and enable its sale for the purposes of rebuilding Ukraine.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: To clarify, there is a difference between the seizure of private assets and the seizure of state assets. Sovereign immunity simply does not stand in the way of the seizure of private assets, which requires only that legislation be passed, therefore negating the sovereign immunity. I accept that the Government could do that quite quickly—they have been talking about it—but state assets are a bigger issue because of state immunity. Again, legislative action could be taken, but it should be done in co-operation with other states so that there is no flight of capital.

Dave Doogan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, particularly because he highlights, as he did in his earlier intervention, the issues to do with state immunity. At the heart of this debate is an appeal for urgency on legislation that tests the very boundaries to which he refers. I take no issue with that intervention.

In contrast with what is happening in other jurisdictions, the UK has yet to transform its words about hoping that the proceeds of sanctions pay for reconstruction into a more informed policy and legislation-focused debate with action to follow. The UK cannot afford to be the weakest link in the western alliance's struggle against Russian illicit finance. We recommend, as a minimum, that the UK Government review the designation criteria underpinning the global anti-corruption sanctions regime to consider whether an abuse of function would provide greater flexibility for FCDO officials to impose designations. Any new legislation must be properly funded, of course. New laws are useful only if they are properly implemented with the correct resource. Economic crime has been the poor relation in UK policing for too long. Economic crime enforcement in the UK is woefully under-resourced, particularly given the scale of the challenge posed by dirty money in the UK economy.

The UK has taken some steps—if belatedly—to freeze assets, but it must now legislate at the earliest opportunity to seize Russian assets, in accordance with international ambition and international law, with adequate funding and in co-ordination with allies who have done the same. While other countries are taking strides to legislate for how frozen Russian assets can be lawfully seized, the UK Government are, thus far, yet to make the transition from warm words to legislative effect. We need a step change on that immediately.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Eight Members are seeking to participate in the debate. We need to start the wind-ups at about 20 minutes to 7. It is a self-denying ordinance; I will not put a time limit on

at this stage, but I may have to do so. If hon. Members could stick to six minutes, we will probably get everybody in comfortably.

5.48 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): The sanctions regimes, and measures taken under them against named individuals and Russian state assets, have played a vital role in the Ukrainian resistance, albeit one of a more slow-burning nature than military help. They are a slow-paced, grinding remedy against what has turned into a slow, grinding war in which bravery, defiance and the spirit and determination of enlisted men will ultimately allow Ukraine to prevail. We must play our part. As of May, records show that 1,604 individuals and 228 entities under the Russian regime are subject to the UK's freezing sanctions to a value of approximately £18 billion. In addition, an estimated £26 billion of Russian state assets are frozen here in the UK. Russia is the most sanctioned country in the world, and while innocent Ukrainians continue to be killed for Russian imperialist ambitions, that must remain the case. More broadly, it is estimated that some £275 billion-worth of Russian assets have been frozen worldwide.

The Government are actively freezing assets. Freezing is good, but reallocating frozen assets to Ukraine's benefit will be better, not least because of the monumental sums that are estimated to be needed to fund reconstruction—that is, reconstruction of homes, businesses, infrastructure and lives. I was therefore interested and pleased to read the detail of the statutory instrument—the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2023—laid by the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), last Monday. Its introduction enables freezing order sanctions to be maintained until Moscow pays compensation to Ukraine for the destruction that Russians have caused and will continue to cause until the war ends. It is a positive step towards the calls that I and many other Members of this House have been making for assets forfeiture, although we are certainly not there yet.

As part of the joint Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Treasury and Home Office press release last week detailing these new legislative measures, I read with interest that the Government's

“proposal to force sanctioned individuals to disclose UK assets will bring in greater transparency and leaves less room to hide.”

This proposal is long overdue, and I encourage the Government to make it a legal reality as soon as possible. Could the Minister explain the planned legislative process to enable that?

Questions over the specifics of the proposal remain. When brought forward, it is crucial that if sanctioned individuals are found to be in breach of the legislation, the proposal should open all their frozen assets to seizure and reallocation. I ask the Minister: would a breach of this provision cover an individual's entire sanctioned asset base—at least that in the UK, and not just that which may have been found to have been hidden? That would have the dual effect of equipping the Government with a large motivational stick when it comes to greater transparency and allowing the effective forfeiture of a potentially significant amount of assets

if breaches are identified. Both effects are desirable, and I would be interested to hear whether the Minister agrees.

Ultimately, the strength of the UK's response to Russia's attack on the post-1945 world order rests on being in lockstep with our international allies. The US, the EU and Canada are all proactively working on or have already implemented means of asset seizure and reallocation, even if only in a limited way. The move to allow frozen assets in the UK to be allocated towards Ukraine's reconstruction complements similar moves in the US and Canada last year and EU proposals made earlier this month. All of this is very welcome.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I apologise for missing the opening of the debate. Has any consideration been given to what should happen to the interest or other income generated by those assets during the period that they are frozen? Surely, even if the assets are not seized in the end, their owners should not benefit from anything that the assets earn during that frozen period.

Mr Djanogly: My right hon. Friend makes a different but important point. That aspect has been pursued by the European Union; in fact, I believe that it set up a committee a month or two ago to look at that very point. I think it is a very good idea, and we should certainly be pursuing it. Obviously, all these sanctioned assets cost money to keep—flats have to be maintained; boats have to be maintained—and we should be using income from these assets at least to pay for the maintenance of them, if not to get income that we can then give to Ukraine. He makes a very good point.

The Minister said earlier that the use of frozen assets towards reconstruction would not be allowed as a means of circumvention. It would, however, seem rather unlikely that a Russian sanctioned person would permit their frozen assets to be donated to Ukraine unless there was some benefit to them, such as sanctions cancellation. Perhaps the Minister could explain why else the sanctioned individual would want to do so. Why would they want to give their assets to Ukraine if there was not a deal to be had? The Ukrainians, it has to be said, have expressed concern at the prospect of deals being done with oligarchs in individual countries—they think that might breach the wall, so to speak. As such, could the Minister confirm that if deals are done at all, they would only be done on a multilateral basis?

To make one final point if I may, the original purpose of our adopting the Magnitsky sanctions was to protect those whose human rights are ignored by foreign regimes. As the Russian Federation staggers on, we must remain vigilant towards those of its citizens who support democracy. At this very moment, Open Russia's vice-chairman Vladimir Kara-Murza—twice poisoned, and now sentenced to 25 years—languishes in a Russian prison, even though his lawyers and family are unsure of his exact whereabouts. Mr Kara-Murza, whose brave wife I had the honour of meeting in Parliament last week, is a valiant spokesman for democracy and human rights. The Government have sanctioned only five of his dozens of tormentors; even Lithuania has sanctioned 15 of them. As a British citizen, should Mr Kara-Murza not expect us to be leading the way on this issue? I hope that Ministers will now respond with appropriate resolution.

5.55 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I rise to speak in this very important debate on repurposing Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on setting out so clearly the case for doing so, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on his work on the issue.

In February of this year, I had the privilege of going to Ukraine with the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine on the anniversary of last year's invasion, and to see Irpin and Chernihiv. There, we saw the destruction of bridges, homes and schools—a reminder of the fact that Russians have targeted civilian areas so often—and the need for generators, because time after time those areas have been hit by power cuts. However, all of that pales into insignificance against the destruction in the east, where whole cities—homes, hospitals and schools—have been left with no power supply and no water, their populations dispersed abroad, to other parts of Ukraine or to the frontline. We have also seen the flooding from the Kakhovka dam, and of course, vast areas of agricultural land are unusable now because of landmines. The task is absolutely immense.

This month saw the Ukraine recovery conference, held in London. A number of events and meetings ran alongside it, including Inter-Parliamentary Union events, which I was able to attend. It was very moving to hear Ukrainian MPs speak of the huge challenges facing their country, but impressive to see their absolute determination to build back better, strengthen democracy and tackle issues such as corruption. Time after time, Ukrainian MPs made clear that they want Russian assets seized to rebuild Ukraine.

We have to admire the immense resilience and determination of the Ukrainian people to rebuild. I have found that whether meeting bosses from the biggest telecoms company in Ukraine, whose workforce have repeatedly been the first out there to restore communication after yet another Russian hit; meeting the CEO of Naftogaz, who stated plainly that tackling corruption has to come before reconstruction; and meeting the deputy Minister for digital technology, who described some of the remarkable progress made in the digital sphere. However, he also pointed out that his departmental budget has been cut by 86%, with the money redirected to the Defence department. That reminds us of the huge economic challenges that Ukraine faces.

The task is enormous; the World Bank estimates that some \$400 billion is needed to reconstruct Ukraine. Using frozen Russian state assets must be part of that, but the UK appears to be lagging behind. In the US, the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act, which would give the US President the power to confiscate Russian assets frozen in the US, has been introduced in the Senate and the House of Representatives; and in Canada, the Government are looking to seize \$26 million from Granite Capital Holdings Ltd. But here in the UK we are still lagging behind.

This issue has been raised time after time in this House. We had a whole Backbench Business debate on the issue not very long ago, in which suggestions and mechanisms were set out very clearly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and others. Today, we have heard suggestions on what

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

could be done from my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). Time after time, we have made it very clear to the Government that they need to move faster on seizing frozen Russian state assets so that they can be used for rebuilding Ukraine.

Recently, like the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), I had the immense privilege and the very sobering experience of meeting the Evgenia Kara-Murza, the wife of Vladimir Kara-Murza, a prominent Russian dissident who has spoken out against the war in Ukraine. She told us of the terrible treatment of anyone speaking out and opposing or seeming to oppose the war, with detentions and arrests all the time, the routine torture of prisoners and the removal of children from so-called dissident parents. We heard how, back in November 2022, Canada first sanctioned Vladimir Kara-Murza's persecutors, and how in March the US also sanctioned all 38 of his persecutors. However, to this day the UK has only sanctioned five. I have to tell the House that Vladimir was actually brought up in the UK and has UK citizenship, so I implore the Minister to make it a priority to sanction the remaining 33 persecutors, and to do everything possible to secure the release of Vladimir. Rather than lagging behind in this case, the UK should be taking the lead.

Many businesses in the UK have had to make alternative arrangements and different business decisions because of the sanctions regime. Although this may have been inconvenient or costly, they understand and accept the importance of using the strongest possible sanctions against Russia to try to exert maximum pressure on Putin's regime to stop his illegal invasion of Ukraine. I would hope that Departments want to set an example by making sure they too stick rigorously to all sanctions, and do everything possible to ensure that no taxpayers' money is inadvertently finding its way into supporting Putin's regime.

In this context, I raise the question of the Home Office planning to use the Stradey Park hotel in my constituency for housing asylum seekers. The Stradey Park hotel was taken over a couple of years ago by an investment firm, which then sold investments in parts of the hotel, rather like timeshares, to a whole range of investors. There are now some 77 of those investors registered at the Land Registry as part owners of the hotel, and they can of course receive dividends from their investments in the hotel. One of them is a Russian domiciled in Russia, so the question is: what due diligence has the Home Office carried out to ascertain what connections this individual has with any individual, entity or sector against which we have sanctions? Departments should be taking extra care to ensure that no taxpayers' money is being used in any way that inadvertently breaks sanctions.

In conclusion, I would like to stress to the Minister the need to be meticulous about the implementation of sanctions, and I urge him to speed up taking the necessary steps to enable Russian state assets to be seized and repurposed to rebuild Ukraine.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before we proceed, I think as a courtesy I should explain to the House that I have given consent to certain hon. Members to leave in order to attend a meeting with a very senior Ukrainian military officer. It is no discourtesy to the House; they have my consent.

6.2 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Following the comments that all Members have made, I am sure we all agree that Russia's appalling assault on Ukraine is an unprovoked, premeditated attack against a sovereign democratic state. Our Government, through their actions, have illustrated that they are completely committed to supporting Ukraine in its fight to liberate the country.

We are all supporting Ukraine, as we are the world's second-largest military donor, with this Government having given £2.3 billion in military aid. This year we have given a total of £9.3 billion of humanitarian, economic and military support. We are also training many Ukrainian pilots and troops in the UK and offering sanctuary to well over 230,000 Ukrainians. I am proud to say that many of them have made Keighley, Ilkley and other parts of my constituency their home, and I have been pleased to meet many of them.

We are also punishing Putin's regime with the most severe set of sanctions that Russia has ever seen. We are sanctioning over 1,500 individuals and entities, and freezing £275 billion of their personal assets. Those sanctions are specifically designed to deal a severe blow to the Russian economy, hobble Russia's military-industrial complex and punish Putin and his allies, including 120 oligarchs worth over £140 billion combined.

In addition to those sanctions, we have ended imports of Russian coal and oil, cutting off a key source of funding for Putin's regime, while limiting the impact on our consumers. We have also stopped the export of high-end luxury goods to Russia and sanctioned Putin and his political allies, including Sergei Lavrov, hitting the Kremlin regime at its heart. We are working, too, in lockstep with allies to exclude Russian banks from the SWIFT financial system. Our sanctions hit not only Russia but its allies in Belarus. We are sanctioning Belarus for aiding and abetting Russia's illegal invasion, making sure not only Russia but its allies feel the economic consequences of support for Putin.

Of course, our sanctions are only one part of what we are doing as a country. We have also provided much military support for Ukraine, including by donating Storm Shadow missiles, giving it the long-range strike capabilities it needs to defeat Russia and liberate its country. We will deliver £2.3 billion of military support this year in addition to the Challenger 2 tanks and self-propelled guns we have already provided, and the hundreds of armoured vehicles and advanced missiles that we provided last year and at the beginning of this year. We have also committed to train 20,000 Ukrainian troops this year, building on the success of the training programmes we have put in place which saw 11,000 Ukrainian troops trained last year, and we have provided £4.7 billion in economic and humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian people.

The Prime Minister took part last week in the Ukraine recovery conference, at which he secured well over £60 billion of combined support from other countries, galvanising

international backing for Ukraine in the face of Putin's ongoing attacks. The conference raised that money to go towards Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction from nearly 500 countries as well as the G7 and EU member states. That is on top of our announcing last week a multi-year financial support package worth over £2.5 billion for Ukraine, helping Ukrainians win the war.

One year on, this Government are absolutely illustrating that we remain committed more than ever to making sure Putin's barbaric venture will fail, and we will continue Ukraine's fight as long as it takes until the war criminal Putin is brought to justice.

6.7 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is not possible to calculate the true cost of Putin's barbaric attack on Ukraine—the misery caused by the death, destruction, and despair he has inflicted cannot be quantified—but there are some costs that we are able to calculate, enormous though they are. We know that the illegal invasion has caused approximately \$137.8 billion of damage to Ukraine's infrastructure, and we know that approximately \$50 billion-worth of damage has been inflicted on Ukraine's housing stock and that its agricultural sector, which is vital to countries beyond Ukraine, has seen a hit of \$9 billion.

Behind each of these statistics are of course people—people who must pick up the pieces of this carnage. It is essential that we provide them with every possible means of support to do that. So I am pleased that the Opposition have secured a debate today to push forward a vital way in which we can fund this support. For it is not enough to fully stand behind Ukraine's resistance to Putin; we must also be fully behind Ukraine's recovery after, as I hope, this awful war has ended and Putin has been defeated. I fully back today's motion, which is consistent with the unwavering support we have shown for Ukraine in the last year.

As we have heard today, the cost of rebuilding Ukraine is estimated to be around \$400 billion, equivalent in scale to the Marshall plan that helped rebuild Europe after the horrors of world war two. We must pull every lever at our disposal to help meet that cost. One such lever is the repurposing of seized Russian assets. From the very beginning of Putin's invasion, Labour has called on the Government to do that. In that time, conservative estimates state that the UK has seized more than £18 billion and possibly, as we have heard today, up to £26 billion in Russian-owned assets, and I commend that effort. I also commend the Government announcement last week that Russian sanctions will remain until compensation is paid to Ukraine. However, we must go further and faster. There are vast numbers of Russian assets in this country, often acquired through the corruption of the Russian state. It is morally and politically right to re-purpose them.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on making an excellent speech. Does he agree that Canada is showing exceptional leadership in how it is dealing with the seizing of ill-gotten Russian assets gained from Ukraine?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I will give some other examples later on of other institutions and nations that are also leading the

way in that regard. For all that there is unity across the House in our support for Ukraine, the Government have not made enough progress on overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of repurposing Russian state assets. Indeed, we had a debate in this place on these issues back in March, when my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) set out a timeline of Government commitments: Ministers had said on five occasions between July of last year and February this year that they were considering all options on using seized Russian assets to help rebuild Ukraine. We are a year on now from those first commitments on repurposing assets, and it is not clear that we are any further forward.

I urge the Government to take inspiration from what is happening not just in Canada but in the US, where legislation has been introduced in the Senate and the House of Representatives that would give the US President the authority to confiscate Russian assets frozen in the United States and transfer them to help Ukraine. The European Commission President has said that the EU bloc will put forward a proposal before the summer break on how the proceeds from the more than €200 billion belonging to the Central Bank of Russia frozen in the EU will be used to be pay for Ukrainian reconstruction. That is the level of urgency we need. I hope that when the Minister rises to wind up, they can let the House know what conversations the Government have had on the feasibility of replicating measures taken by our allies in the US and the EU.

We are all agreed on the importance of maintaining western unity in support for Ukraine, and part of that must not be falling behind our allies in the efforts to make Putin take financial responsibility for the damage he has done. The unity that exists in this House to support Ukraine is vital, but as part of that united effort, we must be able to press Ministers to go further and faster when it is needed. That is what today's motion is about. I know that it is difficult, but Ukraine has no time to wait. We must see a concrete plan soon. The Government will have support from across the House in drawing it up and implementing it.

6.13 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The illegal and unjust war that President Putin has waged in Ukraine has now lasted for 16 months, and it is likely to be some time before it comes to an end. As the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) outlined, Ukraine, a country of more than 40 million people, has been subject to devastation on an unimaginable level. The country's critical infrastructure has been deliberately targeted by Russian attacks, with hospitals, roads, energy infrastructure and hundreds of thousands of homes callously destroyed. But Russia's illegal invasion has broken neither the Ukrainian people's spirit nor the resolve of NATO and allies to stand alongside them both now and once victory has been achieved, as Ukraine rebuilds from this inflicted disaster.

As hon. Members have outlined, the World Bank estimates a recovery cost of more than \$400 billion; it may cost up to \$1 trillion. It is hard to wrap our minds around those figures, but, whatever the cost, the Ukrainian people deserve to emerge stronger from the conflict, and Russia needs to see that Ukraine emerges stronger

[Catherine McKinnell]

from it. It is therefore absolutely right that we are thinking about how we best support Ukraine now and into the future. We should plan for victory and what that means. While Ukraine's future must be determined by the Ukrainian Government, we must be doing all we can to support and contribute to the international effort that is clearly required.

That brings us to Russian assets here in the UK and whether and how they should be used for that reconstruction. The UK's commitment to Ukraine has been steadfast, and proudly so, yet on this question we seem to be lagging behind. Our allies in the US and the EU are already taking steps towards developing the legislation needed to repossess Russian state assets to contribute to mending the impact of this illegal war. We must clearly act within the law, but we cannot hide behind the law. It is for us as legislators to find the legal means necessary to maximise financial support for Ukraine.

For far too long, the UK—London in particular—has been a repository for Russian wealth. The London laundromat served as a haven to billions of pounds of Russian money. We have a moral duty to put things right. We also have a significant opportunity to do that, and the need to do that speaks for itself. It is a matter of justice. The Treasury's commitment to producing a plan that will criminalise the non-disclosure of Russian assets is welcome, but we need to see it and know when it will be introduced. There is no time for delay.

We need to start planning now for investing in reconstruction projects and ensure that every dollar and pound possible reaches Ukraine. To that end, I absolutely welcome the clarification sought by my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for the Government to publish transparently where Russian assets are held, how much they are and who they have come from. We must also take steps to ensure that whatever money is transferred in whatever form and however it is spent—I appreciate that there was a debate about that, which could explain some of the delays—we minimise the risk of any corruption.

The Government must start turning their rhetoric into action. We have heard for months about the intention to ensure that Putin pays and that these assets will be used, but warm words will not help Ukraine. Ukraine needs to rebuild itself, and we need to create the legal mechanisms to give it support to do so.

Once Ukraine succeeds, it needs not only to recover but to thrive. Whether that costs \$400 billion or \$1 trillion, it is clear that Russia and Putin must contribute towards repairing the immense damage they have caused. We can support making that happen. We have the means to do so by ensuring that the proceeds of Russian state assets held here in the UK go towards building Ukraine's future. We need to give Ukrainians back their future—a future that they deserve—in a stable, secure and democratic state, where they can rebuild their lives. Let us as a country continue leading on support for Ukraine, and let us lead on financial support, too. Let us see the Government put their money where their mouth is, support our motion and show how they will ensure that these frozen Russian state assets are repurposed to rebuild Ukraine.

6.19 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): None of us will forget waking up nearly 18 months ago to the most dreadful scenes—images of war—happening on our doorstep in Europe. The people of Ukraine have endured the most unimaginable hardships in the last year and a half. I add my voice and that of the Liberal Democrats to today's messages of solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We have not forgotten them, and we will continue to stand with them.

I also extend my thanks to the people of the UK. We must all be proud of the support that we have seen in this country. The British public have shown their deep generosity over the last year, opening their doors to Ukrainians. Over 2,000 Ukrainian guests have arrived in my home county of Oxfordshire—the fourth highest of any local authority in England. I opened my door to them, and it was a wonderful experience that I would highly recommend to anyone.

That war is not over, and it is vital that we do not rest on our laurels while Putin and his cronies continue to wage unimaginable destruction. We have known since the beginning that the best way to hit Putin where it hurts is through the wealth and assets of his cronies. We know that he funnels money through his oligarchs, which they squirrel away in property, superyachts and shell companies. They also hide it in far less glamorous places.

It was recently reported in *Private Eye* that the developers behind Botley West Solar Farm in Oxfordshire are potentially backed by dubious Russian money. Botley West would be the largest solar farm in Europe, sited on Blenheim Palace and Merton College land. The company behind it, Photovolt Development Partners, is registered in Germany but owned by Cyprus company Cranssetta Investments Ltd. The sole shareholder is a Yulia Lezhen.

A New York court case last year revealed that Yulia Lezhen's husband, Dmitry Glukhov, was the primary beneficial owner of a goldfield development company that borrowed \$58 million from Uralsib bank. The litigating company said that there was never any goldfield to be found. It looked for infrastructure, but did not find it. It alleged that the company was, in fact, a front to syphon off assets. It further said that it was not the only one, and that there were dozens of such companies, of which Photovolt—about to build to Botley West—was one. I ask the Minister: how can we know that Russian money is not still being greenwashed through our economy here in the UK? I would welcome a meeting with him or Treasury Ministers to get to the bottom of where the money is coming from.

Further historical questions remain for the Government about the money, most notably golden visas. A review of them was promised five years ago. The Government finally delivered a, frankly, pathetic statement a few months ago. I continue to challenge them to release the full report. If they have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear. The cross-party work that we did in this place on the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 has been some of the most valuable work I have done in Parliament. It was a real opportunity to ensure that we are able to better fight kleptocracy and economic crime, not just in this case but in others in future.

It is not enough that we have seized Russian assets; it is time that we send those assets to where they will make the most difference. As we have heard, the estimated bill for post-war construction is in the order of \$400 billion. The Ukraine recovery conference last week made an important start to those discussions. I welcome the UK's part and our pledges. But the real prize is that \$400 billion: all the assets we know exist that we could send. We are still unclear on what is stopping the Government from doing it. All I would say to the Minister is this: we have done it before and we can do it again. Where there is a will in this House, we can pass legislation quickly to help the Government. I urge them to come up not just with warm words, but a plan for how they will repurpose the assets and get them to where they are needed before it is too late. If we do not start rebuilding Ukraine now, morale will dip and that itself will affect the war effort.

The leader of the Liberal Democrats' sister party Holos, Kira Rudik, said:

"This is the way we will ensure justice for all and will give a clear signal to other tyrannies about what consequences await them in case of encroachment on other people's property."

The Liberal Democrats continue to be proud to stand shoulder to shoulder against tyranny and will stand with Ukraine until it is victorious. When the Ukrainians are victorious, we will not walk away and leave them to pick up the pieces, or indeed the bill, alone.

6.25 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I would like to start with a word of praise for what was a brilliant opening speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), the shadow Foreign Secretary. He gave the House not just a cry of anger or a plea for solidarity, but a demand for justice. Justice is exactly what the people of Ukraine need and they need it now.

There are three questions at the core of this debate, which were eloquently set out by the shadow Foreign Secretary: a practical question about who pays for violence; a moral question of who is punished; and a political question of how we in this country stay on track and keep pace with our allies. We should start with the question of who pays, because that was where we ended last week at the Ukraine reconstruction conference. As we heard, the bill for reconstruction is now enormous: \$400 billion and counting, a one-third hit to Ukraine GDP, a fiscal deficit that is through the floor and interest rates that are through the roof. Where on earth will that money come from? We give thanks to the Bretton Woods institutions, which, best case, have mobilised something like \$55 billion between them. Notwithstanding the money that was raised, promised, committed and vowed at the reconstruction conference last week, the gap is still enormous. That gap takes us to the question of justice and the requirement on Russia to make good the gap.

Ultimately, we on this continent of Europe are not simply a rules-based order; we are a rights-based order. In the ashes of world war two, we stood together with 10 of our great allies and, on 5 May 1949, founded the Council of Europe, which Churchill declared would hold up

"moral concepts...able to win the respect and recognition of mankind",

a council united behind what Churchill called the charter of human rights

"guarded by freedom and sustained by law."

That is the charter Russia signed in May 1998 and that is the charter it has breached ever since. If we believe in rules, we believe in punishment for those who break the rules. If we believe the aggressor must pay, then we must punish the aggressor. If there is no sanction, sentence, penalty or punishment for those who break the rules, we can expect those rules to be broken time and time and time again. Is that not the lesson that we should learn from even a casual glance at Russia's history: the throttling of Berlin in 1948, the invasion of Hungary, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the invasion of Afghanistan, of Georgia, of Moldova, of Ukraine? When are we ever going to learn the necessity of re-containing Russia? We cannot change the geography of Russia, but we can and we must end Russia's ceaseless choreography of war.

This is no time for the sentence to be deferred. Why should the people of Ukraine wait? Why should they suffer in the sight of their enemies luxuriating in riches while their soldiers die and their children shelter in basements? Why should they watch oligarchs who stole from the people of Russia live high on the hog in their well-tended mansions here in London and elsewhere. Why should the gold of the Russian central bank, all £170 billion of it, sit gathering dust in a vault while the Ukrainian people suffer? That is not justice. Justice deferred is justice denied. Every day that we fail to take action is a day that we fail Ukraine, a day that we fail justice, a day when we neglect our duties to stand up against the brutal code of tyrants who think that might makes right and the strong do what they can while the weak suffer what they must. That is why we have to ensure that Russia picks up the bill for Ukraine's reconstruction today.

That is the case for justice. As for the political case, it is pretty straightforward. Our allies are moving forward in not just freezing but seizing assets; is it not time we moved with them? The United States Senate is moving forward; is it not time we moved with it? The Canadian Government are moving forward; is it not time we moved with them? The President of the European Commission says that the frozen assets of the Russian central bank will be used to pay for reconstruction; is it not time we moved with the EU? Why should we fall behind? Our allies are sending a message to us here in the House—pick up the pace!—and that is the message that we send to the Minister.

It is time for us to crack on. First, as the shadow Foreign Secretary says, we need a Bill to be brought to the Dispatch Box within 90 days. Let us make sure that it amends the State Immunity Act 1978, which gives central banks immunity from jurisdiction and from enforcement. Let us empower Ministers with the authority to make seizure and forfeiture orders. Let us change the relevant terms of international law to safeguard that Bill. Let us move a motion for debate at the UN General Assembly to make it very clear that the majority of states now see the phrase "entitled to immunity" in a different light in different circumstances, now that war has been committed on this scale. To protect ourselves from any attempts to misuse the European convention on human rights, let us immediately begin prosecuting

[Liam Byrne]

Russia for the crime of aggression, so that it cannot pretend that it is in any way some kind of victim in this illegal invasion.

Let me end by saying this. No one in the House forgets their first visit to Kyiv, that glorious city of Europe's eastern border. No one forgets the message that they see emblazoned everywhere, on the posters in the squares, on the trains and in the caf  s: "Be brave like Ukraine." That is the message that the House sends to the Ministers on the Treasury Bench today: "Be brave like Ukraine. Strike a blow for freedom, and send the message from this mother of Parliaments that democracy on this continent will never be defeated."

6.32 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Ukrainians are fighting for their country. They are fighting for their freedom and democracy, they are fighting for our shared values, and they are winning. Yet we must not be complacent: support for Ukraine needs to increase, and to keep increasing. Ukraine is strengthened with our international support.

The question now rightly turns to what will happen when Ukraine wins. Many of the invaded towns and cities have been left in ruins. Mariupol, once a bastion of tourism and the arts, has been turned into a ruin. A centuries-old theatre was completely destroyed. The Russian forces acted barbarically, and it is estimated that nearly 300 civilians were killed. That is only one example among many horrific war crimes that have been committed by Putin's henchmen.

In March, the House rightly debated the seizure of Russian assets. The Government can and must do more to ensure that dirty money and Russian assets do not remain hidden here. London must no longer be the laundromat for oligarch and kleptocrat dirty money. However, that money must be put to good use. The money generated or hidden here for decades has helped to finance the brutal invasion of Ukraine, and for too long a blind eye was turned to it. The Government have a duty to ensure that it is now used to rectify that mistake. Now is the time to start planning how to use the money.

Russian assets should be used to undo the damage and destruction that Putin's army has caused. Nothing will bring back the brave Ukrainian fighters who lost their lives defending their homeland, but we have a duty and a responsibility to honour their sacrifice. We must honour their sacrifice by rebuilding their country; we must honour their sacrifice by ensuring that dirty Russian money is finally put to a good use. Many of the foreign policy mistakes over decades have been caused by Governments failing to plan ahead. This must not be another example. We must not wait until the war is over to start taking action.

Last October, the Government indicated support for repurposing Russian assets, yet there have been no specific proposals. Other countries—our own allies—are taking the first steps to achieve that goal. Time and time again, we hear the Prime Minister say how we are standing shoulder to shoulder with our allies to support Ukraine. Our biggest ally, the United States, has introduced the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act to repurpose frozen Russians assets towards Ukraine, and Canada and the EU are doing

something similar. Our country should be doing the same. We are not standing shoulder to shoulder; we are following when we should be leading—especially as London has long been known as the Russian money laundromat. We need to correct this error.

Since the unjustified and brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine began, I have been delighted by the unity across the House in support of Ukraine, and I hope the same will be true of the efforts to rebuild Ukraine. This motion is the start of that process—a process that will likely go on for years after Ukraine wins—but it is the very least we can do. Putin invaded Ukraine because it dared to be a modern and free-thinking European nation. With our continuing multinational support, Ukraine will win. Russian assets and dirty money hidden here should and must be spent on rebuilding Ukraine for our brave Ukrainian friends, who are fighting for freedom and democracy. It is a war for our shared values, and that makes it our war as well. We must act now.

6.36 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank all my right hon. and hon. Friends, and indeed all Members, who have contributed to it. It has come at a pivotal moment, just a week after the Ukraine reconstruction conference, and at a critical time in Russia's brutal war against the people of Ukraine. I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a shadow Minister.

Today's debate has underscored not only the degree of unity and consensus in the House on the need to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes, but the strong appetite for the UK to go even further. I commend the speeches we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, which had common themes. My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) spoke powerfully about her experience of visiting Ukraine and seeing the destruction. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) set out the record of loss and damage. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) explored how other allies, including Canada, are taking action. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) emphasised the need for urgency—that was a common message in all the speeches today. We heard a powerful speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), with whom I travelled to Ukraine in September last year, about the wider consequences of not acting, the importance of deterrence and the fundamental importance of justice. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) gave a powerful illustration of the loss and destruction in the beautiful country of Ukraine.

We also heard many excellent speeches from the Government side. We had helpful legal clarity from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). We had a useful question from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) about the accrual of interest on the assets that are being held. We heard many other powerful contributions, which all had one common message.

It is beyond doubt that there is only one perpetrator responsible for the unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, and that is Russia and Putin. We all remain

committed to a just and lasting peace based on respect for the UN charter and Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also its future prosperity and the flourishing of its democracy. We all want to see that.

However, intention alone will not bring Ukraine to that destination. We all need to be clear that it will take decades of commitment, determination, consistency and investment to ensure that that happens. Labour has been consistent in calling on the Government to repurpose Russian state assets to help rebuild critical Ukrainian infrastructure, provide much-needed humanitarian aid to the country and invest in its future, and I commend the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) in that regard in his ten-minute rule Bill. We have called for those things because we believe in justice, but we also believe in deterrence—

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I am terribly sorry, but I think I am right in saying that the hon. Gentleman has just walked into the Chamber.

Stephen Doughty: We believe in deterrence not only in relation to Putin, but in relation to others who have egregiously breached the rules-based international order.

I have a great deal of respect for Ministers on these matters. Indeed, we have wholeheartedly welcomed the Government's position on Ukraine, and we continue to show that unity, but we need to be clear that Ministers have not provided the answers. I ask them very directly and very pointedly: what consideration is being given to the seizure, sequestration and repurposing of Russian state-owned assets? I am afraid that our calls have been repeatedly met with haze. We continually hear the phrase "exploring all lawful routes", which has been said to me five, six or seven times in the Chamber and in answer to written questions. We need greater clarity, as Ukraine does not have time to wait. There has been a clear call for urgency today.

The Government need to get on with this. They need to come up with the legislation and the necessary measures to allow frozen Russian state assets to be used to rebuild Ukraine. As our motion says, we hope and believe they can reasonably do this within the next 90 days. I hope the Minister can give us a clear timeline for when we can expect proposals. The President of the European Commission attended the Ukraine recovery conference, and she made it very clear that the EU will come forward with proposals before the summer. I hope we will see the same level of urgency from the Government.

I saw the scale of the damage for myself on my visit to Ukraine last year, and it was utterly shocking to see residential buildings with rocket holes through them and the wanton damage to civilian infrastructure, including railways and roads. We have all seen the terrible scenes at the Kakhovka dam and elsewhere in recent weeks.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), the shadow Foreign Secretary, said, we cannot forget that tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives and millions more are now refugees. This war will leave lasting psychological scars on every Ukrainian.

As I have previously relayed to the House, the Kyiv School of Economics, working in conjunction with the National Bank of Ukraine, estimates that, as of December 2022, the damage to residential and non-residential

infrastructure amounted to \$137 billion. The vice-president of the World Bank has estimated that the figure could be up to \$630 billion, which is treble Ukraine's GDP. This year alone, Ukraine's national budget has a \$38 billion gap.

Of course, before any reconstruction can begin, it will be necessary to clear the huge number of mines and unexploded ordnance that have been scattered across the country, including on the prime agricultural land that feeds not only Ukraine but the world. I commend the HALO Trust and others that do incredible work to deal with mines and unexploded ordnance. The HALO Trust has made it clear to me that it will take more than a month for every day of fighting to clear the ground of unexploded ordnance and munitions. This means that, if the war stopped today, it would take more than 30 years and billions of dollars to make areas safe for habitation and economic activity to begin again. There is also incomprehensible environmental damage. The destruction of the Kakhovka dam will have huge consequences not only for people but for the future ecological welfare of Ukraine, its wildlife and its economy.

We have heard many different arguments today about the legal possibilities, and my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary set out very clearly what is needed. The UN General Assembly has already voted on this issue. A resolution was adopted by last November's special session on Ukraine, setting out a very clear framework for how to proceed. Resolution ES-11/5 recognised that Russia

"must bear the legal consequences of all of its internationally wrongful acts, including making reparation for the injury, including any damage, caused by such acts".

The resolution also called for member states to recognise the need for

"the establishment, in cooperation with Ukraine, of an international mechanism for reparation for damage, loss or injury".

Under international law, this would not be viable in ordinary circumstances but, by explicitly invoking a claim for compensation, the UN resolution clearly satisfies the specific prerequisites of notice and opportunity for Russia to comply.

It is worth noting that, as was referenced earlier, there is clear precedent for such action. A UN compensation commission was established in the case of the first Gulf war, and it paid out \$52.4 billion-worth of Iraqi oil revenues to pay for reconstruction and reparations to Kuwait. Incidentally, Russia supported that resolution.

I hope the Minister can set out his thoughts on the many eminent legal proposals that are out there. There are clear examples of how we could proceed. There are proposals for temporary countermeasures and the temporary suspension of sovereign immunity—there are very clear grounds for that to be done. There are clear precedents in the law of countermeasures and clear grounds in the UN resolution, as well as other historical examples and precedents.

We are under no illusions that this is a complex area, and we recognise that drafting and implementing such legislation is challenging. However, given that extensive evidence out there, will the Minister tell us what review the Attorney General and his Department have made of it? When will he come forward with clear proposals? We heard repeatedly about the work of allies. Canada, the US and the EU have all taken or are taking practical,

[Stephen Doughty]

tangible steps to move in this area, in turning Russia's state-owned assets into the means for Ukraine to forge a brighter future and to meet reconstruction needs now. They are taking the lead and we should be alongside them, as we have been on many other issues, be it on direct military support to Ukraine, humanitarian support or working together on sanctions.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister rightly stated at last week's conference that Russia "must pay" for the damage it has inflicted. He said:

"we're working with allies to explore lawful routes to use Russian assets."

But we need to get on with this now. We must complement warm words with decisive and urgent action, beginning today. Labour is committed to working alongside the Government in their support for Ukraine, in ensuring that it wins this war and defeats Russia. We welcome the commitments made last week, but if we are to be a constructive and objective Opposition, we must make it clear that the UK can and must go further. Therefore, the motion is simple and clear, and if Members support it, it will begin a process that should have started many months ago. Russia forfeited its absolute rights to these assets when it embarked on this egregious, unlawful and unprovoked war of aggression, when it destabilised our continent and when it sought to dismantle the global rules-based order. The consequences not only in this situation, but for many others in the future if we do not act and ensure that there are consequences for Russia for what it has done are very serious and even more wide-ranging. I commend the motion to the House. Let us get on with it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): With the leave of the House, I call the Minister.

6.46 pm

Leo Docherty: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) has had to go away to deal with an urgent welfare issue. So, with the leave of the House, let me begin by thanking all right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for the constructive tone of this debate and for their continued support for Ukraine in the face of Putin's deplorable and illegal invasion. We have heard many thoughtful and considered speeches and interventions. First and foremost, I would like to reiterate our absolute determination to ensure that, fundamentally, Russia pays for the damage it has caused in Ukraine.

I was grateful for the contribution of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), and I will try to cover some of the points he raised. It was welcome that he reiterated the fact that Putin is to blame. We work on the basis that the perpetrator must pay, which is exactly what the Prime Minister outlined last week during the very successful Ukrainian recovery conference.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The Russian economy is worth about \$1.8 trillion, ranking it 11th in the world. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK has a strong legal base and that we need to work with our international

partners so that we can send out a strong message to the Ukrainians today that there is a hope that one day their country will be rebuilt?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for that intervention, as I entirely agree with it. If we look at the work that has been carried out by G7 allies, European nations and other states around the world in constraining the export of Russian hydrocarbons and finding alternative supplies, we see that the European energy picture has changed radically overnight. That was a consequence of allied will and effort. If we bring that same determination to the issues we have discussed today, we can have a very significant impact.

The perpetrator must pay and we are very clear about that. I will come on to what consideration we have given to the various options that have been laid out today, but I should say—

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am nothing if not even-handed. I said to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) that it is not appropriate to come into the Chamber at the end of a debate and then intervene, and that applies to the right hon. Lady as well.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth for laying out the various options. He asked what consideration we have given, give and will continue to give to them. First and foremost, we are working at pace. Our officials were in Brussels earlier this week, liaising with EU officials and looking at various models, so the work is continuing at pace. Clearly, if that were easy we would have done it already, but that does not mean that significant institutional effort and energy is not being put into the matter.

Mr Djanogly: The Minister is speaking about the EU. Is the issue not that at the start of the conflict the UK was leading the pace, particularly in financial services and other areas, but as the war has progressed, we seem to have been waiting for the EU, as he mentioned, and the US to lead the way? Is it not now time for the UK to regain the initiative once again?

Leo Docherty: I respectfully disagree with my hon. Friend's characterisation. We are all looking at these issues. Clearly, the EU has some ideas about the potential use of interest payments on seized assets. That is an idea, not a legally tested, viable route. As the EU is considering that, so are we, which is why our officials were in Brussels earlier this week.

Mr Djanogly: To follow that theme, let us take the question of interest as an issue. That idea has not come out of the EU in the past two months; it has been spoken about for at least six months, but the EU has decided to look at it in the past two months. Has my right hon. Friend not considered that that is something we should have done by now?

Leo Docherty: It is certainly under consideration, but it will depend upon legality. If there is no legality, there is no utility.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being generous. It is welcome that he is having those discussions with our allies in the EU, and I hope he is speaking to the United States and Canada about it as well. Will he give us an idea of the timetable? The motion is very reasonable and specifies 90 days, as we recognise these are complex issues. The EU has committed to coming forward with proposals before the summer break. Will he do the same?

Leo Docherty: I will not commit right now, but I can give an assurance to the hon. Gentleman and the House that we are working at pace, as we recognise that this is an urgent issue. Urgent is what we will be and do, in terms of pushing the business forward.

On a similar theme, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth made some interesting comments about the United Nations General Assembly resolution ES-11/1. We note that resolution and recognise that there are interesting parallels that might be considered with regards to the situation post-war, vis-à-vis Iraq and Kuwait. Of course we will consider that, as we do all other options.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Canadian model. For the clarification of the House, the Canadians use the term “seizure” for freezing. Like the UK, Canada is not yet able to test the lawfulness of any potential seizing fully, as we understand it, through their court system. They have the legislative start, but it has not yet been legally tested. We will keep in touch with our Canadian colleagues as they move forward. He asked what role the Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), might have. He will know that she is much vested in this matter. She has visited Kyiv to look at accountability issues and she will keep colleagues updated as she reviews those issues.

Robbie Moore: In my speech, I mentioned that the Prime Minister had attended the Ukraine recovery conference last week. Does the Minister agree that that demonstrates that the Prime Minister and the Government are taking world leadership on the issue, by bringing together countries from across the world, including EU member states and G7 states, to commit at least £2.5 billion as part of the recovery package for Ukraine, once the war has finished?

Leo Docherty: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Last week was a remarkable show of the convening power of the UK, the tremendous resolve of our Ukrainian friends and the remarkable scale of global support, not just in military hard power but in global capital. When that global capital is mobilised to help Ukraine resurrect itself, that will, in tandem with the military effort, lead to a Ukraine that is sovereign and able to resist all potential future threats. Last week was a great success, but there is more work to do.

Finally, let me say to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth that I am grateful for his reflections on his visit to Ukraine. His insights into the scale of the destruction are very welcome. I am grateful also that he mentioned the HALO Trust, which does heroic work to expedite de-mining. It is 30 years of work, and we are proud to be putting some of our investment into that. It is money extremely well spent. It also speaks to the

horrendous scale of environmental damage that has been wreaked right across the country. I am very grateful overall for the hon. Member's constructive tones.

I should reassure the House that our sanctions have inflicted a severe cost up until this point on Putin for his outrageous imperialist ambitions. In collaboration with key partners, we have now sanctioned more than 1,600 individuals, including 130 oligarchs. We have frozen more than £18 billion-worth of assets in the UK and sanctioned more than £20 billion-worth of UK-Russia goods trade. We will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes in that regard.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister has set out the significant recovery of assets through sanctions, which rather brings us back to the point that the Government have not really been clear about: what is the delay on deciding how and whether those assets can be repurposed for reconstruction in Ukraine? Am I right in thinking that the Government responded to a parliamentary question back in July 2022—so almost a year ago—saying that they were considering all options on assets that have been seized, including whether they can contribute towards the reconstruction of Ukraine? Why is it taking so long? It does create the fear that the Government have considered it, but have not yet come up with the answer.

Leo Docherty: It is taking a long time because it is very complex. There is no straightforward legal route. No other nation has yet come up with a tested legal proposition despite legislative activity. We are therefore moving in tandem with our allies to expedite and find a route, but if it were very simple, we would have done it already.

Through the G7 leaders' statements, we have been very clear that the perpetrator should pay. We have underlined our continued commitment to that objective by introducing new legislation to enable us to keep sanctions in place until Russia compensates Ukraine. Nothing is off the table, as I have already said today, and we continue to work with our international partners on the options for using sanctions for reconstruction purposes. However, of course, if it is not legal, it is not viable and therefore not useful.

Robbie Moore: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Of course, the whole purpose of imposing sanctions is to stifle the economic drive that Russia is undoubtedly using to fund its aggression against Ukraine. Can my hon. Friend confirm that he and the Government are using their ability to encourage other allies to keep their sanctions in place and to take their lead from us?

Leo Docherty: That is a very relevant and good point. We have made the point to colleagues around the world that all allies must stand together to prevent circumvention, because economies more connected and more proximate to Russia face severe economic impact. We do work with allies to ensure compliance and also to prevent circumvention.

As we saw last week, the new measures that were announced during the Ukraine recovery conference marked a significant step forward to driving Ukraine's reconstruction through a number of different ways. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary emphasised the UK's continued commitment to ensuring

[Leo Docherty]

that Russia pays for the reconstruction of Ukraine. The Foreign Secretary announced fresh action to increase the pressure on Putin and his supporters through a series of key measures: first, the new legislation, which I have referred to, enabling us to maintain the sanctions on Russia until Moscow pays compensation to Ukraine; secondly, the development of a route to allow sanctioned individuals to volunteer their money to go to Ukraine to help reconstruction; and, thirdly, under the sanctions regime, delivering a new requirement for sanctioned individuals and entities to disclose assets they hold in the UK.

That, in the round, will ensure that we drive forward, that the perpetrator pays and that we can help our Ukrainian friends to rebuild their magnificent country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House condemns Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine; stands in solidarity with Ukrainians in their resistance to Russia's invasion of their sovereign state; recognises the enormous damage that Russia's invasion has caused to Ukraine's infrastructure, economy and institutions; commends the recent commitments made by the Government to support Ukraine's recovery during the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2023; and calls on the Government to present a Bill before this House within 90 days to allow frozen Russian state assets held in the UK to be repurposed for Ukraine's recovery.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

BUILDING AND BUILDINGS

That the draft Building Safety (Responsible Actors Scheme and Prohibitions) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 25 April, be approved.—(Steve Double.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SANCTIONS

That the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 (S.I., 2023, No. 616), dated 6 June 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.—(Steve Double.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EDUCATION

That the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 (S.I., 2023, No. 602), dated 5 June 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 6 June, be approved.—(Steve Double.)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 28 June (Standing Order No. 41A).

Air Quality: Luton Road, Dunstable

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

7 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is vital for our health that the air we breathe is as clean as possible. When I was on the Select Committee on Health and Social Care, I had the honour to chair the health component of a five-Select Committee report into improving air quality. We should be honest that, unless we are all happy to be a lot poorer, there will always be some difficult compromises involved, but none the less it is right that the Government are committed to improving air quality.

The Government recognise that local action in areas such as transport and planning is key to making the improvements required around the country. Reducing diesel-powered heavy goods vehicle traffic in residential areas and reducing the frequency with which HGVs have to start and stop, which leads to additional concentrations of fine particulate matter caused by brakes and tyres, is a critical part of that action.

On 17 January 2005 an air quality management area was declared in Dunstable by the former South Bedfordshire District Council. The Woodside Link road was first proposed in 2012. At the funding and permissions stages, it was made abundantly clear that reducing traffic, especially HGVs, within the Dunstable AQMA was a key objective of the scheme.

That objective was spelled out in the 2006 air quality action plan, the 2012 Woodside Link consultation document, the 2012 environmental assessment report for the Woodside Link road, the 2012 Central Bedfordshire Council environmental scoping report, the 2013 Woodside connection and Houghton Regis development modelling report, the 2013 local pinch point funding evidence document, the 2013 letter to the chief executive from the South East Midlands local enterprise partnership and the 2015 Woodside Link contract award. I think the Minister will agree that that is irrefutable evidence of what the Woodside Link was intended to do—namely, to provide a direct route for HGVs between the M1 and the Woodside industrial estate. It was not intended to increase traffic in half of Dunstable's AQMA by redistributing HGVs from the high street in Dunstable to Luton Road, yet unfortunately that is what has happened.

The air quality action plan was produced in 2006 and cited the proposed Woodside Link scheme as a means to divert traffic, especially HGVs, away from the AQMA to improve air quality. However—and it is a very significant however—the Woodside Link economic case was published in February 2014, although it does not appear to have been publicly available, and stated:

“The traffic flow forecasts indicate that there is an increase in flows along Luton Road as HGVs re-route in order to access the Woodside industrial area.”

That is highly significant, because the Luton Road is around half of the AQMA. That statement from February 2014 is completely at odds with the document that was put in the public domain on 3 November 2016—namely, the area-wide weight limits report. That report states, at paragraph 15b on page 7:

“An earlier proposal for weight limits in the area was met with opposition from residents of Luton Road. However, it is felt that the completion of the A5-M1 and Woodside Link roads will

mean that heavy traffic in Luton Road will be reduced. It is unlikely that side roads will be used in preference to Luton Road, particularly since the proposal is not expected to increase lorry traffic in Luton Road.”

What the public were told was very clear and stated in multiple documents—fewer HGVs on Luton Road as a result of the Woodside Link—and there it was in black and white. So it appears that Luton Road residents were not given the full facts in the run-up to the decision to build the Woodside Link, which received £5 million of central Government funding.

If we then fast-forward to the 2022 post-opening report for the Woodside Link road, we see that there are no traffic studies available for Luton Road—which, I repeat, is roughly half the AQMA. However, I am grateful to one of my highly assiduous constituents, who has looked at the existing traffic studies on three neighbouring roads—Boscombe Road, Church Street and Poynters Road—and has calculated that there has been an 18% increase in HGVs travelling along Luton Road, following the redistribution of traffic that arose in 2018 from the imposition of weight limits on other roads. Central Bedfordshire Council does not want to use the 18% figure, but has confirmed that it is likely that there has been an increase in HGV traffic along Luton Road. That is highly significant given that a major argument for building the Woodside Link road was to improve air quality across the whole of the AQMA, and certainly not just half of it.

A large number of the people who were identified as the key beneficiaries of the Woodside Link road at the funding stage—residents of Luton Road and nearby—are now worse off as a result of the scheme because increased HGV traffic outside their front doors is not a benefit for air quality purposes. Despite that, Central Bedfordshire Council is reporting to the Department for Transport, in the five-year post-opening report, that all the objectives of the scheme identified at the funding stage have been achieved. My assiduous constituent did not agree with some of the figures in that report. It took him six months of complaining to get the figures changed.

There had been claims that the original figures had been reviewed by the Department for Transport, but it turned out that that was not the case either. My constituent had to request copies of the report under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, and had to wait nine and a half weeks to be provided with a copy. It also needs to be pointed out that the air quality action plan for Dunstable has not been reviewed since its adoption by the former South Bedfordshire District Council in 2006—seventeen years ago. Those plans are supposed to be reviewed every five years.

As MPs, sometimes people come to us about something and there are no easy solutions, but in this case, there is one. Significantly greater use of the Woodside Link road by HGV traffic coming to the Woodside industrial estate and neighbouring industrial developments would provide huge relief. On page 181 in section 13.5, the environmental assessment report for the Woodside Link road, published in October 2012, says of the Woodside Link:

“The route alignments have been designed to maintain substantial distances between existing properties and the new road, where possible.”

The road also includes noise, fencing and bunds. There are significantly fewer residential properties alongside it, and the homes that are alongside it are further away, with some of the protection I have just mentioned.

Coming to the Woodside industrial estate and the neighbouring business developments up the M1 from the south, the additional journey time to go to junction 11A and use the Woodside Link road only takes a few minutes longer than using the Luton Road. The Luton Road is more congested and has many traffic lights on it, causing HGVs to stop and start, producing more diesel fumes and more particulate matter from brakes and tyres.

There is one very significant local business based close to Luton Road which is doing the right thing, and that is Amazon. Amazon sometimes gets criticised as a business, possibly unfairly, but from the very beginning, it has instructed all its delivery drivers to avoid using junction 11, which would necessitate travel along Luton Road, and to use junction 11A instead. That specifically applies to drivers coming up from the south as well. Amazon continues to make that instruction very clear, and is an example of a business behaving responsibly, acting as a good neighbour and caring about local residents’ health. We need other businesses to follow suit.

I salute the patient and studious detective work that my constituent has undertaken to reveal all this information. It is with a desire to seek full transparency, accountability and the remedies necessary to put these issues right that I have brought these matters into the public domain this evening. It should not have taken this long to get this far. Central Government must have a role in overseeing the proper conduct of local government in the noble pursuit of helping people to breathe air that is as clean and pure as possible. It also has a duty to ensure that its money is spent according to the objectives originally stated, with accurate and transparent evaluation of the actual outcomes.

I look to the Minister, who I know is new to this case, to take a serious interest in it and to get into the detail with her officials and Central Bedfordshire Council. As I said, I think there is a solution, and I think we could make life better, as we all originally intended to do.

7.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is correct: I am new to this case and, indeed, to this portfolio. However, this debate has led me to understand some of the monitoring that has been carried out in South West Bedfordshire and the wider area. I thank him for bringing this case to my attention and for giving me the opportunity to set out what the Government are doing to improve air quality, which is a fundamental part of our environmental improvement plan across the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Poor air quality is the greatest environmental threat to health, leading to reduced life expectancy and costing the NHS and society billions of pounds each year, so action from Government is vital. Since 2010, we have achieved significant reductions in major pollutants. I hope my hon. Friend will allow me to talk about some

[Trudy Harrison]

of the positive things that have been achieved, and then I will move on to the specifics of this case, where further interrogation of the monitoring results is clearly needed.

We know that emissions of fine particulate matter, known as PM_{2.5}, are down 10%, emissions of nitrogen oxides are down 45%, and emissions of sulphur dioxide are down 73%. Of course, that is good news and is heading in the right direction, but we must go further. Reducing concentrations of PM_{2.5} in England by just 1 microgram per cubic metre in a single year can prevent around 50,000 cases of coronary heart disease, 15,000 strokes, 9,000 cases of asthma and 4,000 lung cancers over the following 18 years. That is why earlier this year, we set a new maximum annual mean concentration target for PM_{2.5} of 10 micrograms per cubic metre, down from the previous limit of 20 micrograms, to be met by 2040. Alongside that, we set a population exposure reduction target, which will mean that on average, everyone's exposure to that harmful pollutant will fall by over a third by 2040. The measures through which we will meet those stretching targets are set out in the environmental improvement plan, which was published on 31 January this year. That action includes continuing to tackle emissions from domestic burning; challenging councils to improve air quality more quickly; reducing ammonia emissions from farming; and improving our regulatory framework for industrial emissions.

As the environmental improvement plan recognises, councils play a vital role in improving air quality and have the tools and levers to tackle air pollution at a local level. Throughout my hon. Friend's speech, he referenced a particular road, Luton Road, and the good work that a business in his constituency—namely, Amazon—has done by directing its drivers down a different road. Traffic regulation orders are one tool that the local council could potentially look into, and while that is closer to the remit of the Department for Transport, I would be very happy to meet Transport Ministers—probably the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden)—to talk that proposal through.

We are committed to working with local authorities, providing them with clear guidance, funding and tools. On air quality specifically, that includes the air quality grant, which this year provided over £11 million to 44 local projects. Since 2010, we have funded over 500 projects, ranging from anti-idling campaigns around schools to training GPs to become air quality champions. It also includes the £883 million we have made available to help local authorities develop and implement local nitrogen oxide reduction plans and support those impacted by those plans.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's constituent, who seems to be a real champion for improving the air quality in his community. We need those champions—can-do people in the local community who know their area best. It should not be so difficult for people in our communities to get the information and data that they need: even I have struggled to get the data I need to influence policy. That is something that we absolutely need to improve on. The guidance we have provided also includes the revision of our air quality strategy, which we published in April this year. That strategy sets

out how we expect local authorities to use their powers to improve air quality and support delivery of our stretching national targets.

Turning to the Woodside Link, that scheme was completed in 2017 to improve access to housing and other developments in the Dunstable area, with £5 million of Government funding; a further £33 million came from the council and third-party organisations. From the embryonic stages of the link road, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire explained—he will know, because he has been the Member for the area since 2001, all the way through the scheme—local residents were hoping to see a reduction in heavy goods vehicles on that road. The council has shared its “five years on” report with the Department for Transport, and I know that my hon. Friend has raised concerns with that Department, too. The findings and the impacts of the scheme are matters for Central Bedfordshire Council, but I am very happy to take this issue up with it, and I of course recommend that my hon. Friend continues to engage most assiduously with the council on it.

Luton Road is part of Central Bedfordshire Council's declared air quality management area. The air quality management area was declared in 2005, due to exceedances of the nitrogen dioxide air quality objectives from roadside emissions. I am pleased that Central Bedfordshire Council has stated in its latest annual progress reports to us that the levels of nitrogen dioxide on Luton Road have been compliant with objectives since 2018. My understanding, however, is that there is not a monitor for PM_{2.5} on Luton Road.

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful for the Minister's interest and I would like to take up the offer of a meeting with the roads Minister and her to try to work with the local authority, because I think we can move forward to make things better. I think at the heart of this is the public statement

“that heavy traffic in Luton Road will be reduced.”

That has not happened, and that is where the anger comes from. More HGVs belching out diesel fumes when stopping and starting at lights means worse air quality. We will need to measure where I looked before and after, but it must have got worse: more HGVs means the air quality gets worse if someone's front door is next to a busy road such as that. That is where I think the disappointment and the anger is. The Government do need to be transparent, honest and straightforward, and if we have not achieved what we said we were going to, we need to go back and do a proper post-evaluation report and see what we can do to put it right. Would she not agree with me about that as an approach?

Trudy Harrison: I would certainly agree with the local MP, who has served the area since 2001. He has seen this project through to fruition and absolutely understands the concerns—first, the promises made to his constituents, and now the concerns—about increased traffic and therefore increased emissions. While the Department for Transport does have a comprehensive plan to decarbonise the transport sector, including heavy goods vehicles, we are not there yet. As I have set out, air quality is a fundamental and vital part of our ability to survive and thrive, and it is critically impacting on the health of our nation.

I look forward to meeting to speak in more detail with my hon. Friend, the roads Minister and perhaps members or officials from Central Bedfordshire Council to see how we can assist. I will also remind the council that the action plan for the Luton Road air quality management area dates from 2006. That has not been updated by Luton Council. I am pleased to say that, last year, we strengthened the Environment Act 2021 by introducing a new escalation process.

Andrew Selous: I appreciate that this is a long way from the Minister's constituency, but the council that has not updated the action plan is Central Bedfordshire Council. This is about Luton Road, but that is within Central Bedfordshire Council, which is the local authority.

Trudy Harrison: I thank my hon. Friend for that correction. There has been a new escalation process for local authorities behind on their reporting duties, including where air quality action plans have not recently been updated, and that will come into force on 30 June.

I can assure my hon. Friend that, even after compliance with the legal air quality objectives has been secured, we do expect local authorities to continue to act to improve

air quality. As we set out recently in the air quality strategy, we fully expect councils to take action to reduce emissions of PM_{2.5} from sources within their control. If we consider that the action from councils is insufficient, we will consult on introducing a stand-alone legal duty on local authorities to take action to reduce PM_{2.5} emissions.

I thank my hon. Friend again for raising this important issue and for giving me reason to look into our monitoring across the country, particularly the monitoring undertaken in his constituency and specifically on Luton Road. I hope that I have reassured him that we are taking comprehensive and necessary action to drive down harmful emissions, but there is always more to do. We are doing this at both national and local level, protecting our people's health and our environment, and I look forward to following up with my hon. Friend to discuss this in much more detail.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 27 June 2023

[DAME MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

Import and Sale of Fur

[*Relevant document: e-petition 630751, Retain bans on cat, dog, seal fur imports, and extend to ban all fur imports.*]

9.30 am

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the import and sale of fur.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. As Members are aware, the welfare and protection of animals is an issue that our constituents care deeply about. In this country, we have a proud track record of leading the charge on the international stage in animal protection law. Only last year, we marked the bicentenary of the UK's first animal protection law—indeed, the first national animal protection law in the world—the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act 1822, known as Martin's Act. We in the UK lead the way.

In our ever-more connected world, British people are both informed about and concerned by the plight of animals, not just in this country but overseas, and we are rightly and especially concerned when animals suffer overseas to be turned into products that eventually reach the UK as a consumer market or important trading hub. Today's debate is about our current double standard. In the UK, fur farming is banned on the grounds of ethics and welfare, but we continue to allow the import of farmed fur from animals that have suffered overseas. The debate is about recognising that when it comes to protecting the welfare of sentient animals, it is not enough simply to prevent cruelties occurring in our own backyard. We must look beyond our shores and ensure that we do not perpetuate the infliction of cruelty overseas by trading in cruel products such as fur.

The Government's 2021 action plan for animal welfare pledged to explore action on the UK fur trade. It noted that although it is illegal to import seal, cat and dog fur, "it is still possible to import other fur from abroad".

In June 2021, the Government conducted a call for evidence on the fur market that received almost 30,000 responses, although they have not yet released a summary of those responses or a policy position. I hope we might have some progress on that point, and to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister about it today.

Today's debate on the UK fur trade might be seen as a debate about an animal welfare problem. Indeed, animal welfare will feature significantly in my remarks. However, it is also a debate about the trade in an unsustainable product that causes great environmental harm and the production of which carries significant and extremely concerning human health risks through a strong association with the spread of zoonotic diseases, including covid-19. But let us begin with the animals themselves and their experience in the global fur trade.

Fur farming has rightly been banned across all nations of the UK since 2003. We were the first country in the world to ban it and we blazed a trail that 18 countries

have followed, with legislation for fur farming bans currently progressing through the Parliaments of Romania and Lithuania. The shrinking list of countries that continue to allow the farming of animals for their fur includes Finland, Poland and China. Across all countries where animals are farmed for their fur, the conditions are broadly similar.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate on an important issue that our constituents care deeply about. He talks about other countries that have continued to farm fur, but of course here we have a ceremonial hat worn by the King's Guard that is made from the pelt of Canadian brown bears. Is it time to look for alternatives, given that right in the centre of any big parade we have that symbol of cruelty to animals?

Giles Watling: I am glad the hon. Lady mentioned the fur cap. I think it takes one bear to produce one cap. A lot of the caps are ancient and historic, but we now have alternative products that are very effective and hard wearing. There is no reason why we cannot move to that. We will need to talk to the Ministry of Defence about that and take it further. It is something I would be glad to pick up, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Let me return to the condition of animals on fur farms, including foxes, raccoon dogs, mink and chinchillas, which are kept in wire battery cages that typically are no larger than 1 square metre, according to the industry's own literature. They spend their short lives—typically around eight to nine months—in such cages. They are never permitted to run, dig, swim or hunt, or to engage in any of the other behaviours known to be vital to their physical and mental welfare.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing such an important debate. He is making extremely powerful comments, but what does he make of the comments of Mike Moser, the former chief executive officer of the British Fur Trade Association and former director of standards at the International Fur Federation? Mike Moser spent 10 years defending the fur trade, but he now dedicates his life to being an anti-fur campaigner, and he confessed that

"neither welfare regulations nor any industry certification scheme, would ever change the reality of these animals being stuck in tiny wire cages for their entire lives."

Do not those comments add to the argument that there is no such thing as humane fur farming?

Giles Watling: I could not agree more. In fact, I shall use that very quote later in my speech. The hon. Member will find that we agree wholeheartedly on the issue.

Specifically in the case of mink, of which an estimated 20 million a year are farmed in tiny wire cages, veterinarians and welfare experts point out that as they are naturally solitary and wide-ranging animals in the wild, being kept row upon row, just centimetres from their equally unfortunate neighbours, is doubtless very stressful for them. Such an environment, and such cramped and barren conditions, comprehensively fail all scientific measures used to ensure that animals are kept in conditions that meet their welfare needs, such as the five freedoms of animal welfare and the five domains. Unsurprisingly,

[Giles Watling]

such conditions lead to physical and psychological suffering. The suffering in those cages is ubiquitous, and the fur industry builds into its so-called welfare assurance schemes an ambition to keep the percentage of animals suffering from diarrhoea, purulent discharge from the eyes, obvious skin lesions, and severe gum or tooth infections to less than 10%.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I echo the comments of colleagues in congratulating the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he share the concerns of some about the impact of fur farms, which become reservoirs of disease, on human health? We need only look to our experience of the recent pandemic in that regard. That experience is another good reason for the UK Government to take the steps the hon. Gentleman is advocating.

Giles Watling: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, although we seem to be on a repeat cycle as I shall refer to those very issues later in my speech. I think he will be glad to hear my remarks.

Such health problems are widespread on fur farms and are the result of the grossly inadequate conditions in which the animals are forced to live. Investigations by organisations such as Humane Society International, to which I am incredibly grateful for its support during my preparation for the debate, repeatedly show the mental suffering of those wild animals, including a high frequency of stereotypical behaviours such as pacing and rocking as well as self-mutilation and cannibalism. Despite what the fur trade might like consumers to believe, there is no such thing as humane fur farming. Industry-led assurance schemes of high welfare fur farming permit a wide range of cruel practices, including the use of battery cages and cruel traps, such as leg-hold traps and even drowning traps for beavers.

At the end of their tragic lives, mink are typically gassed to death—veterinarians tell me that that is aversive to them, which of course it is, and that it causes suffering, which of course it does—while foxes and raccoon dogs are mostly anally electrocuted. Sickeningly, investigations, including one by Humane Society International in 2020 in China, show that animals are crudely beaten to death with metal poles and even skinned alive.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member is making a fine speech. What brought the issue home to me was something that happened at school when I was 14 or 15. Our physics teacher, Mr Thompson, took an amber rod and showed us that rubbing it would produce a positive charge, but what he rubbed it with shook me to the core. It was a pussycat skin. He had a box of skins. He said, “It is all right; they came from abroad.” The hon. Member mentioned wild animals; that was a domestic moggy, somebody’s cat. That is what put me right off. Like the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), I have had numerous messages from constituents on the subject.

Giles Watling: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right: it does not matter where these skins come from, we should take it very seriously and consider legislating heavily against it.

Could fur production be made humane? The simple and truthful answer is “no”, because the fur trade’s economic model remains completely reliant on battery cages. There is no humane alternative to the fur trade’s model of intensive confinement. When the Governments of Germany and Sweden brought in laws requiring that foxes be given digging substrate and, in Germany, that minks be provided with swimming water, the respective segments of the industry in those countries closed down, as it was no longer economically viable to meet the requirements of those sensible laws.

It is not only animal protection organisations, such as the HSI and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, that are calling time on the fur trade. The former CEO of the British Fur Trade Association, Mike Moser, who was mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), resigned after 10 years defending the fur trade. In September 2020, he publicly pledged his support for the Fur Free Britain campaign to ban fur sales in the UK. It is worth reading his statement again:

“Over time I realised that whatever soundbites we devised to reassure consumers, retailers and politicians, neither welfare regulations nor any industry certification scheme, would ever change the reality of these animals being stuck in tiny wire cages for their entire lives.”

That is a good point, well made. An estimated 95% of fur traded—the majority—is from animals kept on fur farms.

Let us move on to wild animals. Wild animals trapped for their fur suffer different but similarly awful plights. In countries including the USA and Canada, such animals are frequently caught cruel leg-hold traps that have been banned in the UK since the 1950s. Animals such as coyotes and raccoons can suffer for days in those traps before they eventually succumb to the elements or dehydration or are killed. Horrifically, it is not uncommon for animals to rip or chew off limbs in a bid to escape. Such suffering is impossible to imagine, all for the purpose of a sentient creature ending up as the trim on a jacket hood or fur cap.

The case against the cruelty of the fur trade is straightforward. Less commonly understood, perhaps, is that fur farms can act as a reservoir for viruses and present a risk to public health, as the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) mentioned earlier. More than 480 fur farms across Europe and north America have been affected by outbreaks of covid-19 over the past three years, with six countries confirming spillover events from fur farms back to humans. Some 20 million animals were culled to protect public health, but mink farming continues in several countries across Europe and beyond.

An outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza on a mink farm in Spain last autumn further raised pandemic fears, with virologists from Imperial College, London, writing that it is “incredibly concerning” and “a warning bell” for humanity. A recent statement by the World Organisation for Animal Health warns:

“Some animals, such as mink, may act as mixing vessels for different influenza viruses, leading to the emergence of new strains and subtypes that could be more harmful to animals and/or humans. Recently reported infections in farmed mink are a concern, because infections of large numbers of mammals kept in close proximity of each other exacerbate this risk.”

By importing animal fur, we are importing cruelty, and we are facilitating a trade that could very well be the source of the next pandemic.

Lastly, let me outline briefly a final, compelling reason for the Government to act to end the UK fur trade: its sizeable environmental footprint. A new report published by Humane Society International has found that among the eight materials considered, fur from minks, foxes and racoon dogs had the highest air emissions, greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption and water pollution per kilogram. The carbon footprint of 1 kg of mink fur was found to be 31 times higher than that of 1 kg of cotton, and the water consumption in fur production was found to be five times higher than that for cotton, with a kilogram of fur requiring a staggering 29,130 litres of water. The fur trade is bad news for animals, bad news for human health and bad news for the environment. An import ban, as they say in the vernacular, is a no-brainer.

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to take part in the debate.

9.46 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): By means of an intervention, I have already said what I said about my teacher, Mr Thompson. The main point I will make is that that was then. I am quite old; that was an education in the late '60s, in the hands of Scotland at Tain Royal Academy. Things change over time. That is precisely why the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) made the speech that he just did: things change and human opinions change. If someone talked to my three children, they would find the whole idea of the fur trade or breeding any animal to kill it by some ghastly means simply to have its skin, as has been outlined, abhorrent. There is a sense of decency out there, and I am proud that our country is saying what it is saying, and it has a lot more to say. We await the Minister's response with great interest.

There is a sort of moral high ground. We are a nation of animal lovers, which is precisely why my constituents have been in touch with me in the way that they have. I take this opportunity to put on the record that I thank them for saying those things. I hope that we can spread the word to other nations that it is absolutely out of order to do what the hon. Member for Clacton told us about. We have only one planet together, and we are all—pretty much—sentient beings.

I have a much-loved pet cat at home called Hattie, which gives my wife and myself great pleasure; the same is true of everyone who has a pet, or, indeed, if I look out the window and see a blackbird hopping about or just a wild animal. In my constituency, we are blessed with an enormous amount of wildlife, from deer to badgers to otters, and even the occasional roving beaver, so I am led to understand. We all love that, and it makes our lives worth living.

This is a short contribution, but I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Clacton for raising the matter today. It is an honourable cause, and well done to him; I hope his constituents will see the good work he does.

9.48 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Like the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), I did not plan to make a speech this

morning, but I take the opportunity to congratulate both the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) on introducing the debate and the other Members who took the time to participate.

We are a number of nations—four nations—of animal lovers. Since we are mentioning pets, I do not think my own pet has been on the record before, so I will ensure that I mention Wee Jean, who, in 2019, won Westminster Dog of the Year—so I will get Wee Jean on the record.

Jamie Stone: I will just point out that several years ago my cat Hattie was runner-up for the Cat of the Year award.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Member for that.

On a more serious point, we rarely have constituents getting in touch—in fact, I never have—to say “Can we keep fur imports? Can we continue doing this?” On almost everything, we usually get constituents getting in touch on both sides of the debate, so we can say that in this case the issue quite clearly has the support of the public. Many high-street brands have already banned fur, and I believe that Marks and Spencer, H&M and Adidas have all taken a stand against it. There is no reason why we need it, because there are perfectly acceptable alternatives.

I mentioned Canadian bears—I think I said the Canadian brown bear, but I meant to say the Canadian black bear, whose fur is used for hats. There are alternatives. Last year, a group brought an alternative into Parliament and said that it had been tested under lots of different conditions. The group felt that it was just stubbornness and refusal to give up tradition that meant we were continuing to use real Canadian black bear pelts for hats. We need to move on. There is no reason to be doing this.

One thing the hon. Member for Clacton did not mention was foie gras. It is a cruel method of production for a luxury food item that really is not required.

I will mention one other thing. Just a few months ago, the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) successfully introduced the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill and got the support of the House. That was a real show of cross-party strength on an issue, and I think we can do the same for fur. I thank the hon. Member for Clacton once again for bringing forward this issue, and I look forward to other Members' contributions.

9.51 am

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this morning, Dame Maria. I thank all Members for their contributions to the debate, and the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) for leading it. Many of my constituents across Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill have written to me on the issue and have signed e-petition 602285 on the import and sale of fur.

Banning imports of animal fur is a crucial step in upholding high standards of animal welfare. If we are to pride ourselves on our commitment to compassion and ethical practice, we must take action now to ensure that our actions are aligned with our words. The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 was heralded by all at the

[Steven Bonnar]

time, and rightly so, but fur production has long been associated with acts of animal cruelty and unnecessary animal suffering.

The Government talk the talk, but they have dropped the ball completely on animal welfare with the shelving of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. Last year, rumours were swirling around the UK that the Government could back out of their promise to ban the importation of fur. At the time, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs corrected the reports, saying:

“Future legislation to ban the imports of fur and foie gras has not been ‘dropped’”.

It said that the legislation faced a lack of progress due to “limited Parliamentary time”. Considering how early the House’s business has collapsed in recent weeks, we know that not to be the case, don’t we, colleagues?

As the hon. Member for Clacton said, the UK has historically been a leader on animal rights, becoming the first European nation to ban fur farming on ethical grounds back in 2003. As consumers become more concerned about animal welfare, public health and the environment, the demand for fur products is thankfully decreasing, but the United Kingdom still imported around £55 million-worth of fur in 2019 alone, according to the UK charity coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link.

We know that there is strong public backing for a UK fur sales ban. Over 1.1 million signatures have now been collected to date, with a poll from April 2022 showing that 77% of UK voters think that the Government should ban the importation of animal products such as fur.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Member and I were no supporters of Brexit, but much of the talk following Brexit has been about how the UK Government are going to place animal welfare at the top of their international trade policy. Would banning the import of fur not be a huge statement that furthered that agenda considerably?

Steven Bonnar: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. The Department for International Trade has a big part to play: I would like to see a clause in our free trade deals that says that they will not be implemented if the country is involved in these practices. I will come on to a wee bit of that later on.

Early-day motion 929, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), calls for faux fur to be used so that bears are not slaughtered for fur to make ceremonial hats. The Ministry of Defence pays more than £1,700 per bearskin, and in response to a letter it said that 110 caps made from bearskin had been purchased in 2020 at a cost of £145,000 to the taxpayer, and that in 2021 a further 23 bearskin caps were purchased at a total cost of £40,000. The use of bear fur is not only wrong but a colossal waste of taxpayers’ money, particularly at a time when so many people out there are struggling to buy basic necessities. The SNP fully supports replacing those ceremonial hats with indistinguishable fake fur. As has been highlighted, there are alternatives that do not involve the suffering of wildlife to meet the fashion requirements of the MOD.

Giles Watling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that very good point about the fur caps that the military wear. I am sure he agrees that there are also more cost-effective ways of producing that fur.

Steven Bonnar: It is on the record that there are far more cost-effective ways of doing that, and faux fur caps last a lot longer too, so I am absolutely behind that. Nobody wants to take away the pomp and pageantry. Some people like it, and we respect the fact that it matters to people here, but there is no need for animal suffering.

The early-day motion states that the continued use of bearskin from wild bears impedes the UK Government’s efforts to strengthen animal welfare legislation and improve animal rights. That cruelty and maltreatment must not continue unabated, given that faux fur is a cruelty-free and more cost-effective alternative, as the hon. Gentleman has just outlined.

Despite all that, and despite calls from the length and breadth of the UK to protect animals and choose the humane option, the MOD has not moved. In June, the Government stated:

“The use of faux fur products for future requirements remains under review.”

That is not good enough. The Ministry of Defence uses not only bear for ceremonial caps, but black fox skin, and rabbit, beaver and hare fur, for various other items of uniform. We believe that the Ministry of Defence has serious questions to answer, and so does the Department for International Trade.

As the regulation of international trade remains a reserved matter, this is a decision that the UK Government must take on behalf of all nations of the UK. The SNP urges the Government to make the right decision, listen to the people and to morality, and prohibit the import of any new fur products. Furthermore, we call on the Department for International Trade to introduce a ban before it negotiates and signs any more free trade deals with fur-exporting nations. The challenges we face must not be used to oppose a ban, as is currently happening in some quarters. We also do not want to find ourselves bound by the terms of any trade agreement that makes a fur ban more difficult to introduce, so we must have guarantees that such terms will never be used as a bargaining chip in any negotiations.

I remind those who argue that this issue is insignificant compared with other pressing concerns that our treatment of animals speaks volumes about our society. The way we treat the most vulnerable among us, including animals, reflects our collective character. By banning fur imports, we would reaffirm our commitment to empathy and compassion, and foster a society that values the inherent worth of all sentient beings. The time has come for the United Kingdom to take that bold step and ban the import of animal fur.

9.59 am

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) for securing this important debate, and particularly for his point about the environmental footprint of fur, which, as he rightly points out, involves water and carbon usage far in excess of any other type of clothing.

I will start with a quotation:

“The UK has a world-leading record on animal welfare, and over the last decade the Government has introduced a range of measures to ensure we offer animals the care, respect and protection they deserve.”

Those were the words of the then Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), as he launched his party’s action plan on animal welfare. I wonder how the Conservative party feels about those words now. The Government have dropped the kept animals Bill and abandoned the animals abroad Bill—two pieces of legislation that promised to cement the UK’s reputation as a global leader in animal welfare. It raises questions about whether the Government genuinely care about animal welfare.

As I am sure is the case for everyone here, my office has been inundated with correspondence from concerned constituents expressing their deep distress and disappointment with the Government’s decision to scrap their promises and renege on animal welfare measures. In particular, there is great concern about the importation of fur to our country, effectively outsourcing animal cruelty and suffering overseas—a measure that would have been included in the Bills that I mentioned. It is pertinent to remind the House that in February, DEFRA released a statement confirming:

“Future legislation to ban the imports of fur and foie gras has not been ‘dropped’”.

We now need the Minister to provide us with a straight answer on this and shed some light on why this legislation has not come forward. Has it been abandoned? I think we would all like to know.

We have had some excellent contributions. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) made a moral case, reminding us that the UK is a nation of animal lovers. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) made the point that no constituent has ever asked us to keep the importation of fur and that alternatives are widely available. This is an “unethical”, “outdated”, “cruel” and “out-of-touch” practice—those were the words of 79% of people surveyed by YouGov in a 2020 poll about wearing real animal fur. The survey found that 93% of the British public are opposed to wearing real animal fur.

It is not just the general public. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and the hon. Member for Clacton said, the former CEO of the British Fur Trade Association, Mike Moser, has pledged his support for a ban, stating:

“Over time I realised that whatever soundbites we devised to reassure consumers, retailers and politicians, neither welfare regulations nor any industry certification scheme, would ever change the reality of these animals being stuck in tiny wire cages for their entire lives”.

I have never seen such a flip from a leading exponent of a practice and industry as Mike Moser’s. That shows the need to reflect not just in the UK, but internationally, about the practice of fur farming.

Back in 2018, the Government claimed that advancing a ban on imported fur would be unlikely because of our membership of the EU. They touted Brexit as an opportunity to get the job done and promised us again that they would ban fur imports in their last manifesto in 2019. Regrettably, it seems that the opinions of the British public and experts in the field such as HSI, Four Paws, Dogs Trust, the RSPCA and Cats Protection, as

well as leading international experts such as the World Organisation for Animal Health, hold little sway with the Government.

Just last week, we had Conservative MPs blocking Labour’s motion to revive the kept animals Bill, which would have outlawed fur imports. Instead, they chose to disregard animal welfare again, reneging on their own manifesto pledge and dismissing the will of the people who voted for them. Their party is out of touch and, I am afraid, out of time.

Two decades have now passed since fur farming was banned in the UK. I am proud to confirm once again that a Labour Government would take the necessary action on the importation of fur into Britain. We are committed to this. Unlike the current Government, we would base our actions on evidence, advice and morality. The Labour party has a clear plan for protecting animal welfare and looks forward to honouring the will of this nation of animal lovers. A Labour Britain will be a compassionate, fur-free Britain.

10.4 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. It has been less of a pleasure, in many ways, to listen to colleagues’ accounts, but I thank all Members for raising awareness, which is absolutely necessary, about some of the ways animals have been kept and treated in the production of fur.

I would particularly like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) for his evidence-based, exceptionally well-written and powerful speech, and to ensure that the record remembers his work for decades on the subject of animal welfare, in this place and well before coming to this place. I thank all colleagues for bringing to our attention accounts that are deeply awful but necessary to face. I do feel that ignorance—simply not knowing about the conditions in which some fur-farmed animals are kept and the way they have been so cruelly treated and killed—would lead to the purchase of these products. Of course, this debate has expanded well beyond animal welfare to include biosecurity and environmental impacts.

As I think every speaker said, we are a nation of animal lovers. Animal welfare has been a really significant priority for the Government since 2010. Already, our standards of animal welfare are world-leading: according to the World Animal Protection International animal protection index, they are not just the best in the G7, but the best in the world. I was pleased to hear such a focus by colleagues across the House on this area today.

Since 2010, we have raised animal welfare standards for farm animals, companion animals and wild animals. The most notable legislative measures already taken include the banning of traditional battery cages for laying hens and the raising of standards for chickens to be consumed for meat. We have implemented and upgraded welfare standards at slaughterhouses and introduced CCTV. Further steps include the revamped local authority licensing regime for commercial pet services including selling, dog breeding, boarding and animal displays. We banned third party puppy and kitten sales through Lucy’s law. We introduced protections for service animals through Finn’s law. We introduced offences for horse fly-grazing and abandonment. We also banned wild animals in travelling circuses.

[Trudy Harrison]

Our manifesto commitments demonstrate the ambition to go further on animal welfare. In 2018, we committed to bringing in new laws on animal sentience; introducing tougher sentences for animal cruelty; implementing the Ivory Act 2018 and extending it to other species; ensuring that animal welfare standards are not compromised in trade deals; cracking down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies; bringing forward cat microchipping; banning the keeping of primates as pets; and banning imports of hunting trophies from endangered species.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) referred to the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith). It is making sterling progress through the House, as are other private Members' Bills—there is the work that the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) is doing on the banning of shark fins, and the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) is doing through her Bill to improve animal welfare abroad in relation to advertisements.

Nadia Whittome: It is clear from the Minister's words that she understands the importance of animal welfare and the impact that fur farming has, not just on animal welfare but on the environment and public health. Given that, can she tell us a date by which the Government will introduce an import ban on fur?

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. If she can be patient for just a couple more minutes, I will go into more detail about the response to the call for evidence—30,000 people responded—and the next steps in this process, but I would like to continue to explain the Government's progress so far. We have also banned the cruel shipment of live animals, or rather there has been no shipment of live animals for fattening and slaughtering since 2020. We want this to continue, and that is absolutely why we will be bringing forward legislation in the very near future—certainly before the end of this Parliament—to ensure that it continues. We also want to ensure that, in return for funding, farmers safeguard high standards of animal welfare.

We have already delivered many of the manifesto commitments. The Government have increased penalties for those convicted of animal cruelty. We passed the Animal Welfare Sentience Act 2022 and launched a dedicated Animal Sentience Committee. We made microchipping compulsory for cats as well as dogs. We also announced an extension to the Ivory Act 2018, which came into force last year, covering five more endangered species: hippopotamus, narwhal, killer whale, sperm whale and walrus.

On top of our manifesto commitments, in 2021 we published our ambitious and comprehensive action plan for animal welfare. The plan includes about 40 different actions—steady progress is being made on the vast majority—and sets out the work we are focused on pursuing throughout this parliamentary term and beyond. Our action plan covers farmed animals, wild animals, pets and sporting animals, and it includes legislative and non-legislative reforms relating to activities in this country and abroad. Most recently, the Government supported a private Member's Bill that paves the way

for penalty notices to be applied to animal welfare offences, and we are consulting on how we should do that. We have also banned glue traps and given the police additional powers to tackle hare coursing.

As well as legislating, we have launched the pioneering animal health and welfare pathway, which sets out the way forward for improving farm animal welfare for years to come, building on the work that we have already done to improve conditions for sheep, cattle and chickens. With the pathway, we are working in partnership with industry to transform farm animal welfare, through annual health and welfare reviews with a vet of choice, supported by financial grants.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) invited me to provide updates and reassurance on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. The reason that I went through our impressive track record on animal welfare was to convey confidence to Members across this House that what we set out in our 2019 manifesto will be delivered. It will not be delivered through a single Bill, because we have encountered numerous difficulties in trying to achieve that. As I said last week, the important thing is that we deliver our commitments successfully and swiftly, so we have announced that measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill will be taken forward individually during the remainder of this term.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that the King's Speech later this year will be followed by a ballot. Private Members' Bills will then be supported by officials in DEFRA, along with other single-issue Bills, statutory instruments, legislative programmes, secondary legislation, regulation and reforms with industry.

Alex Sobel: What will the Minister do if, in the private Member's ballot, no Member wishes to bring forward a Bill to ban the importation of fur?

Trudy Harrison: I regard that to be an incredibly low risk—nigh on impossible—given the interest that we have already had from Members looking to pursue such private Members' Bills. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman encourages Opposition Members to apply to take a Bill forward. I can guarantee that officials in DEFRA will work incredibly diligently, as they always do, to support Members with their private Members' Bills to ensure that they are robust, evidence-based and make the necessary progress across both Houses.

Giles Watling: I, like many others across both sides of this House, was disappointed when the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was dropped. I listened very carefully to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries when he made that announcement. My understanding is that parts of that Bill will be going through as legislation. I ask the Minister how many parts will become legislation and will the Bill eventually go through in its entirety?

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend allows me to say that there were six measures listed in the manifesto, and all six will be acted on through various legislative means, including primary and secondary legislation, regulation and reforms with the industry. I will be happy to meet with my hon. Friend to provide further detail, and to encourage him to submit an application in the ballot

after the King's Speech later this year. I reiterate that officials across DEFRA will provide support to ensure that Bills are delivered successfully, swiftly and in the best interests of animal welfare.

Carol Monaghan: The Minister is detailing a lot of the legislation that has passed, and we are all thankful for what has been done so far, but surely it should not be up to private Members' Bills to make the required changes in matters such as importing fur.

Trudy Harrison: I undertook my own private Member's Bill to ban wild animals in circuses, and I certainly found it was a rewarding way to spend my time in Parliament. The hon. Lady does not do justice to private Members' Bills by speaking ill of them. The record is there: they are incredibly successful at gaining Royal Assent and transitioning into Acts of Parliament, and making a tremendous difference.

Carol Monaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Trudy Harrison: I would like to make some progress on the subject of the debate brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton, but I will give way.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister. To clarify, I did not speak ill of any hon. Members bringing Bills forward; my point was that the Government should not be relying on Members to bring them forward. They should be part of the Government's legislative programme.

Trudy Harrison: As I said, private Members' Bills will be supported, enabled and progressed by the Government. Their success to date reinforces why I am looking forward to working with hon. Members as they bring their Bills forward. The most important thing is that measures are enacted successfully and swiftly.

As hon. Members know, fur farming has been banned domestically for over 20 years. Our legislation prohibits the keeping and breeding of animals solely or primarily for slaughter for the value of their fur. Consumer protection laws means that information given to consumers must be accurate and not misleading. As a consequence, real fur must not be sold as faux fur. We also have strict restrictions on some skin and fur products that may never be legally imported into the UK. Those include fur and fur products from cats and dogs, whose import, export and placing on the market is prohibited. Seal products, including fur and fur products, may be imported and placed on the UK market for sale only in very limited, strict conditions. They are otherwise prohibited.

We have well-established controls in place on fur from endangered species, which are protected by the convention on international trade in endangered species. We also do not allow imports of fur from wild animals caught using methods that are non-compliant with international humane trapping standards. We recognise that some countries and territories have chosen to impose restrictions on trade in fur. We will watch developments on the European citizens' initiative "fur free Europe" petition with a keen eye.

Although fur cannot be farmed in this country—quite rightly—and the import and sale of fur from some species is prohibited, it is still possible, as hon. Members have discussed, to import and sell other types of fur from abroad, including products from caged production.

It is also possible to re-export fur and fur products that have been imported. It is a complex picture, but we have begun a course of action. In our action plan for animal welfare, the Government committed to exploring potential action in the area. In line with our commitment to improving animal welfare standards, we have sought to build on our evidence. We have sought the perspective of the public, and reached out to both animal welfare organisations and organisations directly involved in the fur trade.

DEFRA published a formal call for evidence on the fur trade in Great Britain in 2021. Launched jointly with the Scottish and Welsh Governments, it asked for views on animal welfare and on the social and economic impacts associated with the trade, both on our shores and overseas. This is a key step in helping us to improve our understanding of the fur sector. In particular, we sought views on the scale and nature of domestic fur sector activity, including trading; the scale and nature of fur sector activities abroad, which are integral to our existing domestic fur sector; and individuals' attitudes towards the domestic fur sector.

We received around 30,000 responses from businesses, representative bodies and individuals. Officials have been analysing the responses we received and have engaged directly with stakeholders to develop further our understanding of the sector; this includes meeting key representatives and animal welfare groups. We would like to use the evidence gathered to inform future action on the fur trade. A summary of responses to the call for evidence, setting out the results and the next steps in this policy space, will be published very soon.

Members rightly acknowledged the importance of biosecurity, so I will touch on some aspects of that. We note the reference to the report by Humane Society International and will consider it as part of the evidence-building process, along with other sources. As I think has been recognised today, covid-19 and its significant global impact reminds us of the importance of the interaction between humans, animals and the environment at all times and in all places. We all need to work together globally to understand better how our behaviour, our supply chains and our cultures change these interactions and create risks. We are aware of concerns around disease risks associated with the fur trade, and we will continue to gather evidence on that issue.

It is vital that any future policies are developed on the basis of robust evidence. We will continue to build the evidence base on fur, which will inform potential future action on the fur trade. Far from evidence-gathering being abandoned, I can confirm today that this process includes commissioning a report from our experts on the Animal Welfare Committee, who have done tremendous work for a number of years now. They will consider the issue of responsible sourcing in the fur industry, including the animal welfare standards and safeguards that apply to fur imported into this country. Given what we have heard today from Members, in particular the accounts by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton of the ways in which animals are kept and treated, I pay tribute to members of the Animal Welfare Committee, because gathering such evidence will most surely be a harrowing ordeal, albeit an absolutely necessary one to provide us with the evidence we need to take action in the interests of animal welfare.

[Trudy Harrison]

Animal welfare is an absolute priority for this Government. Our track record thus far speaks for itself. We recognise the valuable contribution that animals of all kinds can make to our lives and our planet, and it was lovely to hear the accounts of two Members about their pets. I think that all of us have had incredibly positive interactions with animals, including pets, and it is certainly part of my role to ensure that people are more connected to nature through the work of our environmental improvement plan and our commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes of a blue or green space, all of which contribute to people's enjoyment of nature and animals in their own environment.

That is the way that we should enjoy animals—not by having a piece of fur attached to a jacket, but by being in the great outdoors and experiencing animals in their own environment. So we will continue to prioritise caring for, respecting and protecting animals in the future.

I will leave a couple of minutes, Dame Maria, to hear a final few words from my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton, who has done a sterling job, not only in raising our awareness today but in working in this area over many decades, both in this House and before he came here.

10.24 am

Giles Watling: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her very positive words. At the end of her remarks, she mentioned the animals we all know and love, and share our lives with. I have been a lifelong animal owner of one sort or another. Humphrey and Herbie are my current companions, and I say that just so that I can get them into *Hansard*. They have wonderful fur that is much better on them than anywhere else. I have had many dogs.

I think it is worth touching on a couple of points before the debate ends. On a positive note, it is good to remember that the UK fur trade, once prolific, is now almost dead as far as the high street is concerned. We have come an awfully long way, but there is much further to go. I think all Members agree that banning the import and sale of fur is a low-hanging fruit for the Government, and I therefore implore the Government to move on it. A survey found that 70% of British people would like to see a fur ban, and 1.1 million people signed a petition. The Government should listen. This is an easy win that will be appreciated by all sides and all constituents across all our four nations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the import and sale of fur.

10.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Asylum Applicants: Mental Health and Wellbeing

11 am

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): I will call Gareth Bacon to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered asylum applications and asylum seekers' mental health and wellbeing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I did not want to bring forward this debate. Indeed, I did everything I could to avoid tabling it, and I would like to explain why. At the outset, I would like to talk about the challenging immigration situation faced by this country. Britain is one of the most tolerant and welcoming communities in the world. A recent King's College study found, among other things, that only 5% of the population would not want immigrants as neighbours. Similarly, it was reported that, by last year, 75% of ethnic minority people living in Britain either felt very strongly or strongly British. Those are very positive statistics.

But we must also recognise the need to strike a balance between welcoming people and having reasonable immigration policies. Uncontrolled immigration and unchecked illegal immigration can have very serious consequences. That is why I believe the Home Secretary is right to be working to stop people putting their lives at risk by crossing the English channel in small boats to come to this country illegally. We must ensure that those coming to this country seeking asylum do so through legal routes.

It is right that we respond appropriately to the plight of asylum seekers escaping violent, authoritarian and dictatorial regimes that systematically persecute and even execute their own people. It is our duty to take in genuine asylum seekers, just as it is our duty to remove economic migrants who have entered our country illegally. It is our duty to process asylum claims quickly and efficiently for the good of all concerned.

It cannot be denied that pressures in our asylum system have dramatically increased in recent years, to unprecedented levels. Indeed, the number of people waiting for longer than six months for an initial decision went up from around 18,000 in 2019 to 60,000 in the space of two years leading up to 2021. That is a serious matter that requires our urgent attention. In saying that, I make no criticism of Ministers, who I sincerely believe are battling to fix the system. I am afraid that in some instances, the lack of application and apparent disinterest on the part of some officials, exacerbated by the high-handed arrogance and disdain of some individuals who work closely with Ministers, have had terrible consequences on the lives of real people, in particular their mental health and wellbeing.

That brings me to a case I want to draw attention to, which caused me to table this debate. The case relates to an asylum claimant who until recently resided in my constituency of Orpington. In recent weeks, he has been moved to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who has given

me full permission to continue processing this case. I will refer to this man as Mr A. He is a 31-year-old Syrian refugee who arrived in the UK on 3 November 2020. He initially claimed asylum on 7 April 2021, but by March 2022 had not received any updates at all on the progress of his application. At that point, charitable Orpington constituents started to contact me to raise Mr A's case.

I will quote from a letter I received from a neighbour of Mr A, who has been attempting to assist him. I received this letter in January this year, after I met Mr A and my constituent at my advice surgery. I believe it summarises Mr A's situation very clearly:

"Mr A is an asylum seeker from Syria. He arrived in the United Kingdom on 3rd November 2020 on a Chilean passport as his Grandmother was from Chile. He has never visited Chile and has no relatives living in that country. Chile has mutual diplomatic relations with Syria and if he were sent to Chile they would return him to Syria.

Mr A was detained in Syria for 5 years for protesting against the government. Whilst in detention he was beaten, tortured and shot with lead pellets, the photos of which I gave to you. He still has over 150 pellets in his body.

Mr A escaped from prison after his father borrowed money and bribed one of the guards and is therefore classed as an escaped prisoner in Syria and his life would be in danger if he were to return to that country. The debt still is outstanding and also added to Mr A's worries as he is unable to work and doesn't know when he is going to be able to start repaying this debt.

Mr A is married and has three stepchildren. His ultimate goal is to be granted asylum in this country and bring his family here for a safe and better life. He wants to be able to work and settle in this country which he has called home for over two years.

Mr A had his final interview with the Home Office on 26th October 2021 and should have been informed of the decision shortly thereafter. It is now January 2023 and he is still awaiting a decision. This has affected Mr A's mental health and in August 2022 he climbed 50 feet up Tower Bridge and threatened to kill himself as he was so psychologically tired.

When I met Mr A about a year ago he had no support and was really lonely and struggling to get help from anyone. I took it upon myself to arrange deliveries from the food bank, contact the mosque for support and arrange English lessons for him, his spoken English now is much improved and he is able to communicate in a basic way.

Mr A's life whilst in Great Britain has been one of loneliness, fear of deportation and worry for his family which I find heart-breaking. I feel that we as a country have really let Mr A down and it needs to be resolved with a final positive decision of asylum as soon as possible."

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on a hugely important issue. Obviously, there are tens of thousands of Mr As in all sorts of temporary accommodation, and they are sometimes demonised for being in hotels. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not their choice to be there, that we need to establish whether people are asylum seekers or not, that we can do that only if we process cases quickly, and that the best way to ensure that people do not get into this awful situation and that their mental health is protected is to process them swiftly and fairly?

Gareth Bacon: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman, and the point of my bringing this case to the House is to highlight the fact that Home Office officials simply are not approaching the issue with anything like sufficient urgency to sort it out. I reiterate the point I made earlier: I make no criticism of Ministers in this regard,

because I do not doubt for one second that every Home Office Minister is straining every sinew to make this a reality. My criticism, such as it is, is aimed squarely at the officials, who do not seem to see these people as people; they see them as problems they will get to when they have time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward an issue that is important to him, and congratulate him on being so assiduous. Does he not agree that our obligations—and, I believe, our moral duty—must mean that, as well as feeding and sheltering asylum seekers, we ensure they are supported to survive in this land, which is foreign to them, and are given help to assimilate, rather than being left voiceless and frightened in a hotel room with their children, wondering for weeks what is going to happen next?

Gareth Bacon: I have a lot of sympathy with that point. It is critical that we process asylum claims much more quickly because while those claims are in abeyance, the asylum seekers are living in stasis. It might be that people who come to claim asylum are not asylum seekers, but economic migrants. That does not make them bad people, but it does mean that they are illegal immigrants, and they should be returned. What should not happen, as in the case of my constituent, is that they live in a state of limbo for years. That should not be acceptable in any way, shape or form.

I became aware of Mr A's case on 14 March 2022, when a constituent made contact to request that I engage with the Home Office. Back then, my constituent had already noted Mr A's deteriorating mental health. However, despite my office's regular efforts to obtain updates, it was not until August 2022—five months later—that the Home Office responded, and only to say that Mr A would have to wait a further six months for an update.

I am sure the House can imagine the effect that that message had on Mr A. Indeed, only a few days after receiving that news, he climbed up Tower Bridge with the intention of attempting to kill himself. Fortunately, he was talked down. He was taken to hospital and later returned to the accommodation with which he had been provided in Biggin Hill. Given the elevated risk of harm displayed by Mr A, my office contacted the Home Office to alert it, in the hope that a sense of urgency would be felt by those in charge of processing the case. However, several more months went by without a resolution of any kind.

In January, therefore, I met with Mr A and another of my constituents, who had been helping him. During our meeting, Mr A presented me with evidence for his asylum claim. That included X-ray images of his body. Disturbingly, the images showed a large amount of metal shrapnel lodged in his torso and limbs as a result of being shot at by the Syrian regime. The evidence also included photographs of him after he had been beaten with an iron bar. Faced with this disturbing evidence and having no success at all in persuading Home Office officials to progress Mr A's case, my office informed officials that if no progress had been made in two weeks—that is, by 3 February—I would seek a meeting with the Home Secretary to personally brief her on the situation, place the entire file in her hands and ask her to intervene. I hoped that that might lift the all-pervading sense of disinterest and inertia.

[Gareth Bacon]

No such luck: on 31 January, I received an email from Home Office officials that gave no additional information and no indication as to when a decision would be made, and that claimed to have sent a response to Mr A on 16 January. Neither Mr A nor my other constituent who attended the meeting with me on 20 January—four days after the Home Office letter was allegedly sent—had mentioned that letter. On 1 February, my office called the Home Office hotline to request a copy of it. The response we received was that the Home Office was unable to locate the letter, and the officials stated that it had not been uploaded to the system. When they asked my staff member if he would like to request that they find the letter and send it to him, and he said he would indeed like them to do that, he was told that that would be treated as a new query and it would be sent to my office within 20 working days. You could not make this stuff up.

Later that day, I informed my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), who is a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Home Office, of my intention to seek a meeting with the Home Secretary. He chased my request diligently, and three weeks later, on the morning of 22 February, he informed me that he had made progress on securing the meeting and asked me for Mr A's date of birth and case reference number, which I passed to him a short while later. At 6 pm, he informed me that he had secured a meeting with the Home Secretary in her office in the House, scheduled for 6.45 pm that evening.

When I turned up for the meeting, I was brusquely turned away by a Home Office special adviser called Jake Ryan, who refused to allow me in. When my hon. Friend told him that that was unacceptable, the special adviser swore in his face. The high-handed arrogance of this unelected political appointee was staggering. I gather that my hon. Friend escalated the situation to higher authorities because at last there was movement on Mr A's case. When I finally attended a meeting with the Home Secretary on 1 March, she informed me that officials had determined Mr A's case. He would be granted 30 months to remain in the country and his application for asylum was refused on account of him being a Chilean national. The House will recall that I had been informed that, while Mr A had a Chilean grandmother, he is not a Chilean national, has no living Chilean relatives and, indeed, has never visited Chile.

Giving Mr A limited leave to remain means that he cannot regularise his life here or bring his family. Furthermore, giving him limited leave to remain, after which he will presumably be returned to Syria or sent to Chile, which apparently has a returns arrangement with Syria, is terrible news for Mr A because it significantly increases the likelihood of him being returned to a country where there is a direct threat to his life. The fact that the special adviser refused to allow me to see the Home Secretary on 1 March is extraordinarily frustrating, because had he not done so, I would have been able to alert her to those facts and it is possible that a different outcome to Mr A's case would have been achieved.

In the meeting on 1 March, I asked the Home Secretary for the case to be looked at again by officials, and she assured me that it would be. Two weeks later, on 15 March,

I received formal notification from the Home Office of the decision it had taken. The relevant sections of the letter read:

"On 3rd November 2020, Mr A submitted a claim for asylum; I apologise for the delay in progressing this case and any distress this may have caused."

For the avoidance of doubt, that letter was written in March 2023. The delay referred to amounted to two years and four months. The letter continued:

"Mr A had a series of significant safeguarding issues (suicide attempts); We take the mental health and wellbeing of asylum seekers very seriously. We discussed Mr A's case with officials and there were a number of delays due to the sensitivities and complexities of the case."

The claim that Home Office officials take these issues seriously is one that I treat with a great deal of scepticism, certainly in the context of this particular case. Again, for the avoidance of doubt, it was the disinterest and protracted institutional inertia of Home Office officials that caused the safeguarding issues that they referred to.

The letter then stated:

"Mr A's application was fully considered and the asylum and Humanitarian Protection aspect of the claim has been refused as Mr A does not have any individual protection needs in Chile."

However, we will be granting Mr A a period of leave of 30 months on the basis of his private life as, given his vulnerabilities, there would be insurmountable obstacles to him establishing himself in Chile."

So on the one hand the Home Office accepts that Mr A would be unable to establish himself in Chile, but on the other it is refusing him asylum here, thereby condemning him to suffer another two and a half years of the purgatory.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the enormous amount of hard work and dedication that he has put in for what is now my constituent; it is absolutely right that he continues to deal with this case.

I am deeply concerned about the information that my hon. Friend has set out to the House. We have an excellent Minister here; I hope that she is listening carefully to what he is informing the House about, that she will go back to the Department later today, and that firm and immediate action will be taken on this matter for my constituent.

Gareth Bacon: I agree with my hon. Friend.

For Mr A, two and a half more years of loneliness, worry and fears for his family, as well as fear of deportation back to a country where his life is under threat, has inevitably had further detrimental impacts on his mental health. On 13 April this year, I received a further email from the constituent who attended the advice surgery with Mr A in January. She wrote:

"All of the above matters are causing Mr A great frustration and his mental health has seriously deteriorated. We have an appointment with the mental health team at the hospital in May but I personally am extremely concerned that he may harm himself if these matters are not resolved soon. Anything that you can do would be greatly appreciated. I personally cannot understand why our immigration system seems to be so complicated."

Since I met the Home Secretary on 1 March, my office has been chasing Home Office officials, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West has been asking for updates on my behalf, but absolutely

nothing has been forthcoming. We seem to be back in the cycle of disinterest and total inertia. In the meantime, Mr A continues to spiral downwards.

Dame Maria, I realise that I have talked at length about a single case, but that is precisely to highlight the wider implications of the approach of officials to processing asylum applications—an approach that is simply not delivering acceptable outcomes. The consequence is deeply damaging to people such as Mr A. I realise that Ministers cannot fix the system overnight, and I have absolutely no doubt that they are straining every sinew to improve the situation. However, they can make a significant difference in cases such as this. Small steps can lead to long strides.

I know my hon. Friend the Minister to be a woman of high integrity and compassion, so I thank her for listening to me and call on her to do the right thing in cases such as this one. Please take them back to the Home Office and fix them.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) for raising this important case. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who is supporting him in this endeavour and is now also involved in the case.

As would be expected, the Home Office is aware of Mr A's case, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington continues to receive regular updates. I am not able to comment on the details of this case, because of convention; I am sure that the House will understand that. However, I can of course ensure a suitable meeting with the Minister for Immigration, in whose place I stand today; I am pleased to respond in his absence.

We are committed to ensuring that asylum claims are considered without unnecessary delay, and that those who need protection are granted it as soon as possible, so that they can start to integrate and to rebuild their life. Of course, that includes those involved in cases that are granted on appeal. Asylum casework teams are dealing with high levels of new applications, including those from small boat arrivals, and we have been clear about the pressures that the situation in the channel has created. It is a significant and complex challenge, but we are doing everything in our power to balance the overall needs of the system and to ensure that cases are appropriately prioritised.

Colleagues will recall that in December, the Prime Minister pledged to clear the backlog of initial asylum legacy claims, which are claims made before 28 June 2022. We are taking immediate action to speed up asylum processing, while maintaining the integrity of the system. For example, we are simplifying the guidance, reducing interview length and streamlining processes. Streamlining the process will play an important role in our achieving our aims. The streamlined asylum policy guidance was published on 23 February; on the same day, questionnaires began to be sent to legacy claimants from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria and Yemen at their most recently recorded correspondence address. Those countries were included in the streamlined asylum

process on the basis of their high grant rate, which is 95% or higher, and the fact that over 100 grants in the year ending September 2022 were grants of protection status—refugee status or humanitarian protection.

We are making good progress. According to provisional data, between the end of November 2022 and the end of May 2023, the legacy backlog was reduced by 17,000 cases. During April, streamlined asylum processing was further rolled out to legacy claims from nationals of Afghanistan, Eritrea, Sudan, Syria and Vietnam. That means that where a positive decision can be taken, the claimant will have not a substantive interview, but a preliminary interview meeting.

Tim Farron: The Minister mentioned people with legacy claims from Libya and Eritrea. Under the Government's new proposals, there is no safe route for those people to get here at all, even though, as she said, over 90% of claimants turn out to have a claim. Would she think again about ensuring that we do not dismiss people as bogus asylum seekers before we have even considered their claims?

Miss Dines: I beg to disagree with the hon. Gentleman. Of course there are safe routes. By international agreement, we take people from Syria, and we do fulfil our international obligations. *[Interruption.]* May I continue? Streamlined asylum processing for accompanied and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will enable cases to be progressed more quickly, and enable us to clear the backlog of outstanding initial asylum decisions.

We are also working hard to significantly increase the number of asylum decision makers above intake levels, so that we can reduce the time taken to reach decisions and the number of claimants awaiting decision. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington who called for this debate, and I am grateful to him for doing so, was quite right to raise this issue: speed is of the essence, and we need to reduce the time taken to reach decision significantly. That is why finance and effort is being put into increasing the numbers of those who determine claims.

We have recruitment strategies in place that will help to increase staffing, and to maintain it at the level required for better management of the asylum intake. As was mentioned, the sheer weight of numbers is significant; we will need to improve management of the system if we are to make the changes that my hon. Friend is desperate to see, not only for his constituent but for others in similar positions. We have already doubled the number of decision makers over the last two years, and we are continuing to increase them further. A large recruitment campaign is under way; it will take the expected headcount of decision makers to 2,500 by September this year, which will make a significant difference.

Asylum Operations continues to mitigate the effects of the high attrition rates. That can hinder productivity, as experienced decision makers are used to upskill new colleagues. Although we are increasing the number of decision makers and expect the number of decisions to increase, it can take up to 12 months for a decision maker to become fully proficient in their work. We are putting a place a range of interventions—for example, we are looking at job design, reward and management capability—to reduce churn and increase the rate of productivity.

[Miss Dines]

We take the welfare of those in our care extremely seriously. At every stage in the process, our approach is to ensure that the needs and vulnerabilities of asylum seekers are identified and shared with health partners. To facilitate that, the Home Office and its contractors work closely with the NHS, local authorities and non-governmental organisations to ensure that people can access the healthcare and support that they need. Asylum seekers have access to health and social services from the point of their arrival in the UK. All asylum seekers, regardless of the type of accommodation that they are in, have the same access to free NHS services as British citizens and other permanent residents. The Home Office operates a safeguarding hub to support vulnerable individuals in quickly accessing the healthcare services.

I am particularly interested in the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington raised about the delays he has experienced, which are in no small part due to the dramatic rise in cases. We have the highest number of applications for two decades; that is why he is quite right to support the Government on reforming the system. I remind hon. Members that there were 75,492 asylum applications, relating in total to 91,047 people, in the UK in the year ending March 2023. That is a third more applications than in the year ending March 2022, and the highest number for 20 years or so. It is also higher than at the peak of the European migration crisis; the figure was 36,446 in the year ending June 2016.

Many of the top nationalities applying for asylum in the UK in the year ending March 2023 are also the most common nationalities of those arriving in small boats. Those nationalities include Albanians, Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis and Syrians. The significant increase in dangerous journeys across the channel is placing unprecedented strain on our asylum system. Those in need of protection should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, rather than risking their life and paying people smugglers to take them on the dangerous journey across the channel.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the UK has a proud history of supporting refugees. Since 2015, we have offered a place to just under half a million men, women and children seeking safety, including those from Hong Kong, Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, as well as family members of refugees. Our focus will remain on directly helping people who are from regions of conflict or instability. The best way to help the most vulnerable people, which of course includes Syrians, is to bring them into the country through safe and legal routes. That will bypass the evil criminal gangs and protect vulnerable people, including children.

The Government are committed to reform. The Illegal Migration Bill is essential to ensure that we can better

marshal appropriate applications, and to ensure that people who should not be seeking asylum do not jump the queue by paying money to an illegal smuggler.

Let me turn to the issue of wellbeing. My hon. Friend mentioned that his constituent, who was based in Orpington and is now based in the Dartford area, is suffering from ill health and mental illness, in part as a result, it is said, of his treatment abroad, but also of his living and waiting here. The Government take the safety and wellbeing of asylum seekers extremely seriously. We are working closely with health partners, accommodation providers in the UK and the UK Health Security Agency to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Asylum seekers have access to health and social care services, and those who deal with asylum seekers at any point of the process, including first responders, are under a duty to assist in ensuring that safety and wellbeing.

Significant effort goes into ensuring that people have the appropriate health and wellbeing services. We provide funding, via a therapeutic support grant, to Barnardo's, so that it can operate its Boloh helpline. That service provides mental health and wellbeing support to adult asylum seekers; it aims to prevent the escalation of any mental ill-health among those navigating the asylum system, and to facilitate joined-up working in the community, on mental health provision in general. My hon. Friend mentioned that he has concerns on this issue in relation to his case, and I am sure that he will continue to raise it. The service offers UK-wide virtual therapeutic support, practical support from helpline advisers and intensive one-to-one treatment where needed. There is extensive work with a team of psychotherapists who speak 15 languages, and extra help will be brought in where it is needed.

In closing, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington for securing the debate. He works extremely hard on this issue and will continue to do so, and I am sure that he will hold the Home Office to account. I reassure him—as much as I can; I am standing in for the Immigration Minister—that I will seek to secure a meeting for him with that Minister, so that he can assist him in representing an important former constituent. This is an important topic that we take seriously, and the Government are committed to ensuring that all asylum claims are considered without unnecessary delay. Where there has been historical delay, we are doing our best to reduce it. We are mindful of our responsibilities to those in our care, and are ensuring that their needs are met. That will remain an integral part of our approach.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Energy Company Obligation Schemes

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the implementation of ECO4 and ECO+.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the importance of energy efficiency schemes for domestic properties in general, and more specifically the implementation of the energy company obligation 4 and energy company obligation plus schemes.

As everybody will be aware, households have had to endure wave after wave of challenges to budgets in recent months, with each adding to the financial burden on families and eroding living standards. Although we have recently received welcome news that falling wholesale energy prices will begin to feed through to households, it is unlikely that energy bills will return to pre-crisis levels any time soon.

A frequently cited statistic that bears repeating, lest we allow current prices to be normalised, is that in April 2022 the Welsh Government estimated that energy bills of £1,971 would push 45% of Welsh households into fuel poverty. Next month, when Ofgem's price cap kicks back in, it will still be marginally higher, at £2,074. The New Economics Foundation suggests that that pressure will continue into next year, with energy bills in April 2024 estimated to be as high as 70% above pre-crisis of 2021 levels. To put it simply, for too many households energy prices will continue to be a significant pressure on their budgets for some time to come. Households will also be more vulnerable this coming winter, after being forced to use savings or take out debt to make it through last winter.

Citizen Advice Cymru has seen an increase in the number of people seeking debt advice, and reports that more people are falling into arrears on essential household bills. The number of people seeking advice on debt relating to energy bills, for example, has more than doubled between May 2021 and May of this year. Although that is not the purpose of today's debate, it demonstrates why short-term relief with energy bills is still required, including another round of the alternative fuel payment for off-grid households next winter.

In the long term, the energy crisis has thrown into very sharp relief the urgent need to implement measures to bring down energy bills permanently for households and businesses. One solution is to transition to renewable energy sources, another—the focus of today's debate—is to introduce comprehensive policies to enhance the energy efficiency of the UK's housing stock.

That issue is particularly acute in Wales, given that we have some of the oldest and least efficient housing stock in western Europe. Data from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities shows the percentage of dwellings within each local authority with energy performance certificates rated level C or above. The data shows that five out of the 15 local authorities with the smallest percentage of dwellings with EPCs rated level C or above are in Wales, with Gwynedd third from bottom at 23% and my constituency of Ceredigion only slightly better at 25%.

It is perhaps not surprising that Ceredigion does so badly, when we consider that 35% of our homes were constructed in the 19th century. It is sobering to reflect on the fact that the vast majority of the county's 2050 housing stock has already been built, more than a third of it in the Victorian age. The case for action is, therefore, quite clear and simple. We need to upgrade the energy efficiency of our housing to reduce people's exposure to increased energy costs. Almost a quarter of tenants in the private rented sector live in fuel poverty, with those living in the least efficient homes spending as much as £950 more per year on their energy bills, compared with homes rated EPC level C.

The UK Government have made the case that it is unsustainable to maintain support indefinitely for households with energy bills. By retrofitting, we can mitigate the need for ongoing and future support packages. Indeed, the New Economics Foundation estimated that had all homes in England and Wales been upgraded to EPC level C by October last year, the energy price guarantee would have cost £3.5 billion less over its first six months and households would have saved an average of £530 over the year.

Of course, retrofitting would also have significant beneficial outcomes for health. We know that living in a cold home can worsen asthma and other respiratory illnesses, and increases the risk of heart disease and cardiac events. It can also worsen musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis, as well as having a detrimental impact on mental health. Wales's Future Generations Commissioner estimated that a comprehensive home retrofitting programme could save the Welsh NHS as much as £4.4 billion by 2040 by tackling some of those health issues.

Finally, reducing household energy demand is of course vital for us to improve energy security, reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and, of course, realise our climate targets. A coalition of charities, including Fuel Poverty Action and Green Alliance, have warned that without action on housing and buildings, there is no plausible path to achieving the fifth carbon budget or meeting the 2030 statutory fuel poverty target.

It is clear that home retrofitting is vital and that action taken now will place the UK in a good position in the future. The UK Government's flagship fuel poverty reduction scheme, the energy company obligation or ECO, has a key role to play in upgrading our homes to permanently reduce the cost of heating for households and to address fuel poverty. ECO has operated since 2013 in several iterations and up to March of this year it had delivered a total of 3.6 million energy efficiency measures in Great Britain. The energy performance improvements that have been delivered have saved low-income customers as much as £17.5 billion in lifetime energy bills and saved the average home some £290.

ECO4 is, of course, the fourth iteration of the scheme. It began in April last year and is planned to run until March 2026. In the past year, however, installations have dropped quite significantly. All versions of ECO have experienced difficulties in some form or other, but ECO4 has undoubtedly been delivering at a slower rate than previous iterations. Energy suppliers and installers are now warning that structural issues are preventing the scheme from fulfilling its potential and I want to dwell on those issues today.

[*Ben Lake*]

Between April last year, when ECO4 commenced, and March this year, approximately 45,000 households had received support under the scheme. Given that that is around 10% of the 450,000 households that the scheme is supposed to support over its four-year lifetime, there is concern about the pace of the roll-out so far. One reason might be that the number of measures installed per property during the roll-out of ECO4 to date has been much higher than expected, with an average of nearly 3.5 measures per property since April 2022 compared with the average of 1.8 measures expected in the scheme's final impact assessment. In the first quarter of 2023, the figure increased to an average of 4.93 measures per household.

E.ON Energy estimates that, as result, industry could achieve its overall national bill saving target by delivering ECO4 to only 215,000 properties of the 450,000 targeted. Of course, it is not a bad thing that energy efficiency is being significantly improved for those households supported by ECO4, but it raises a question about the adequacy of the funding in place if ECO4 is to achieve its target of supporting 450,000 households, as I am sure that Members will agree.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, as I am sure that many would, that this is primarily a question of funding. We should take a step back and realise that Shell has directed £5 billion in windfall profits towards its shareholders in the first quarter of this year, so there is surely a good case to be made for an emergency windfall tax to enable additional work for the other households that would benefit so much from it.

Ben Lake: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that important intervention and you will be unsurprised, Mr Paisley, to hear that I agree with her that there is an important opportunity to introduce emergency measures. At the end of the day, energy companies are making eye-watering amounts of profit at a time when households across the country are struggling. I think it is very appropriate for us to consider ways of recouping some of that potential income to put against this important measure.

Adjustments are required to get the scheme back on track so it can achieve its full potential. The first adjustment requires the UK Government to look again at ECO4's cost assumptions. They were finalised in April 2022 and do not reflect current market conditions, including the escalation in costs caused by labour shortages and manufacturing prices. More recent cost assumptions, such as those included in the Great British insulation scheme's impact assessment, reflect those price increases.

For example, the fixed assumed costs of installing external solid wall insulation, which comprises 12% of measures installed under ECO4 to date, increased from £4,200 in 2021 to about £5,000 in 2022—by almost 20%. Meanwhile, the UK Government estimate that the cost of installing cavity wall insulation for bungalows, as well as detached, semi-detached and end-of-terrace houses, has increased by 50% to 63%. That is all without factoring in the inflationary pressures we have seen in 2023 so far. At the start of 2023, insulation and associated material prices increased significantly, many by close to 10% and some by as much as 35%, compounding similar increases seen last year.

Another aspect of the scheme that requires attention is the minimum requirements threshold, which means that a household's energy performance certificate must be improved to a particular level. For example, if band D and E homes are to be eligible for the scheme, they have to be upgraded to at least band C, and band F and G homes must be upgraded to at least band D. We should welcome the intent of that requirement. Providing support to the poorest households in the least efficient homes by bringing them up to a significantly higher energy performance rating is an important objective. Nevertheless, the requirement is proving to be a limiting factor on the scheme's delivery. I have spoken to installers and energy suppliers who say that the minimum requirements are too inflexible compared with previous schemes.

It is suggested that the requirements are making it difficult to find eligible properties, and installers are reporting difficulties in proving how properties in higher EPC bands, such as those in band D, as well as on-gas properties, can meet the requirements. E.ON Energy estimates that around 90% of qualifying fuel-poor households cannot have works delivered to their properties, as either they fail to meet the minimum requirements threshold or it would be economically unviable to upgrade them to the levels required to meet it.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is giving one of the best speeches I have heard in Westminster Hall in a long time, and he has some good evidence to back up his comments. I congratulate him on securing the debate. My constituency, like his, has a high number of rural homes. Many are reliant on oil-fired central heating and also struggle to fit into the qualifying criteria for the type of scheme that he has outlined. What advice does he have for the Government on how we can improve the flexibility of the schemes to ensure that oil-fired homes can qualify?

Ben Lake: The reality is that a very high proportion, if not the majority, of homes in rural constituencies find it difficult to access the scheme because they are not on the mains gas network. In my constituency, some 72% of properties are not connected to mains gas and they are struggling uphill to get on to the scheme. The Government would do well to look again at whether we can change the ECO Flex pathways to allow local authorities greater flexibility to support off-grid properties in particular. That might be a way forward. We certainly need to address the issue. If we do not, I worry that rural areas, which often have an older, less efficient housing stock, will be left behind. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that important point.

As greater investment is required per property to meet the minimum improvement threshold requirements, the current iteration of the scheme appears to be more exposed, and therefore more vulnerable, to the inflationary pressures that I mentioned earlier, so we need to look again at how it is funded. I ask the UK Government to look at that very carefully.

Another aspect of ECO4 that is welcome in principle, but which is putting pressure on those delivering the scheme, is the Flex pathway. The pathway is important, because it enables local councils to identify low-income households that are in need of support, but that are unlikely to be eligible under the scheme's standard approach. It also provides an opportunity for local councils to better

tailor energy efficiency schemes to their respective areas, and I refer back to the remark from the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) about rural properties. The issue, however, is that local councils feel that the Flex pathway is too onerous and that the information required of them for each application takes up significant staff time and resources. Indeed, I am told that the level of detail required can make the Flex pathway inflexible when considering different local factors.

One of those factors is the nature of the housing stock in an area, and I have already mentioned that Wales has some of the oldest and least efficient housing stock in western Europe. I spoke to representatives of Gwynedd Council, who expressed concerns that the products available via ECO do not always work well with the design of older houses.

Liz Saville Roberts: On that point, I would like to mention Meilyr Tomos at Gwynedd Council, who supplied me and others with advice on this debate. In relation to the ECO Flex programme, another issue in Gwynedd is second homes. Younger people are now priced out of staying in their own homes, and more non-dependant children are remaining with their parents—between 2011 and the 2021 census, in Gwynedd the figure increased by 6.8%. Given that non-dependant children artificially inflate household incomes, that has a knock-on effect on ECO Flex. The Government would be wise to give due attention to such rural issues.

Ben Lake: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The Flex pathway offers a real opportunity to allow the policy to be tailored to the specific needs of local areas, so as to accelerate the delivery without impacting on the broader scheme that the Government have implemented.

The consequence of rising costs and a perceived inflexibility in the structure of the scheme has been that supply chains are starting to stutter, and I am told that many installers are leaving the market. The Installation Assurance Authority warns that there are now fewer than 10,000 people involved in the industry and public-funded schemes, whereas there were 54,000 in 2012. Those who have moved away from ECO4 are reluctant to return. If installers continue to leave the market at this rate, it will make it very difficult not just to deliver ECO4, but to achieve the level of home retrofitting required to meet our future climate and fuel poverty targets.

If those issues are not addressed, thousands of eligible households will miss out on crucial energy-saving measures, meaning that they will face higher energy bills this winter and beyond. I believe that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is consulting on the deliverability of elements of ECO4. If it intends to do so, I ask that they publish the consultation before the summer recess in order to allow sufficient time ahead of April 2024 for industry to adjust accordingly. A failure to do so may mean that even more installers drop out of delivering the scheme due to continued uncertainty.

It is not too late to get ECO4 back on track, and I would argue that a consultation could play a key part in doing so, but I would appreciate it if the Minister could explain what consideration has been or will be given in a consultation to the following points. Could ECO4's cost assumptions be revised in line with current supply costs to reflect current market conditions? Could the

eligibility of homes be widened to ensure that more people can benefit from the scheme? That could include increasing the number of fuel-poor households eligible in the private and social rental sector; or it could mean enabling the Flex channel to be more responsive to local needs in order to be able to capture more fuel-poor households, such as those in receipt of means-tested benefits or with health conditions.

Another suggestion is that we investigate the possibility of extending the buy-out mechanism, so that others besides energy suppliers can take on obligations, and enable local councils to deliver ECO. Other suggestions are: making long-term funding available for training, so that we can boost the supply chain, and considering measures to boost recruitment and careers in the retrofitting energy efficiency industry; ensuring continuous and open engagement with installers, energy suppliers and other industry and fuel poverty experts, to guarantee that the scheme remains on the right track and to ensure that the UK Government can respond effectively to any future issues that arise; and finally, exploring the possibility of expanding the range of technologies that will be considered in scope in future iterations of ECO4 to, for example, water control technologies, which can help bring down the cost of energy used to heat water.

I will briefly touch on ECO+ or, as it is now known, the Great British insulation scheme. I of course welcome the scheme, which is designed to support households in installing single energy efficiency measures in their homes, but again possible adjustments could vastly improve delivery. Can the Minister say what consideration has been given to refining the scheme's targeting, so that it better helps fuel-poor households? For the majority of the scheme, households are expected to make a financial contribution to the cost of the measures. That will effectively make a large proportion of the scheme inaccessible to the lowest-income households, which cannot afford to make those contributions. In a cost of living crisis, when disposable income is diminishing across the UK, surely the requirement for contributions should be taken out of the scheme, or the percentage of participants who are expected to make contributions should be lowered.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that I have heard from constituents who were unfortunately let down by contractors delivering measures under the ECO4 scheme. Of course, any measures installed are now covered by the UK Government-endorsed quality scheme, TrustMark. I appreciate that incidents of poor delivery may be isolated examples, but in those worst-case scenarios where delivery goes horribly wrong, the protection and security for households is still inadequate.

Liz Saville Roberts: I would be grateful if the Minister addressed the issue of providers who place solar panels on agricultural land, but do not guarantee against damage caused by animals. Obviously, placing panels on agricultural land is very convenient, and it makes access cheaper, although attention is not always paid to planning requirements. However, the convenience may be outweighed by the risk for the householder of damage caused by animals that is not covered by a guarantee. I very much wish the Government to address that rural issue.

Ben Lake: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising another important point. It perhaps illustrates the need to strengthen the accountability of the scheme. In Ceredigion,

[Ben Lake]

households have had measures installed that were of substandard quality, and they find it almost impossible to get information about redress and holding the installers to account for the sub-par work. Her concerns would be captured by a broader effort to improve the scrutiny and accountability of the scheme. Will the UK Government consider ways of improving oversight of installations? We need a stronger mechanism by which installers can be held to account.

Before closing, I will touch on the need to incentivise those who are ineligible for the ECO scheme to invest in retrofitting—those who might have the means to do so. A few measures come to mind. First, could we look again at removing VAT from insulation products, and not just from the installation of these products, as well as from storage batteries? I appreciate that that might be a Treasury matter. What work might the Government undertake on providing interest-free loans to those who wish to install energy efficiency and low-carbon heating measures? Providing access to such support will be even more important in the face of steep interest rate hikes.

Finally, I come to another area that deserves a brief mention in a discussion on how we can help households to bring down energy bills and expand our renewable capacity: incentivising households to invest in smaller-scale renewables. I have been contacted by several constituents who are concerned that the reduction in support from the feed-in tariffs—and now their replacement, the smart export guarantee—has vastly reduced the incentive to invest. I urge the Government to consider increasing the tariffs that the energy suppliers are required to offer to homeowners who generate renewable energy. I draw my remarks to a close, and very much look forward to the comments of my colleagues.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members for bobbing. If anyone else wishes to bob, feel free. I intend to call the Front Benchers at approximately half-past the hour.

2.55 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on bringing this important debate to this place.

We are in the middle of a cost of living crisis. Bills are soaring, wages are not keeping pace with inflation, and people are struggling to make ends meet. We must not forget how harsh last winter was. The energy price cap rose by 54% and many people were trapped in cold, leaky homes. We cannot allow that to happen again.

Households in poorly insulated homes will pay an estimated £13 billion a year more in energy bills. That is because the Government have failed to bring those homes up to at least band C of the energy performance certificate rating. Some 43,000 homes in Bath have a poor efficiency rating, and the Government's inaction has meant that some of my constituents are more than £1,300 poorer each year.

We are also in the middle of a climate emergency. The UK has some of the leakiest homes in Europe. Insulating our homes would push down energy demand and cut

our country's greenhouse gas emissions. For the past decade, the energy company obligation schemes have delivered warmer homes, cheaper bills and greener buildings for millions of vulnerable households. The ECO4 scheme is the latest iteration. It provides grants to fund energy-efficient upgrades to homes, and pays for loft or cavity wall insulation, new heating systems such as boilers, and other measures designed to increase energy efficiency, as we have already heard.

However, ECO4 installations are not keeping up with the target to improve 450,000 homes by March 2026. The Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group has shown that, by March 2023, only 15,000 homes had been treated. That is just 3% of the overall delivery target. That is very poor, and an example of the Government's inaction on delivering what has been promised.

The cost assumptions made in the ECO4 assessment are outdated and unrealistic. The modelling used to set ECO4 targets was based on estimated costs in 2021 prices, with an allowance for general inflation over time. Since that assessment was made, inflation has soared. December 2022 saw inflation having risen by 9.2% in the previous 12 months. That is more than three times what Ofgem projected it to be.

The costs of delivery far exceed what Ofgem has accounted for. Loft insulation is, on average, 430% more expensive, cavity wall insulation is 372% more expensive, and external wall insulation is 147% more expensive. The Government should ensure that those costs are taken into account and must match the cost of measures in ECO4 with inflation. That is the main point that I wanted to make; the 2021 estimates do not take into account the soaring inflation that we have seen over the past year.

The ECO4 criteria restrict the number of homes that can be improved. The eligibility requirements set out that the homes must be improved by at least two EPC bands, which makes it hard to find suitable homes. Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group members estimate that 90% of qualifying homes miss out because they are unable to meet the minimum requirements of the scheme. To illustrate my point, E.ON attempted to deliver energy-efficiency measures to a three-bed mid-terrace property in Dagenham. The owners of the property qualified for ECO4 as their home was rated EPC band E and they were living in fuel poverty. The package of measures that E.ON proposed would have saved the family about £600 a year on their energy bill, but the installation was rejected because the measures would not improve the house enough to make it jump two EPC bands.

When it comes to tackling the climate and cost of living crises, every little helps, so why is the ECO4 scheme making perfection the enemy of the good? The Government should relax the minimum requirements when all reasonable measures have been installed in an eligible household. That would ensure that vulnerable households could still receive much-needed support. To tackle the cost of living and climate crises, we must improve the energy efficiency of our homes. We must do all that we can to ensure that the ECO scheme benefits as many people as possible, as soon as possible.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making some excellent points. I am sure that in her constituency, as in mine, there are many older properties that are very difficult to convert. Does she

agree that more needs to be done to ensure that those households can access the scheme, because it is harder for them to convert their house?

Wera Hobhouse: Absolutely; I could not agree more. In Bath, we have a lot of old, leaky homes. They are very beautiful, but they are not particularly energy efficient. People really want to do something, but ECO4 does not work for a very large number of households. If we really want to help vulnerable people and tackle the climate emergency, we must look at how the scheme has been designed and make some improvements to it. The two-jump requirement is particularly difficult in old properties.

The Government must take urgent action and improve ECO4, in order to protect the most vulnerable from cold winters and tackle the climate emergency as soon and as effectively as possible.

3.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley; I have done so in the past, and hopefully I will do so again in the future. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on his passion for this issue. His dulcet Welsh tones seem to flow, unlike my Ulster Scots accent, which does not come anywhere near his. Like him, I have a number of park homes in my constituency that have lacked support during this great energy crisis. He has spoken about this issue in the Chamber, including in an Adjournment debate; he has been very much at the forefront of raising it, and I thank him for that.

I read with interest that Ofgem stated at the end of March that the Great British insulation scheme, which was previously referred to and consulted on by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero under the name ECO+, will allow early delivery from 30 March 2023, and will run until 31 March 2026. On 5 April, Ofgem published a consultation, through which it sought stakeholder views on its proposed administration of the policies set out by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and included in the Electricity and Gas (Energy Company Obligation) Order 2023. The consultation covered areas where Ofgem exercised its discretion in administering the new legislative provisions for ECO4, and proposed further improvements to current policies.

That is where we are. That is why the hon. Gentleman raised this issue, and why it is important that we understand it better. We look to the Minister for a positive response, and I look forward to the contributions from the two shadow spokespeople. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) has a deep understanding of these issues and brings her knowledge and interest to the debate.

We have seen the havoc wreaked by protesters, who have destroyed pieces of art, and caused disruption on motorways, to the extent that ambulances have been stuck, and people have missed operations and work. The discussion about insulation and necessary improvements has been lost in the wanton disruption caused by people who have a sound message—that is not in doubt—but whose methods do not encourage debate. Instead, they encourage righteous indignation and, in some cases, anger. That is why I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ceredigion for bringing the discussion back to where it needs to

be—in this House, in Westminster Hall. Here, we can do our jobs and advocate for the change that the protesters want, but in the right way. I commend the hon. Member for that.

I read the hon. Member's piece in *Politico* last year. His words are worth repeating, so I will quote them. I am not trying to embarrass him, but his words were very salient:

“We know that households in the least efficient properties have energy bills that are twice the cost of the most efficient homes. There is a statutory target to upgrade the energy efficiency of all fuel-poor households to EPC C by 2030 and all households to EPC C by 2035. Government needs to ensure that it follows through with its existing commitments. Ensuring the ECO 4 legislation is prioritised in Parliament to maintain installation rates, making swift decisions on minimum energy efficiency standards in the rented sectors and meeting its manifesto commitment to spend £2.5 billion on the Home Upgrade Grant this Parliament.”

Those words are even more relevant today, and I commend him for that. Each of us fully supports him. It also shows that we read the magazine—some people wonder whether we do. I look through it to see whether I know any of the authors, and I always catch up on it.

I support the hon. Member's efforts to hold the Government to account on this issue, to the betterment of all. I always like to give an example from back home. My parliamentary aide bought a property that had been lying vacant for years. It had no heating and needed a total refurb, which was reflected in the price. When she looked into insulating that property, she could not afford to do it as well as all the other work—the new flooring, new kitchen, and new bathroom, and the work on the heating, the garden, and the front. There was lots of work to do. She is a clever girl—she writes all my speeches and interventions, so people must know that she is exceptionally clever and busy. She knows that in the long run the insulation will save money, but given the demands on the joint wages of her and her husband, and given that she is raising two children, with only child benefit to help, I understand why she made that choice. It would have been better to do the insulation, but people's money does not stretch that far. That is why this debate is so important. The scheme gives a wee bit of a helping hand, and nudges and assists people.

We need to help more people like my parliamentary aide to do the right thing—people who get little or no help from the system as a rule, and who work extremely hard. We are talking about people who are environmentally conscious; she washes out her yoghurt pots at 11 pm at night after writing a speech for me. People want to do the right thing by the environment. I support them. We must do the same. I look to the Government and the Minister here; they can start by fulfilling their obligations, and can move on from there.

I know that the Minister is listening. I hope that we can have a positive answer, and that she will reinforce the fact that I do not need to throw orange powder around the streets, or over the Minister or my colleagues, to make my point. Orange is a good colour, Mr Paisley—you know that—but I still would not do that. My point is that insulation makes sense. We all agree that those who highlight the issues may use different methods—in this House, we use dialogue and communication—but they are trying to make change. Let us get buy-in from the average person, who is making sacrifices, and prove that we are in it with them. I am here on behalf of my constituents. The hon. Member for Ceredigion, and

[*Jim Shannon*]

everyone who has spoken and will speak, is here to do the same thing. We can do it, but we need the Minister's help to get over the line.

3.9 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing the debate and making an excellent and detailed opening speech. I also pay tribute to the other contributors, who have spoken well on a really important subject. I am indebted to Cumbria Action for Sustainability for its work in helping to bring homes up to an adequate standard to ensure energy efficiency and lower heating prices, as well as to tackle the climate emergency.

It is estimated that our homes—the ones that we live in—contribute something like 19% of the greenhouse gases emitted by the United Kingdom. In the last two years especially, there have been crushing increases in fuel poverty. Families who may have considered themselves comfortable a couple of years ago now find themselves in dire straits. Mortgage payments and rents are rising, as is the cost of living in general, but the huge increase in fuel and energy costs in the last couple of years has rendered many in a situation where they cannot see where to turn.

The need for a scheme that delivers warmer, greener and cheaper-to-run homes has never been greater, yet the number of UK energy efficiency installations peaked at 2.3 million in 2012. In the decade that followed, we got down to a miserable 100,000 a year. The Government's much-vaunted green homes grant, which was meant to deliver energy efficiency for 1 million homes, in the end did so for only 60,000. ECO4 can and must do much better.

In Cumbria, we face specific problems that make our challenge much greater. We have a much larger proportion of solid-wall properties, of off-grid homes and of homes that are listed or in conservation areas. There are lots of positive things to say about ECO4, including, fundamentally, about its ambition of raising energy performance certificate points and its fabric-first policy—the aim to ensure that insulation happens before the installation of new and hopefully better heat sources. Those things are positive in principle, but in practice they are not entirely being followed. Households in Cumbria—especially those that can least afford it—are suffering because the detail is not being got right.

The funds provided to those installing insulation do not meet the costs, especially for single-wall properties. As we have heard, on average there has been a 77% increase in the cost of materials. Insulation is not happening because companies simply cannot afford to do it, and it is much more expensive to do the work on single-wall properties, which need it most. Insulating a single-wall property entails the further risk that moisture will build up between the wall and the insulating layer. That can lead to the build-up of mould and have a huge impact on human health and building quality in the months and years that follow.

I am told by the people who advise me on such matters that there are answers to that. Cork board or timber fibreboard can be used, as can insulating lime

render, which is especially suitable for Lakeland properties in terms of its aesthetics as well as its efficacy. Frustratingly, however, none of those materials are available through the ECO4 scheme, which goes to explain why a relatively small number of people will take advantage of it.

ECO4 is a more complex scheme, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion rightly pointed out. There are many good reasons why, but one of the consequences is that the energy companies and local authorities have been reluctant to engage as providers. That means that the only people providing work through ECO4 will be independent and private providers, some of whom will be very good but some of whom will not. Private householders, almost certainly including the likes of me, are not always the best judge of which is which. That will have an impact on the quality of the work, and on whether taxpayers' money is spent wisely. For that reason, while Cumbrian contractors have been used to deliver some of the work, Cumbria Action for Sustainability tells us that there have been no Cumbria-based companies offering ECO4 measures.

I mentioned listed properties and those in conservation areas. Residents of Westmorland living in such properties tell us that, when they explain that their home is listed or in a conservation area, suppliers almost instantly—and very politely, I hope—tell them that they are not interested, because there is no way they can make it add up and make the scheme pay.

Fuel poverty among residents of private rented properties, as has already been mentioned, is the worst of all in a community like mine. The average income in my constituency is about one twelfth of the average house price. We have a council house waiting list of 5,000 or 6,000. We have an inadequate quantity of affordable housing. The only way there is any workforce of a working age available in my constituency is because of the private rented sector, and let us say that there is a mix in its quality. Cumbria Action for Sustainability is unaware of a single private landlord in Cumbria who has pursued ECO4, as things stand.

Insulation, and the warmth and energy efficiency of any property, stands and falls on the property's windows. Of course, ECO4 allows for funds to replace single glazing, but it will not allow funds to replace double glazing, even if it is 50 years old, past its use-by date, cracked and faulty. That appears to be a blind spot, which I hope we will act on quickly.

We have heard that ECO4 does not cover the real costs of insulation, especially in single-wall properties. That is especially so for floor insulation above garages, where there are rightly fire safety requirements, making the work more expensive. Where the scheme does not cover costs, measures are not taken, and the people who suffer are those who are left with a home that is too expensive to heat.

Cumbria Action for Sustainability and providers point out that a major reason that the green homes grant failed was the lack of skilled workers to carry out, in particular, the work needed for solid-wall housing. The situation is no better now. Retrofitting, for example, still does not feature in most relevant training schemes.

ECO4 is, in principle, better than its predecessors but, if it does not work in practice, people in Cumbria and elsewhere in our country will suffer. I will argue that ours is the most beautiful bit of the country,

though it is often the coldest and the wettest, too. There are extremes of wealth and poverty, and it is hard for many of my constituents to cope with the financial costs and deprivations that go with that. More than a third of our housing stock is single-wall properties. Cumbria needs the Government to get ECO4 right. I hope they will hear the practical and constructive suggestions made by colleagues on all sides in this debate, and act accordingly.

3.18 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I commend the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) for securing and leading the debate.

There are two issues that require immediate attention and decisive action: the soaring cost of living crisis and the importance of energy efficiency support. In the light of that, it is deeply concerning that, while we face those crises, the Government choose to cut taxes on bankers. Such a decision is abhorrent, especially when it is ordinary citizens who bear the brunt of an escalating cost of living crisis, much of that due to rising energy costs.

Inflation continues to hit those on the lowest incomes most severely, exacerbating their ongoing struggle to make ends meet. The Prime Minister pledged to cut inflation by half. However, it is evident that the Government are struggling to meet that pledge, and now aim to reduce public sector pay to compensate. We learned today that the leader of the Labour party, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), also refused to back public sector pay rises. That is a misguided approach, in our opinion, that will only further burden those who are already struggling.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation paints a distressing picture, revealing that 7 million households have gone without essentials, such as food, heating or basic toiletries, due to the cost of living crisis. It is our responsibility to provide support and relief to those individuals and families who are enduring such hardships. Considering all those other parts that play into the crisis, it is vital that we do not withdraw or cancel energy efficiency support for those in need.

Energy efficiency measures such as ECO4 and ECO+ play a crucial role in achieving our net zero targets and combating climate change. In 2019, a report from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee praised the Scottish Government for being leagues ahead of the UK Government on energy efficiency, and we continue to deliver on that front. Our planet is facing unprecedented challenges, with soaring sea temperatures, and action is urgent. It was disheartening that a previous BEIS Secretary and disgraced former Prime Minister Boris Johnson blocked plans for a public information campaign on energy efficiency. How much could consumers have saved if they had received the necessary information and support? Many of our constituents do not know that help and support is out there in the form of these schemes.

The Scottish Government have taken proactive steps towards energy efficiency and are committed to investing at least £1.8 billion in heat and energy efficiency over the course of this Scottish Parliament. Through existing programmes, we have already supported over 150,000 households in or at risk of fuel poverty, including those in rural and island communities. Our Home Energy Scotland grant and loan scheme offers grant funding of

up to £7,500 for heat pumps, with an additional £7,500 made available as an optional interest-free loan. Moreover, we have provided an uplift of £1,500 to both the heat pump and energy efficiency grants for rural and island homes, recognising the specific challenges faced by those communities.

Beyond immediate measures, we must recognise the urgent need to change the way we use our energy. As oil and gas production naturally declines, there is a tremendous opportunity for growth in low-carbon energy production. It is projected that low-carbon energy jobs could increase to 77,000 by 2050, delivering an increase of 7,000 jobs across the energy production sector. The Scottish Government's draft energy strategy and just transition plan outlines the actions necessary for the UK Government to collaborate with us to achieve Scotland's full energy potential. To facilitate that transition, the Scottish Government, led by the SNP, are already investing in the sector's net zero transformation.

Our expanded £75 million energy transition fund and £100 million green jobs fund, alongside the £500 million just transition fund, will support regions such as the north-east and Moray in becoming centres of excellence for a just transition to a net zero economy. That stands in stark contrast to other parties, which have historically bled the north-east of Scotland dry and left the region on the proverbial scrap heap.

Renewable energy presents a significant economic opportunity for Scotland. The just energy transition will deliver a net gain in jobs across the energy production sector. The Scottish Government have taken decisive action, but we are constrained by the limitations imposed by Westminster's grip on the purse strings. It is time for the UK Government to recognise that and the importance of energy efficiency, collaborate with us and our colleagues in the Scottish Government, and provide the necessary support to achieve our shared goals.

3.23 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing the debate.

We have heard from all Members who have spoken how important it is for the Government to look at the complexities of this issue. I represent a predominately urban constituency and, by and large, the other Members we have heard from represent rural constituencies. Each area will have different problems depending on its housing stock, the availability of skills and so on, but it is the Government's job to try to iron those problems out. That is why it is important that we are having this debate so that people can put on the record some of the issues they have found.

Let me start with the broadbrush issues with retrofitting. Members have set out well that the crisis of rising energy bills has brought home to people how much energy they lose through having poorly insulated homes—energy is literally going through the roof—and how we could reduce not only bills, but our emissions if we had homes that met the EPC C standard.

I would say that this is about retrofitting existing homes, but the Government had a pledge to introduce zero-carbon new homes and then dropped it. Estimates suggest that well over a million homes have been built

[*Kerry McCarthy*]

since then that do not meet the EPC C standard. Given that we face such a massive task in retrofitting existing housing stock, it seems ludicrous that we do not insist that new builds meet a certain standard, because we will need to retrofit them not too far down the line.

I have just come from the Energy Bill Committee, where we were talking about how we ensure that we have the skills for a just transition. This work tends to be carried out by small and medium-sized enterprises and sole traders—it is not as though there is one big company that will deliver it—and they need certainty that this is a line of work in which there will be jobs for the foreseeable future. With schemes stopping and starting as they have in the past—there was lack of consumer confidence because of the way some earlier schemes floundered—people will not move into those jobs, particularly given the shortages of construction workers, plumbers and electricians. It can be difficult to get people to do even the traditional jobs, let alone move into this area. We must address that to create stability.

The need for consumer advice was mentioned, and I just mentioned consumer confidence. Previous experience shows us that that is really important. This is about going into people's homes, uprooting their domestic lives and putting them at risk of having to pay a lot of money. Under earlier schemes, cowboy operators did not do work to the expected standard and people were suddenly told that they needed extra—

Liz Saville Roberts: It seems evident to me that, since many of the people who will qualify for support through these schemes will be vulnerable, unless protections are built in for them, they may not be able to deal with it when work is not done to the expected standard, which is what we will hear about as MPs. I would have expected the Government to build that into the schemes in the first instance because of the nature of the people they are trying to support.

Kerry McCarthy: That is very much the case. I have been in this place for 18 years. Earlier in my career, I saw in my casework people who had been ripped off really struggling to deal with the bureaucracy of whether they would be able to get public funding and whether they had to pay the people who were literally on their doorstep asking for money.

Turning to where we are now, the ECO scheme was well intentioned and welcome, but it is not working. At the moment, the UK has the least energy-efficient housing in Europe and home insulation rates have plummeted. Many statistics have been bandied around. My numbers are slightly different and relate to a different time period. In 2013, the coalition cut energy efficiency programmes; in the same year, insulation rates fell by 92%. That is what I go back to—the period when the market crashed, setting us back about a decade to where we are now. Last year, only 159,699 ECO measures were installed in low-income and fuel-poor homes, a reduction of 59% from the 393,706 in 2021.

There is a substantial gap between Government insulation targets and delivery where ECO4 is concerned. Analysis from E.ON Energy suggests that, as of December 2022, the industry had completed around 11% of the obligation, compared with an expected 19%. We estimate that at

the same point during the ECO3 scheme, the industry had completed 29%. That delay will have consequences. A report from the World Wide Fund for Nature and ScottishPower warns that the Government are on track to insulate just one sixth of the homes needed to meet their target of reducing energy consumption by 15% by 2030.

I have spoken to people from various businesses in the retrofit industry, and they fear that the same mistakes are being made. Nigel Donohue, chief executive of the Installation Assurance Authority, said the transition to ECO4 was

“really poorly managed...despite conversations with the Government about not allowing this to happen to the industry again”.

There is no getting away from the fact that the scheme is really struggling.

There are two major issues delaying delivery. The first is limitations on scoring. Aeon estimates that up to 90% of the properties eligible for ECO4 will not receive the support they desperately need because those homes do not meet the minimum improvement requirements. The goalposts that must be cleared for properties to meet the SAP score are being moved, so vulnerable, fuel-poor households have been ruled ineligible and are missing out.

The second issue is costs. Funding assumptions under ECO4 are significantly lower than actual installation costs, and rising inflation has led to costs in the supply chain escalating even further. With current inflation rates and the skill shortages, those costs are likely to be increasing incrementally, almost by the week. I am not convinced that the Government have taken that into account. Delivering loft insulation, for example, is currently 430% more expensive than the Government estimate, while cavity wall insulation is 372% more expensive. These are clearly not small discrepancies, and they have to be recognised in the ECO4 scheme.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero acknowledged the increased costs when consulting on the ECO+ scheme back in December, but ECO4 has not been aligned. There is also the problem I mentioned of the gaps between schemes causing confusion and a drop in uptake. There was a four-month gap before ECO4, and I think at one point prior to that there was an 18-month gap between schemes, which I am told had a major impact on the skills front. We cannot allow the same to happen with ECO+. Continuity is needed.

I have also spoken to a housing association boss who says that he thinks the schemes are working okay generally, but that timescales and bureaucracy are a big problem. Low levels of contribution to band D homes means that installers and energy companies are less likely to take them on. He would like a focus on ensuring that installers are compliant with publicly available specifications, PAS, in the long term, so that people trust retrofitting more, but at the moment the process is very bureaucratic. He cites a case where a 115-page form was needed to fit loft insulation that took only an hour to install. I do not know how long it takes to fill out a 115-page form, but I would imagine that it was considerably longer than one hour. He also said that with schemes such as the home upgrade grant, the focus on specific measures, rather than letting retrofitting co-ordinators decide what is best, sometimes means that they cannot offer support for some houses.

It would be remiss of me not to mention how well Bristol is doing at retrofitting homes through its City Leap programme. The 3Ci website has a really good account of what we are doing. One of our ambitions, for example, is to get all social housing up to EPC C by 2030, which involves an innovative arrangement with private sector finance. Under our green prosperity plan, Labour is committed to spending £6 billion a year to retrofit 19 million homes to EPC C within a decade, saving families an average of £1,000 a year on their energy bills, creating over 206,000 new full-time equivalent jobs, and cutting national gas imports by up to 15%. I hope that we will be ready to start work on that in just over a year's time, or whenever the election is called, but it would be good if the current Government addressed some of the underlying issues, particularly the skills gap, ensured continuity of supply, and listened to what Members have said today, so that we are ready to hit the ground running. Even if we do not win the next election, I am sure the Minister would hope to get things in a better place so that we can steam ahead with this programme.

3.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): It is a great pleasure to be serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing this incredibly important debate and thank all those who have contributed. As you may know, Mr Paisley, this issue is not in my portfolio; however, I am here to represent the Government and to take away any questions that I am unable to answer today.

I welcome all Members' contributions; they really have been incredibly helpful. I thank everyone, particularly the hon. Member for Ceredigion, for the suggestions they made throughout the debate. One of the things that we really need to apply within all of this activity is common sense, and a lot of the suggestions that I have heard today have been based on common sense.

Although they are not relevant to this debate, I will also talk about the energy costs that really play on my mind as the Minister with responsibility for consumers and affordability. Clearly, there are many schemes that I could go into, although, as I say, they are not relevant. I will just say what many hon. Members have already said, which is that we must encourage all consumers to make sure that they get all of their benefits. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue; as Members of Parliament, we should always encourage people to do that.

The energy company obligation is the Government's most successful domestic energy efficiency scheme in Great Britain. It obliges larger energy suppliers to deliver bill savings for households by installing energy efficiency measures. Since it began in 2013, it has delivered 3.6 million measures in more than 2.4 million properties, which means that over 9% of British households have had an ECO measure installed. Low-income and vulnerable households will save over £19 billion on their bills over the lifetime of the measures that have been installed. As the hon. Gentleman may know, over 17% of households in his constituency have received ECO measures over the last decade.

ECO4 was introduced last year and runs until March 2026. It has continued to support low-income and vulnerable households while also increasing the focus on the least energy-efficient properties and on fuel poverty. To be eligible for it, households either have to be in receipt of means-tested benefits, live in social housing or be referred by their local authority or energy supplier. For the first time, part of the overall target has been met by upgrading the equivalent of 150,000 of the worst-performing homes, with those living in homes with energy performance certificate ratings of E, F or G the most likely to be in the deepest fuel poverty. Also for the first time, we set a minimum requirement for energy efficiency improvements, depending on a home's energy efficiency rating. This means that more of the households receiving help will be brought out of fuel poverty permanently. We estimate that at current energy prices, households benefiting from ECO4 will reduce their annual energy bills by over £600 on average.

Delivery under ECO4 commenced last April, with around 130,000 measures delivered to over 43,000 low-income households. The scheme data shows a gradual increase in delivery, and recent reporting from the supply chain indicates that delivery has continued to increase through May and June.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Ceredigion will be delighted to hear that Ceredigion continues to benefit disproportionately from ECO4; over 1% of all measures installed under ECO4 have been in his constituency. This success is partly due to the explicit incentive within the scheme to treat off-grid rural homes in Wales and Scotland, and it is also thanks to the ECO Flex provision, which allows up to 50% of the overall obligation to be met by treating homes that have been referred by a local authority or a devolved Administration. Ceredigion is one of the leaders in that part of the scheme.

Nevertheless, I assure the House that we are not complacent. We continue to monitor delivery closely, working with local authorities, energy suppliers and devolved Administrations to share best practice about ECO Flex and to remove administrative barriers where possible. Ofgem has recently republished guidance that should make the ECO Flex process easier, and, as has been mentioned, we are considering how the whole scheme can be amended. We recognise that costs have increased since we developed ECO4 and that, as the hon. Gentleman explained, meeting the minimum improvement requirement in certain homes is challenging. We are considering whether changes to the policy are desirable and analysing the potential impact of such changes. For example, we will need to examine the consequences of relaxing the minimum requirement for our fuel poverty targets, given the imperative of proofing homes to band C. Making changes to ECO4 will require a public consultation and amendments to affirmative regulations, so any changes we decide to make will be well informed by external stakeholders.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about expanding the list of technologies, the primary legislation that enables ECO4 and GBIS limits technologies to those that reduce space heating costs. While we are open to expanding the eligible technologies in the future, that would require a change in primary powers. Beyond ECO4, and in response to persistently high energy prices, we have extended the help available through a new eco energy efficiency scheme: the Great British insulation scheme, which many Members

[Amanda Solloway]

mentioned. Previously consulted on as ECO+, it will boost support for those on the lowest incomes and the most vulnerable, and extend help to a wider pool of households who are also challenged by high energy bills.

ECO4 and the Great British insulation scheme are a major expansion of the Government's action on energy efficiency. The predecessor ECO3 scheme was worth £640 million annually, and total ECO funding has now reached £1.3 billion per year to March 2026. We estimate that by April 2026, the GB insulation scheme will have delivered about 376,000 measures to about 300,000 households, helping households to cut heating bills by an average of £300 to £400 per year.

These schemes also create continuity for the supply chain. To further facilitate supply chain growth, the Government have increased funding for training schemes, as many Members mentioned. The Department's £9.2 million home decarbonisation skills training competition, launched in September 2022, has awarded grant funding to 19 training providers in England to deliver subsidised training in the energy efficiency, building retrofit and low-carbon heating sectors. That training will deliver an estimated 9,000 training opportunities to the building retrofit, energy efficiency and heat pump sectors through to summer 2023. That includes accredited training to qualify standard installers and retrofit co-ordinators.

Alongside the energy efficiency upgrades we are making through the Great British insulation scheme and ECO4, the Government are investing £6.6 billion over this Parliament in clean heat and energy efficiency, reducing our reliance on fossil fuel heating. In addition, £6 billion of new Government funding will be made available from 2025 to 2028. We have heard it said that consumers are at the heart of everything we do, and I give my assurance that one of the things we are doing is reaching out to stakeholders. Hon. Members have also mentioned places such as citizens advice bureaux. Clearly it is important that we talk to people about the cost of living but also what we are doing in our ongoing support.

The Government investment I have listed, as well as specific investment in building a market for green finance, means that a range of green financing options are already available from high street lenders to owner-occupiers and private landlords. They include things such as green mortgages and additional borrowing facilities, or cashback offers to homeowners undertaking energy retrofit. Some energy suppliers also offer 0% finance for certain energy efficiency products. Improving the energy efficiency of our homes is the best long-term solution to reducing energy bills and tackling fuel poverty. ECO4 and the

GB insulation scheme will support that, while also helping to protect our nation's energy and support our net zero target.

A comparative assessment of cost assumptions for the ECO4 scheme and those set out in the Great British insulation scheme consultation has also been talked about. We are monitoring ECO4 delivery against the current cost assumptions, and we will consider changes if necessary. Changing the cost assumptions may require a change to the overall energy bill reduction target, to the estimated funding, to policy details of the scheme, or a combination of all three. Such changes will require public consultation and regulatory change.

There are many more areas that I could discuss, but I will end by thanking the hon. Member for Ceredigion again for securing this important debate. I look forward to continuing to engage with him and all ECO stakeholders to ensure that the schemes continue to help fuel-poor households, support jobs and deliver value for consumers.

3.45 pm

Ben Lake: I thank all those who have contributed to the debate; it has been very detailed and useful. As well as some of the practical concerns and challenges, we have discussed some of the broader and deeper tensions within various aspects of the policy, and how changes to one aspect might have a detrimental or unintended impact on another.

I am grateful to all colleagues. I thank the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who made speeches. I also thank the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and the Minister, as well as those who made interventions. It has been a good debate with a consensus that this objective is very important, and the policy will deliver a great deal of good for households as they face ever-increasing pressures on their finances.

I have the last word, as it were. I will use it to say that I am pleased that the Government are monitoring the situation, particularly the cost assumptions. That will be broadly welcomed by those who are responsible for installing some of these measures.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the implementation of ECO4 and ECO+.

3.47 pm

Sitting suspended.

Protection of Seals

4 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered the protection of seals.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am delighted to have secured this debate. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for all her hard work on the subject of seal welfare. I was proud to sponsor her Seals (Protection) Bill last year. I hope this debate might offer a chance to discuss this vital topic.

Ensuring the protection and welfare of seals is a dual process of education and legislation. Seals are rare enough that their presence is a novelty to many communities, making information and guidance essential. However, there will always be individuals who, for whatever reason, do not mind disturbing wildlife and do not care about the impact of their actions on the ecosystem. In the light of that, I urge the Government to amend the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to make the intentional or reckless disturbance of seals an offence. This would give seals the same protections as whales and dolphins, and would bring England and Wales in line with existing seal protection legislation in Northern Ireland and Scotland, creating a consistent framework across the UK.

The issue of seal welfare first came to my attention two years ago, when the riverside near Hammersmith bridge in the north of my constituency became home to a curious and excitable seal pup. Nicknamed Freddie Mercury for his love of the spotlight, he quickly became a treasured feature of the local community. The return of seals to the River Thames was a joy, not just to local people, who loved to watch Freddie sunbathe and play, but to campaign groups, who saw their presence as a sign that the Thames was finally recovering from decades of pollution. While seals are rare in my constituency of Richmond Park, whenever they are sighted they always capture the public's attention.

Sadly, just a few weeks after arriving on our shores on 21 March 2021, Freddie was attacked by a passing dog. Although onlookers intervened to try to save him, he had already had his flipper broken and suffered horrific wounds. Two days later, Freddie died. The owner of the dog that killed Freddie was not a callous person. Had she been aware of Freddie's presence and the need to keep her dog on a lead, she would have done so. Unfortunately, Freddie's story is not uncommon. Almost every day seals are injured or killed by our negligence. In many cases, these incidents are entirely preventable. I have been encouraged to see that, since Freddie's death, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has provided support and funding for a number of initiatives to educate the public about seal welfare. I also welcome the introduction of the marine and coastal wildlife code last month and hope that the Department will continue its work to spread best practice and behaviour to communities.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. As he is here, I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who was incredibly supportive of the Seals (Protection) Bill, which I introduced in February 2022. Although the code she has referenced is welcome, it is still only

advisory, so does she agree that we need legislation such as the Seals (Protection) Bill, which would amend the existing legislation, to protect seals from intentional or reckless disturbance?

Sarah Olney: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention; that was the point I was about to make. As well as the education initiatives, which have been so welcome, we need more progress on the legislative side of this issue.

Just a few weeks after Freddie's death, a BASE jumper performed a jump directly above a group of seals in north Wales. Despite being warned of the threat he posed to local wildlife, he went ahead with the jump, causing a mass stampede of seals into the sea. That kind of disturbance may seem relatively harmless, but it can be catastrophic for the animals involved. It disrupts the pups' feeding, reduces their chances of surviving the cold winter months and leaves adults stressed and tired. Extreme cases can result in injury or death. When startled, some seals will do anything to hide from suspected predators, throwing themselves off rocky ledges towards the oceans, breaking jaws and flippers. Unable to swim or eat, seals injured in this way will die soon after.

Freddie's death and the stampede in north Wales reinforce the need for a dual approach whereby education and legislation are implemented hand in hand to ensure the safety of seals in Britain's waterways.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate and for the way she is setting it out. Angel Bay, in my north Wales constituency, is well known for its seal population. In fact, this debate is extraordinarily timely, as today I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned because a film crew are out there. I happen to know that they are supported by the North Wales Wildlife Trust. Will she join me in thanking groups such as the North Wales Wildlife Trust and the many volunteers who look after these colonies and help to balance the important demand for education of the public with the protection of these remarkable creatures?

Sarah Olney: The hon. Member is absolutely right. We have a fantastic group of voluntary organisations in this country that are really dedicated to protecting the interests of seals and ensuring their welfare. It is great news to hear that the film crew in his constituency are working closely with the North Wales Wildlife Trust, but we also have organisations such as the Seal Research Trust, Seal Watch and the Seal Alliance. There is a whole group of organisations doing really valuable work in this area.

We have a special responsibility on behalf of the rest of the world to ensure that we protect these rare creatures. The United Kingdom is home to more than a third of the global grey seal population. We are a sanctuary for seals in Europe, and we should have legal protections in place to ensure that they are not harmed by our actions. Beyond our global responsibility, introducing a ban on seal disturbance would safeguard the current economic benefits brought by these creatures and encourage further responsible, sustainable seal-based tourism.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I support what the hon. Lady is trying to do. On the point about numbers, I represent North Norfolk, which has some of

[Duncan Baker]

the largest seal colonies in the whole of Europe. Off Blakeney Point, we have 3,000 pups born every single year. In the east of my constituency, the Friends of Horsey Seals does an incredible job at looking after seals all year round. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to bring in more protections. The Marine Management Organisation can quite often create byelaws. If the Minister is unable to create legislation to deal with this issue, I wonder whether the MMO could introduce byelaws in certain locations to help to stop seal disturbances.

Sarah Olney: The hon. Member is absolutely right. I am quite certain that more can be done at every level of government, but he is absolutely right to make the point about certain sensitive locations in his constituency. If we are not able to progress with legislation on a national level, local opportunities should be pursued. Perhaps that is something the Minister might like to address in his remarks.

Coastal tourism in Great Britain is estimated to generate £17.1 billion in spending and support 285,000 jobs in seaside towns. Those jobs are a vital source of employment in many coastal towns, which often suffer from high levels of deprivation and unemployment. Seal watching has already become a mainstay of the tourist industry in Scotland and, with the right protections in place, could bring huge value to struggling coastal communities across England and Wales. In 2015, the National Trust found that 39% of visitors to the UK coastline came with the intention of getting close to nature and wildlife. In Norfolk, nearly 80,000 people a year are estimated to visit the seal colony at Horsey, while certain seals in Devon have developed a cult following among tourists, with their own social media pages and supporter groups.

Seals are uniquely well suited as tourist attractions. Unlike other marine megafauna, they are found in predictable locations, reside in an open habitat and can be seen in all seasons. If managed correctly, seal watching could boost tourism across the UK coastline and increasingly become a valuable source of revenue for British tourism.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I want to highlight the work of the Seal Research Trust in Cornwall. At Mutton Cove, we have a fantastic number of seals and some great work is done. Further to the point made earlier, does she think that, as well as the MMO potentially having powers to introduce byelaws, the inshore fisheries and conservation agencies could also do so; and that, rather than having an offence for disturbance, it might be better to create an obligation on certain marine agencies to give consideration to seals when designating byelaws?

Sarah Olney: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which demonstrates that there are many routes to achieving the goal that we all want. Perhaps the Minister will address that point in his closing remarks.

Unfortunately, badly managed tourism and inappropriate individual behaviour can threaten this industry. According to data gathered by the Seal Research Trust, 68% of the time that humans are present near seals, the animals

have been disturbed. Continued disturbances and a persistent human presence in close proximity to seal habitats can mean the permanent abandonment of formerly well-used habitats, behaviour alterations and reduced survivorship for the whole local population. For that reason, it is crucial that public and private businesses are issued with more than simple voluntary guidance. They must be bound by law to uphold certain standards; otherwise, we may see fewer seals in our seas in years to come.

The damage caused by human disturbance may not be immediate or obvious, but it is very real. Without protection, some seal colonies will be abandoned, costing communities money and throwing the local ecosystem into chaos. Like most British marine life, seal populations are under intense pressure. Although their numbers have boomed in recent years, they must increasingly contend with litter in the ocean, changing prey patterns and extreme weather. However, unlike addressing most environmental issues, improving conditions for seals would be extremely simple for the Government. Reduced rates of disturbance would allow more seal pups to survive until maturity, and would leave adults to properly rest and recuperate between trips to the ocean.

In 2021, the Government committed to becoming a global leader in animal welfare, and to setting high standards for others across the world to follow. Although those are commendable aims, many of my constituents were heartbroken when the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and the Animals Abroad Bill were set aside. They were hoping to see a genuine commitment to the protection of animals, but so far they have unfortunately been let down. Given that two of the Government's three flagship animal welfare Bills have now been scrapped, I hope that the Department has time to revise its current guidance and create some small pieces of legislation that will show that the Government have not entirely abandoned their commitment to animal rights.

Charities such as the Seal Research Trust, Seal Watch and the Seal Alliance are already doing fantastic work to educate the public. A huge amount of effort goes into their work of spreading good practice. I want to recognise the dedication of my constituent Mary Tester, who is in the Public Gallery, and Sue Sayer from the Seal Research Trust. Their commitment to seal welfare is commendable, and they have done so much to inform and educate people visiting or living near seal habitats. Unfortunately, despite their tireless work, it takes only one bad tour operator or persistently uncaring person in each area frequented by seals to cause serious damage to the local population.

In the coming decades, marine life will be stressed by warming seas, plastics in our oceans and the effects of decades of over-fishing. By creating stronger protections for seals now, we can give them the best chance of surviving the difficult years ahead and ensure that future generations have the opportunity to see these wonderful creatures in the wild for years to come.

4.12 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for securing the debate. We have a rich wealth of marine life in the UK, and it is important that we continue to raise such issues and champion the protection of those species.

The UK Government have a strong track record in ensuring that protection and management measures are in place for marine species. As the Minister with responsibility for fisheries, I fully acknowledge the fishing industry's expertise and stewardship of the marine environment. I recognise its concerns about the potential impact of environmental protections on livelihoods.

The British coastline is home to two globally important populations of seals: a significant 38% of the world's population of grey seals, and 30% of European harbour seals. Seals play an important role in the marine ecosystem, but they face a list of threats, including pollution, entanglement, marine plastic and debris, climate change and, as the hon. Lady said, disturbance from human interaction.

None the less, we have a comprehensive suite of protections in place for seals, including the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, which make it an offence to capture or kill a seal. Seal shooting licences and the shooting of seals, which were previously allowed under the "netsman's defence" provision in the Conservation of Seals Act 1970, have been banned since 2021. The Act is equally applicable in inland waters, rivers, coastal areas and territorial waters.

It is also an offence to take, injure or kill a seal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The Act makes it an offence for anyone to disturb any animal that is recognised as a designated feature in a site of special scientific interest. For example, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said, in Norfolk there are two SSSIs designated for harbour seals: the Wash and the north Norfolk coast. Seals uniquely occupy both marine and terrestrial spaces. Seal spotting at beaches and estuaries is a popular pastime for coastal visitors.

Together with the Seal Alliance, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs launched the "Give Seals Space" campaign in 2021, to help to raise awareness of the impact of disturbance on seals, and the importance of keeping dogs under close control. Earlier this year, we also published England's first national marine and coastal wildlife code. The code provides further targeted guidance for coastal visitors on marine species and activities.

The Government recognise that seals interacting with fishing gear and eating fish can be a problem for some sections of the fishing industry. I have also heard concerns directly from the industry that seals can stress aquaculture species in pens, such as salmon. That is why we work closely with the seafood industry, as we develop non-lethal deterrents and implement protections.

In 2022, the UK Government and the devolved Administrations published the marine wildlife bycatch mitigation initiative, setting out how we will work collaboratively with the fishing industry and stakeholders to minimise and, where possible, eliminate the bycatch of sensitive marine species. DEFRA also worked alongside the Marine Management Organisation to fund the development of non-lethal methods to help prevent negative seal-fishery interactions and costly damage to fishing gear. The MMO has been working with the fishing industry to test the use of targeted acoustic startle technology as a seal deterrent. I am pleased to say that it is yielding promising results for limiting seal interactions

for specific fisheries. A full report on that is due to be published shortly, and we are considering the next steps that we can take to address the issue under the Clean Catch UK programme.

The UK marine strategy provides a framework for assessing and taking measures to achieve and maintain good environmental status in our seas. It covers a range of biodiversity and marine environment indicators, which include a seal abundance and distribution indicator. Overall, GES for seals has been partially achieved. We will also continue to be at the forefront of marine protection. We are developing a well-managed network of marine protected areas. We have recently designated the first three highly protected marine areas in English waters. Sites protecting seals include Berwickshire and north Northumberland, which have MPAs protecting grey seals, and the Wash and north Norfolk coast, where the MPA also protects harbour seals, as I mentioned earlier.

As a final point, we can only protect and manage the marine environment effectively when we do so in collaboration with the countries with which we share the ocean. I am proud that the UK is a leading voice for the protection of marine mammals internationally.

Tracey Crouch: I am listening to the Minister with great interest. It is undeniable that the Minister and the Department are doing what they can to enhance the protection of seals, particularly through measures in the fishing industry, as he has spoken about at length. However, my Bill—the foundation of today's debate—is about humans and their interaction with seals, and the disturbance and harassment they cause. There are still many campaigners, including those in the Public Gallery and those who have made representations in the past, who feel that not enough is being done to stop the intentional harassment of seals. Although the things the Minister is outlining in his speech are wonderful, he has not addressed the point that a great number of people are still disturbing seals, causing them great harm.

Mark Spencer: That is something that the Government recognise. We clearly do not want to see that disturbance by members of the public. That is why, as I said earlier, together with the Seal Alliance, in spring 2021 we launched the new Government-backed "Give Seals Space" campaign to help to raise awareness of the impact that human disturbance can have on seals, and to try to reduce it. To help to address rising numbers of summer visitors to coastlines and minimise the disturbance, in May 2023, DEFRA published England's first national marine and coastal wildlife code. It is about educating members of the public to ensure that they are aware that their interactions with seals can disturb and have a negative impact.

George Eustice: I am conscious that we are potentially close to a Division, so the Minister will want to wind up soon. He is right that there is a comprehensive set of legislation dealing with the injuring, killing or taking of a seal. On the issue of disturbance, however, there is potentially a gap. We can do awareness raising campaigns—I was responsible for introducing those at the time—but sometimes there may be recreational tourist boats, for instance, that cause a disturbance. Allowing inshore fisheries and conservation authorities the power to introduce certain byelaws to manage that activity could make a big difference.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to all the work my right hon. Friend did as Secretary of State to move us forward in this area. Our ears are always open to new ideas, and this debate has played a significant part in ensuring that the Government are tuned into some of the thoughts of colleagues across the House.

We are seeing increasing public awareness, and we are carrying out industry engagement. Innovation is also going to help, and we have a range of legislative, licensing and spatial conservation measures in place. I am sure there is still more to do, but I am proud of what the UK has done to deliver in this space. I thank Members from across the House for engaging in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

4.21 pm

Sitting suspended.

Population Growth: Impact of Immigration

4.50 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of immigration on population growth.

It is a delight to speak in this Chamber on a subject which is not a delight; it everything but a delight, as I shall articulate briefly in this important debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

The greatest Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli—of course, a Conservative, but I suppose that is implicit—said that

“change is inevitable...change...is constant.”

I want to speak about the course, character and consequences of change.

Each of us encounters change in our lives. The ultimate change is death, the first change we enjoy is birth, and those between can be either joys or sorrows, but our capacity to adapt to change is not limitless. The enduring touchstones of familiarity help to give our lives certainty and assurance, and it is vital that we understand that that applies communally and collectively as well as personally. Yet the changes that this country has seen in population growth have been dramatic.

So much of the political debate that we cherish and thrive upon in this place is about change, and yet the Government have made no real measure of the effect of a rapidly growing population and have no mechanism across Government to deal with its consequences. When I first ran for Parliament in 1987—I know there are people in this Chamber thinking, “How can that be possible?” and it is true that I was all but a boy in those days—net migration was just 2,000. Up until the mid-1990s, migration was essentially balanced. We had people leaving the country and people coming, and that is what all advanced countries enjoy, for it is the inevitable consequence of being an advanced economy.

When I was first elected to this House in 1997, 10 years later, net migration was 47,000. Ten years later—10 difficult, and some would say tragic, years under the stewardship of Mr Blair—net migration was 233,000. Under the previous Labour Government, total migration was 3.6 million, and nearly 1 million British citizens emigrated, so net migration topped 2.7 million. The rate of inflow between 1997 and 2010 equated to one migrant arriving every minute. Every year since 1997 bar one—when the world was locked down—net migration was in excess of 100,000, and often by a much bigger margin than that. Indeed, net migration has averaged about 250,000 a year over the past two decades.

The most recent figures published by the Office for National Statistics last month are truly shocking: they heralded record net migration of 606,000.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend find it even more, frankly, antidemocratic that at no point in that whole process since the 1980s have the electorate been asked whether that outcome is what they want?

Sir John Hayes: That is entirely true. Indeed, there is a huge gulf between the expectations and the sentiments of the vast bulk of the British population on this subject and those of that awful marriage of greedy plutocrats and doubt-fuelled liberals, who seem to think that endless migration is acceptable. My hon. Friend is right: this has been done without consent—indeed, without as much as consultation, let alone consent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman on bringing this forward. I understand the direction he is going in, but my understanding is that 1.2 million people migrated to the UK and 557,000 left to go elsewhere. That leaves a balance, as the right hon. Gentleman said, of 606,000 at the end of June '22. Does the right hon. Member accept that many of the people who are coming here have a contribution to make to society and can build society alongside us? I understand that economic migrants are outside of this system, but there are many who want to make a contribution. Does he accept that fact, and does he think that the contributions they make to the NHS and to families are important?

Sir John Hayes: Yes, of course I accept that and I will say a bit more on that later on. Of course it is true that people come here and make remarkable contributions to our communities and to our society. This is not about a failure to acknowledge that contribution; it is about dealing with the unprecedented scale and pace of it. It is impossible to sustain this level of migration for reasons I will set out.

To be clear about the relationship to population, migration alone accounts for 57.5% of population growth in England and Wales. Since 2001, the UK population has increased by 8 million, of which nearly 7 million was due to immigration. Just imagine that figure for a moment. To put it in context, that equates to the combined populations of Birmingham, Manchester, Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Peterborough, Ipswich, Norwich, Luton and Bradford. A much higher population increase can be expected in future years unless we do something radical to address this problem.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): My point relates to the ratio of numbers of individuals who have come to certain regions of the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, we have a fairly small population—maybe even in comparison with some of the cities that have just been mentioned—and yet we have received a large percentage of the people coming in. I am talking about illegal immigrants, of which we took 3,356 in Northern Ireland. We were told that we would take 1,000. Those people are in 21 hotels, which are part of one of our growth industries in Northern Ireland, and are taking up more than 1,100 rooms. That is a big problem. Unfortunately, Scotland has taken a lot fewer. People will ask what is going on there. It is not fair.

Sir John Hayes: Of course, when people arrive in the country, there is no accounting for where they choose to go. They will typically go to places where there is work, understandably; we would, too, after all. When I speak of these general numbers, the impact in certain parts of the country, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, has been much more profound than in others.

To go back to my point about change. The ability to cope with that level of change economically, socially and culturally has placed immense burdens on those communities that have enjoyed the greatest levels of migration. The population of this country grew by 606,000 last year. The fact that that is unprecedented is a matter of fact. The fact that it is unacceptable is obvious. The scale of growth will put unbearable pressure on already stretched—

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will be happy to do so in a second, but I just want to illustrate my point.

My hon. Friend may have been about to intervene to tell us this, but last year, we built around 180,000 houses. Bear in mind that the population increased by 600,000. We did not, and could not, build enough surgeries, clinics and hospitals to cope with more than 600,000 additional people. We cannot build enough new railways and roads to deal with the extra demand. We are simply adding 600,000 people to an infrastructure already in desperate need of being upgraded. The pressure on the NHS, which my hon. Friend will know a great deal about, is immense. There were 700,000 new GP registrations last year by people entering the country.

Dr Poulter: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I wonder whether he might reflect that last year was slightly unusual in that this country rightly took in approximately 130,000 Ukrainian refugees. There was also a net inflow of about 90,000 British citizens returning. There were other refugees from Afghanistan and Hong Kong to whom we rightly held out our hand as a country to give refuge.

On a wider point, my right hon. Friend is at slight risk of suggesting that immigration per se is bad, when we recognise that people who come here and work hard for the NHS can make a great contribution to our country. Frankly, a number of our public services could not operate without them.

Sir John Hayes: People come with an economic need as well as providing an economic benefit. There are costs and benefits to every individual in this room and every person who arrives in the country. The degree of cost they bring will depend on their circumstances. If someone comes who is sick, elderly or infirm, their demand on the NHS will be much greater. If someone comes who is young and fit, economically active and skilled, their contribution to the economy will be much greater.

My hon. Friend is right that last year was exceptional, for the reasons he gave. When I spoke of a typical figure over the period of 250,000, he will understand that that is the size of several substantial cities. Just housing those people alone is proving impossible. The biggest single driver of housing demand is migration, and has been for a very long time indeed.

My hon. Friend is also right that our health service benefits immensely from people born overseas. Both of my sons were delivered by people born overseas. I have been treated by all kinds of specialist doctors, nurses and others born overseas, as have members of my family. I thank them for that service, and fully recognise and appreciate the contribution they have made.

James Daly: It is important to say, in respect of that, that the reason why that contribution is required is that we have palpably failed to train home-grown people, who could take the same jobs. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we fall into a lazy argument if we simply talk in platitudes, rather than look at the lives and opportunities of our citizens?

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend encourages me to digress, though within the scope of the matter before us. There is a macroeconomic lesson that needs to be taught to the Treasury and the Office for Budget Responsibility. There is a lazy assumption that increasing population is an automatic good for the economy. It is certainly true that an economy can be grown by those means, but that does not mean per capita growth. It means growth of an altogether cruder kind.

Moreover, the macroeconomic fact is that doing so displaces investment in recruitment, skills and modernising the economy. The economy is stultified in a high-labour mode. Britain's chance to succeed and prosper in future is as a high-tech, high-skilled economy. Rather than displacing our attention, and subsequently policy and investment, in those skills, by recruiting labour from abroad, we should indeed look closely at the kind of economic future we want to build, and drive policy forward towards that future. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the myth that pervades the economic debate about migration.

I want to make two more points. One is on the likely future population. Experts estimate that the UK population could grow from 67 million to between 83 million and 87 million by 2046 if current immigration trends continue. Growth to 80 million-plus will result in the need to build between 6 million and 8 million more homes. That is equal to between 15 and 18 more cities the size of Birmingham by 2046. I do not say it lightly or blithely, but this is by far the greatest challenge facing the Government.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I would like to expand on that very point and return to the issue of housing. My right hon. Friend might be interested to know of a visit I made to a housing development site in the midlands, where the vast majority of sales were to British national overseas people from Hong Kong, who were buying homes en masse on a development. When the development had been planned, it was not known that this migration route would be open, so the planners did not have that population level in mind. Does that not illustrate the challenges of long-term planning—how long it takes to build the homes we need—and show that the very quick changes in migration patterns have the impact he has described?

Sir John Hayes: I agree with my hon. Friend and pay tribute to her work in her constituency and more widely to highlight these issues.

To put this in perspective, if the UK continues to welcome the number of people we are admitting now, we would need to build 6.5 million more homes solely to cope with population growth over that period. Current immigration numbers require a home to be built in England every five minutes to meet skyrocketing demand. By contrast, even modest changes such as cutting net migration levels back to about 100,000 would help

young people to get on the property ladder and prevent more of our countryside from being lost forever to house building.

Given the dramatically increased numbers of people coming here, driving immigration to levels never seen before in British history, urgent action must be taken. I look forward to hearing what action my right hon. Friend the Minister has in mind, but let me make some suggestions. Some work has been done already, due to the exceptional Home Secretary and Minister for Immigration that we are proud to have as members of the Government. The measures to limit master's degree students bringing their dependants is welcome but insufficient. As I said at the time, it is odd—I will put it no more strongly—that those who are studying a taught master's can no longer bring their dependants, but those who are studying a research master's can.

Frankly, we need to be more bold altogether. We should raise the wage threshold for those entering the country on employment visas. We must look closely at the health service and the charges for accessing it—after all, it is a national, not international, health service. We need to focus on building domestic skills, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), which would reduce the need to bring in people with skills that should be home-grown. We certainly need to look at the number of spouse visas issued and the criteria for issuing visas of that kind.

More than all of that, we need to recognise that people coming here can do an important job for us and welcome them accordingly, but they must know that they too will be disadvantaged if the infrastructure creaks to the point of breaking due to this unprecedented level of population growth.

The best way forward would be for the Government to take a holistic look at this challenge. My good friend Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots, in excellent paper he published through the think-tank Civitas, wrote of the need for an office for demographic change along the lines of the Office for Budget Responsibility. It would be missioned to establish proper evidence, provide expert advice and recommend actions for the Government and other agencies to deal with population change. It would set out long-term strategies to meet the needs that are inevitably the product of population growth. I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on that very sensible idea.

We need to reduce the period that graduates can stay after completing their degrees from two years to about six months, and we must look again at the shortage occupations and skilled workers routes to ensure we are bringing people into the country only when strictly necessary and not allowing businesses to simply hire cheap labour. There is real evidence of declining working conditions. That point has been made very well by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock): working conditions, salaries and so on have been detrimentally affected because some of the people I described as greedy plutocrats—that was an understatement, by the way—would rather employ people on the cheap than do the right thing by their workers. I thought he made a strong case about that when he spoke about it recently in the House.

Disraeli also said:

“Man is not the creature of circumstances. Circumstances are the creatures of men.”

The prevailing circumstances this country faces in respect of population growth cannot be ignored any longer. We need leadership—I know my right hon. Friend the Minister is well placed to offer it—across the whole of Government because this affects every aspect of government. I have spoken about health, housing and infrastructure; I could have spoken about transport. Every time someone complains about roads and potholes—as they often do—they should know that every extra 10,000 or 100,000 people using the roads puts extra pressure on the infrastructure. I could pick almost every aspect of government—every Department. We need urgent action; otherwise, we will fragment our society, undermine our sense of shared belonging and alter our communities forever. More than that: we will not be able to sustain the good quality of life that British people rightly expect and want the Government to help them enjoy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. This debate has a hard stop at 5.55 pm. I intend to call Alison Thewliss at 5.32 pm or thereabouts, so Members, monitor yourselves.

5.13 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this debate. It is good to see him leading the debate on this issue, as he does on so many others.

In any advanced, modern economy and free society, people come and leave. That has always been the case in this country, and for the vast majority of our history the numbers of those coming and going have more or less been broadly in balance, as my right hon. Friend said. Sadly, for much of the past 25 years, that has not been the case. The Blair Government famously admitted to sending out search parties in an effort to bring immigrants here, and they deliberately engineered mass immigration to change the fabric of our society. Sadly, for all the promises over the past 13 years, that trend has broadly continued.

Last year, a staggering 1.2 million people came to the UK—equivalent to the population of Birmingham, or 10 times the population of Blackpool. Net migration totalled 606,000—a colossal number, simply unprecedented in modern times. Although last year's figure was something of an anomaly, the general trend over much of the past two decades has been net migration in excess of 250,000 annually. That is simply not sustainable in any way, shape or form, and it is the British people—those who placed their trust in us to control immigration—who are suffering the consequences of this failure.

There is much talk at present of the housing crisis. Supply side issues, such as lack of planning reform, comparatively low numbers of new builds and the Government's ill-advised interventions in the private rented sector, have all contributed to that crisis, but it is clear that immigration is the elephant in the room. We cannot allow the population to grow by the equivalent the population of Glasgow, as we did last year, and then wonder why on earth there is a housing shortage that is causing misery for so many people.

It is not just housing that is at breaking point. Our public services are also creaking under the strain of mass immigration. Take the NHS, for example: waiting lists are at a record high—yes, partly as a consequence of the pandemic, but the trend was long in evidence long before then—and I know as a former primary school teacher that in some of our schools much of the additional investment and funding put in over the last decade has been directed at specialist tuition and support for children who arrived here without having mastered the basics of the English language.

There have also been profound impacts on our labour market, with reduced investment in technological innovation due to over-reliance on cheap foreign labour. This has hurt productivity and suppressed wages for working people in all sorts of sectors, as I see in my local economy in Blackpool. We have to wean ourselves off this dependency on low-skilled foreign labour and an economic model that is, sadly, broken.

The immense demands that such high levels of immigration place on housing and our public services are recognised by the British people, who, frankly, are fed up with the situation. Time after time, they have stated that they want less immigration, and time after time they have been left disappointed. The Brexit referendum in 2016 was perhaps the clearest illustration of that, with many people, myself included, voting to leave the EU precisely on the basis of a promise to control immigration. Although we have ended free movement of people, which is to our credit, it is no good swapping high levels of EU immigration for high levels of immigration from the rest of the world.

Many of those who voted to leave the EU, and indeed many of those who supported our party in 2019, many of them for the first time, did so partly on the basis of our manifesto pledge to control immigration. Understandably, they now feel bitterly disappointed by our inability to control net migration, and who can blame them? Sustained high levels of immigration have changed the nature of some of our communities forever, and when new arrivals have not integrated into those communities, it has on occasion created significant problems.

The frustration that so many ordinary people feel is exacerbated by the fact that too few people in the liberal, metropolitan political establishment, across all political parties, are prepared to face up to the consequences of high immigration. People have been far too squeamish to confront its realities out of a misguided sense of political correctness. Sadly, some of those who have recognised the impact that it has had have further eroded public trust with their failed promises to tackle the issue.

Our failure to stop the small boats is the most obvious focus of people's anger and frustration. We have rightly made stopping the small boats a key priority, and I commend the Minister for leading the way on that. However, we will be judged not only on that aim but on our promises to reduce net migration. Time, and the patience of the British people, is, sadly, running out.

5.18 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Thank you very much indeed for calling me to speak, Mr Paisley.

I did not come here to Westminster Hall to talk about figures. I came here to talk about what I believe is the important factor that has dominated the debate on

[James Daly]

immigration in Parliament for the last 20 to 30 years: the complete ignoring of vast sections of the population by the people who sit in this House.

The people who sit in this House have often refined their attitude to immigration. Mr Paisley, please forgive me for reading this, but in 1774 Edmund Burke, with whom I normally agree, said:

“Your representative owes you not his industry only but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”

In that speech, Burke also used a phrase that I think should be a flashing red light for all politicians: “his enlightened conscience”. What we have seen in Parliament for the last 20 to 30 years is people who believe they have enlightened consciences and who have made decisions on the basis of their own ideological views, at the expense of their constituents. I have repeated that point continually, and I cannot be the only MP who feels that way.

When I first became involved in politics in Bury in 2010, as all people do who get involved with political parties I travelled around the north of England. Without a shadow of a doubt, at nearly every single door that I knocked on, immigration was the issue raised. It was not a nuanced debate; it was not, “Let’s talk about how many people use the NHS.” It was essentially, “There are too many people coming into this country and we are extremely concerned about it.” That is going back over a decade.

When I was growing up, immigration was something that could not be discussed. “You can’t mention things to do with immigration or race, because you’re almost certainly racist.” There was a chorus of people only too willing to challenge you on that basis.

This Government face a real decision on where they want to go in terms of representing the opinion of the British people and representing constituents such as mine in Bury, as well as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) and others. We could decide to take the perfectly intellectually coherent view, which I am sure will be articulated by the Scottish National party and the Labour party, that immigration is a matter of conscience and morality. When morality comes into any debate in this place, I shrink away from it; my morality may well be very different from yours, Mr Paisley, or anybody else’s. Anyone who decides policy on the basis of their own prejudices is to be questioned and thought of as a politician who is not serving their people.

A politician who looks at immigration in the correct way is a politician who takes account not only of the views of their constituents and people in the country but of the practical consequences. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has set out the practical consequences. In today’s debate in this Chamber, however, especially by Members of other parties, those two things have been ignored.

I often wonder what the Labour party thinks when it looks at why Brexit happened and why the Conservatives had such a majority in 2019. I can tell the Opposition that it is because, especially in the north of England, Labour politicians for 40 years ignored their own

constituents’ views—not only ignored them but considered them to be racist. That is the basis of the Labour party’s downfall and it is what made Brexit happen. It would be a great tragedy if the Government, under the excellent Minister—I genuinely mean that; he is a great man and a great Minister—do not respond to the issue that people trusted us on.

Going back briefly to the issue of Brexit, I often hear in this House from colleagues who fought titanic battles, and talk about regaining our sovereignty. Brexit was about immigration. We can kid ourselves it was about anything else, but in Blackpool and Bury it was about immigration. That is what shifted the votes in their millions. We never hear about it in this place. We talk in nuanced terms that completely exclude voters from the debate, and then we wonder why the voters look at this place like they do.

The people in this place do not represent the views of the people on the issue of immigration. As Burke said back in 1774, they are people who consider themselves to have an enlightened conscience; they ignore the views of their constituents and would prefer to judge policy by their own perceived morality and judgment—and to hell with the consequences for housing, opportunity and skills. Who are the people who are sacrificed because of the ideology that has gone on in this country for 40 to 50 years? It is the poorest. That is the true shame of the policy, and it must change.

5.23 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. It is great to be able to participate in this debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on introducing it.

I will concentrate on the issue of the population, because that is the core issue we have got to address. In 1990, which is the base date for all our policies relating to net zero and so-called climate change, the population then was about 20% less than it is now. There has been a 20% increase in population since then, yet all our net zero targets are related to absolute figures, rather than to carbon dioxide emissions per head of population. That is a dimension to the debate that I do not think we have sufficiently addressed.

When the Environmental Audit Committee, on which I have the privilege of serving, was asking an environment Minister the other day what is being taken into account in determining the impact of rising population on the ability of the Government to deliver on their net zero targets, there was a big gasp—“Oh, well, there is no briefing on that.” He did not have a clue. All that happened was that the Minister resorted to talking about heat pumps. He seemed to think that that was the answer to the question, which I raised. Yet we know that heat pumps are a subsidiary issue.

The Government keep setting targets for almost everything under the sun. Yesterday, I visited a garden centre and found that the Government are prescribing the amount of peat that we can have in a grow bag. They are prescribing that, but they have no policy whatever on the number of people we think it is right to have in our country.

I visited Hungary with some colleagues a few weeks back. Hungary does have a strong population policy. The Prime Minister there, who recently got re-elected with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, has the support of his people in recognising that one can limit immigration and at the same time grow one's population and grow one's economy.

On the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings made about growth in the economy, I think that is one of the most destructive policies that this Government are adopting. They are talking about GDP growth as being a good thing, but what should really count is GDP growth per person—per capita—and if you look at the figures, Mr Paisley, you will see that, in effect, over the last 10 years GDP per head of population has been static. We have not had that growth, so when people feel that they have not shared in the growth, the answer is no, they have not, because to a large extent the growth is actually being generated just by having more people in the country. The Government can brag about the fact that we have higher growth than Germany, but actually that growth is a mirage in terms of the economy, because it is not growth per head of population; it is the overall growth created by just bringing more people into the country, so this is an overdue but very timely debate.

The contribution that net migration makes to population growth is important, but let us first of all get a policy on our population. We have not had a population policy in this country. Why do not Ministers go off and see what is being done in Hungary, which is addressing this problem in a really constructive way? It is incentivising the home-grown population to grow their families, while at the same time having tight control over migration from outside, and encouraging people to develop their skills instead of allowing employers to take the easy shortcut of bringing in people who are already trained from overseas, thereby denuding those economies of their skillsets. There is a lot to be done, and I do not know whether my right hon. Friend the Minister, in responding to this debate, will be able to promise that we will introduce a population policy. I hope he will.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call the SNP spokesperson.

5.28 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. Oh my goodness, where to start with this debate? Well, I will start with my own constituency of Glasgow Central, in which 24.7% of the population were born outside the UK. In the constituency of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who brought forward this debate, 8.9% of the population were born outside the UK; in the constituency of the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), 5.7%; in Bury North, 8.4%; in Christchurch, 5.5%; and in the Minister's constituency, 5.7% of the population were born outside the UK. Before we get started on any of this, Mr Paisley, let me say that I will not take any criticism from anybody about immigration or attitudes towards it in Scotland, because I am in a far stronger position to talk about these issues than any of them are, given the demographics of my own constituency.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings approached the debate by talking about the lack of housing, healthcare capacity and schools. Those

infrastructure problems were caused, in huge part, by a lack of investment from the party that has been in government in the UK for the past 13 years. Investment has not kept pace with population growth in this country. The right hon. Gentleman should be addressing those concerns to this Government, because that infrastructure investment has not taken place. That is why there is not enough housing: he and his colleagues stand up and go, "Oh, we don't want any housing in our constituencies; we don't want housing in this place, that place or other places," then they wonder why there are not enough houses. An absolute mystery, I must say, Mr Paisley.

Sir John Hayes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison Thewliss: No, I will not. I listened with patience to the right hon. Gentleman's comments, and he can listen with patience to mine.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about issues with skills and labour. I agree that there needs to be more investment in skills in the population. Again, the Government have cut back on education infrastructure over all these years at the cost of education, so people have not been able to go into it. For example, the UK Government removed nursing bursaries. We kept them in Scotland, and people are going through that system and becoming the nurses who we so need.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the fact that people here are perhaps not having children. Gosh, is that because there are no nursery places for them because this Government have failed to invest in those places? The lack of childcare is preventing women from having children, and that is a significant problem that this Government have caused—[*Interruption.*] He did talk about the issue of families here not having children and those demographic challenges. Other Members talked about it too.

Sir John Hayes: On a point of order, Mr Paisley. Hyperbole is one thing; calumnies are another. I did not mention people in this country not having children. I did not mention families. I do not know whether that was an invention or a misunderstanding, but it was one or the other.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. That is not a point of order, as you know. Throughout this debate, people have been listened to quietly and all their points have been made. Allow the SNP representative to make her points quietly and with dignity.

Alison Thewliss: Thank you kindly, Mr Paisley. I will accept that the right hon. Gentleman did not make that point about demographics, but one of his colleagues did. Perhaps that is happening because in this country, people have been demonised for having children by the two-child limit, which has reduced family size. It has had an impact on the number of people in poorer demographics having children, because there is no support through the social security system. There is a cost of living crisis—perhaps Government Members have not quite noticed that—which means that families are holding off from having children because they do not feel that they can afford them.

We have talked about housing policy in the UK, and issues with measures chopping and changing, as well as with targets moving and shifting and disappearing. In Scotland, we have built lots of social housing. We have

[Alison Thewliss]

invested in that sector and we have stopped things such as the right to buy, which removed affordable housing from many communities in England.

In Scotland, our issues are about emigration, not immigration. The depopulation of areas such as our islands has been a problem for generations. For that reason, I am sure the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) will be pleased to hear that Scotland has a national action plan and population strategy. We started that because we are losing people, not because we want to close the door and prevent them from coming in. We want devolution of immigration law to allow us to tackle issues such as the depopulation of our island communities and to put further investment into them.

Brexit is the elephant in the room in many ways, but not in the way Government Members seem to think. Brexit has meant a loss of skills. It has meant people feeling unwelcome. It has meant that qualified staff in universities have gone elsewhere because they cannot further their research in the UK. Government Members mentioned graduates. They seem to want to take international students for their fees and then kick them out. That is no way to welcome people or to thank them for choosing to be in this country.

On the issue of students and dependants, in a written parliamentary question I asked the Minister how the Government calculates the amount brought into this country through immigration health surcharges and dependant visas. They could not draw out that number from their immigration figures. There is no evidence to suggest that dependants of students are any kind of burden, because the Government cannot produce that information when asked.

It is a fact that we are more likely to be treated by an immigrant in hospital than find one in the bed next to us. They come here and help out our health service to a ridiculous degree, if indeed they are allowed to work. I have constituents who are waiting for Home Office permission to be allowed to work in the NHS. They would dearly love to be able to be using their skills to help people in Scotland, but are not permitted to do so at a time when health and social work has its highest number of vacancies. In September to November 2022, there were 3.9 vacancies for every 100 employee jobs.

The skills gaps go right across the other sectors in our society. We have huge shortages. We need people to come in and work because there are vacancies, and the vacancy rates significantly impact both the UK's productivity and its GDP growth, as other Members have mentioned. We are refusing to take those skills—refusing to let people come in, and closing the door on them—and that makes me incredibly sad because that is not what Scotland chooses.

People talked about hearing about immigration on the doorsteps. I go around the doorsteps in my constituency just the same, listening to people's concerns, and they accept that immigration is important—that people come to Scotland to contribute skills and jobs. People in Pollokshields love the joy of being able to go and buy fresh mangoes and pakora on their doorstep. They welcome all of those things that immigrants bring to

enrich our culture, and it makes me incredibly sad that the Conservative Members do not think that immigrants have anything to bring.

I will close with some words from The Proclaimers:

"All through the story the immigrants came
The Gael and the Pict, the Angle and Dane
From Pakistan, England and from the Ukraine
We're all Scotland's story and we're all worth the same
Your Scotland's story is worth just the same".

5.36 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your Chairship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this vital debate, and thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

That net migration is currently at its highest level on record is beyond question. Historically, the number averaged around 200,000 per year—of course I am not going back as far as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings did, but instead looking across recent years—while, of course, the figures this year came out at 606,000. It is therefore entirely fair to ask questions about why the number has grown by so much and whether continued growth at such numbers would be sustainable over time.

Debates on this issue can always be contentious, as I think we have just seen, but I hope that we can all agree on the need to have a well-informed discussion based on facts and evidence and driven by an honest assessment of the trade-offs that lie at the heart of this issue. Unfortunately, though, our national conversation on immigration is too often characterised by oversimplification and false binaries. For example, it is clear that a substantial proportion of the public are concerned about the current level of migration overall, and their worries are entirely legitimate given the amount of pressure on our social infrastructure following 13 years of successive Conservative Governments hollowing out our public services and utterly failing to build enough affordable housing. However, it is equally true that we are confronted by a demographic challenge when we consider that the replacement rate—the ratio of births to deaths—has been below 1:1 for the past 50 years. Meanwhile, the dependency ratio—or the number of working people per retiree—has fallen from roughly 15:1 at the time that Lloyd George introduced the first state pension, over 100 years ago, to around 4:1 by the time that this Government came into office in 2010.

Rather than taking a narrow, blinkered, partisan position that dismisses one of those factors in favour of the other, we should see the immigration question through the prism of competing priorities that must be well managed so that we get the balance right and deliver the best possible outcomes for our country. It is also vital that we avoid the temptation to see immigration policy as something that operates in isolation from other policy challenges. Rebuilding our public services and housing infrastructure after 13 years of Tory neglect will be a top priority for the next Labour Government, and we are clear that doing so will also help to build more cohesive community relations.

The competing priorities that underpin immigration policy are perfectly illustrated by the points-based system for skilled workers. Labour supports the points-based

system—indeed, we created it in 2008 for non-EU citizens—but it is clear to us that the way in which this Government are managing the system is simply not working, because Ministers have failed to engage with employers and trade unions such that our economy gets the overseas labour it needs while ensuring that those key stakeholders bring forward workforce plans and skills and training strategies that maximise opportunities for our home-grown talent. As a result, for too long employers have seen immigrant labour as a substitute for investing in local workers.

It is also clear that with 7 million people on the NHS waiting list and more than 2 million people on long-term sick leave, we urgently need a Labour Government so that we can implement our new deal for working people, as set out by the Leader of the Opposition along with the shadow Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), and the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth).

I turn now to our broken asylum system. It was this Government who gave us new legislation—the Nationality and Borders Act 2022—that we were told would increase the fairness and efficacy of the asylum system, break the business model of the people-smuggling gangs and remove more easily from the UK those with no right to be here. Well, it is almost one year to the day since that legislation came into force, yet here we are again with new legislation and the same old promises from Ministers, as if none of it had ever happened.

Whereas those on the Conservative Benches offer nothing but platitudes and more broken promises, a Labour Government will act decisively to deliver an immigration system that is fair, affordable, sustainable and, above all, fit for purpose. We will reform the points-based system by ending the disparity between wage rates paid to migrant and non-migrant workers in order to prevent undercutting and abuse, and we will engage with employers and trade unions to deliver workforce plans that strike the right balance between inflows and homegrown talent. Equally, if not more importantly, we will deliver a comprehensive workforce plan to upskill our homegrown workforce and equip the next generation with the skills and knowledge to meet the long-term demands of an ever more interconnected global economy, in which specialist knowledge and skills are at a premium.

As I said earlier, public concern about immigration is focused on a range of issues, including both economy-driven immigration and asylum. However, far from stopping the boats, as is so often promised, the Conservatives “bigger backlog” Bill will deliver nothing more than chaos, inefficiency, unfairness and further costs to taxpayers. We need Labour’s five-point plan to stop the dangerous channel crossings by delivering on tasks based on common sense and quiet diplomacy, rather than chasing headlines and the government-by-gimmick that the Immigration Minister is so fond of.

James Daly: May I ask the hon. Gentleman what the plan is?

Stephen Kinnock: Yes, of course. I am just checking the time, but—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): You have about a minute.

Stephen Kinnock: Under the five-point plan, we will scrap the unworkable, unethical and unaffordable Rwanda plan, and channel the funding into the National Crime Agency. We will triage the backlog so that there is much faster processing of high grant-rate and low grant-rate countries, and reverse the catastrophic decision made in 2013 to downgrade caseworkers and decision makers’ seniority, which led to a collapse in productivity and to poorer decisions being made. We will make the resettlement schemes work—the Afghanistan scheme has completely collapsed, which is frankly shameful, given that we owe a debt of gratitude to people in Afghanistan. We will get a returns deal with the European Union, which we know has to be based on having safe and controlled legal pathways, and we will get our aid programme working so that we are focused particularly on countries that are generating a large number of refugees rather than plundering the aid budget, which is being used to fund hotels in this country.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I thank the hon. Member for his comments. I have to call the Minister at this point. Minister, you have about 11 minutes.

5.36 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Thank you, Mr Paisley. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing the debate and for his kind words—flattery, of course, will get you everywhere.

There are few more important decisions for this Parliament to make than who gets to come to our country, which is why the debate is so critical. My right hon. Friend is right to say that, over the decades, immigration has generally occurred in this country in an ad hoc manner, without the careful thought and planning that it warrants. Sometimes it has been successful, and sometimes less so, but it has rarely been planned in the way that it should be. As has been said, the levels of immigration that we are currently seeing, and have seen for most of my adult lifetime, are significantly higher than throughout the history of this country. The level of net migration that we have seen in the past 25 years is not normal by historical standards, and it is right that we consider the consequences of that and whether we should take action to change it.

My right hon. Friend said that Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots proposed to create an organisation to consider more deeply the demographic changes that the country is experiencing. In fact, I met Lord Hodgson to discuss just that. I know him well, having grown up not far from Astley Abbots, where his mother created the most northerly lavender farm in Europe in her 80s—that is by the by. His proposal is very important and worthy of consideration. The issue is something that the Migration Advisory Committee could play a greater part in considering when it advises the Government on changes to our immigration system, but, if not, I think there is a good argument for having a separate organisation. I committed to Lord Hodgson to give further thought to the topic.

My right hon. Friend and a number of others raised the profound consequences that large quantities of migration have on the population of this country as regards housing, access to public services and integration, cohesion and unity. We should consider each of those points very seriously. I have paid particular interest to

[Robert Jenrick]

housing throughout my time as a Minister. It is undoubtedly true that if 600,000 additional people come to this country every year, that has profound consequences for house prices and, in particular, for the poorest in society, who want either to get on to the housing ladder or to access social housing. We have to take that seriously.

I made a speech recently at Policy Exchange about the impact of illegal migration. Although that is a different subject, many of the same arguments apply. We have to make sure we are representing our constituents' true opinions correctly, as my right hon. Friend said, and we must be cognisant of the consequences, including the pressure on public services, housing and integration.

Secondly, my right hon. Friend argued—again, the Government would agree—that companies should not reach in the first instance for the easy lever of foreign labour. That is not the route to productivity enhancement and prosperity. If it was, this country would be even more prosperous than it is today, given the large amounts of legal migration that we have seen in the past 25 years. We have to encourage companies to embrace technology and automation, train their staff and invest in their skills.

The Government are doing that in a number of ways through our skills reforms, such as those for apprenticeships. My right hon. Friend started that process when he was the apprentices Minister many years ago. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has made it one of the central missions of his tenure to ensure we get more of the economically inactive in our country back into the workplace, and to ensure businesses support them in the first instance rather than reach for those overseas.

The Government's most crucial reform in this Parliament was taking back control. It is as a result of leaving the European Union that, for the first time in my lifetime, Governments of this country can control the levers that dictate the numbers of people coming into our country. That is an absolutely essential change. It is now in our hands, but there has been a lazy assumption that control alone was sufficient and that people were not concerned about numbers. I disagree with that, and the Government do too. We believe that net migration is far too high, and we need to take action to bring it down over the medium term.

It is correct that, as others have said, the levels of net migration we have seen in the past two years have included some exceptional factors. The kaleidoscope was shaken as a result of covid, and we have subsequently seen very large numbers of people return to the UK, such as students. We have made important commitments, such as creating the Ukraine, Hong Kong and Afghanistan schemes—all of which we should be proud of and which should command high levels of public support. In fact, the UK, contrary to the view we sometimes hear expressed on the left, is one of the world's leading countries for humanitarian protection schemes. Since 2015, under a Conservative Government, we have enabled half a million people to come into this country for humanitarian purposes. But we need to do more.

We have recently taken a significant step, which my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings mentioned, to ensure that dependants of students cannot come with a student unless they are coming for longer research degrees, such as PhDs. That will

make a tangible difference to numbers in the years ahead. Most importantly, it reaffirms the principle that universities should be in the education business, not the migration business. No one should be coming to this country to study merely as a back door to a life in the UK. They are entirely separate things.

If there are further steps we need to take, we can and should do so. My right hon. Friend raised a number of important points to which I will give further consideration. He knows that I have sympathy about the salary threshold. There is a question as to whether the immigration health surcharge is at a fair place or whether there is more that can be done. There is also a question about whether family visas and such are being issued appropriately. Those are all things that the Home Office keeps under review. If we need to take further action there, we obviously will do.

I am conscious that my right hon. Friend is keen to speak at the end of the debate, so I will—

Sir Christopher Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: I only have a few seconds. I don't want to deprive my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): The debate will finish at 5.55 on the dot.

Sir Christopher Chope: Can the Minister set out what the Government believe the right target is for the population of this country?

Robert Jenrick: That is a big question to answer in 30 seconds. What we have said is that we remain true to our manifesto commitment that we will seek to bring down net migration in the medium term. My hon. Friend can see from the first step that the Home Secretary and I have made on student dependants the seriousness with which we take this challenge. I hope I have said in my remarks that I am very alive to the issue. I take seriously the profound consequences of net migration on community cohesion and access to public services and housing. If there are further things we can do, such as some of the ideas raised by Conservative Members today, the Home Secretary and I will do everything we can to implement them.

5.52 pm

Sir John Hayes: Huge, vast population growth may be seen by out-of-touch bourgeois liberals as a quick fix for our economy, but what the vast majority of the public know is that it fuels a dependence on low-skilled labour, stultifying our economy over time. The ease of employing workers from overseas displaces investment in domestic skills, including the upskilling of the existing workforce, automation, better working practices and fair pay. The consequence is to inhibit productivity and damage British competitiveness.

More than that, it changes the places we call home beyond recognition. Unless the Government act quickly and decisively, we face the grim future of a weakened, uncompetitive economy and a fragmented disparate society robbed of any sense of shared belonging. The bulk of the public, regardless of their origins, know this. The Minister, gauged by his articulation of his

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excellent case today, clearly knows it. We know that the Home Secretary understands this too. It is time the whole of Government took back control.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of immigration on population growth.

5.54 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 27 June 2023

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Wilton Park Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):

I am announcing today a review of Wilton Park, an executive agency of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Wilton Park has convened discreet dialogues on the UK's strategic priorities since 1946. It brings together global experts, policy makers and decision takers from a wide range of sectors to solve complex global issues.

This review is part of the public bodies review programme which delivers against the commitments made in the declaration on government reform to increase the effectiveness of public bodies and departmental sponsorship. In 2022, all Departments were asked to prioritise their arm's length bodies for review and the then Foreign Secretary decided Wilton Park, which had last been reviewed in 2018, should undergo one before the end of 2023-24. This timing would allow the review to consider the impacts of the pandemic and some internal structural changes.

This review will follow the Cabinet Office guidance on the undertaking of reviews of public bodies and the terms of reference for the review will be published on gov.uk. It will consider whether and how Wilton Park's mandate could be delivered more effectively and efficiently. It will provide robust recommendations to provide assurance that Wilton Park has a clear future strategy that meets FCDO and HMG needs.

In conducting this review, officials will engage with a broad range of stakeholders including staff, management and the board of Wilton Park, the FCDO, cross-Whitehall Departments, the all-party parliamentary group on Wilton Park and participants in Wilton Park activities.

I shall inform the House of the outcome of the review when it is completed.

[HCWS884]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Learning Disability and Autism

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Today I am delighted to announce the launch of the consultation on the draft Oliver McGowan code of practice (the code) on statutory learning disability and autism training. The launch of this consultation represents a significant moment in the journey towards improved care and treatment of people with a learning disability and autistic people. I welcome

anyone with an interest to complete the consultation and share their views on the draft code. An easy read version of the draft code and consultation will be made available as soon as they are ready.

The purpose of the code is to ensure that service providers registered with the Care Quality Commission (CQC) have the necessary guidance to meet the new legal requirement introduced in the Health and Care Act 2022. The effect of the new requirement is that, from 1 July 2022, CQC-registered providers are required to ensure their staff receive training on learning disability and autism, appropriate to their role. To aid those who need to comply with the new training requirement the Secretary of State is obliged by the 2022 Act to issue a code of practice setting out what we consider is required in order for them to comply. Therefore, this draft code sets out the standards this training must meet to comply with the legislation and guidance on what I believe providers need to do to meet those standards.

As set out in the draft code, the Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism is the Government's preferred and recommended package to support CQC-registered providers to meet the new requirement introduced by the Health and Care Act 2022. The training is named after Oliver McGowan, a young autistic teenager with a mild learning disability, who sadly died after having a severe reaction to medication given to him against his and his family's strong wishes. Oliver's parents, Paula and Tom McGowan, have campaigned for better training for health and care staff to improve understanding of the needs of people with a learning disability or autistic people. The training was trialled in England during 2021 with over 8,000 people and is helping to ensure that staff are equipped with the right skills to care for people with a learning disability and autistic people.

In my role as Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Care, I have heard experiences of the poor care and treatment received by people with a learning disability and autistic people, which has highlighted the importance of introducing this legal requirement and the development and publication of the code.

I look forward to receiving responses to this consultation to help us to develop a code that supports health and care staff to provide high-quality care for people with a learning disability and autistic people which complies with the legislative requirements. Too often people with a learning disability and autistic people experience poorer health outcomes and higher mortality than the general population. We are confident that these disparities can be reduced when health and care staff are equipped with the right skills and knowledge. The draft code therefore represents a crucial step in the right direction.

[HCWS885]

National Institute for Health and Care Research Capital Call

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): Today I am pleased to announce just over £96 million of funding from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) for equipment and technology to support NHS organisations to deliver high-quality research to improve the prevention, management and treatment of disease for patient benefit.

This large-scale investment right across the length and breadth of England will support over 90 NHS organisations, including less research-active trusts, to grow research capacity and take research to populations outside of the major teaching hospitals. I want everyone, regardless of where they live, to be able to access the latest innovations in the health and care system through research.

The majority (55%) of funding will go to NHS organisations outside of the greater south-east aligned to the Government's levelling up commitment. It includes equipment for primary care research expansion in integrated care systems across the east midlands; and mobile research units across seven regions in England, from North Tees and Hartlepool in the north-east to Somerset in south-west, to take research to underserved regions and communities with major health needs, including rural areas.

There is also funding for cutting-edge equipment and technology such as a mobile CT scanner for the north-west coast region to support respiratory, lung cancer diagnostic and cardiology research studies; and state-of-the art

equipment in Exeter to transform genomic and transcriptomic sequencing for research into dementia, infectious diseases, cancer and precision medicine. This will enable research that can drive future innovation in the health and care system and allow the UK to remain as one of the most attractive places in the world for innovative commercial companies to invest in research.

I intend to build on this substantial Government investment with a series of further capital calls through the NIHR. The emphasis in future rounds will be on extending the reach of research into our communities, including a focus on reaching those in rural areas, to improve access to clinical research for all. We particularly want to ensure that people outside of major population centres in rural and coastal areas are enabled to take part in clinical research by using innovative ways of designing and delivering our research, fit for the future. Ensuring our world-leading researchers have the right equipment, in the right place, is key to delivering the best, most innovative health and care for our population.

[HCWS886]

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