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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 13 September 2023

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

1. **Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the UK's accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership on the Scottish economy. [906278]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I think that we should draw a veil over last night's football, but I look forward to Scotland qualifying next month for Euro 2024.

Today is the National Farmers Union's Back British Farming Day, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in marking the important contribution that we farmers and growers make to our everyday lives and to our economy.

The comprehensive and progressive agreement for the trans-Pacific partnership trade bloc is projected to make up the majority of global growth in the future. As a result of joining the CPTPP, a deal that we could not strike while in the EU, Scottish businesses are now in a prime position in the global economy to seize opportunities for new jobs, growth and innovation.

Alun Cairns: The CPTPP is the most exciting and dynamic trading bloc, and a significant Brexit dividend. Scotland, like Wales, has great products to export. My right hon. Friend mentioned farming. Welsh lamb and maybe Scotch whisky have some great opportunities to take advantage of within the CPTPP. Will he encourage the devolved Administrations to work with the UK Government to ensure that we exploit those benefits and this Brexit opportunity for people in Scotland, Wales and elsewhere?

Mr Jack: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend is right: the CPTPP is the fastest-growing trade zone in the world, and with the UK included it is worth circa £12 trillion. To that end, we are working with the devolved Administrations. We have also put in a huge network of support centres across the UK, not least in Queen Elizabeth House in Edinburgh.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am sure that the Secretary of State will be assisted in determining Scotland's place in international arrangements by the Scottish Affairs Committee's report, "Promoting Scotland Internationally", which was released today. In it, he will find that the working arrangements between personnel in both Governments are consensual and productive. Does he not therefore feel slightly embarrassed by the ridiculous diktat from the Foreign Secretary, intended to put the Scottish Government back in their place? The Scottish Secretary told our Committee that it was necessary because, among other insignificant things, Scottish Government Ministers had the temerity to say that Brexit is a bad thing for Scotland. Does he not think that nearly all of Scotland thinks that Brexit is a bad thing for Scotland?

Mr Jack: I stand by the words that I said to the hon. Member's Committee.

Sheep and Cattle Exports: Quarantine

3. **Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the adequacy of the quarantine period for (a) sheep and (b) cattle to be exported from Scotland to Northern Ireland. [906280]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): Livestock can move from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and then return to Northern Ireland, as long as they are hosted at an Animal and Plant Health Agency approved assembly centre and return within 15 days.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Does he agree that the Windsor framework has created unnecessary bureaucracy around livestock movements from Northern Ireland to GB mainland, particularly into Scottish markets, and has in fact decimated our pedigree cattle trade? What can he do to help me?

Mr Jack: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion for rural communities in Northern Ireland, and he raises an important point. I will endeavour to arrange a meeting for him with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as soon as possible.

Poverty and Inequality

4. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What discussions he has held with Cabinet colleagues and the Scottish Government on the effectiveness of the steps being taken to reduce rates of (a) poverty and (b) inequality in Scotland. [906281]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The United Kingdom Government are committed to a sustainable approach to tackling poverty and supporting people on lower incomes. We have made substantial investment to help to mitigate the worst of the cost of living impacts, including welfare spending of around £276 billion. The best route out of poverty, of course, is through work. Therefore, our focus remains firmly on supporting people to move into and progress in work.

Martyn Day: Scotland has the lowest rates of child poverty in the UK, with the game-changing Scottish child payment helping more than 300,000, and lifting 50,000 of them out of poverty. Why do the UK Government continue to refuse to follow such a successful example?

John Lamont: The UK Government have ensured that the cost of living challenges have been tackled by working in tandem with the Scottish Government and using reserved and devolved levers to get the best outcomes for everybody across Scotland. The benefit cap levels have been increased by 10.1% from 1 April. The national living wage has increased by 9.7% to £10.42 an hour for workers aged 23 years and over. Overall, this Government are working to deliver for the most vulnerable in society, and will do so in conjunction with our partners in the Scottish Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): After 16 years of SNP Government and 13 years of the Tories, one in four children in Scotland lives in poverty. There are 40,000 more children in poverty compared with a decade ago, and this week it was revealed that three members of the Scottish Government's own Poverty and Inequality Commission had resigned. Does the Minister agree that both the Scottish and the UK Governments should be working more urgently and more effectively to tackle child poverty?

John Lamont: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new position. The UK Government are committed to protecting the most vulnerable in our society and we have taken decisive steps to do that, including UK-wide additional spending of £137.5 billion in benefits for pensioners, £67.9 billion in benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions and £114.3 billion in working-age benefits and child welfare. We have also uprated benefits and pension credit in line with inflation and have raised the national living wage to help to protect the most vulnerable. We will continue to keep the situation under review, but this Government have continually demonstrated our commitment to the most vulnerable across Scotland.

Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage

5. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent discussions he has held with Cabinet colleagues on supporting the development of carbon capture, utilisation and storage in Scotland. [906282]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): Carbon capture, utilisation and storage will be essential to meeting the UK's 2050 net zero target, playing a vital role in levelling up the economy, supporting the low-carbon economic transformation of our industrial regions and creating new high-value jobs across the United Kingdom. In Scotland, the Acorn cluster has been allocated more than £40 million in development funding by the Government and has been selected, subject to final due diligence, for track 2 CCUS cluster sequencing.

Neale Hanvey: According to Office for Budget Responsibility and UK Government projections, the UK will see between £50 billion and £80 billion in revenue from North sea oil and gas over the next five years. While it is welcome that the Acorn project can now bid for funding, it is important to know that not a penny has been committed. Can the Minister tell me what discussions the Secretary of State has had with

Government colleagues to secure at minimum a share of those revenues—say £1 billion over five years—to rapidly accelerate Scotland's carbon capture industry? If not, does that mean he is content to see Scotland's people stripped of their vast natural resources without a single penny of that £80 billion being invested in Scotland's carbon capture ambitions?

John Lamont: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman actually listened to my first answer, but more than £40 million has been allocated by the United Kingdom Government to the development of this technology. The Government will commence engagement and assessment of delivery plans and due diligence on the Acorn and Viking transportation and storage systems and will engage with them directly in respect of the next steps to develop those. We will set out the process by which capture products in track 2 will be selected to meet the stated ambitions in due course.

Scottish Economy

6. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to help support the Scottish economy. [906283]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): When it comes to growth, the hon. Lady will have noted that the economic data shows that we have recovered better from the pandemic than France, Italy or Germany. Supporting economic growth in Scotland remains a core priority of the Scotland Office, exemplified through our work in investing in the city and regional growth deals and in delivering freeports and investment zones in Scotland, which has brought tens of millions of pounds in investment and has created highly paid jobs.

Kerry McCarthy: There is huge potential for offshore wind in Scotland and it is an important part of the transition to a green economy there. What conversations will the Minister be having with the offshore wind sector following the absolutely disastrous contracts for difference round last week?

John Lamont: I personally engage with all sectors of the energy market, including the offshore wind sector. We are very pleased with the announcements that have been made following the announcements last week and will continue to engage with the sector to see it develop across Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom.

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

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in saying how gutted we are about the football result last night—but mark my words, we will be seeking revenge in Germany at the European championships next year.

I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who was in the shadow Scotland team but has moved on to do new things after the reshuffle, and to welcome to the Scotland team my hon. Friend the Member for Keir Hardie's old seat, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). He is very welcome.

Last week, it was revealed that the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), had secured a book deal. Her book is titled “Ten Years to Save the West”, but it might have been better focusing on the 44 days it took her and her Government, with the support of the Scottish Secretary, to crush the economy. Does the Minister accept that Scots will be paying the price for years to come for the Tories’ kamikaze handling of the economy?

John Lamont: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, the economic challenges we face here in the United Kingdom are no different from those faced by other economies around the world. They have been entirely caused by the illegal war in Ukraine and the covid pandemic. Thankfully, due to the decisive action of this Conservative Government and Prime Minister, the evidence suggests that the UK is recovering from the economic shock far better than France, Italy and Germany.

Ian Murray: Ukraine and covid did not crash the economy; this Government did. The truth is that, after 13 years, we have a low-wage, low-growth economy. Let me take the example of residents in a random Scottish constituency, Rutherglen and Hamilton West. Behind every door we knock on, the story is the same: the cost of living. Those voters are paying the price for two bad Governments: the UK Government, who crashed the economy and are asking working people to pay for it, and the Scottish Government, who mismanaged the economy and are also asking working people to pay for it. There is a Tory premium on everyone’s mortgages and rents, alongside the highest tax burden on working people in 80 years, and the SNP wants to increase income taxes further and is proposing eye-watering council tax rates for those residents. Do the people of Rutherglen and Hamilton West not deserve a fresh start with Scottish Labour’s Michael Shanks?

John Lamont: It was not so long ago that Scottish Labour was calling for even higher taxes on the people of Scotland. When Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar stood for the leadership, he said:

“I actually think our tax policies will be even more progressive and radical than even John McDonnell’s or Jeremy Corbyn’s tax policies or manifesto”.

Mr Sarwar has now U-turned, of course, but maybe the hon. Gentleman can explain how much Scottish Labour secretly wants to put up taxes in Scotland.

UK Departure from EU

7. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the UK’s departure from the EU on Scotland. [906285]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The UK Government are focused on opening new international export markets for Scottish businesses. We have trade agreements with 71 non-EU countries and the EU, and those agreements will support growth, jobs and higher wages. The hon. Gentleman will have noted the recently revised numbers, which show that we have recovered better from the pandemic than France, Italy or Germany. Since 2010, the United Kingdom has achieved the third highest rate of growth in the G7—faster than Italy, France, Japan and Germany.

Patrick Grady: We had a really good trading relationship with the European Union—it was called membership—and 78% of people in Glasgow North, and 62% of people across Scotland, voted to retain it. If Brexit is really delivering the successes that the Secretary of State says it is, why does he think the polls show that those figures would be even higher if the people of Scotland had the choice again?

Mr Jack: The recent trading numbers show that we are now doing more trade with the EU in goods and services than we did when we were members.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we are developing a much better relationship with our former colleagues in the EU, including through agreements such as the Windsor framework, and our accession to the North sea group of countries that co-operate on energy and, more recently, to Horizon and other European programmes? That shows that we are on the right footing to have a good future relationship post Brexit.

Mr Jack: Yes. On Horizon, we were patient and did the right deal. It showed the future for British scientists, as well as how important British scientists were to Horizon and how much the EU wanted them to be part of it. My right hon. and learned Friend is right: we have a better relationship, and one that does not cost £22 billion a year.

NHS England-NHS Scotland Co-operation

8. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Whether he has held recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues and the Scottish Government on increasing co-operation between NHS England and NHS Scotland. [906286]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The United Kingdom Government support collaboration between all our nations to share best practice, improve transparency and provide better accountability for patients. Ministerial colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care have written to the Scottish Government inviting them for talks on how we can work together to tackle long-term waiting lists in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Jamie Stone: If someone is sick and their life is in danger, is it not the case that the border between Scotland and England should not get in the way of the best possible health outcome?

John Lamont: The hon. Member makes an extremely important point—that is something about which I am acutely aware as a Borders MP. Indeed, I have a constituent who lives in Foulden who has been told that they will need to wait over three years to have their cataracts seen to in Scotland. Meanwhile, their neighbours, who are registered with a GP in England, are being treated by NHS England within six months. My constituent simply does not understand that discrepancy. The SNP Government in Edinburgh should be doing much more to drive down NHS waiting lists and engage with colleagues in Westminster to ensure that all people across these islands get the best possible NHS services.

Government Spending: Public Services

9. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the levels of Government spending in Scotland to deliver public services. [906287]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The United Kingdom Government are providing a record settlement of £41 billion per year—the largest since devolution. In fact, the UK Government are providing the Scottish Government with over 20% more funding per person than the equivalent UK Government spending in England. With the generous fiscal framework agreement, the Scottish Government have the certainty and flexibility to manage their budget and deliver high-quality public services across Scotland.

Mary Glendon: The recent programme for government launched by the Scottish First Minister only revealed a tired Government too distracted by internal squabbling to achieve anything for the people of Scotland. Does the Minister agree that the Scottish people deserve a change of Government in Scotland and Westminster, with a Labour Government focused on tackling the cost of living and improving living standards for the whole of the UK?

John Lamont: The SNP's programme for government was a complete and utter missed opportunity: rather than focusing on Scotland's NHS and schools, and our economy and transport links, the SNP is too busy planning independence rallies. Scotland does need change, and I am confident that, in the next general election, we will see that change in the election of even more Scottish Conservative and Unionist MPs.

Seafood Sector

10. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What recent discussions he has held with Cabinet colleagues on supporting the seafood sector in Scotland. [906288]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The Government are committed to supporting our seafood sector, which is the lifeblood of some of the most remote and fragile communities in Scotland. This past Monday, I met with ministerial colleagues in the Home Office to discuss in more detail the comprehensive package of support measures this Government have offered to the sector to ease access to labour challenges.

David Duguid: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. What discussions has he had with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero—I see the Minister, our hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), sitting next to him on the Front Bench—and the Scottish Government to ensure that the impacts of offshore wind on the fishing industry and coastal communities will be adequately addressed, along with the impacts of marine protection areas?

John Lamont: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his continued, energetic and relentless campaigning for his constituency and the fishing sector. This Government are committed to working with other Government Departments and the Scottish Government on our shared ambition to protect the marine environment and ensure

that the increasing spatial squeeze on our sea is managed effectively. However, we also note the legitimate concerns of the fishing industry and continue to engage with stakeholders, other UK Government Departments and the Scottish Government through the Scottish Seafood Industry Action Group. I understand that the Energy Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), is due to meet my hon. Friend shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Fishermen from Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel work hand in hand with fishermen from Scotland, so whatever benefits the Minister can bring to Scottish fishermen will benefit the fishermen and fisherwomen of Northern Ireland. Have any discussions taken place of how Scotland and Northern Ireland can work better together, including here at Westminster?

John Lamont: I am happy to work with all colleagues across the United Kingdom to advance the fishing industry, and I am happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss how we do that together.

Devolution of Drugs Policy

11. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What discussions he has held with Cabinet colleagues and the Scottish Government on the devolution of drugs policy to Scotland. [906289]

12. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What discussions he has held with Cabinet colleagues and the Scottish Government on the devolution of drugs policy to Scotland. [906290]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): Illicit drugs destroy lives and devastate communities. The United Kingdom Government's 10-year drug strategy sets out ambitious plans, backed by a record £3 billion over three years, to tackle the supply of illicit drugs and build a world-class system of treatment and recovery. This is a UK-wide strategy, and there are no plans to devolve drugs policy to the Scottish Government.

Joanna Cherry: The Lord Advocate has announced that she is not going to prosecute drug users for simple possession offences committed within a pilot safer drugs consumption facility. Both the Home Affairs Committee of this House and the Scottish Affairs Committee have recommended that the UK Government support such a pilot in Glasgow by creating a legislative pathway under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 that would enable such a facility to operate, or by devolving the power to the Scottish Government. Both cross-party Committees of this House are very clear that the evidence shows that those measures could be lifesaving, so when will the Secretary of State act to save lives in Scotland by persuading his Government to drop their intransigence on this issue?

Mr Jack: It was disappointing that the Scottish Government were not prepared to work with the UK Government on Project ADDER. That offer was made with supporting funding. The E in ADDER is for "enforcement". I believe the police and the Procurator Fiscal Service should be enforcing the laws in Scotland, not decriminalising drugs, because enforcement helps to drive people to health solutions.

Marion Fellows: The Minister did not answer the question, so I will try again. Scotland needs a caring, compassionate, human rights-informed drugs policy with public health and the reduction of harm as its principles, and the Scottish Government are ready and willing to work with the UK Government to put that progressive policy into practice. Scottish Tory MSP Miles Briggs said on “Good Morning Scotland” yesterday that he hoped the UK Government would not move to block this lifesaving measure. Despite the Minister’s Cabinet colleagues continuing to denounce its effectiveness, what recent discussions has he had with the Scottish Government on advancing this pilot scheme?

Mr Jack: Drug consumption rooms are not the easy solution hon. Members may think they are. There is no safe way to take illegal drugs. Drugs devastate lives, ruin families and damage communities. The UK Government believe that the police and the Procurator Fiscal Service should fully enforce the law. However, I say to the hon. Lady that if the Scottish Government and the Lord Advocate decide to proceed with a pilot on DCRs, the UK Government will not intervene.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of state will fully realise the challenge it would present for Border Force if we had differing rules on what drugs were lawful and not lawful across the United Kingdom. Therefore, will he assure me that he will not look to devolve drugs policy, and will instead get the Scottish Government to focus on their own responsibilities?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr Jack: Labour Members always seem to cheer me at this moment in Scottish questions. They are very generous.

My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Drug deaths in Scotland are three times higher than the UK average, despite the laws being the same across the UK. I do not believe drug consumption rooms are the panacea to those problems, but we absolutely must have drugs laws that work across the whole United Kingdom because it is a UK-wide problem.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think we should be clear: the Lord Advocate’s statement on Monday is a game changer. It removes one of the major obstacles to a pilot drug consumption facility, which is designed to prevent overdoses. The Secretary of State has been equivocal in his responses so far, so let me give him another chance to get on the right side of history. Will he actually say that he will support and work with the Scottish Government to see this pilot project through?

Mr Jack: I think I have been clear. I have been clear that the UK Government’s policy is not to proceed with drug consumption rooms. We believe, as I have said, that drugs devastate families and destroy communities. I was very clear about those things, but I am also very clear that the Lord Advocate and the Scottish Government appear to have achieved a workaround that allows them to have a pilot drug consumption room, probably in Glasgow, and the United Kingdom Government will not intervene in that, so the SNP now has no more excuses.

Tommy Sheppard: Can I press the Secretary of State on this point, because of course he has form on intervening in decisions of the Scottish Government? He says he will not intervene. Can we therefore be clear that he will say, on behalf of the UK Government, that he will not use any administrative or legislative means to frustrate or block this pilot policy by the Scottish Government?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr Jack: I am very popular today. I will be with SNP Members in particular when I say that the answer is yes.

Cost of Living Increases

13. **Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** What recent discussions he has held with the Scottish Government on the impact of increases in the cost of living on people in (a) the UK and (b) Scotland. [906291]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): Our Government have taken assertive action on the cost of living. UK-wide support for households to help with higher energy bills is worth £94 billion, or £3,300 per household on average. The United Kingdom Government’s focus has been on supporting everyone with the cost of living with specific targeted support and tailored interventions for the most vulnerable.

Christine Jardine: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will know that, like his constituents, my constituents in Edinburgh West still face the impact of food inflation, higher energy bills and unfair standing charges for electricity. However, we also now face the potential bombshell of a council tax hike by the Scottish Government, which will affect 14,500 households in Edinburgh West that will have to pay more than £2,000 a year. Will the UK Government be speaking to the Scottish Government—[*Interruption.*] If SNP Members do not mind! Will the UK Government be speaking to the Scottish Government to try to mitigate this, and what steps do they have in mind to do so?

John Lamont: I share the hon. Lady’s concerns about the SNP-Green Government’s bombshell tax plans to hike up the tax burden for many households, with people already facing pressures on their household budgets. As she will know, along with the record block grant, the spring Budget provided the Scottish Government with an extra £320 million over the next two years, on top of the £1.5 billion of additional funding that we provided in the autumn statement of 2022. Our economic priorities of halving inflation and growing the economy are the most effective way of supporting her constituents.

Strength of the Union

14. **Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the Union. [906292]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I believe that support for the Union is strong. The United Kingdom is one of the most successful political and economic unions in the world, and the foundation on which all our businesses and citizens are able to thrive. When we work collaboratively, we are safer, stronger and more prosperous.

Robbie Moore: While the SNP's First Minister whips up grievance politics at independence rallies, Scotland's NHS goes backwards, Scotland's ferries do not work and Scotland's economy stagnates. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is about time that the SNP stopped obsessing about another independence referendum, and started delivering for the people of Scotland?

Mr Jack: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I could not have put it better myself.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): Is the truth of the Union not that while we see independent Norway and independent Ireland in budget surplus— independent Ireland with a surplus this year of €10 billion, rising to €23 billion in the next three years—the Scottish Government cannot build small hospitals on small Scottish islands? Is the answer not for Scotland to remove the Westminster handcuffs and to get the independence and budget surpluses of Norway and Ireland, so that we can move forward and move away from the Brexit of the Tories and the Labour party?

Mr Jack: They always say independence will sort the problems. Scotland is not building hospitals on the islands because the Scottish Government are squandering the most generous settlement they have had since devolution began.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I wish to welcome a special guest who is observing our proceedings today—the Speaker of the Jordanian House of Representatives. Mr Speaker, you are most welcome.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906398] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 13 September.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I start by paying tribute to the Clerk of the House, Sir John Benger, and thank him for his many years of distinguished service. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

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

Chris Law: The wealth of billionaires has skyrocketed over the past decade, while average working households in the UK have the lowest living standards since the 1950s. While hard-working families are struggling to make ends meet, the wealthy are playing by a different set of rules, with reports that even Members of the House of Lords are trying to exploit the non-dom status loophole to avoid paying their fair share. Does the Prime Minister agree that whether it is the wife of the most powerful man in the country or the host of "The Apprentice", no billionaire should qualify for special tax treatment while my constituents face soaring levels of inequality and poverty?

The Prime Minister: The facts tell a very different story from what the hon. Gentleman said. He mentioned inequality; inequality today is lower than it was in 2010. He mentioned the number of people in poverty. Again, I am pleased to say that 1.7 million fewer people are in poverty today than in 2010, including many in Scotland. Of course we understand that things are challenging right now with the cost of living. That is why we have put in place record support to help families, particularly with their energy bills and particularly for the most vulnerable in our society, with record amounts of cost of living payments going to millions across the country, including in Scotland, showing the power of the United Kingdom Government.

Q2. [906399] **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): Thanks to this Conservative Government, we have the opportunity to be the first country in the world to end new cases of HIV by 2030. That is partially down to our world-leading opt-out HIV testing programme that has been rolled out in very high prevalence areas. To reach this goal and to make this progress, we must roll out opt-out testing to other high prevalence areas, such as the west midlands, including my constituency of West Bromwich East. Will the Prime Minister commit to meeting me and the incredible Terrence Higgins Trust to hear more about the merits of opt-out testing?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue and thank her for her work in this area. We remain absolutely committed to ending new HIV transmissions within England by 2030, and I am pleased that she highlighted that the provisional data from NHS England indicates that the opt-out testing programme has been highly successful. The Department of Health and Social Care is currently evaluating the impact of the programme with a view to deciding whether it should be expanded to additional areas, and I know Ministers will keep her and the House updated.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in his words about the Clerk of the House.

I pay tribute to the police who tracked down the escaped terror suspect from Wandsworth prison last week. Despite being charged with terrorism, and despite being a flight risk, he was not held in a category A prison. Why not?

The Prime Minister: I thank the police and their partners for their efforts to find and arrest Daniel Khalife. There is now an ongoing legal process that must be allowed to take its course, but I would like to reassure the public that while these cases are extremely rare, the Justice Secretary has launched an internal investigation about how this could happen, as well as an independent investigation of the incident so that we can learn the lessons from this case and ensure that it never happens again.

Keir Starmer: The truth is, the Government are presiding over mayhem in the criminal justice system. Only a few short months ago, Zara Aleena's family said that Ministers had—these are their words—"blood on their hands"

after probation failures that led to her murder, so it beggars belief that we are back here once again. The chief inspector of prisons said that conditions in Wandsworth were so bad that it should be shut down. The Chancellor is telling anyone who will listen that he raised concerns months ago. Probation, school buildings, and now prisons—why does the Prime Minister keep ignoring the warnings until it is too late?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman, with his background, should know better. Because of the wide variety and considerable difference in severity of people charged under that Act, it is not, and has never been, the policy that they are all held in category A prisons. It should not need me to point that out to him, given his experience.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about resourcing. I am happy to tell him that, over the last few years, we have delivered an extra 4,000 new prison officers. Staffing levels at Wandsworth in particular are up by 25% in the past six years and, because we are boosting prison pay, we are also improving retention. At the same time, we are investing £100 million to improve prison security with new measures such as X-ray body scanners. If he wanted to have a truly honest debate about this, perhaps he would acknowledge that prison escapes were almost 10 times higher under the Labour Government than under the Conservatives. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I did say this last week, and it will continue this week: anyone who wants to start the session by leaving, please do so. I am happy to help you on your way.

Keir Starmer: Every week, whatever the topic, the Prime Minister paints this picture as if everything is great and fine out there. It is so at odds with the lived experience in the real world.

Let me turn to another serious security concern. Some in this House face sanction, intimidation and threats from the Chinese state. When I asked the Prime Minister on Monday whether the Foreign Secretary raised the specific issue of the alleged spy arrested in March when he visited China a few weeks ago, he would only say that he raised that “type of activity”, but avoided specifics. I ask the Prime Minister again: did the Foreign Secretary raise this specific case when he visited China—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to my previous answer, where I said clearly that the Foreign Secretary raised these issues with the Chinese Foreign Minister, whom he met, as did I when I had my meeting with Premier Li over the weekend. When it comes to China, the Government have put in place the most robust policy that has ever existed in our country's foreign policy. It is to protect our country and the values and interests we stand up for; it is to align our approach with our closest allies, including those in the G7 and Five Eyes; and it is to engage—where it makes sense—either to advance our interests or, as I did at the weekend, to raise our very significant concerns. That is the right approach to China. It is one that is welcomed by each and every one of our allies. I would be interested to know what he thinks he would do differently.

Keir Starmer: That certainly was not a yes. What the Prime Minister says now is totally at odds with the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament report of July. That set out that the Government have no clear strategy when it comes to China, have failed to support the intelligence agencies, and are leaving the UK “severely handicapped” in managing our future security. This has been raised time and again but, yet again, the Prime Minister fails to heed the warnings and is now desperately playing catch-up. Will he finally commit to the full audit of UK-China relations that so many in this House have so long demanded?

The Prime Minister: As always, the Leader of the Opposition is just playing catch-up, but he has not caught up with the reality of what is actually happening. He talks about the ISC report. If he actually went through it, he would realise that it related to a period of investigations in 2019 and 2020. Since then, we have launched a whole new integrated review refresh of our China strategy, which is published. We have put in place a range of new measures, including the National Security Protective Authority, which is staffed out of MI5 and supports businesses and organisations to be alert to the risks from cyber and from China.

If the right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to talk about foreign policy, he should perhaps reflect on his own record. This is the man who said he was 100% behind the former Labour leader—a person who wanted to abolish the Army, scrap Trident and withdraw from NATO. It is clear what he did: he put his own political interests ahead of Britain's.

Keir Starmer: Probation, prisons, schools, China—yet again, inaction man fails to heed the warnings and then blames everyone else for the consequences. On Sunday, the Home Secretary celebrated her first anniversary in post—that is, if we overlook the six days she missed when she was deemed a national security risk. In that year, 40,000 people have crossed the channel on a small boat, and the taxpayer is now spending £6 million a day on hotel bills. The Prime Minister is failing to stop terrorists strolling out of prison, failing to guard Britain against hostile actors, and he is completely failing to stop the boats. How can anyone trust him to protect the country?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about trust and about action, but just today, this Government are taking action to reform defective EU laws to unlock over 100,000 homes, boosting our economy, supporting jobs and ensuring that we can realise the aspirations of homeowners. He talks about trust; he tried in this House to talk the talk on house building, but at the first sign of a cheap political hit, what did he do? He caved in. Rather than make the right long-term decisions for the country, he has taken the easy way out. It is typical of the principle-free, conviction-free type of leadership that he offers, flip-flopping from being a builder to a blocker. The British public cannot trust a word he says.

Keir Starmer: Every week the Prime Minister comes here, protesting that nothing is his fault and trying to convince anyone who is still listening that everything is great. The truth is that the floor fell in for millions of families because of the Government's economic mayhem;

the classroom ceilings collapsed because he cut vital school budgets; and now the walls of our national security have been breached because they have ignored repeated warnings. No one voted for this shambles. No one voted for him. How much more damage do the British public have to put up with before he finally finds the stomach to give them a say?

The Prime Minister: We are getting on for the British public. Just in the last week we have announced a new landmark deal for British scientists and attracted £600 million of new investment for our world-leading auto industry, and wages are now rising at the fastest rate on record. And where has the right hon. and learned Gentleman been this week? Locked away with Labour's union paymasters, promising to give them more power and to scrap the laws that protect British families and their access to public services. It is clear that it is only the Conservatives who are on the side of the hard-working British public.

Q4. [906401] Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Last week, with Yorkshire colleagues, I met our local integrated care board to discuss plans for improving dentistry provision. When surgeries suddenly close to NHS patients without notice, as one in Harrogate did very recently, an immediate strain is put on local provision. Will the Prime Minister look at what can be done in those circumstances to ensure no one is left without access to an NHS dentist?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that, and we will look into the issue. He will be reassured to know that we are investing £3 billion a year in dentistry. There is no geographical restriction on which dental practice a patient may attend and practices should keep all their records up to date, including whether they are accepting new patients. Typically, where a practice ends a contract, NHS England and ICBs should work together to ensure that funding is reallocated and patients continue to have access to NHS dental care.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): As someone who spends more money heating their swimming pool than the total value of the UK state pension, the Prime Minister—I think it is safe to say—might not be as invested in this topic as some others, but let us afford him the opportunity to clear up any confusion. Will he commit his party, the Conservative party, to maintaining the state pension triple lock beyond the next general election—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: This is the party that introduced the triple lock. This is the party that has delivered a £3,000 increase in the state pension since 2010. It is also the party that has ensured that there are 200,000 fewer pensioners living in poverty today and that this winter pensioners will get an extra £300 alongside their winter fuel payment to support them through the challenging times with inflation. Our track record is clear. There is one party in this House that has always stood up for our pensioners and that is the Conservative party.

Stephen Flynn: I do not think we heard a yes there, Mr Speaker. You will imagine my shock—my utter surprise—that we appear to have consensus once again

between the Conservative party and the Labour party on this most important of issues, despite the promises that were made to the people of Scotland in 2014 and despite clear statements from the likes of Gordon Brown that the only way to protect pensions was to remain within the UK. How hollow those words are now. Who does the Prime Minister think will scrap the state pension triple lock first, his Government or the Labour party's Government?

The Prime Minister: Thanks to the actions of this Government, pensioners in Scotland are receiving record increases in their state pension—£870 this year—and extra support with the cost of living this winter. This is the Government who introduced and remain committed to the triple lock, but the hon. Gentleman raises a good point. Pensioners in Scotland should know that the reason they can rely on the state pension, not just today but for years to come, is the strength of our Union and the strength of our United Kingdom Government.

Q5. [906402] Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Beautiful Eastbourne is perhaps best known as a top visitor destination, but there is important work being done to put us on the digital map. DigiFest, the first local event of its kind, is coming to the Welcome Building next week. It will showcase some pretty stellar local tech talent and open doors of opportunity, with an ambition to create 10,000 local jobs in this sector. Will the Prime Minister applaud event organisers Chalk Eastbourne and Switchplane, and lay out what the Government are doing to ensure Great Britain—and Eastbourne—is one of the best places in the world to be involved in this continually groundbreaking sector?

The Prime Minister: The Government have a mission to make the UK the most innovative economy in the world and the growth of our tech industry is one of the key ways we will achieve that. I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in thanking and paying tribute to Chalk Eastbourne for its terrific organisation of DigiFest. This is a great example of how, in local areas, we can bring together people to create jobs and opportunity, and ultimately drive the growth that our country wants to see.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Last year, after being referred by their GP, 22,000 people waited more than four months to start urgent treatment for cancer—a terrible wait that is twice as long as the Government's maximum 62-day pledge; a cancer target they have not met once since 2015. We all have loved ones whose lives have been turned upside down by cancer and we all know that every day counts. Waiting reduces the chances of survival. Will the Prime Minister tell people waiting anxiously to start their cancer treatment when this cancer target will be met?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that we do everything we can to speed up cancer diagnosis. The pandemic has had a significant impact on cancer recovery: as the right hon. Gentleman will know, before the pandemic there were about 200,000 cancer referrals a month, but during the pandemic the figure dropped to about 80,000, and now, as those referrals come through,

that is having an impact. However, we are ensuring that there are hundreds more oncologists and radiologists working this year than last year, and rolling out more than 160 community diagnostic centres. As the right hon. Gentleman says, early diagnosis is key, which is why, although there is work to do, cancer treatment today is at record levels. We are making progress, and the 62-day backlog is now falling. Recently the NHS wrote to all trusts, streamlining our targets, clinically advised, and now all the focus is on meeting them as quickly as possible.

Q6. [906403] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): In 2017, the Bolton police station custody suite was closed by the police and crime commissioner and the then chief constable, because they had given up on arresting criminals. The new chief constable is delivering on the people's priorities, so that emergency calls are answered promptly, crimes are investigated and arrests are made, which means that the newly reopened custody suite is always full. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking Greater Manchester police? Does he think that that approach ought to catch on throughout the country?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted with the improvements that have been made by Greater Manchester police; the Home Secretary met the chief constable recently. They have made significant improvements in, for example, answering 999 calls, and have seen almost a 50% year on year increase in the number of charges recorded. I very much welcome the force's focus on getting the basics on crime and antisocial behaviour right. It is a model for police forces across the country.

Q3. [906400] Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his response to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), but I am still confused on this matter. Just yesterday, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that the pensions triple lock was not sustainable, and the Chancellor's economic advisers have suggested that it is time to review the policy, but those at No. 10, when questioned, have said that they are committed to it. Which is it?

The Prime Minister: This Government are committed to the triple lock; it was this Government who introduced the triple lock. The hon. Lady might want to have a word with her own deputy leader, who did not provide much clarity on the matter. What we all remember, when it came to pensions, is Gordon Brown's 75p a week increase.

Q7. [906404] Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): Week in week out, as I meet businesses in my constituency, I hear about how artificial intelligence is transforming the way we work in sectors such as life sciences, automobiles and financial services. Does my right hon. Friend agree that artificial intelligence will transform the way in which humanity will live in the 21st century? Through his upcoming global AI summit, will he ensure that appropriate guardrails are put in place to protect society as we become world leaders in this technology?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the incredible power of AI to transform not just businesses and our productivity, but public services

such as health and education. However, we do need guardrails to allow us to make the most of the opportunities of AI, and to address risks. We have a responsible, proportionate regulatory approach that balances risk with innovation, and I look forward to working with international partners at our upcoming AI safety summit on how we do that at a global level.

Q10. [906407] Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Luton airport is trying to expand its capacity massively, from 18 million passengers per year to a whopping 32 million. That will blight the lives of thousands of residents across Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire—especially those in north St Albans, who live under the flightpaths—but it will also fly in the face of advice from the Government's own climate advisers. It has been reported that the Prime Minister is getting ready to ignore his climate advisers. Is that true?

The Prime Minister: No; but I would say that my approach to reaching net zero is not one that requires people to give up doing the things that they want to do and enjoy, such as flying. The right thing to be doing is as we are doing: investing in and funding new technologies, such as sustainable aviation fuel, because that is how we will decarbonise aviation during the transition to net zero, rather than forcing people to give everything up.

Q8. [906405] Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): When the Prime Minister was Chancellor of the Exchequer, he put the full might of the Treasury behind the 10-year drug strategy, which, with its Adder Project, is now turning lives around across England and Wales. A key part of that strategy was developing a new approach to possession. He will know from his own constituency that in towns such as Andover in mine, possession is a huge concern, particularly to the parents of young people who spend time in the town centre. The Home Office issued a White Paper on this over a year ago, and the consultation closed in October last year. Will the Prime Minister commit in the forthcoming King's Speech to legislation that will deal finally with this pernicious problem?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for all of his work and attention in this area; it was good to work with him on Project Adder in particular. He is right to highlight the fact that drugs destroy lives and families, hitting the most vulnerable in our society the hardest. The 10-year drug strategy, which he helped put in place, is ambitious and backed with a record £3 billion of funding. As he highlighted, we have consulted on a new drug possession offences framework, and I assure him that Ministers will keep him and this House updated on future plans.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): In the last few hours I have been contacted by the headteacher of St James's Church of England Primary School in Blackburn, who is desperately seeking help after a reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete survey conducted on 7 September was inconclusive. The urgent intrusive inspection that was supposed to follow has not been arranged by the Department for Education. The potentially affected part of the building has been closed off, with children crammed into the dining room and learning at the tables. Staff are unable to access facilities and the whole

school is hugely inconvenienced. The headteacher has been unable to meet the Department for Education, so can I implore the Prime Minister to get the Secretary of State for Education to investigate this urgently?

The Prime Minister: Of course I am sorry for the disruption at schools as we work hard to identify those affected, but the DFE is fully funding the inspection process, ensuring that we are now rapidly inspecting and surveying all potentially affected schools and paying for that work. Also, with the increase of up to 80 dedicated caseworkers, St James's Primary School, like others, should have a dedicated point of contact to work through those issues. I will ensure that the Secretary of State and the Department are in touch with the school and the hon. Member for an update.

Q9. [906406] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Personally, I know the stark impact of dementia and the effect that it has on the families of our 1 million citizens who live with it. It was my honour last week to sponsor Alzheimer's Research UK to highlight the recent progress on a new diagnostic test and new drugs that could be available as early as next January. I welcome the inclusion of dementia in the Government's major conditions strategy, but will my right hon. Friend ask his Secretary of State to convene a dementia medicines taskforce so that we can take advantage of this progress in research? Will he consider Alzheimer's Research UK's request for a dementia champion?

The Prime Minister: I start by thanking my hon. Friend for his work in this important area. Regulators are working closely with industry to evaluate new dementia medicines, because of course we want patients to benefit from rapid access to safe and effective treatments. We are also strongly committed to funding dementia research, including doubling the amount allocated to £160 million a year by next year, and last year we launched the Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission, backed up with new funding, which will work with industry to develop biomarkers and data and digital science innovations and to strengthen our trials in dementia. I look forward to hearing more suggestions from my hon. Friend on that.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): In the 1990s, under the Conservative Government, people were dying because of the length of time they were on NHS waiting lists. In 2023, we are seeing an increasing number of people dying while they are on NHS waiting lists before getting treatment. Is the Prime Minister ashamed that people are dying needlessly on his watch?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the number on waiting lists has been impacted significantly by the pandemic, but that is why we have put record funding in place to help to address that, including innovations such as surgical hubs, same-day emergency care, virtual wards and such like. I would gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that, in England, part of the reason that waiting lists are not coming down as fast we would like is the strike action by doctors—something that is supported by him and his colleagues, who have stood on the picket lines ensuring that patients cannot get access to care. It is also him and his party who are saying that they will

repeal the laws we have put in place that will guarantee patients safe access to medical treatment in the event of industrial action. If he wants to make this issue emotional, he should tell people why he believes that patients should be deprived of access to lifesaving care because of industrial action.

West Midlands: Economic Outlook

Q11. [906408] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the economic outlook for the west midlands.

The Prime Minister: We regularly engage with local partners across the west midlands to gather insight and intelligence on the economy. Earlier this year we initiated the trailblazer devolution deal, which includes measures to help businesses thrive. I see that, just the other week, the Mayor launched Business Growth West Midlands, backed with £100 million in funding for business support.

Michael Fabricant: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer, and I am glad to hear about the continuing growth in the west midlands. However, in Lichfield we have a problem with road and footpath closures, and we do not know for how long they will go on. HS2 is behind these closures, and one hand does not know what the other is doing—HS2 is the most dysfunctional organisation I have ever had to deal with. Will the Prime Minister, in the short term, try to restructure HS2 so that it works as a company should? In the longer term, can he save other constituencies by stopping HS2 at the end of phase 1?

The Prime Minister: I know the frustration that this is causing to my hon. Friend's constituents. I am told that HS2 Ltd is prioritising the completion of works that are under way, including roadworks in Lichfield, to keep disruption to a minimum. I know that the Transport Secretary will continue to hold it to account and that the company will keep local communities informed about future works.

Engagements

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): UK billpayers are facing having to pay an extra £1 billion because of the Government's failure to agree new offshore wind. With Russia using energy as a weapon, when will the Prime Minister take energy security seriously and protect us from the whims of fossil fuel autocrats?

The Prime Minister: We do take energy security seriously. Indeed, we created a brand-new Department to focus on energy security, so it is a bit rich coming from a Labour party, which wants to cut off our access to home-grown British oil and gas, which would increase our reliance on foreign oil and gas, increase our reliance on dictators and increase our exposure to those markets. As independent reports have said, it would also be bad for the climate, as imported fossil fuels come with something like two or three times the emissions. Labour's policy is not just bad for the environment; it is bad for our energy security and bad for British jobs.

Q12. [906409] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The collapse of a potential rescue deal for Wilko this week brings added urgency to the regeneration of our town centres. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and the leader of Torbay Council to identify ways that, with Government support and planning reform, this can be accelerated?

The Prime Minister: Investment through both arms of our towns fund is part of how we will regenerate and unleash the potential of our town centres. I am delighted to hear that that investment includes Torbay's £21.9 million town deal and, indeed, £13.5 million for Paignton via the future high streets fund. My hon. Friend is right about ensuring that our planning system is friendly for small businesses, and that is what we are doing: making it much easier to convert unused shops into cafés, restaurants or, indeed, new homes. That is an example of how we are helping our high streets to adapt and thrive.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The new Defence Secretary has been quoted as saying that RAAC could be present in military buildings. Can the Prime Minister today guarantee the safety of our military personnel and equipment? Or is this yet another ticking time bomb that the Government have failed to see coming?

The Prime Minister: Across the public sector, Departments are making sure they follow the technical guidance to identify and mitigate RAAC, as required. As the hon. Lady has seen in the NHS, we have moved the affected hospitals into the new hospitals programme. More generally, this Government have invested record sums in defence—the £24 billion at the last spending review is the single biggest uplift in defence spending since the end of the cold war.

Q13. [906410] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is vital that we retain, recruit and protect our prison officers, so will the Prime Minister agree to prevent any prisoner who assaults a prison officer from being released early from jail? This simple measure would be very popular with prisoner officers and the public, and—you never know, Mr Speaker—it might even find favour with the parties opposite, which normally think that the only people who should be in prison are those who misgender people.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that prisoners who are violent towards people working and living in prisons will and should face the full consequences of their actions. I am pleased that the recent Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 increased the maximum penalty, to up to two years' imprisonment, for those who assault emergency workers—that includes prison officers. The Ministry of Justice will continue to press for charges for more serious offences, such as ABH—assault occasioning actual bodily harm—where appropriate.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): At the weekend, seven global economic powers came together to agree a monumental trade agreement. They included India, the United States and the European Union, but not the UK. Did the Prime Minister choose not to sign up because, presumably, he thought it was a bad deal, or was the UK left out altogether because he has as weak a reputation on the world stage as he does at home?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady was here for the statement on Monday, but I rather assume she was not. What she describes was not a trade deal so, first, she should get her facts right. As I explained on Monday, there are lots of different ways in which countries will participate in solving international issues. At the same summit she mentions, we announced a record investment in the green climate fund—the single biggest investment by this country to help with international climate finance. That was warmly welcomed by countries at the summit, which can see that the UK is taking a leadership role and helping countries to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Q14. [906411] Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): This week, we were hit by the devastating news that all Wilko stores would be closing, meaning the loss of 12,500 jobs. Bassetlaw and Worksop are the home of Wilko's headquarters and a distribution centre, where 1,500 jobs are set to go. Wilko has been mismanaged for years. In the past decade, more than £77 million has been paid out to shareholders, and recently the HQ was sold for £48 million before being leased back. Will the Prime Minister reassure my constituents, and all those nationally who are affected by the demise of Wilko, that he and the Government will do everything in their power to help support people into jobs and make sure that their redundancy packages and pensions are protected, and that we will take whatever action is available to us to hold the ownership to account?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, some of the topics he raises will be commercial matters for the company, but I do know that this is a concerning time for workers at Wilko. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is keeping close to developments and we have already started supporting those who have been made redundant, and we stand ready to support others to the fullest of our abilities.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The head of the Army, General Sir Patrick Sanders, has said that the UK must

“forge an Army capable of fighting alongside our allies and defeating Russia in battle”.

So why are the Government still pushing ahead with further cuts, of 10,000 troops, to the British Army?

The Prime Minister: Again, this is the Government who have put a record amount into our armed forces: £24 billion. We remain the second largest investor in our defence in NATO. As we saw at the NATO summit, other countries look to us for leadership. How the armed forces allocate that record funding is a matter for the chiefs, to make sure that we have the capabilities we need to meet the threats of today. That is a decision that they will make and we will back them, but no one can doubt our commitment to funding properly the armed forces and ensuring that we keep this country safe.

Q15. [906412] Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Prime Minister has rightly said that democracies such as the UK, not authoritarian regimes, should lead the fight on global challenges such as development and climate change. Given that the links between failed regimes, climate change and the number of asylum seekers are growing, will my right hon. Friend ensure that doing

development democratically is a key theme in the White Paper on international development? Will he also visit the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's Garden of Democracy exhibition here in Parliament, which highlights our promotion of democratic values abroad?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the exhibition in Portcullis House. Members will have heard his invitation. We are consulting widely

on the detail of the White Paper on international development and what it should say, and specifically on the role of democracy in development. I encourage all interested organisations and individuals to share their ideas through the public consultation.

Mr Speaker: May I just say thank you to Sir John Benger, in his final Prime Minister's questions, for his loyal service to the House? We do appreciate it. Thank you, Sir John.

Combined Sewer Overflows

12.41 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if she will make a statement on combined sewer overflows.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): With the usual courtesies, I welcome the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) to his place.

I restate that I have always been clear that the current volume of sewage discharged by water companies is totally unacceptable, and they must act urgently to improve their performance so that they meet Government and public expectations. I confirm that the Department, the Environment Agency and Ofwat have received the information notices and will, of course, comply with their requests. We do not agree with the Office for Environmental Protection's assessment of our compliance with the law, and the House should note that the OEP itself has said:

"We recognise that a great deal is already being done to tackle the issue of untreated sewage discharges, and we welcome the intent of Government measures such as the Plan for Water and storm overflow targets, as well as commitments to increase investment."

The public are rightly disgusted by sewage discharges from storm overflows, and so are the Government, which is why we have taken more action than any other Government on the issue. I remind hon. Members that the European Commission took the Labour Government to court in 2009 for breaches of the law. Subsequently, we have started the construction of the Thames tideway tunnel, which is due to be completed next year. It is taking a decade to construct.

However, a decade ago, the Conservative-led Government took action and started requiring the monitoring of storm overflows. That work will be completed by the end of this year. It is owing to that that the scale of the problem has been unveiled. I note that in Wales, which is run by a Labour Government, discharge occurrences are much higher—38 times a year for outflows versus 23 in England.

The Environment Act 2021 included new powers and responsibilities, which increased understanding. Last year, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published the storm overflows discharge reduction plan. That led to some of the action that we are taking.

We have been repeatedly clear that water companies' reliance on overflows is unacceptable. They must significantly reduce how much sewage they discharge as a priority. We are holding them to account, and that is also true of our regulators. I remind the House that active investigations, including an active criminal investigation, of water companies are under way.

We welcome the opportunity to set out the scale of the action that the Government are taking. No Government in history have done more to tackle the issue. Last year, we launched the storm overflows discharge reduction plan. Our strict targets will lead to the toughest ever crackdown on sewage spills, and we require water companies to deliver the largest ever infrastructure programme in water company history.

I am therefore happy to answer today's urgent question, but I say, yet again, that the Conservative Government are cleaning up the mess left by a Labour Government, and we will get on with the job.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Nothing more graphically illustrates 13 years of failed Tory government than the tide of raw sewage swelling down our rivers, into our lakes and washing up on our beaches. The Conservatives cut the Environment Agency's budget in half. That led to drastic cuts in monitoring, enforcement and prosecution, which led to a drastic increase in illegal discharges, trashing nature, damaging tourism and putting kids' health at risk.

This Government are up to their necks in a sewage crisis of their own making. And now, in an absolutely unprecedented move, the Office for Environmental Protection tells us that the Government may have broken the law themselves in allowing all of this. It identifies possible failures to comply with environmental law by the Secretary of State's own Department, the Environment Agency and Ofwat.

This Government have broken the entire regulatory system. They enabled this scandal, but did we hear a word of apology just now? No, we did not. There was only complacency. Labour wants severe and automatic fines for every illegal discharge to pay for a tougher regulation and enforcement regime. Why will the Government not do that? We want mandatory monitoring of every outlet so that the public know where the discharges are happening. Why will the Government not agree to that?

Can the Secretary of State tell us which Ministers signed off what the OEP calls

"a misinterpretation of the law"

to allow more frequent sewage discharges without risk of sanction? That is a Government-sanctioned green light to pollute. Was it her? What action will she now take to put an end to this appalling situation, bring the water companies to heel and clean up our waterways? Will she publish the correspondence between the OEP and her Department if she has nothing to hide?

Finally, if the Secretary of State's Department is found to have broken the law, will she do the right thing and resign? The Prime Minister would not tolerate raw sewage in his private swimming pool, so why is he happy to treat the British countryside as an open sewer?

Dr Coffey: The risk for the hon. Gentleman is that he has already soiled his own reputation by failing to acknowledge that the investigation that led to that court case, which is referred to in the information notice, took place under a Labour Government. On Sky last night, I believe it was a former Labour Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who basically said that he knew sewage discharges were happening, and what did the Labour Government do about it? They did not do anything. In 2006, they set out a consultation basically allowing self-monitoring by the water companies. Frankly, the Labour Government did sweet FA and we are cleaning it up now.

Let us have a look at the timescale that has been mentioned for the situation that led to the ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union. Things have not been done in Wales, where there is a Labour

[*Dr Coffey*]

Government, so there is no change in policy there. Meanwhile, the Conservative Government have got on with imposing unlimited penalties on water companies. That is why so many powers were put into the Environment Act 2023, and regulators are now using them. There was hardly any monitoring in 2010, thanks to Labour—the Scottish National party does not have a leg to stand on either—and it was the Conservatives who got the monitoring going. Where Labour has weakened monitoring, we have increased it.

On the assertions that the hon. Gentleman made about budgets, he should be aware that the purpose of the permits, and of the fees that go with the permits, is to pay for those regular inspections. Government funding, which we increased last year, is used when enforcement action needs to be taken, and that includes taking companies to court. That is why there is an active criminal investigation under way now.

Frankly, it was the Conservatives who got the monitoring going and unveiled the scale of this, while the Labour Government looked the other way. I have no confidence in the plans that Labour has put forward. We are already getting on with many of the actions that it talks about, and that is why we will sort out the mess that the Labour Government left behind.

Mr Speaker: Can we be more moderate in the language that we use? I do not think that it has been appropriate, and hopefully we will hear no more of it.

I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): We all understand the long-term challenge of storm water overflows where heavy rainfall is inundating the system. Over time, we will see more storm water tanks, such as the 4 million litre tank that Yorkshire Water installed in Scarborough, but there can be no excuse for discharges when the weather is dry. Some are down to human error or to mechanical failure, but many are down just to under-capacity in the system. As we address the problem, can we focus on the dry discharges and ensure that investment goes where it will have the most effect: where the most concentrated sewage goes into waterways?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is right to point out some of the investment that is under way, but the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which I anticipate will receive nearly £60 billion of investment from the water companies, will prioritise where the biggest issues are. I think that is the right thing to do. I am also mindful of other potential environmental responsibilities, particularly in areas of conservation. We will continue to ensure that, as part of the plan, we get on and get into the detail. We are already doing quite a lot of work with the water companies, holding them to account and ensuring that they get on and spend the money.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Along with the water companies, one of the main sources of water pollution in the south-west is the minority of livestock farmers who put silage, run-off from silage and slurry into local waterways, yet the Government have radically cut the number of inspections and there have been hardly any prosecutions. Why?

Dr Coffey: The right hon. Gentleman is a former Minister in DEFRA. I am not aware of what inspections were done when he was in office. What I do know is that we increased funding for farm inspections; my understanding is that there were about 4,000 last year. The approach is targeted. Sometimes farmers are not doing it intentionally. We are helping in different ways, including by increasing the funding for slurry infrastructure. Through the environmental land management schemes we are increasing incentives to help with things such as barrier strips and buffer strips so that stock is kept further away. We are actively working with farmers. We want them to be able to do the right thing. Enforcement is undertaken—he will be aware of a recent case in Herefordshire—and we will continue to allow our regulators to make decisions on criminal investigations independently, rather than the Government dictating them.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I welcome the work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in this area. Despite what has been said today, we have to recognise that this is the first Government to take the bull by the horns and actually do something about illegally discharged sewage, which has been happening for decades. I have witnessed it myself. I have recently been speaking to Southern Water about a river that my constituency happens to be near. Although I recognise that Southern Water is doing its very best to do small trials around land drainage, frankly it is not doing enough quickly enough. Will the Secretary of State outline the powers of the Environment Agency that she is strengthening in order to fine companies such as Southern Water, which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill) said, are using opportunities in dry weather to dump sewage where that really should not be happening?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that we have taken action and given powers to the regulator. A very successful prosecution happened; I believe Southern Water was fined £90 million in a recent case. We need to continue to work to get effective action. I have complete confidence in the Environment Agency in getting on with the detailed work that we need to do to ensure that the water companies stick to the law, and we continue to strengthen the law, including through the unlimited penalties that this House voted for. Actually, I think it was only Government Members who went through the Division Lobby to pass those penalties.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know of the concerns from her own mailbag, as I certainly do from mine. My constituents are in touch with me week in, week out with concerns about the River Lune or the beach at Fleetwood. My constituents and I would like to know what steps the Secretary of State will take to ensure that when water companies break the law they will be punished and brought to justice, and will not do it again?

Dr Coffey: I am conscious of the breakdown near Fleetwood earlier this year. To give some credit to United Utilities, it worked at pace to try to fix the mechanical failure that had happened. We now have legislation that allows the Environment Agency to apply unlimited penalties. She will be aware that a live criminal investigation by the Environment Agency is under way

against water companies. It will then be for the courts to decide the scale of the fines. We will continue to ensure that penalties are applied and clearer instructions are given. We have had discussions with the Environment Agency. We need to get the problem fixed, but water companies should not try to do this on the cheap, and think that it is cheaper just to pay a penalty than actually sort out the problem.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I sat on the Bill Committee for the Environment Act 2021, which created the OEP. I also sit on the Environmental Audit Committee, which interviewed the now chair of the OEP. It was Government Members who introduced the OEP, enabling her to do this work to find out the scale of the problem. When the report refers to the Government, it is not being party political; it is referring to all Governments for the past 20 years or more. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to keep looking at these reports, ripping off the plaster that we have started to rip off, and holding to the fire the feet of all the polluters that caused these problems in the first place?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we left the European Union, we recognised the need to have suitable scrutiny, which is what is in place. Clearly the OEP has not come to a conclusion about breaking the law. That is why it has asked for more information. That is its right and entitlement. That is what we legislated to allow it to do, and we will continue to comply with that. Meanwhile, it will not distract us from getting on with our plan for water and holding water companies to account.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Water companies have dumped sewage more than 1 million times over the past three years. Now we find out that instead of standing up to the water companies, the Government seem to have been complicit in letting them break the law. Beyond the Government's own failures, has this sewage crisis not been driven by under-investment, while £72 billion was handed out to shareholders since privatisation? Is it not time to put an end to this racket and restore water as a proper public service?

Dr Coffey: I understand that the hon. Member comes from the very left wing of the Labour party, and that that will continue to be his mantra. I understand, however, that it is not the position of his party to nationalise water, because it recognises that about £190 billion-worth of investment has gone into water infrastructure since privatisation.

Clearly the scale of what needs to be done in the next few years is considerably greater than we have seen before. At the same time, back in 2006 we had one of the biggest dividends going, and the gearing of Thames Water was changed. Frankly, the Labour Government then did not do anything about it. That is key to one of the situations that we face at the moment, but meanwhile we will continue to get on. I am confident that with the Thames tideway tunnel opening next year we will have good sewage channelling and will be able to deal with that in London. The work continues, including things such as nature-based management practices, in order to help in Yorkshire as well. I know that his water company is looking into that too.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): 19 July last year was the hottest day on record in the UK. Temperatures exceeded 40°C in some places during a dry spell, yet water companies that responded to a BBC investigation admitted to so-called “dry spills” of sewage that day. The Environment Secretary was reported as saying that it “does seem extraordinary”, but that the Environment Agency “is the regulator”. Given that it was the hottest day, when people were inadvertently bathing in sewage, why does the Environment Secretary wash her hands of it?

Dr Coffey: I am conscious of the investigation that the BBC undertook. The Environment Agency and the Department do not agree with its assessment of the data. That does not mean, of course, that there have not been sewage spills on dry days. That is why it is part of the investigation. It is part of fixing the problem, and we will continue to do that.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): The Secretary of State knows Gill Rider from history—the chair of Pennon Group, which owns South West Water. I have heard what the Secretary of State has said, but surely the time has come to get these companies and their leadership under control. South West Water is a disgrace. It is leaking. It is treating its customers with utter contempt. Secretary of State, please sit on these companies and make them do the job that they are meant to, which is to stop this now.

Dr Coffey: Unlimited penalties are available to the Environment Agency and there is already a criminal investigation under way. I know my hon. Friend has secured a Westminster Hall debate next week to discuss it in further detail, and my hon. Friend the water Minister will reply substantially to the many detailed points that I am sure he will raise.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It was my constituent Mr Latimer who was responsible for the law change stating that sewage should only be discharged during exceptional circumstances. He knows, as we all know, that it is this Government who are actively enabling the water companies and regulators to get away with dumping sewage into our rivers and our oceans. Why will the Secretary of State not admit that under this Government, sewage dumping is no longer the exception but the rule?

Dr Coffey: Because the hon. Lady's assertion is simply not true.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Rather than just scaremongering, which is what we are hearing again from the Opposition, could we have a focus please on the quality of our waters? In Leigh-on-Sea and Southend West, the quality of our water has gone up from 76% in 2010 to 93% and the vast majority of our beaches are rated good or excellent. Will my right hon. Friend applaud the work of local group the Bluetits Chill Swimmers, run by Daniella Bee, and Philip Miller of Adventure Island, who are assisting me in having regular sewage summits with Anglian Water? We have extracted a promise from Anglian Water to eliminate 75% of use of our combined storm overflows five years ahead of the Government's target. Is this local action not the sort of thing we should be doing—not just scaremongering?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to praise the activity happening in her constituency, and the people of Southend should be congratulated on electing her to this House, because she is an avid campaigner for them. She recommends her part of the world for swimming due to the designated beaches, and I could do the same in my own constituency. I remind the House that when the Conservatives came in to power in 2010, only half our swimming beaches and designated bathing waters were deemed excellent, thanks to whatever happened under Labour. Now it is more than three in four, which shows the progress we have made right around the country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I ask the Secretary of State this pertinent question: what does she say to the senior executive at Yorkshire Water, who, when I complained about the quality of the water in some of the rivers in Yorkshire, said, “Mr Sheerman, don’t you realise that there is no river in our country that is fit to swim in?” Is it not the truth that the Secretary of State’s pathetic performance today, and her use of the most vulgar language I have heard in this Chamber in all my years in this House, show that she is out of her depth, that she is incompetent and that she should resign immediately?

Dr Coffey: I look forward to the election in Huddersfield—the hon. Gentleman should look at some of his own speeches. I do not know on what basis he has made that assertion, quoting the chief executive of Yorkshire Water, but that is not the case—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman can always contact me directly to give me the quotation and the source of the quotation. I look forward to receiving it, and I will take the water company’s chief executive to task if that is truly what she said.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Despite all we have heard from Labour, is it not the reality that in Government Labour did absolutely nothing on this issue, with no monitoring in place, and that it is this Government, as the OEP recognises, who are sorting the problem through the plan for water, through record investment, and through monitoring, improving waters in North West Norfolk and across the country?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; he has a coastal constituency as well and will know the continuing work to improve the quality of our designated bathing waters and our waters more broadly. There have been more stringent standards applied over the last decade. We continue to work to try to improve that and we will continue to get on with the job.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Secretary of State seems to have a weird amnesia about the past decade or so, so that there is a big leap from Labour being in government to her suddenly being in front of us today. I hope she does remember the many times, whether in the Environmental Audit Committee, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee or the Environment Bill Committee, that I asked her about making sure the Office for Environmental Protection really had teeth, was independent and was respected by Government. I am concerned that there are already signs that the Government are trying to undermine the work of the OEP. Will she assure us that she will respect the conclusions that it comes to and act accordingly?

Dr Coffey: I will say that we set up the OEP, we will comply with the information notice it has requested and then we will see where its decision goes from that. It is important that that institution continues to have the freedom we gave it; we will continue to respect that and to comply with its notices, as set out under the statute.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The water Minister and I regularly visit a beach that has been subject to several environmental spills this August. When I checked at the site, it was a storm overflow and not a combined sewage outlet. Given that there was not enough rainfall to constitute an exceptional amount, can the Secretary of State advise me why the Environment Agency has not taken enforcement action against South West Water and all the other water companies that are spilling sewage when there are no exceptional circumstances?

Dr Coffey: I understand from my hon. Friend the water Minister that the Environment Agency is currently investigating the source of the pollution to help with its investigation.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The right hon. Lady’s Department issued a statement saying that it does not

“agree with the OEP’s initial interpretations,”

but will

“continue to work constructively with the OEP on this issue.”

That seems like a contradiction to me. How does the Secretary of State plan to work constructively with the OEP when her Department’s statement demonstrates a complete disregard for environmental law?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady is incorrect. We absolutely respect the law—we introduced the Environment Act. We can disagree with initial assertions, but we will continue to ensure that we provide the information the OEP has requested.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the renewed determination to bring about improvement—it is clear that we need it. When we voted on this issue in the House, we were given assurances that these incidents would not take place. It is clear that, while officials may not agree with this investigation, there is still a real cause for concern. How does the Secretary of State intend to alleviate those concerns and, more importantly, ensure that sewage releases are regulated and safe? I make this suggestion very respectfully: stopping the dividends to the chief executives and directors would be a method to encourage improvements by the water companies, who seem reluctant to make them.

Dr Coffey: I am conscious that the hon. Gentleman is a Member for a Northern Ireland constituency. The OEP’s remit extends to Northern Ireland, although not to the Welsh Labour Government or the Scottish SNP Government. Investigations can be undertaken—that is what we legislate for in this House—and unlimited penalties can be applied. That is true in England. We will continue to make sure that we do what we can not only to reduce these challenges, but to fix the long-term issues. We know that in London, for example, the Thames tideway tunnel has taken a decade—that is the scale of the issue. The fact that we know about the scale of the issue right now is due to the Conservative Government having taken action, while the Labour Government looked the other way.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): The last time I asked about the dumping of sewage in our rivers in this Chamber, the Prime Minister agreed with me that it is absolutely unacceptable. However, the OEP's investigation is a scandalous revelation that shows the entire water and regulatory system is broken. What does the Secretary of State think should happen to companies, regulatory bodies and Government Departments that knowingly break the law?

Dr Coffey: We set up the OEP and it has the powers, thanks to this Conservative Government, to get on with the role as it sees fit. It is doing so—it has started the investigation and asked for more information, and we will comply with that. I say to the hon. Lady, as I said at the start of my response to the urgent question, that this is completely unacceptable by the water companies. That is why we are taking action and getting on with the job. We do not need lessons from Labour, who looked away and did nothing. They are the people who were taken to court by the European Commission for failure, failure, failure—thanks to Labour.

1.9 pm

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that the Secretary of State is under great pressure today—she seems to be out of her depth in quite shallow water—but she misquoted me. In a question I asked a few moments ago, I said a “senior executive of Yorkshire Water”; I did not say “the chief executive of Yorkshire Water”. That is on the record and *Hansard* will show it. I want an apology from the Secretary of State.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That stands on the record. [*Interruption.*] Secretary of State, do you wish to respond?

Dr Coffey: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought that the hon. Gentleman said “the chief executive”. I hear now that he said a “senior executive”. But the point still stands: provide the quotation, provide the source, and I will take it up with that executive and the chief executive of Yorkshire Water, because, frankly, that is not acceptable.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, Secretary of State, for responding to the urgent question. We will now move on.

Asbestos (National Register)

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

1.10 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for a national register of asbestos present in non-domestic premises and of the condition of that asbestos; and for connected purposes.

May I begin by thanking Mesothelioma UK for all the fantastic work it does to support those living with the asbestos-related cancer? As well as providing access to mesothelioma clinical nurse specialists across the UK, that charity offers a range of support services and dedicated research to help patients live better and longer lives. I found its work invaluable a few years ago in this place, when my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and I were trying to get the Government into the sensible and correct place on the issue of compensation.

I represent an area with many former steelworkers, power station workers, dockers and a few miners, so respiratory industrial disease is an issue that I know well, including from my close family. Increasingly, the disease is not restricted to roles that involved directly installing material with asbestos; it also affects those who work in buildings with asbestos, such as teachers. Indeed, teachers are more likely to die from mesothelioma than the general public—sadly, I have heard examples of that from my constituents. A 2019 Government survey found that 80.9% of participating schools had asbestos on their estate, and although most had a plan for dealing with it, that figure speaks for itself.

I thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), who, apart from being an excellent champion for her constituents, has done incredible work leading up to this 10-minute rule motion, including her recent Westminster Hall debate on asbestos in the workplace.

As most people will be aware, asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that was used extensively in buildings in the UK and around the world between the 1950s and 1980s. It can be found in ceiling tiles, pipe insulation, flooring, textured paint and boilers, and it is often mixed with other materials, which makes determining its presence even more complex. In fact, asbestos is one of three materials considered so hazardous that they require their own regulations, the others being radiation and lead. Lead and radiation are tightly controlled, and although there has been a lot of work over the years to tighten regulations on asbestos—and, indeed, to ban it—many would say that it remains the poor relation of the three materials in public policy terms.

The scale of the problem cannot be underestimated. The Health and Safety Executive has said that between 210,000 and 400,000 buildings in the UK contain asbestos. Other estimates suggest 6 million tonnes of asbestos are spread across 1.5 million buildings in this country. Asbestos is, of course, the single greatest cause of work-related deaths in the UK. HSE estimates that more than 5,000 people die from asbestos-related cancers each year, of whom half die from mesothelioma.

Governments of both sides have sought to address that issue. We have had bans on import, use, manufacture and supply. The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012

[Andrew Percy]

provide a framework for working with asbestos in non-domestic premises. The regulations are welcome, as they place a requirement on a duty holder to assess the presence, condition and exposure risk of asbestos in non-domestic premises. The duty holder is required to maintain an up-to-date register and share it with anyone who may be at risk of exposure or of disturbing asbestos-containing materials.

However, as welcome as those regulations and other interventions may be, there remain too many new mesothelioma cases in the UK, and there is a clear trend of rising cases among those who have worked in buildings with asbestos, rather than among those who worked directly with asbestos products and materials. A report by Alpha Tracker on the condition of asbestos in schools, hospitals and homes found that more than half of 1.3 million samples found to contain the material were already damaged; that 20% of asbestos-containing materials in hospitals and healthcare settings had high damage; and that 55% of asbestos in schools was in poor condition. We must therefore ask if the current approach is working and sufficient.

The UK National Asbestos Register, a new social enterprise established to help management and duty holders to manage the material, has identified five common failings in the current system. First, there are communication failures. Contractors rarely see an asbestos register, or records are mislaid or difficult to access. A contractor undertaking what seem like minor works, for example, may be unaware there are ACMs in that building and that they might disturb them.

Secondly, information is provided in a format that is difficult to understand, poorly arranged or too lengthy, meaning that documents are often incomprehensible. Thirdly, registers are not updated as work is undertaken, meaning that information is out of date, or the information is held on different databases. As contractors change, information can be lost.

Fourthly, the current system often results in there being no evidence of compliance or confirmation that any register has been accessed and read by a contractor or anybody undertaking works. Fifthly, although asbestos registers contain the same basic data, they are arranged in different formats, which makes them more difficult to understand. Andrew Paten, one of the founders of the UK National Asbestos Register, says:

“A standard, common format would allow everyone to become familiar with them and competent in their use, regardless of the property.”

As highlighted in the Work and Pensions Committee’s “The Health and Safety Executive’s approach to asbestos management” report, and in Mesothelioma UK’s “Don’t Let the Dust Settle” campaign, the introduction of a national asbestos register would go a long way towards solving those issues, and is necessary if the management-in-situ approach of recent decades, which makes good sense in many ways, as opposed to blanket removal, is to be maintained. I believe that a national register of the type proposed is absolutely crucial.

I recognise that questions and concerns will be raised about how such a national register would operate. It would bring together all the existing information on

buildings with ACMs into one coherent database—as I have said, it is currently piecemeal and fragmented—not only making it easier for duty holders to record and maintain information about asbestos in their buildings, but making the information more easily accessible for those who require it.

There would be wider benefits to a national register. It would help to support a longer-term strategic approach to managing asbestos. If we have learned one thing in recent weeks in respect of concrete, it is that access to information and clear data is absolutely necessary when managing any risk in a building accessed by the public.

Furthermore, a national register would increase public awareness of the harmful effects of asbestosis, something that Mesothelioma UK believes is crucial to protecting future generations and for better treatment and care for those who suffer from asbestos-related conditions. Such a register would also ensure that the Health and Safety Executive could use that database to better target and improve its own enforcement efforts in this area. As I have said, recent issues with school building conditions in relation to concrete have shown us that we need to be proactive, rather than reactive, when it comes to managing risks of this kind.

At the moment, there is no simple and cost-effective way to reverse our legacy of using these materials in non-residential buildings, but we cannot ignore the fact that we have a growing number of mesothelioma cases among those who have worked not just with, but within, buildings that contain those materials. That is why better asbestos management is needed, and a national register is key to providing that.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Andrew Percy, Jane Hunt, Tracey Crouch, Sir Stephen Timms, Martin Docherty-Hughes, Ian Lavery, Holly Mumby-Croft and Ben Lake present the Bill.

Andrew Percy accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 354).

PROCUREMENT BILL [LORDS]: PROGRAMME (NO. 2)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Procurement Bill [Lords] for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 9 January 2023 (Procurement Bill [Lords] (Programme)).

Consideration of Lords Message

(1) Proceedings on the Lords Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Steve Double.)

Question agreed to.

Procurement Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Lords message

Schedule 7

DISCRETIONARY EXCLUSION GROUNDS

1.22 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 102B.

It is an honour once again to open the debate on this important Bill, which I am delighted to say is now so close to receiving Royal Assent. The Bill is a key Brexit benefit, delivering a simpler, more transparent procurement framework that will benefit small businesses and meet the needs of UK suppliers and contracting authorities.

Colleagues in the Chamber will also, I hope, remember that, when the Bill was last debated in this House, we offered significant new measures to protect the UK's public procurement supply chain from threats to national security. Those included new grounds to add suppliers to the debarment list for particular types of contracts that will allow us to ban risky suppliers from bidding for those contracts; the creation of a new national security unit for procurement that will provide dedicated resources in the Cabinet Office to scrutinise national security risks in procurement; and a commitment to publish a timetable for removal of surveillance equipment supplied by companies subject to the national intelligence law of China from Government Department sensitive sites. Earlier this week in the other place, we went further: my noble friend Baroness Neville-Rolfe provided an official clarification of the definition of sensitive sites and committed to an annual written report detailing progress. I am sure this House will welcome our additional agreements and agree that they demonstrate the Government's unwavering dedication to tackle these issues seriously.

I will deal today with one amendment that the other place sent back to this House, on the subject of organ harvesting. Let me begin by saying that I think all sides of this House are in complete agreement that organ harvesting is a dreadful practice that has no place in our supply chains. The question before us today is whether Lords amendment 102B is the right or necessary one to make, given other provisions in the Bill. In Committee in this House, the Government removed a discretionary exclusion ground for suppliers engaged in forced organ harvesting. The other place has subsequently proposed an amendment in lieu, with some modifications of the original amendment. This new version of the Lords amendment does not cover unethical activities relating to human tissue; it does, however, still cover forced organ harvesting and dealing in devices, equipment or services relating to forced organ harvesting.

I urge this House to reject this amendment for a number of reasons. First, as I have said previously, I do not believe that the amendment is necessary as, crucially, organ harvesting is already dealt with under existing provisions in the Procurement Bill. Under the Bill, any suppliers failing to adhere to existing ethical or professional standards that apply in their industry, including those relating to the removal, storage and use of human tissue, could be excluded on the grounds of professional misconduct. It is worth adding at this point that, as far

as His Majesty's Government are aware, no supplier in the UK public sector has been involved in forced organ harvesting. This means that it is very unlikely that any of our public money is being spent on that terrible practice. As noted above, however, if such a situation did arise, the exclusion for professional misconduct would apply.

Secondly, the amendment has significant consequences for contracting authorities. It extends to suppliers

"dealing in any device or equipment or services relating to forced organ harvesting."

That is an incredibly broad provision that would be extremely difficult for contracting authorities and suppliers to verify in respect of all supply chains and customer bases. If there were any doubt about whether that discretionary ground applied, local authorities or NHS trusts would need to undertake significant due diligence to satisfy themselves that the entire supply chain and the end user of all goods provided by suppliers—potentially including oxygen masks, IT equipment and so on—were not used in these terrible practices. It would mean that a small business tendering for Government contracts would need to understand where their customers might be using or selling their products, to enable them to genuinely and legitimately confirm that they were not subject to this ground.

More generally, the amendment would create excessive bureaucracy, requiring each and every supplier bidding across the thousands of contracts awarded by contracting authorities each year to declare that they are not guilty of forced organ harvesting, when we know that there is no evidence of that horrific practice occurring in UK public sector supply chains. We believe that such a burden would be unjustified when the Bill already covers this issue.

Thirdly, the Government are already taking steps to tackle the issue of organ harvesting. We have been explicit that the overseas organ trade, or complicity with it, will not be tolerated. For example, by virtue of the Health and Care Act 2022, it is already an offence to travel outside of the UK to purchase an organ. In addition, the Government continue to monitor and review evidence relating to reports of forced organ harvesting in China, and maintain a dialogue with leading non-governmental organisations and international partners on this very important issue. This Bill creates new rules for suppliers and contracting authorities that will hopefully stay on the statute book for many decades to come.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I apologise for being slightly delayed, Mr Deputy Speaker: I did not see this debate pop up on the annunciator. I rushed to ask a question about this topic. Forgive me.

On the issue of organ harvesting, I understand the difficulties with this particular amendment, so while I am instinctively supportive of what the Lords are trying to do, I understand the Government's arguments. However, there is a way to tighten this up. Organ harvesting is taking place in China—it is a regular occurrence—but I would not rely too much on declarations from supply chains. We have already unearthed the problem that supply chains are under no obligation to do the due diligence that would enable them to know

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

whether companies, or the people they are trading with, have any involvement with organ harvesting. Tightening that up would be great.

On that basis, does my hon. Friend accept that we now have to make sure that China is on the enhanced tier of the foreign agents registration scheme? That would really put power in the Government's hands to make sure that supply chains were properly checked. Will he say to our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and to all those concerned that it is time we did so? China is a genuine threat to us, industrially as well as politically.

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend is an expert on these matters. I thank him for his intervention—I have to say that I was quite surprised that he was not sitting behind me when I stood up in the first place, but I am delighted to see him in the Chamber now. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will have heard his remarks and will consider them carefully. This is obviously a procurement Bill, and we are doing our best to create the post-Brexit framework that will give us an enhanced ability to improve all aspects of procurement in our society.

In Committee and on Report in this House, we thought it was necessary to tighten up national security considerations to make sure that foreign hostile actors could not get involved in public procurement. We have—as my right hon. Friend knows, because he gave us good advice—taken steps to make sure that we remove technologies that come from those hostile actors from sensitive sites. On the broader point he made at the end of his comments, that is beyond my pay grade, but I have no doubt that those above my pay grade have heard what he has said.

This is an excellent Bill. It is a tribute to the officials who have worked on it and to my predecessors who worked on it in the Cabinet Office. I therefore urge the House to reject the amendment made by the other House and support the Government's motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the shadow Minister.

1.30 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Coming in as I do at the tail end of the passage of this Bill, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for all her work on the Bill, and to say that I look forward to working constructively with the Minister.

Turning to the Government motion to disagree with Lords amendment 102B, we can all agree that forced organ harvesting—a practice involving the removal of organs from a living prisoner that results in their death or near death—is abhorrent. The debate on this Government motion is about whether there should be a specific clause in the Bill to make it clear that we do not want to see a single penny of taxpayers' money go to any company linked to this practice, or whether that is adequately covered by the concept of professional misconduct that can be used against serious unethical behaviour.

We heard powerful speeches in the other place from Lord Alton of Liverpool and Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, who made compelling arguments for the inclusion

in the Bill of the measure against forced organ harvesting and provided evidence of the practice taking place in China. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Vauxhall and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) for all they have done to highlight the issue.

Furthermore, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has stated that serious human rights violations have been committed in the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region:

“Allegations of...torture...including forced medical treatment...are credible”.

This is a very current issue, and we would like to see specific mention of it in the Bill.

First, including a specific reference to forced organ harvesting in the Bill will highlight the issue and send a message to potential supply companies to make specific checks that they are not inadvertently in any way associated with the abhorrent business of forced organ harvesting. Secondly, although the Minister has said that forced organ harvesting is already covered by the ground of professional misconduct, which includes serious unethical behaviour, specific mention of it in the Bill will highlight to those undertaking procurement to be particularly vigilant in respect of any potential association of supply companies with this appalling practice. Thirdly, making specific mention of forced organ harvesting helps to send a clear message to China and anywhere else it may occur that the practice will not be tolerated and that there will be economic consequences.

The Minister has objected to having specific mention of forced organ harvesting because it means additional paperwork, and we all want to cut down the amount of paperwork that companies have to deal with. However, I would suggest in this case that a small amount of additional work is well worth it if it sends a strong message of condemnation, strengthens awareness of the issue and hastens the end of this abhorrent practice. The Opposition support the position taken by the other place of including the measure on forced organ harvesting in the Bill, and will therefore vote against the Government's motion to disagree with the Lords amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be here talking about Lords amendments for the second day in a row. I am glad to see the Procurement Bill making progress and getting towards becoming legislation. As the Minister has commented on a number of occasions, we have not got to the place that he wanted in relation to his conversations with the Scottish Government about the Bill. To be fair, we have also not got to the place we wanted for the Bill. Neither of us is entirely happy with the position that has been reached, but I do appreciate the work that has been done to communicate between the Governments on this. Both tried to find a compromise solution, but it was just impossible on this occasion to come to one that we were both happy with.

Specifically on the Government motion to disagree with Lords amendment 102B on forced organ harvesting, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) has laid out a number of very important points and I do not want to go over those. The Minister has said there is an absence of evidence that there is any forced organ harvesting in any of the supply chains involved in UK procurement, and I do appreciate that that is case.

However, if the Government are able to find out that there is an absence of evidence on this, surely it should not be beyond the means of those procuring or of companies supplying or buying things that are bidding for Government procurement contracts to find out that their supply chains are not involved. If the Government are able to find out these things, surely those companies should.

The point made by the hon. Member for Llanelli about raising awareness is incredibly important. We have worked very hard with companies through the changes in various Acts, including improving companies' corporate social responsibility and requiring them to make modern slavery statements. We have worked hard to ensure that companies are taking their social responsibilities seriously, and I therefore do not think that this measure is unreasonable. It would not apply to all companies; it applies only to companies bidding for Government contracts. Surely we want companies bidding for Government contracts to ensure that they are as within the law as possible, upholding human rights and demonstrating corporate social responsibility. I do not think it is unreasonable for us to ask those companies to look into their supply chains and consider whether they are financially supporting organisations or companies that are involved in forced organ harvesting. I think it is reasonable for us to ask them to spend a little bit of time doing this if they expect to take on Government contracts.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Actually, it is simpler even than that. In America, first, it is an offence for a company to have falsified, knowingly or unknowingly, its declarations on supply chains. Secondly, the US Government use companies such as Oritain that use criminal science to test where products were made and whether declarations were correct, and they are therefore able to enforce them. What is happening is that those supply chains are now being rigorously declared by American companies that do not wish to lose Government business. It would not be too much to ask the Government to do spot checks, using such companies that are available to them, and I have recommended it to the Foreign Office, not that that really matters.

Kirsty Blackman: I think the right hon. Member makes a reasonable and proportionate suggestion. Although we disagree on lots of things, I am very surprised to find myself agreeing with him for the second time this week on this. I do appreciate his suggestion, and I hope those on his Front Bench are listening to the advice he has given.

I am not going to test the House's patience by dragging this out. We will be voting with the Labour party against the Government's motion to disagree, because we believe that the more stringent controls are something it is absolutely reasonable for us to ask of companies. This is not for all companies, as I have said, but just for those that hope to get Government contracts.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): In this week of all weeks, the House needs to show that our democracy is strong and that we are not intimidated by other nations. The Chinese Communist party has shown that it holds our democracy in contempt. Today we have an opportunity to put tough talk into action.

Forced organ harvesting is a systemic trade that is taking place on an industrial scale in China. Up to 100,000 of its citizens are butchered each year for their organs. This is a state-sponsored crime against humanity. The two or three organs harvested from a healthy young adult are worth over £500,000. Evidence of this crime has been extensively investigated by the China and Uyghur tribunals chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice KC, the former lead prosecutor at The Hague. At the tribunals, evidence was heard of systematic medical testing of thousands of prisoners of conscience, allowing the oppressive regime to create an organ bank.

I have spoken extensively on the horrors that have occurred due to forced organ harvesting in previous stages of the Bill, so now I will address some of the concerns that the Government expressed in the other place when opposing the amendment. The Government claim that forced organ harvesting will be covered by existing provisions of the Bill. Certain conduct will absolutely not be covered by the existing provisions on professional misconduct. Supply chains can be complex, and improper conduct may often be one step too far removed from the crime for professional misconduct elements to be made out. Trying to cover all the different ethical and professional misconduct regulations across a multitude of industries is not practical. Only by having a specific provision for forced organ harvesting will we ensure that British taxpayers' money is not funding this horrific trade. Otherwise, it will be all too easy for companies to hide behind complex supply chains.

The second issue that the Government raised in the other place was that there was no evidence of UK organisations facilitating forced organ harvesting, yet there are companies with substantial operations in the UK providing immunosuppressive drugs for transplants in China. There is evidence of companies dramatically raising their stake in the Chinese market over the past few years. Sources on the ground claim that CellCept, an immunosuppressive drug, has been used on Chinese prisoners for transplants. There is no evidence that those individuals consented.

That is why a clear and direct provision relating to forced organ harvesting is necessary. UK taxpayers' money should not inadvertently be supporting this inhumane trade perpetrated by the Chinese Communist party. There must be the ability or at least the option to stop it. The amendment is not asking for draconian action. It simply gives discretionary powers to exclude a supplier from a procurement contract if there is a connection to forced organ harvesting. That would give the Government the ability to act to prevent the complicity of UK taxpayers in forced organ harvesting.

The amendment must be seen in the context of our country's wider relationship with China. The Government have extensively talked tough about standing up for our values against China. China is a trading partner that we cannot ignore or close ourselves off to, but that does not mean that we should not take such opportunities as this amendment to do right by our values and by humanity. Only a couple of days ago, the Prime Minister told the Chinese Prime Minister that attempts to undermine British democracy are completely unacceptable and that we will defend our democracy and our security. The amendment gives us the opportunity to use our democracy—the democracy that they seem to hold in contempt—to stand up for our values against China.

[Ms Marie Rimmer]

I urge colleagues across the House to take this opportunity to send a clear message to the Chinese Communist party, in this week of all weeks, that this House will stand up for our values by keeping Lords amendment 102B in the Bill.

Alex Burghart: With the leave of the House, I thank all Members who have made points in this important debate. Let me remind colleagues that the exclusion grounds in the Bill have been selected in the areas of greatest risk to public procurement. I return to the point I made at the start: there is fortunately no single known instance of such practice in the UK public procurement chain. We do not see it as a great risk to public procurement. I welcome the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) to her place and her new role, and I look forward to debating with her and working with her in the weeks and months ahead.

1.45 pm

The hon. Lady mentioned the World Health Organisation. The Government regularly discuss allegations of organ harvesting with the WHO, and also with other international partners and human rights NGOs. Ministers in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office wrote to the WHO in Geneva to encourage it to give careful consideration to the findings of the China tribunal on organ harvesting in March 2020. I very much do not want the House to get the impression that we do not take this seriously. It is a feature of our diplomacy and our work, where we are co-operating with like-minded nations that abhor this practice.

A number of Members raised points about professional misconduct. The existing provisions relating to professional misconduct apply where suppliers fail to adhere to ethical or professional standards that apply in their industry or where the supplier is engaged in professional misconduct that brings into question their integrity. I assure the House that practices involving the removal, storage and use of human tissue that are either illegal or contrary to ethical professional standards will be covered. It is therefore unnecessary to single out that particular practice in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) spoke on a number of issues. It remains a sadness for the Government that the Scottish Government chose not to be part of this Bill, leaving Scotland out of this new procurement regime and depriving small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland of the advantages that will come. They will also sit outside the new security measures that we have introduced, but that is a matter for the Scottish Government, and I hope that Scottish voters are listening and that as this Bill goes through they realise the opportunities that their Government have chosen to deprive them of.

The hon. Lady raised an issue about the scope of Government contracts. We are dealing with many contracts from many different layers throughout public procurement, which could be such things as grass-cutting services in a local authority. With the amendment, we would be asking small and medium-sized enterprises to conduct a level of diligence that goes way beyond their needs and expertise. That is a disproportionate burden to place on them. If we put too many burdens on small and medium-sized enterprises, we may discourage those businesses

from applying for public contracts, which is one of the precise and specific aims of the Bill. We have £300 billion-worth of public procurement every year. I want to see small and medium-sized enterprises in England, Wales and Northern Ireland getting a bigger bite of that pie, as I am sure do you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that SNP Members will vote against this Bill that they are not part of, which I am afraid speaks to their peculiar constitutional mindset.

To the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), I remind him that if anybody falsifies their procurement declaration, that would be grounds for exclusion under the Bill. We therefore believe that that point is covered off.

I commend the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) again on everything she has done to shine a light on these terrible crimes. She is always at the forefront of these debates and ensures that the plight of people in China is heard in the House. To her points, I say again that if we were to specify this one crime, of which we have found no evidence in UK supply chains, we would also be inviting a long list covering every conceivable misconduct in a vain attempt to provide certainty on specific issues. That would create a large bureaucratic burden, which is precisely what we are trying to get away from in the Bill. However, I reassure her again that having looked at this over and over again, we believe that the existing professional misconduct exclusion grounds will cover that and help contracting authorities to do their bit to ensure that we do not have suppliers in our supply chains who are involved in those abhorrent practices.

I hope that we can move this vital Bill a step closer to Royal Assent. The House has made its view clear once before, and I ask that it makes its view clear a second time.

Question put, That the House disagrees with Lords amendment 102B.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. A deferred Division was going on in the No Lobby. That will be paused while this Division takes place and will resume after it is over, with injury time of about 10 minutes so that those who have not voted in the deferred Division will get an opportunity to do so.

The House having divided: Ayes 274, Noes 194.

Division No. 326]

[1.50 pm]

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Baron, Mr John
Aiken, Nickie	Baynes, Simon
Aldous, Peter	Benton, Scott
Anderson, Lee	Beresford, Sir Paul
Anderson, Stuart	Berry, rh Sir Jake
Ansell, Caroline	Bhatti, Saqib
Argar, rh Edward	Blunt, Crispin
Atherton, Sarah	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Atkins, Victoria	Bradley, Ben
Bacon, Gareth	Bradley, rh Karen
Bacon, Mr Richard	Brady, Sir Graham
Bailey, Shaun	Braverman, rh Suella
Baillie, Siobhan	Brereton, Jack
Baker, Duncan	Britcliffe, Sara
Baldwin, Harriett	Browne, Anthony

Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard

Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen

McVey, rh Esther
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 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
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim

Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 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, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Steve Double and
Robert Largin

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty

Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth

Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret

Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollern, Kate
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen

Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sherman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat

Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Noes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Christian Wakeford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 102B disagreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendment 102B;

That Alex Burghart, Julie Marson, James Daly, Peter Gibson, Nia Griffith, Chris Elmore and Kirsty Blackman be members of the Committee;

That Alex Burghart be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Scott Mann.*)

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

Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendment 161B. If that Lords amendment is agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*. Dame Margaret Hodge has tabled two manuscript amendments to Lords amendment 161B, which have been selected by Mr Speaker. Papers will be distributed as soon as possible.

The deferred Division has now resumed in the No Lobby and injury time has been added, but Members do not have long.

After Clause 46

REGISTER OF MEMBERS: INFORMATION TO BE INCLUDED AND POWERS TO OBTAIN IT

2.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendments 23B and 23C.

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

Lords amendments 151B and 151C, Government motion to disagree, and Government motion to insist on amendment 151A.

Lords amendment 161B, Government motion to disagree, manuscript amendments (a) and (b), and Government motion to insist on amendment 161A.

Kevin Hollinrake: It is always a pleasure to speak with right hon. and hon. Members on the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which they will know is close to my heart and contains many vital measures for which I have long campaigned. The Bill will give us the powers we need to crack down on those who abuse our open economy, while ensuring that the vast majority of law-abiding businesses can grow and flourish.

I am grateful that both Houses have reached agreement on several issues, including those relating to the register of overseas entities and on removing the extension of the failure to prevent offence to money laundering. However, we are here today as agreement is still outstanding on a handful of remaining issues. I urge this House to accept the Government amendments, to settle those remaining topics and ensure that we can proceed to Royal Assent and implementation of these important reforms without delay.

I will now speak to those remaining topics. In the other place, the Government tabled two amendments on nominee shareholders—amendments 23B and 23C, in lieu of Commons amendment 23A, and in response to Lord Vaux's amendment 23 on this topic from Report stage in the other place.

The Government's amendments will allow the Secretary of State to make regulations to make further provision for the purpose of identifying persons with significant control in cases where shares are held by a nominee. This will allow the Government to work with relevant stakeholders to target the regulations in an effective and

focused way that does not impose disproportionate burdens. Members of the other place agreed with the Government's proposal and I trust that Members of this House will therefore agree with it today.

Lords amendments 151B and 151C would apply the exemption from the failure to prevent fraud offence to micro-entities only, rather than the Government's position of excluding all small and medium-sized enterprises. The Government appreciate that Lord Garnier has moved closer to the Government's position in agreeing to the principle of applying a threshold. However, our position remains that such an amendment would still incur significant costs to businesses. Reducing the exemption threshold to only micro-entities would increase one-off costs for businesses from around £500 million to £1.5 billion. The annual recurrent costs would increase from £60 million to over £192 million.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Where do those figures come from?

Kevin Hollinrake: We used very similar analysis to that used for the failure to prevent bribery and failure to prevent tax evasion offences. We have used a common methodology. I have not seen any figures that contradict our figures here, but in my view—having run a business and dealt with some of the failure to prevent bribery provisions—there is no doubt that there are significant costs. There may be external consultants to bring in, for example. Even if one is compliant, one might not know whether one is compliant, so there are definite associated costs to ensuring that reasonable efforts are made to prevent fraud, as it would be in this case.

Those costs would still be disproportionately shared by small business owners, when law enforcement can attribute and prosecute fraud more easily in these smaller organisations; and, as I have set out before, we must be mindful of the cumulative impact on SMEs across multiple Government requirements and regulations. In all the work I have done in the past from the Back Benches on failure to prevent, it was invariably the case that all cases involved larger businesses, not SMEs.

Large companies have the resources and specialist expertise to cope with additional burdens, whereas small businesses often have to dedicate a significant amount of time and resource, often paying for external professional advice to assess what new rules would mean for them. That is the case even where they subsequently assess that they already have adequate controls in place. That is time and resource that could otherwise have been used to grow and generate wealth for their businesses and jobs for their staff. The Government are extremely mindful of the pressures on companies of all sizes, including SMEs, and therefore do not feel it is appropriate to place this new unnecessary burden on over 450,000 businesses. I therefore urge Members of this House to support the Government motion to disagree with the Lords amendments, to ensure that we take a proportionate approach and do not impose unnecessary measures that would curb economic growth.

Turning to Lords amendment 161B, made by Lord Faulks, on cost protection for law enforcement in civil recovery cases, the Government remain of the view that the amendment would be a significant departure from the loser pays principle and therefore should not be rushed into without careful consideration. There is

[Kevin Hollinrake]

no clear evidence that such changes would help to achieve their intended aim of increasing the capacity of law enforcement to take on more civil recovery cases. There have been no adverse cost rulings against an enforcement authority carrying out this type of civil recovery in the past six years.

Costs are just one of many factors that determine whether law enforcement will take on a case. For example, the evidence available to pursue a case, particularly where evidence is required from overseas, often proves more vital to an operational decision. There are already a number of ways in which an enforcement agency's liability to legal costs can be protected under the civil procedure rules in England and Wales. For instance, rule 44.2 gives the court discretion as to the payment of costs by either party, including whether they are payable to another party, the amount, and when they are payable. In addition, a cost-capping order can be applied for under rule 3.19 to limit any future costs that a party may recover under a later costs order. If we are to introduce further legislation, we must consider what gap this is trying to fill. We should also consider civil liberties and property rights that underpin our economy. We will potentially be handing huge powers to the state, which could be held over an individual.

2.15 pm

The Government recognise the potential merits of reform, which is why we have added to the Bill a statutory commitment to review the payment of costs in civil recovery cases in England and Wales by enforcement authorities, and to publish a report on the findings before Parliament within 12 months. I therefore hope that Members of this House will agree with the Government's position today.

In conclusion, I encourage this House to agree with the Government's position on the outstanding Lords amendments. It is vital that we achieve Royal Assent without delay, so that we can proceed to implement the important reforms in the Bill as quickly as possible.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a great honour to speak for the Opposition on behalf of myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). I am also grateful to my right hon. Friends the Members for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) and many others across the House who have played such an important role in getting the Bill to this point.

By the Government's own definition:

"Economic crime refers to a broad category of activity involving money, finance or assets, the purpose of which is to unlawfully obtain a profit or advantage for the perpetrator or cause loss to others."

It poses a threat to our country's national security, our institutions and our economy, and causes serious harm to our citizens and society. Failure to act allows criminals to benefit from the proceeds of their crimes and to fund further criminality. In the most extreme cases, we have seen the funding of organised crime groups, terrorist activity, drug dealing and people trafficking.

Economic crime has many victims. For too long, the Government have turned a blind eye to corruption and dirty money, allowing Russian illicit finance to flood into our country and let Putin's cronies stash ill-gotten gains and even recycle the proceeds of crime into luxury properties across our cities. More than two thirds of English and Welsh properties held by foreign shell companies do not report their true owners. Research by the London School of Economics and Warwick University shows that the register of overseas entities is not fully effective. For 71% of those properties, essential information about their beneficial owners remains missing or publicly inaccessible, despite the register of overseas entities. It is not enough, and we need more action.

After the Grenfell Tower fire disaster, which claimed 72 lives, we have learned more about freeholders hiding behind offshore trusts and labyrinthine company structures to make it impossible for leaseholders to uncover who is responsible for replacing dangerous flammable cladding. Hundreds of thousands of people across the country are living in fear of Grenfell-style fires in unsafe blocks, while some owners hide abroad under company structures that help them to dodge paying for replacement cladding by setting up companies and trusts in overseas territories, lacking transparency. Our Government and our citizens must be able to access information about who owns what, and where responsibility lies.

This legislation is long overdue. As far back as 2018, the then Security Minister, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), was reported to have said that the BBC hit series "McMafia" was

"very close to the truth"

and condemned the

"impunity with which some of these people operate and the brutality of it".

He promised new powers to crack down on gangsters, criminals and corrupt members of the global elite, with the full force of Government to be used against them. While some steps have been taken, it took Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the Government to step up and introduce further legislation. The Government have delayed legislation for too long, and in that time money has been lost, economic crime has persisted, and the UK economy has once again lost out. Shamefully, our city—our capital—has taken on the reputation of cleaning up much of the world's dirty money.

The illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine has merely highlighted a shameful situation that campaigners have long decried. For years the UK has been awash with cash from kleptocrats and oppressive regimes. Transparency International UK has highlighted that £6.7 billion worth of property has been bought with the use of suspicious wealth. I recently visited Ukraine, where I witnessed the terrible impact of the Russian aggression on the civilian population, who are constantly living in fear of airstrikes. It is sickening to think that the people who are responsible for these atrocities today could be enjoying luxury apartments and houses in Belgravia and Mayfair, just a stone's throw from this House. However, it is not just the Kremlin; as *The Times* has reported, more than £200 million-worth of UK property is owned by the children of notorious rulers and their henchmen from failed states and autocracies around the world. The cost of economic crime is as much as £350 billion.

There is much to do. Law enforcement must be backed up; we must have the transparency that justice demands, and send a clear signal that there cannot be

dark corners where kleptocrats can stash their money. The Bill is a starting point, not an end point. We will be holding the Government's feet to the fire to ensure that this legislation makes an actual difference. Crucially, tackling economic crime requires support for key institutions such as the National Crime Agency, His Majesty's Revenue and the Customs Crown Prosecution Service. It is not enough just to introduce legislation; we need enforcement, and we need these institutions to be properly resourced and supported.

We have had the FinCEN files, the Panama papers and the Paradise papers, as well as numerous inquiries by Select Committees—including the Treasury Committee, on which I served for a number of years—but we have seen only incremental change, which is very frustrating for many Members on both sides of the House. Further action is needed to ensure transparency in respect of the ownership of UK property by overseas companies, and on compensation for victims of economic crime. There remain huge gaps. However, we welcome the changes that the Government have made in relation to strategic lawsuits against public participation, which have been worked on by a number of Members.

We support Lords amendments 151B and 151C, and welcome Lord Garnier's focus on the failure to prevent fraud in non-micro entities. We also support Lords amendment 161B, tabled by Lord Faulks. As he has explained, subsection (2) should state that the court should not normally make an order

"that any costs of proceedings relating to a case to which this section applies",

and so on. My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking has tabled an amendment to that Lords amendment, which has been accepted, and we accept the Lords amendment on that basis.

This Bill is almost over the line. It has been improved since Ministers first embarked on it. However, there is much more to be done. We hope we can ensure that enforcement takes place once it is on the statute book, so that dirty money can be exposed, illegal assets can be seized, and action is taken against those who are guilty of economic crime. We must not have further delay in pushing for transparency and action in tackling economic crime.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is an important Bill and there is much good in it, but I am afraid that a number of areas require further attention. Now is not the time for discursive speeches, but I regret to say that notwithstanding the good in the Bill, the Government have fallen into error in relation to the two Lords amendments that they seek to reverse.

Let me say first that while a measure to deal with "failure to prevent" offences is a good idea, this measure is too widely drawn. The Minister made a point about the burden of costs on small businesses, but the definition of a medium-sized business is significant: the risk is less to do with the size of a business than with where it does its business, and also its corporate structures. One of the important things we have learned from the United States is that "failure to prevent" offences are not simply about prosecuting, important though that is, but also about changing corporate behaviour. I did not hear a word about that in the Minister's speech, and I think it might be better to reflect on it again.

Lord Garnier tabled an amendment to compromise on micro-entities; perhaps we should think again about a third tier, consisting of medium-sized as opposed to small entities. That would not be unreasonable, given that many medium-sized entities do significant work abroad where there is some risk, and given that the costs are tax-deductible from profit. I urge the Government to think again, because having done so much good in the Bill, it will be a shame if we weaken its enforcement by widening the net too much.

As for the cost caps, when the Minister said that no prosecutions had been brought yet, he did not add that that was because of their chilling effect. People will not risk bringing prosecutions if their budgets are going to be eroded after the event by costs being awarded against them. Only yesterday, in the House of Commons, I had the pleasure of meeting Bill Browder, who has set out very clearly why that has been the case for a number of years. The Serious Fraud Office tried to bring a prosecution a few years ago and got its fingers burned, and there have been few prosecutions since then. This is about behaviours rather than outcomes.

I have to say—with apologies to the Minister, whom I like and respect—that the Government have taken an unduly restrictive and literalist approach to these matters. It would be far better to find compromises—to think again, go back to the Lords, and see whether there is somewhere between Lord Garnier's position and that of the Government. Perhaps that third tier of the medium-sized entity is a way around this. The Government are committed to a review of cost caps in 12 months' time, but, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) said the last time this came up, what is there to review? The evidence is there: cost caps are chilling. As the Minister will see if he reads the evidence given to the Cambridge economic crime summit—at which I had the pleasure of speaking last week—it is overwhelmingly clear that not a single one of the experts could understand the Government's position on this, so I ask them please to think again about it as well.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I strongly very much with what the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) said. Let us just agree with the Lords. Let us get on with this. Let us do this legislation, and do it properly.

Let me say first that it is important for us to have as much information as possible about those who own companies. It is clear from all the evidence that has come before us that the lack of such information causes people to find ways of hiding their money, and the UK has become a magnet for that. The Minister has suggested that there will be a significant cost to businesses, but businesses are already doing work on failure to prevent bribery. As Lord Garnier said on Monday, there is a clear read-across: it would be easy to add fraud to the current provisions. It would not be difficult, and it would bring about an economic benefit. The Minister also suggested that economic growth would be hampered in some way, but he himself has said that

"a corporate offence of failure to prevent economic crime and money laundering would reduce the amount of money that is illegally shifted out of the UK into foreign jurisdictions and increase the amount of tax that is paid."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2020; Vol. 672, c. 220.]

[Alison Thewliss]

Why does the Minister now disagree with himself? Why does he disagree with statements that he has made in the past? He knows that this is an important measure, and that this is an issue that we can deal with here today and it will be done. We will not have to come back to it, we will not have to keep debating it, and the Minister will be able to see that he has finished it off and done a good job.

On the issue of adverse costs, I agree with what Bill Browder said in his evidence to the Bill Committee. By not introducing such a measure, we are inhibiting law enforcement when it comes to economic crime. We know that those on the other side of the equation who want to hide their money have plenty of it to throw at the best lawyers and at the best accountants to make things look a particular way. If we are to be in this fight, we need to give the law enforcement agencies the resources that they require, and cost capping is a key element of that.

As I said the previous time we debated these matters, there is no need for a review. We need to get on with things. An election is coming, and we do not know when we will pass this way again. The Minister should accept the Lords amendments, and get on with the work.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I shall be brief. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) repeated her phrase of last week—and, indeed, we have passed this way again. I will resist the temptation to be too biblical today; I will simply reiterate to the my hon. Friend the Minister the points that I made last week. Lord Garnier has moved on the position in the Lords and offered an olive branch to the Government, in the sense that this is a different amendment. It rightly now affords what, in the opinion of many of us, will be greater protections for businesses. What is being ignored in this debate is the fact that businesses that take reasonable measures will not be the subject of a prosecution or investigation. Businesses that are not within this regime will not have that protection, so there is a cogent argument that failing to extend the “failure to prevent” offence to more businesses would leave them less well protected.

2.30 pm

I pray in aid the excellent speech by Lord Garnier, and in particular his reference to the guidance that was issued to the Bribery Act 2010, which states:

“To a certain extent the level of risk will be linked to the size of the organisation and the nature and complexity of its business, but size will not be the only determining factor. Some small organisations can face quite significant risks and will need more extensive procedures than their counterparts facing limited risks. However, small organisations are unlikely to need procedures that are as extensive as those of a large multi-national organisation.”

Herein lies the point. The Government at that point were taking the view that it was the extent of external risk that mattered, not the size of the enterprise, which begs the question: what on earth are we doing here? Why this change? Why this change from the policy of a Conservative Government, which was echoed in the tax evasion “failure to prevent” offence of 2017?

With the greatest of respect to my hon. Friend the Minister, whom I respect utterly—he knows that I share his passion for reform in this area—it is no good citing at the last minute figures that I simply do not accept have the veracity that he claims they do. A lot of the measures have already been taken by businesses dealing with tax evasion and bribery, and I say again that this is not fraud in general; this is fraud with an intent to benefit the entity—the company—which is a different beast altogether from fraud in general.

Secondly, on the cost cap, Lord Faulks was absolute right to ask: if not now, when? The reason that there have not been many cases is that there has definitely been a dampening effect on authorities bringing these civil proceedings. The intention in the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 was for a lot more use of part 5 in civil proceedings, but we have seen that vanishingly irregularly. We need more of those in order to burnish Britain’s reputation as a centre of clean money.

Kevin Hollinrake: I have listened carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend’s points. He said a few seconds ago that this would relate only to fraud that benefits the body concerned. Paragraph 1(b) of Lords amendment 151 also covers the body or an associate within that body providing services, so this is not just about the benefit to the organisation itself.

Sir Robert Buckland: I will take that qualification. I was seeking a short cut because time is brief. My hon. Friend is right to mention the agency point, but it is still a much narrower ambit of the offence than fraud in general. That is the point I would ask him to take away, because I am not persuaded. I think the amendments should remain within the body of the Bill as amended, and I will be voting accordingly.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am conscious that we must vote in five minutes to remain in order, so I will simply say that economic crime is a national security issue and should not be a partisan issue in this House. I urge the Minister to set aside the party political views that he is expressing and to go with the consensus that has been built, not just in the House of Commons but in the House of Lords and in the non-governmental organisation sector outside.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The right hon. Lady is right. It is not just the parties but the different sides of the natural arguments over authority, libertarianism and civil rights that are not divided. I am a strong defender of the right to be presumed innocent, but there needs to be a rebalancing in this area, where the criminals we are up against are very sophisticated and will use smaller companies to get around this if they need to.

Dame Margaret Hodge: In the interest of trying to get to the vote on time I will close my speech, but I urge all Members to please support the amendments proposed by Conservatives in the House of Lords, which are eminently sensible, rational and pragmatic.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am afraid that I am going to disappoint the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and speak

very strongly against Lords amendments 151B and 151C, and I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am surprised at Lord Garnier's lack of any conception of what it is like to run a small business and the cumulative impact of Government regulation thereupon. The limits that are drawn here will draw in all manner of businesses, not least some eminent barristers who will fall foul of some of the numbers. Indeed, the average town-centre or city-centre pub will be covered by these regulations, such is their level of turnover and employees. It is worrying that I am perhaps the only small-business voice here and that there are not enough small-business people in the House to point out the problems with this issue.

As the Minister has said, hundreds of thousands of businesses will be drawn into the net. This is not necessarily about the compliance cost. The kind of regulation that comes with the prospect of a criminal offence has a chilling effect on small businesses. I speak as somebody who has owned one for nearly 30 years. When the Revenue, health and safety or trading standards show up with some new regulation, a whole industry cranks into place to terrify the owners of small businesses into some kind of compliance. Then along come the consultants, the accountants, the webinars and the newsletters telling us what we do and do not have to do. All of this distracts us from what we should be doing, which is trying to create employment and wealth and paying tax to the rest of the country.

The other issue is that this misunderstands the dynamic of businesses of this size. If a business of this size is going to engage in fraud, it is very possible—more than likely, actually—that the principal will be the instigator of that fraud. The idea that, alongside all the other offences, they should take steps to prevent themselves from perpetrating fraud seems ridiculous. Added to those general difficulties are the specific ones presented by the Heath Robinson-type calculation that every business will have to undertake every month: adding together how many employees there are and how many are employed in each month in year P, then taking away the number you first thought of and dividing it by the number of months. We are all going to have to do this every single month to work out whether we are above the threshold or not. Should we have the steps? Should we not have the steps? It all seems particularly nonsensical.

We know that a vast amount of this fraud takes place in larger companies, and they have the capacity and the wherewithal to deal with it. If my hon. Friends really think that senior barristers, whose turnover and assets will be more than the threshold, should be taking and showing procedural steps to avoid conducting fraud—do not forget that they are sole practitioners—then I am afraid we have gone through the looking glass of what Conservative Members think is appropriate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Barry Gardiner.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): In the interest of moving to the vote, I will not speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In which case we come to the Minister, with the leave of the House.

Kevin Hollinrake: I welcome the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) to her place. We worked closely together on the Treasury Committee and it is a pleasure to work across the House with her today. I also pay tribute to her predecessor, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for her similar approach to the work we have done on this legislation. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions to this debate and their support for the Government's amendments made in the other place. I want to refer to a number of points that have been raised today.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, referred to the Government turning a blind eye to the issue of economic crime, but nothing could be further from the truth. Many of us have worked on this cross-party across the House from the Back Benches and now on the Front Benches, and this is the second piece of legislation we have brought forward on economic crime in the past 18 months. These are groundbreaking new measures. This Bill contains further reforms to the Register of Overseas Entities introduced in the previous legislation. Our legislation on strategic lawsuits against public participation—SLAPPs—is world leading, and we now have the “failure to prevent” offence, which I will speak to in a moment.

The hon. Lady also referred to the resources made available to our law enforcement agencies. We are continuing to invest in measures to tackle economic crime, and we have increased the budget of the National Crime Agency year on year since 2019. Its budget has now increased 40% from the figure in 2019 and stands at just over £700 million.

Together, the recent spending review settlement and private sector contributions through the new economic crime levy will provide £400 million of funding over the spending review period, and the levy is estimated to bring in £100 million per annum starting from this financial year, 2023-24. There will be a wide-ranging review by the end of 2027, providing transparency on how the levy is performing against its original purpose, including on how the money is spent. Existing efforts will move at pace to enhance and further drive forward the unit in what are inevitably complex and lengthy operations. In considering this legislation, we have often debated the extra resources that we are determined to deliver for Companies House and will pay for at least 400 more people. That is an incredibly important part of the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) stated very clearly that he feels the failure to prevent threshold is too widely drawn, and I understand his point. As I said in my opening speech, all the cases I have dealt with in this place—whether it be Lloyds HBOS Reading, HSBC, NatWest or others—have involved large organisations that turned a blind eye to fraud or let it happen on their watch. We believe it is right to strike a balance between the offence's crime prevention benefits and the burden placed on business. There is a balance between risk and regulation, and we want to make sure that the regulations do not put excessive costs on business.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) made similar points. He cast doubt on the figures I have in front of me on the costs of the burden on business, which we

[Kevin Hollinrake]

believe will be £1.5 billion of implementation costs and around £192 million of recurrent annual costs. I am happy to look at other costs and analyses, but those are the figures before me.

My right hon. and learned Friend makes an interesting point that the threshold will facilitate economic crime in certain companies, but the Lords amendment allows some companies to be outside the rules. I am not sure how he can draw a line to say that there will be economic crime in some companies and not in others. It is very difficult to draw a line, and we believe that drawing a line at larger companies is right.

Kit Malthouse: Lines matter. At a point in a business's evolution, as my hon. Friend will know from building his own business, it crosses a line. It is perfectly possible, under the definitions in Lords amendment 151C, that a company that satisfies the financial criterion will decide to go from nine employees to 10 or 11, and suddenly it crosses into this world of pain—the compliance people show up, and the company needs a whole new process and procedure that comes with employing that single extra person, on top of all the other employment and safety regulation it is having to deal with. Setting these thresholds at a level at which companies can absorb the step up in responsibility, and without a disproportionate amount of cost, seems critical. Does he agree?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do agree. I listened closely to my right hon. Friend's remarks. He said he might be the only small business owner currently in the Chamber, but he is talking to one. I have owned a business for 30 years, growing it from a small business to a larger one, and I absolutely agree that it is not just the legislation itself but its implementation and the requirement to implement prevention procedures. As he puts it, that would almost create a new industry of advisers to advise on what needs to be done, be they accountants or third parties. He is right to raise those concerns on behalf of small and medium-sized enterprises.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst asked about setting the threshold at a different level, the small company threshold rather than the current micro company threshold. The small company threshold is 50 employers, £10.2 million of turnover and a £5.1 million balance sheet, according to Companies House, whereas we think a 250-employee threshold would be more appropriate. That is where we differ, but I am happy to continue that conversation.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I want to ask a question that I do not think was addressed last time we debated Lords amendments, and that I do not think the Government have addressed today. What are the implications if there is an explicit threshold? What further thought have the Government given to the implications of putting in a threshold? Are they satisfied that some of the concerns raised by Opposition Members and Conservative Back Benchers have been taken into account?

2.45 pm

Kevin Hollinrake: We are very clear that we believe we have the right threshold. Larger companies clearly have the capacity and the human resources and risk compliance departments to mitigate these kinds of risks, whereas

small and medium-sized enterprises are rightly much more focused on driving their business forward, which is very important to the economic health of our country. I think we have it right. My hon. Friend made a similar point in our previous debate on this issue, and he makes it very strongly. The fact that both he and my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) have made that point today counterbalances some of the arguments on the other side for extending the threshold further.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke about my previous comments. I think I have been pretty consistent in everything I have said in the House, unless she can point to anything different I have said from the Back Benches—[*Interruption.*] The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), laughs, but I have always been a champion of the “failure to prevent” offence. If Members look back to the original Bill, which I think was 260 pages long—it is now nearly 400 pages long—they will see that I have been very keen to make sure that we listen to hon. Members on things like the “failure to prevent” offence and the identification doctrine, which both now feature in the Bill. All the cases I dealt with on the Back Benches, and indeed the information I have seen as a Minister, show that the kind of fraud the law enforcement agencies have not been able to prosecute is happening in larger companies, not smaller companies.

We believe that these circumstances are different from unexplained wealth orders, for which we obviously put cost-capping measures in place. Of course, unexplained wealth orders are not a process for taking somebody's assets from them; they are a process for freezing assets. Lords amendment 161B is entirely different. In my view, there is definitely a civil liberties issue in terms of the power of the state versus the power of the individual. This measure potentially delivers an imbalance of power between the state and the individual. I would be keen to have a conversation with the very learned Members in the Chamber, but they must understand that the state is powerful and well resourced compared with the individual. Obviously there are some individuals who are very well resourced, but we still operate on the presumption of innocence in this country, and we have to be very careful. That is why we want a review to look into this and report back to Parliament within 12 months.

We have communicated with the National Crime Agency to ask for evidence on where it feels these measures are needed. All law enforcement agencies want more power and more provision, of course, but I have seen no clear, significant evidence from the enforcement agencies that cost-capping orders would be needed in this situation.

I, too, have spoken to Bill Browder, and I have spoken to officials about whether this measure is needed in the UK regime. Members will be aware that Mr Browder principally looks at the parallels with the US situation, where adverse costs do not apply across the system. Members have talked about the chilling effect of such provisions, but there is potentially a chilling effect on the other side of the equation.

Yesterday I met a barrister who defends people against such actions, and he was very concerned about the imbalance of power that would result. I have not seen any significant evidence, and I am very interested in the evidence that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley

and Chislehurst gave to the Cambridge crime symposium, at which I have spoken in the past, on whether this is needed. However, I am not aware of anything the Justice Committee or the Law Commission has done in this area. It is important that we look at that kind of evidence before we implement these kinds of measures.

The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) accuses me of being party political. I am surprised she takes that view. I have worked on a cross-party basis from the Back Benches and, as she knows, I do the same from the Front Bench, and I will continue to do so to make sure that we get this legislation right.

In conclusion, throughout the passage of the Bill, the Government have worked hard to get the balance right between tackling economic crime and ensuring that the UK remains a place where law-abiding businesses can flourish without unnecessary burdens. The motions tabled by the Government today achieve that balanced and proportionate approach, and I therefore urge Members on both sides of the House to support them.

Lords amendments 23B and 23C agreed to.

After Clause 180

FAILURE TO PREVENT FRAUD

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their Amendments 151B and 151C and insists on its Amendment 151A.—
(*Kevin Hollinrake.*)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Will the Serjeant at Arms investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby?

The House having divided: Ayes 276, Noes 210.

Division No. 327]

[2.51 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Braverman, rh Suella
Afriyie, Adam	Brereton, Jack
Aiken, Nickie	Britcliffe, Sara
Aldous, Peter	Browne, Anthony
Anderson, Lee	Bruce, Fiona
Anderson, Stuart	Buchan, Felicity
Ansell, Caroline	Burghart, Alex
Argar, rh Edward	Butler, Rob
Atherton, Sarah	Cairns, rh Alun
Atkins, Victoria	Campbell, Mr Gregory
Bacon, Gareth	Carter, Andy
Bacon, Mr Richard	Cash, Sir William
Bailey, Shaun	Cates, Miriam
Baillie, Siobhan	Caulfield, Maria
Baker, Duncan	Chalk, rh Alex
Baldwin, Harriett	Churchill, Jo
Baynes, Simon	Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Benton, Scott	Clarke, Theo
Beresford, Sir Paul	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Bhatti, Saqib	Colburn, Elliot
Blackman, Bob	Collins, Damian
Blunt, Crispin	Costa, Alberto
Bone, Mr Peter	Coutinho, rh Claire
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Bowie, Andrew	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bradley, Ben	Crosbie, Virginia
Bradley, rh Karen	Daly, James
Brady, Sir Graham	Davies, Dr James

Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, rh Michelle (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
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
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, Paul
Hudson, Dr Neil

Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackrory, Cherylyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Mills, Nigel
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Patel, rh Priti

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
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Mr Rob
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 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
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob

Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 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
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Andrew Stephenson and
Robert Langan

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Baron, Mr John
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian

Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
 cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast
 by Chris Elmore*)
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Debbonaire, Thangam

Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
 by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hollern, Kate
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
 cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia

Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Noes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Christian Wakeford

Question accordingly agreed to.

3.8 pm

More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords message, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 4 September.)

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

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The inexplicable delay in counting votes has now risked denying the House a vote on ensuring that this Bill to tackle economic crime is as strong as it could be. Will you therefore advise the House on what action we can now take to ensure that in the debates that lie ahead we can come back to this question and make sure we have the right provisions in place in statute and that this country is no longer a soft touch for economic crime?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he knows, we are now going to move on to the motion on amendment 161B, and if that is annulled there will be other opportunities, I am sure.

After Clause 187

CIVIL RECOVERY: COSTS OF PROCEEDINGS

Resolved,

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their amendment 161B in lieu of Commons amendment 161A and insists on amendment 161A in lieu.—(*Kevin Hollinrake.*)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendments 151B, 151C and 161B.

That Kevin Hollinrake, Scott Mann, James Sunderland, Jane Stevenson, Rushanara Ali, Taiwo Owatemi and Alison Thewliss be members of the Committee;

That Kevin Hollinrake be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Kevin Hollinrake.*)

Question agreed to.

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

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I seek your guidance about how I properly place on the record a reference to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in the context of my speech in the debate about the Lords message on the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. and learned Member for his point of order. He has recognised that he made an omission and he has corrected it at the earliest opportunity. I thank him for doing so.

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

3.11 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): I beg to move,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 6 September, be approved.

Before getting into the detail of the order, I take this opportunity to apologise to the House and to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the fact that news of my decision, which we are here to debate, became public before the order was laid.

I am grateful to hon. Members for their consideration of the order, which will see the Wagner Group, a truly brutal organisation, proscribed. Having just met Ukrainian Interior Minister Klymenko, I am proud to reiterate the United Kingdom's commitment to Ukraine, as it resists and defeats Putin's war of aggression.

Some 78 terrorist organisations are currently proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000. Proscription is not only a powerful tool for degrading terrorist organisations; it sends a strong message about the UK's commitment to tackling terrorist activity globally.

Wagner Group are terrorists, plain and simple. I therefore propose amending schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000 by adding Wagner Group, also referred to as the Wagner Network, to the list of proscribed organisations. In referring to Wagner Group, the order encompasses all Wagner's activities across the globe.

For an organisation to be proscribed, I as the Home Secretary must reasonably believe that it is currently involved in terrorism, as set out in section 3 of the 2000 Act. If the statutory test is met, I must then consider the proportionality of proscription and decide whether to exercise my discretion.

Proscription is a powerful tool with severe penalties. It criminalises being a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation and wearing articles of a proscribed organisation in a way that arouses suspicion. Penalties are a maximum of 14 years in prison and/or an unlimited fine. Proscription also supports other disruptive activity, such as immigration disruptions and terrorist financing offences. The resources of a proscribed organisation are terrorist property and therefore liable to be seized.

The order builds on sanctions that are already in place against Wagner Group. Terrorist financing incurs criminal rather than civil penalties, which allow the Government ultimately to forfeit terrorist property, rather than just freezing an individual's assets. I am supported in my decision making by the cross-Government proscription review group, and a decision to proscribe is taken only after great care and consideration, given its wide-ranging impact. It must be approved by both Houses.

A great deal of carnage and blame can be laid at the feet of Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, which emerged following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and Putin's first illegal invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. Wagner have acted as a proxy military force on behalf of the Russian state, operating in a range of theatres including Ukraine, Syria, Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, Mozambique and Mali. They have pursued Russia's foreign policy objectives and those of other Governments who have contracted their services.

In the hours following Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, Wagner Group were reportedly tasked with assassinating President Zelensky. They failed in that task, thanks to the heroism and bravery of the Ukrainian security forces. Wagner Group describe themselves in heroic terms, even suggesting, revoltingly, that they are saviours of Africa. That private military companies remain illegal under Russian law has never particularly concerned Putin.

Putin can distort the truth to suit himself all he likes, but Wagner Group are terrorists. Wherever they go, instability, misery and violence follow. With the House's consent, Wagner Group will therefore be proscribed. Having carefully considered all the evidence, including advice from the cross-Government proscription review group, I have decided that there is sufficient evidence to reasonably believe that Wagner Group are concerned in terrorism and that proscription is proportionate.

Although I am unable to comment on specific intelligence, I can provide the House with a summary of Wagner Group's activities, which supports the decision. Wagner Group commit and participate in terrorism. That is based on evidence of their use of serious violence against Ukrainian armed forces and civilians to advance Russia's political cause.

Wagner Group played a central role in combat operations against Ukrainian armed forces to seize the city of Popasna in May 2022 and during the assault on Bakhmut, which was largely occupied by Russian forces this year. The horrific assault on Bakhmut resulted in the virtual destruction of a city that was once home to 70,000 people. Those are 70,000 innocent civilians whose homes happened to be in the way of Putin's neo-imperial ambitions.

Wagner employed the same inhumane and senseless tactics that Russian forces had previously used in Chechnya, killing innocent civilians and destroying an entire city in the process. They barely showed any more concern for the lives of their own side. Defence intelligence has assessed that up to 20,000 convicts, recruited directly from Russian prisons on the promise of a pardon and early release, were killed within a few months of the attack on Bakhmut. Wagner's relentless bombardment of Bakhmut was one of the bloodiest episodes in modern military history.

Hon. Members will also be aware of multiple reports that allege unbelievable brutality by Wagner Group commanders against their own troops who retreat, desert or otherwise refuse to carry out their leaders' murderous orders. The most notorious of those events, the killing of a purported deserter, who was murdered by a sledgehammer blow to the head, has even been glorified by Wagner's leaders and Russian ultra-nationalists. That macabre culture and brutality are indicative of an organisation that is more than just a private military company. There is a reason for that: it is a terrorist organisation.

Ukrainian prosecutors have accused Wagner Group fighters of war crimes near Kyiv. The tortured bodies of civilians were found with their hands tied behind their backs in the village of Motyzhyn. I visited Ukraine last year in my role as Attorney General and I saw at first hand those prosecutors' unrelenting commitment to seeking justice. We stand with Ukraine in that mission.

Wagner Group have also been implicated in serious acts of violence in several countries in Africa. A UN report published in May this year implicated Wagner in

the massacre of at least 500 people in the central Malian town of Moura in March 2022, including summary executions, as well as rape and torture. In June 2021, a panel of experts convened by the UN Security Council detailed atrocities in the Central African Republic, including excessive use of force, indiscriminate killings, the occupation of schools and looting on a large scale, including of humanitarian organisations.

Despite their mutiny in June of this year and the reported death of their leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, last month, Wagner remain a violent and destructive organisation. Proscription sends a strong message of the UK's commitment to tackle terrorist activity and builds on our existing cross-Government work to counter Wagner's destabilising activities. Their leadership's recent feud with senior Russian military figures is a predictable consequence of Putin's disastrous decision to invade Ukraine, but it is fundamentally a distraction from the fact that Wagner continue to commit violent acts around the world. While Putin's regime wavers over what to do with the monster that it created, Wagner's destabilising activities only continue to serve the Kremlin's political goals.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am listening carefully to what the Home Secretary is saying about the timeline for all this. Although I certainly welcome this proscription, the frustration is that it did not happen sooner. Although she cannot go into the detail of the intelligence that she has heard, could she perhaps expand on why it has taken this long, because much of what she has said refers to 2021 and early 2022. Why did we not do this sooner?

Suella Braverman: The decision has not been taken in isolation; it builds on a strong response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Wagner's wider destabilising activity, including extensive sanctions. Decisions on whether and when to proscribe a particular organisation are taken after extensive consideration and in the light of a full assessment of the available information. Significant events have taken place recently, including the mutiny in June, the alleged death of the core Wagner Group leadership in August, and it is right that we consider the impact of those key events when taking the decision.

The real fact remains that this group present a serious risk to security around the world, and their increasing activities in Ukraine affect European stability and our security, which is why the case for action is now stronger than ever. Wagner are vulnerable. A leadership vacuum and questions about their future provide a unique opportunity to truly disrupt their operations and the threat they pose. That is why this House must proscribe Wagner now.

This decision comes after public calls from President Zelensky for international allies to take action and list Wagner as a terrorist organisation. In doing so, we stand alongside our allies in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and France, whose Parliaments have all called for Wagner Group to be labelled as a terrorist organisation on the EU's list of terrorist groups. We continue to work in close co-ordination with the US, which designated Wagner under its transnational criminal organisation sanctions programme earlier this year.

In formally proscribing, we will be leading the international effort by taking concrete legal action against Wagner. I urge our allies to follow suit. This decision

demonstrates that the UK will maintain its unwavering support for Ukraine, in co-ordination with our allies. It shows that we stand with the people of Ukraine against Russia's aggression.

To conclude, wherever Wagner operate, they have a catastrophic effect on communities, worsening conflicts and damaging the reputations of countries that host them. Wagner may be at their most vulnerable and Russia's military leaders may be grappling to regain control of the organisation, but the brutal methods they have employed will undoubtedly remain a tool of the Russian state. Let there be no misunderstanding: in whatever form Wagner take, we and our allies will pursue them. We will expose them and we will disrupt them. Wagner are a terrorist organisation and we must not be afraid of saying so. We will hold Russia to account for its use of these malign groups—these international gangsters—and the destruction they bring around the world. We will continue to support Ukraine in the face of Russia's aggression, and we will confront and challenge terrorism however and wherever it occurs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Before we proceed, I must now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Windsor Framework (Enforcement etc.) Regulations 2023. The Ayes were 434 and the Noes were 10, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

3.25 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her remarks. I wish to begin by paying tribute to the exceptional men and women who serve in our intelligence and security services, in Government and in our police, as they all work tirelessly to keep our country safe. Two days on from the anniversary of 9/11, I also wish to remember the lives lost and all those affected by the tragic events of 2001, and to reaffirm Labour's commitment to stand against the evils of terrorism.

As the Home Secretary has laid out, the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2023 amends the list of proscribed organisations in schedule 2 to the Act by adding Wagner Group as a new entry. What the Government are proposing today will make it a criminal offence to belong to Wagner Group, to engage in activities, such as attending meetings, to promote support for the group, or to publicly display their logo, putting the group on a par with organisations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. It also enables Wagner assets to be categorised as terrorist property and seized. It is a motion that we on these Opposition Benches strongly support.

Proscribing Wagner Group is a necessary step to address the threat that they pose. It is an action for which we on the Labour Benches have been calling for some time—the shadow Home Secretary called for this back in February. The United States designated Wagner a transnational criminal organisation nine months ago. France designated Wagner as a terrorist entity back in May. Although I am very conscious of the complexities around this type of proscription—perhaps the June coup was a further complicating factor—will the Home Secretary reflect on whether lessons could be learned

[Dan Jarvis]

with regard to acting sooner? This goes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) a moment ago. I ask that question, mindful of the long-standing support for proscription from Members right across this House, including the former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The shadow Home Secretary has consistently raised the challenges involved in using counter-terror legislation to proscribe state-sponsored organisations such as Wagner. We have long called for the introduction of a bespoke proscribing mechanism designed specifically to address state-sponsored threats. The Government's Contest update published in July stated:

"The most pressing national security priority is now the threat from Russia to European security."

Yet the strategy does not set out a comprehensive response to the national security threats posed by states and state-sponsored actors. I would therefore be grateful if the Home Secretary outlined what robust action the Government are taking to tackle those threats.

There are many people and organisations in the world that we could call a force for good. Wagner are at the opposite end of that spectrum. They are a force for evil wherever they are. Their track record is one of violence, theft and murder, from Ukraine to Syria, and from Mali to Mozambique. They helped to spearhead the takeover of Crimea in 2014 and has carried out appalling war crimes since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. They have been implicated in massacres of civilians and increasing abuses by security forces in multiple other countries. In places such as the Central African Republic they have offered a business model essentially trading violence for natural resources, turbocharging the abusive extraction of minerals that has driven so much conflict and corruption in weak states around the world.

As of July, the Government had sanctioned fewer than a quarter of the 81 individuals and entities the Foreign Affairs Committee recently identified as being linked to Wagner. I ask the Home Secretary to give an assurance that the Government are looking closely at those individuals and working to ensure that, where possible, sanctions are applied. As the Committee also pointed out in its excellent report, Wagner are

"a sprawling, decentralised network of individuals and commercial entities...for which the 'membership' is not always clear."

The presumed assassination of Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin may hasten the break-up of the organisation, but there is little doubt that their work could continue under different names, by the same or different individuals. Will the Home Secretary confirm that, working with her colleagues across Government, steps are being taken to ensure that the UK is ready to respond to such a scenario?

Of course, the threat posed by Wagner is multiplied exponentially because of their links to the Kremlin. It fits neatly within a pattern of crime, corruption and kleptocracy that poses a much wider danger. Russian information and election subversion operations, which Wagner supported and which have targeted the UK, among other countries, will not go away, not least because other countries are imitating them, but by proscribing the group we demonstrate an important

commitment towards protecting our democratic values. I completely understand that the Home Secretary will be limited in what she can say, but given the activities of Wagner it would be helpful were she able to say something about the progress that the defending democracy taskforce is making.

We also need to consider ways in which the UK may itself be facilitating the profits of Wagner's backers and those like them. For example, research by Transparency International UK suggests that since 2016, £1.5 billion-worth of UK property was bought by Russians accused of corruption or with links to the Kremlin. More than half of that is held through companies in Britain's overseas territories and Crown dependencies. More than 2,000 companies registered in those areas were used in 48 Russian money laundering and corruption cases, involving more than £82 billion of illicit funds. What is the betting that some of those beneficiaries are linked to Wagner? What is the harm to our security being done even by those who are not?

I know that the Home Secretary will not consider this proscription as job done, and will see it as just an important further step towards disrupting and defeating Wagner's murderous terrorist activities. While I am conscious that she will be limited in what she is able to say, I would be grateful if she could say something about what steps the Government are taking to strengthen financial transparency and accountability in the UK, in our dependencies and overseas.

The Labour party strongly supports the motion. We will work constructively to stand against the evils of terrorism, and I look forward to hearing from the Home Secretary on the questions that I have put to her.

3.33 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I completely support my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary in proscribing Wagner Group. As she said, they are instrumental in Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine. They are almost certainly complicit in war crimes of the sort that we have seen described throughout this horrific conflict, and it is right that we support our allies in Ukraine, in particular President Zelensky.

My purpose in rising in this debate is to question the logic of proscribing Wagner Group today and the Government's sense of priorities in that we are not doing so alongside, if not linked to, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran. I do so by reference to the tests set out for the proscription of Wagner Group in the Government's explanatory notes to this motion. The first test is

"the nature and scale of the organisation's activities".

My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has set out how Wagner meet that test, but the IRGC is answerable directly to the supreme leader in Iran, so it has a direct link with the Iranian state's malignant activities, including its support of the war in Ukraine. The IRGC is directly involved in the brutal oppression of the Iranian people, the suppression of human rights, the disappearances, the torture and the executions—so why not proscribe it?

The second test set out by the Government for proscribing an organisation is

"the specific threat that it poses to the UK".

I hope my right hon. and learned Friend may say a little bit more, as far as she is able, about that specific threat, but it is clear in the case of the IRGC that MI5 has acknowledged the real threat from Iran's "aggressive intelligence services" towards the United Kingdom. The IRGC clearly passes that test.

The third test for an organisation is "the specific threat that it poses to British nationals overseas". Given the scale of the activities that Wagner Group are involved in, they would clearly pass that test. However, the IRGC is an indispensable part of the chain of hostage taking that has a direct impact on the safety of UK nationals and particularly UK dual nationals abroad, including in Iran. Why are we not seeing that linkage here?

The fourth test is "the extent of the organisation's presence in the UK". I am not quite clear about the extent of Wagner's presence in the UK—I can understand its impact on the UK, but I do not quite grasp its presence in the UK. However, I am very clear about Iran's presence here and the IRGC's role in using its propaganda base to incite extremism in the UK.

The fifth test is "the need to support international partners in the fight against terrorism."

My right hon. and learned Friend has quite rightly set out a number of countries that are our partners in the international community and should be getting our support in the fight against Wagner Group and their interests in their own countries. However, we know that the IRGC is the export bureau for terrorism in the region, to its neighbours and beyond. We have had so many examples, from Hezbollah onwards.

Then we come to the linkage. The IRGC in Iran has huge control over the means of production in that country. It is inconceivable that it was not intricately involved in the production of the drones that Iran sent to Russia for the oppression of the Ukrainian people. If war crimes have been carried out by Russia, the means of carrying out those crimes has at least part of its origin in Tehran with the IRGC. It is essential that we tackle that as quickly as we can.

No one will disagree that Wagner is an evil, dangerous and malign grouping, but I would argue that they are no worse than the IRGC, which is not being proscribed by the Government. Indeed, the Prime Minister, in seeking the leadership of the Conservative party, was very supportive of the concept of proscribing the IRGC, so why this inactivity? I understand that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will have to have discussions and there will be a strong input from the Foreign Office in this. She has been a tough and robust Home Secretary, something that many of us greatly appreciate, but we are well behind the curve compared with the United States when it comes to the IRGC, and our failure to tackle what is a malign influence in the world today is damaging Britain's reputation in the world beyond.

I ask my right hon. and learned Friend to consult urgently with the rest of Government to see whether we should not be coming back to this Chamber as quickly as possible and adding the IRGC to the groups that this country will rightly proscribe because of their impact on this country, our citizens, the safety of countries beyond, our allies and international law itself.

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

3.39 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to follow the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), and I agree entirely with what he said. Many people in this House have for some time been calling for the proscription of the IRGC. I have constituents who are also concerned about the reach of the IRGC and are scared for their own safety, even in this country. It would be useful if the Home Secretary addressed the delay in the proscription in her summing up.

Wagner Group are an appalling organisation. The strength of the atrocities that that murderous organisation have been carrying out has been well documented and well known for years at the highest levels of the British Government. The explanatory memorandum to the order sets out clearly the group's activities, as a proxy military force, on behalf of the Russian state. It states:

"Founded in 2014, Wagner Group has operated in a range of theatres, including Ukraine, Syria, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, Mozambique, and Mali...in pursuit of Russia's foreign policy objectives and the objectives of host Governments who have contracted Wagner's services."

So why has it taken until 2023, a hot war on European soil and a co-ordinated plane crash killing the group's leader for this order to come before the House? That is quite astonishing. A catalogue of chaos and destruction has come before today, and as much as we support the measure, it feels to me and many others that the Government have taken far too long to raise the designation.

We in the SNP are disgusted that in October 2021, before Putin's invasion, the Treasury—then under the control of the now Prime Minister—allowed Yevgeny Prigozhin to circumvent sanctions and launch a targeted attack on a British journalist. We very much want to see action against Wagner Group and all those associated with them—that is a significant point.

In the press release accompanying this announcement, the Minister for Security, the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), said:

"Proscribing Wagner sends a clear message that the UK will not tolerate Russia's proxies and their barbaric actions in Ukraine, and condemns Wagner's campaign of corruption and bloodshed on the African continent, which has been repeatedly linked to human rights violations."

That is all fine and well, but why was this not done sooner? I would like answers from the Home Secretary on that. Acting sooner may have stemmed some of that bloodshed and some of what has happened, and may have sent a clearer message more widely at a much earlier stage. If the organisation was indeed founded in 2014, that means that we have now been waiting nine years for this measure, and a lot of destruction has passed since.

Designating Wagner Group for proscription is a response to repeated requests from Ukraine's President Zelensky, who has called for the group to be treated as a terrorist organisation. Can the Home Secretary tell us when he first made that request of the Government, and what response has been given to him? Clearly, we support President Zelensky and want him to succeed in his endeavours, but it would be useful to know the timeline and when the Government responded to that request.

[Alison Thewliss]

On the wider situation, organisations that work for Wagner Group depend on the flow of funds that often wash up through bank accounts in the United Kingdom. We know about the UK's reputation as a hub for laundering dirty money. Prior to this debate, the House dealt with the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which could do more still to ensure that we know who owns and benefits from various types of financial structures. Is the Home Secretary satisfied that that legislation will go far enough to prevent the sons, daughters, relatives and associates of Wagner Group members from moving money through accounts here in the UK? We should do everything we can, in light of Prigozhin's actions to evade UK sanctions, to shut down Wagner Group wherever they might sprout up.

The Foreign Affairs Committee has branded the UK Government's efforts to deter Wagner Group "underwhelming in the extreme" and recommends that the Conservative party revive at the earliest opportunity the 2019 manifesto commitment to spending 0.7% of the UK's gross national income on official development assistance. Russia, and China to an extent, are exploiting and seeking to put their influence into the gap left by UK development assistance. As we pull back from that influence that we have had in the world, we do not want countries to be turning to states such as Russia, and to groups such as Wagner that work on their behalf. Will the Home Secretary comment on what more can be done to ensure that we counter such nefarious influence? Once states go down that road, it can be very difficult to come back, and we know from countries in Africa that the result of that will also end up on the Home Secretary's desk in the form of people seeking asylum in this country, fleeing from wars that we could have done more to prevent had we clamped down and had we provided aid at a different stage. All of this is interconnected, and all of it comes through her Department.

The Foreign Affairs Committee has also commented that it has received no evidence of any serious effort by the UK Government to track Wagner Network's activities in countries other than Ukraine. That is perhaps not directly within the Home Secretary's remit, but could she comment a wee bit further on the tracking of the Wagner Group's activities—on how closely the UK state is monitoring those activities to ensure we understand where they are now and, crucially, where they might be going next? They appear to have a very nimble organisation that can change and evolve, so we need to be mindful that although Prigozhin is gone, there are plenty of people to replace him within that organisation. What they are doing is clearly lucrative, so we need to have that intelligence and analysis of their network to make sure we are keeping a close eye on what happens next, and what more the UK state can do to intervene in it.

Can the Home Secretary talk a bit more about the further sanctions on civilian enablers and frontmen, which I touched on a little when we were debating the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill? There are people in this country, I am certain, who are facilitating a lot of the movement of finance. We have the opportunity to go further than is proposed in the order to look at those frontmen and those who give the organisation its corporate face. Will the UK Government have a regular mechanism for co-ordinating with allies

about sanctions—prioritising travel bans, for example—to make sure that those actors involved in Wagner do not get to move around? Is the Magnitsky sanctions list also co-ordinated with today's action, and will more sanctions on that list follow? I know that it is not the done thing to say who is going to be sanctioned, but it would be good to get some reassurance that that list is continually under review.

Finally, it would also be useful to know what further mechanisms there are for oversight in this House. We need to be keeping a closer eye on this issue: it should not have taken nine years to get to where we are today. What more will be done to make sure that this is an effective mechanism—that we are keeping a very close eye on this organisation and its operatives, and doing everything we can as a good ally to Ukraine to make sure that all our actions are co-ordinated, working with other allies to make sure everything that can possibly be done to shut down this evil terrorist organisation is done, and done quickly?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.47 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Naturally, I and the Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's decision to proscribe Wagner mercenary group as a terrorist organisation, but I hope the Home Secretary hears some of the frustration about how long it has taken. When President Zelensky first addressed the House of Commons on 9 March 2022, just 13 days after Russia's invasion—I am sure many Members were there; it was profoundly moving—his ask of us was that we recognise Russia as a terrorist state. The next day, our party agreed with him publicly, and furthermore said that we must proscribe Wagner Group. It has been 551 days since the illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, and the Government only decided last week to finally get their act together. I am sorry, but that is far, far too late.

The proscription comes after the organisation's infamous leader had his plane mysteriously blown out of the sky, and Wagner Group's power is now waning. This is a classic case of closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. Yes, Wagner Group are weaker now, but what could we have prevented—what could we have stopped them from doing—had we started this process earlier? This barbarous group have always been terrorists: they were terrorists a year ago, and they were terrorists nine years ago. We did not need more information; we just needed to get on with it.

As has been described, Wagner Group have been wreaking havoc and destruction not just in Ukraine, but all over—in Syria, Mali, the Central African Republic, Sudan and Libya. The Government have repeatedly informed the House of what steps they are taking to provide support to Ukrainians fighting Russian forces and Wagner Group, but I ask the Government to update us on what support we are providing our partners in Africa facing these same bloodthirsty mercenaries. We have taken too long in weakening them, and we have allowed them to take root. We understand that Russia is now falling in behind and trying to recoup some of these contracts, but I am afraid to say that it should not have got to this point.

On sanctions, which were mentioned by the Home Secretary, my colleagues in the House of Lords have recently raised the issue of joint ventures that operate between the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Wagner Group and countries such as Sudan. I join my colleagues in the Lords in hoping that the Government might update money laundering regulations with haste to ensure that these loopholes are closed, because we know these loopholes exist.

I would like to remind the House of a debate we had in January, when we debated the openDemocracy report that exposed how the Government assisted—assisted—Yevgeny Prigozhin in evading sanctions to launch a legal attack on a British journalist. Special licences issued in 2021 by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, now the Prime Minister, enabled this move, despite sanctions that had been imposed in 2020 to prevent such dealings with Prigozhin. As I said at the time, that one of the most notorious criminals in the world—and now a UK proscribed terrorist, albeit dead—might have evaded sanctions to sue a British journalist should not have happened, and we still need answers about what happened.

The other thing that remains an unanswered question—again, this is linked—is the issue of golden visas, which lies squarely in the Department of the Home Secretary. Yes, the Government ceased the use of tier 1 investment visas, but time and again they have refused to publish the full review. After five years, they released a short statement about the review, but never the review itself. I am sorry to say that this just creates suspicion. This House needs to know to what extent the Government let Kremlin-linked oligarchs treat this country as their playground, and if it is too sensitive for us to see here, and I accept it might well be, release it to the Intelligence and Security Committee, for example. Let it have the transparency it needs, because if the Government have nothing to hide, then they have nothing to fear.

Finally, I am glad that the Government have finally seen the error of their ways regarding the timeline to proscribe Wagner, but they now must learn this lesson and not wait. In particular, they must not make the same mistake with Iran, and I echo the points made by Members earlier. The Home Secretary will know that 16 September marks the one-year anniversary of the killing of Mahsa Amini in Iran, and time and again across this House we have repeatedly called for the proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran. The Home Secretary has warmed up her proscription muscles, and I would urge her to use them again, perhaps even this week to mark that tragic anniversary.

3.53 pm

Suella Braverman: I am grateful to all who have contributed to this debate. Many important issues have been raised, and I am encouraged by the supportive atmosphere in which the discussion has taken place. We all agree that Wagner Group are terrorists plain and simple, and I am confident that this House recognises, as the British people recognise, that we have a moral responsibility to act. We must and we will confront terrorism wherever and however it occurs, and that is why we are taking this action.

Hon. Members have all made very powerful points, and let me attempt to take them in some kind of logical order. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley

Central (Dan Jarvis), raised the issue of comparisons with other international allies. I gently say that we have been working intensively to build international consensus, but also to work closely in a cohesive way with our allies.

The US designation to which the hon. Gentleman refers is equivalent to the sanctions that the UK imposed in March last year. It was not equivalent to our proscription power that we are taking right now. The French Parliament supported a non-binding resolution to call Wagner terrorists, but it has not formally proscribed. That is why I emphasised that we are taking a leadership role in formally proscribing Wagner as a terrorist organisation. I will continue to work with international partners to create a broader consensus.

Layla Moran: I agree with everything that the Home Secretary has said. We are taking a lead, and that is brilliant. Has she had specific conversations on this matter with her counterparts and also with the EU? The EU can also proscribe and designate Wagner as a terrorist organisation, which itself has financial implications. Will she bring that up with the European Union, too?

Suella Braverman: The threat posed by terrorist organisations, including Wagner Group, has been on the agenda in many of my dialogues with international partners because of its wholesale destructive nature and the enormity of the threat that it poses.

The shadow Minister also asked about our broader strategy on Russia and our approach to state threats. What I turn to first is our integrated review, which sets out in the most pressing terms that the most urgent national security and foreign policy priority in the short to medium term is to address the threat posed by Russia to European security. We will continue to work with our allies and partners to defend the rules-based international order, and we stand united in condemning Russia's reprehensible actions, which are an egregious violation of international law and the UN charter.

When the integrated review was published, it made clear that we are dealing head-on with the threat posed by Russia. We take it extremely seriously, and we have responded to it. We have called out Russian aggression wherever it occurs. The National Security Act 2023—a landmark piece of legislation that overhauls our outdated espionage rules—already creates a wide range of new offences, tools and powers to counter state threats and their activities. In many respects, those cover similar grounds to a proscription-like power of the kind that the shadow Minister was referring to, but the Act will give us and, importantly, equip our agencies with wide-ranging tools to specify a foreign power, or part of a foreign power, or an entity controlled by a foreign power, under the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme, for example. It will mean that persons in those arrangements will have to register their activities or risk prosecution. That is a groundbreaking tool that we will be equipped with thanks to the passage of that landmark legislation.

The defending democracy taskforce, to which the shadow Minister referred, is leading cross-government work. It is chaired and led by the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), but that cross-government work is taking place to drive forward the taskforce's

[Suella Braverman]

priorities with Parliament, our security and intelligence community, the devolved Administrations, local authorities, the private sector and civil society. It has been incredibly extensive in its coverage so far, and we look forward to its having a tangible impact on those agencies to which I referred.

Several Members asked about sanctions, and in particular the sanctions in place against Wagner Group. In 2020, the UK designated Prigozhin through the Libya sanctions regime. That was for his and Wagner Group's involvement in activities that threatened the peace, stability and security of Libya, including defying the UN arms embargoes. In March 2022, the UK also designated the Wagner Group for their role in actions that destabilised Ukraine. Asset freezes were imposed on funds identified as belonging to the Wagner Group in the UK, as well as travel bans on any of their members.

In July this year, the Foreign Secretary announced 13 new UK sanctions targeting a range of individuals and businesses linked to the actions of the Wagner Group in Africa. That included individuals from the Wagner Group associated with executions and torture in Mali and the Central African Republic, and threats to peace and security in Sudan. Those sanctions have had an impact: they constrained the ability to utilise assets and limited the ability to travel. As I said, the framework has constrained the freedoms and abilities of these organisations and individuals. Of course, the broad-ranging set of sanctions has been one of the largest sets of sanctions imposed on a modern economy.

Several hon. Members asked what more the Government are doing to monitor the risk that the Wagner Group and other Russian private military companies or mercenaries fragment and reform in different moulds. Our approach to tackling Wagner and other Russian PMCs has three core strands: military, sanctions and state building. The extensive military support we have given to Ukraine seeks to counter the threat that Wagner pose there, and our sanctions constrain their ability to utilise assets and to travel.

Our diplomatic engagement with partners around the world focuses on supporting fragile states to build their own capacity and discourage Wagner from taking root. Several hon. Members referenced how Wagner trade in violence and benefit through Governments, para-governments or paramilitary groups plundering resources, assets and other forms of wealth in those nations. If those states are robust and resilient in the first place, groups such as Wagner will not be able to take root. That work relating to private military companies is extensive, and our cross-Government Russia unit brings our full range of capabilities to bear against the malign influences of these contractors, in concert with our allies.

Several hon. Members referenced Africa. For many years, Wagner have had a destabilising effect on the African continent. They have been reportedly responsible for multiple breaches of international humanitarian law and abuses of human rights, including numerous reports of indiscriminate killings of unarmed civilians, summary executions and rape. We have again sought to take a leading role in reducing opportunities for Wagner to operate in Africa and holding them to account for the atrocities they commit.

Lastly, several hon. Members—notably my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox)—referenced the IRGC. It is clear that Iran continues to pose a persistent threat to UK-based individuals, which is unacceptable. There has obviously been significant parliamentary, media and public interest in a potential proscription decision on the IRGC. Both the House of Commons and the House of Lords have discussed IRGC proscription, with the House of Commons unanimously passing a motion in January to urge the Government to proscribe it. It is clear that the Iranian regime continues to occupy a serious and worrying role in our global order. We continue to condemn Iran's role as one of the top military backers of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Since August last year, Tehran has transferred hundreds of unmanned aerial vehicles to Moscow, in violation of UN Security Council resolution 2231. We work tirelessly with our international partners to hold Iran to account for the sale of drones to Russia, and we have imposed three rounds of sanctions on Iranian individuals and entities involved in the illegal transfers to Russia. They add to the already extensive sanctions on Iran's drone programmes. We have also publicly raised this matter twice at the UN Security Council, alongside France, Germany and the US, and we support Ukraine's request for a UN investigation.

It is clear that Iran continues to pose a persistent threat to UK-based individuals, which is unacceptable. The Department keeps the list of proscribed organisations under review. I know I will frustrate colleagues to say that our policy is not to comment on the specifics of individual proscription cases, and that I am unable to provide further details on this issue. I have heard the comments of Members here and the sentiment of the House. Ministers previously confirmed to this House that the decision was under active consideration but that we would not provide a running commentary. I know that will disappoint Members, but we are cognisant and open-eyed about the threat that the IRGC poses to the UK.

I am very grateful for this House's support for the decision to proscribe the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation. The brutality and the enormity of destruction and devastation wreaked by this group is unspeakable. It is right that we act now. I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 6 September, be approved.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek your advice. Recently, Cumberland Council, which incidentally happens to be Labour-led, wrote to me about the impact of the EU's nutrient neutrality rules on house building in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson). As well as a number of new businesses and business expansions being held up, I am told that more than 2,500 new homes that have gone through the planning process and are awaiting granted permission have been blocked, and a further 1,450 homes as part of St Cuthbert's garden village have been blocked. At least one national house builder

has effectively withdrawn from the region. The forecasted turnover reduction runs into millions of pounds, with the inevitable impact on local jobs and the supply chain.

The council also says that the impact of the small amount of mitigation that may be found for some developments will be a reduction in section 106 agreements for affordable housing. Hundreds of jobs in my constituency are at risk. The Government found a solution and we have now found out that the Opposition plan to block it, after previously signalling agreement. I wonder if a Minister might signal their intention to come to the House to set out the impact that the flip-flopping of His Majesty's Opposition might have on constituencies such as Workington.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The hon. Gentleman has placed his view on the record, and it has been heard by Ministers. He will understand it is not a matter for the Chair, but I am quite sure that Members on both Front Benches will have heard what he has had to say and will treat the matter with the respect that it deserves.

PETITION

150 years of Notting Hill and Ealing High School

4.8 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I rise to present a petition signed by people from Ealing, Acton and Chiswick—all parts of my constituency. Fittingly, they are all women, because it regards Notting Hill and Ealing High School, an all-girls school that is 150 years young this weekend. If I am to declare an interest, it is that I am product of that school, as many women have been since 1873. The petition states:

"The petitioners...request that the House of Commons urges the Government to celebrate the achievements of"—the outstanding—

"Notting Hill and Ealing High School".

In fact, it is not just a high school; it educates people from kindergarten and all the way from four to 18 years old. It urges the Government

"to recognise the historic and important role it has played in supporting girls' education" and empowering women.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Ealing Central and Acton in London,

Declares that the Government should recognise the 150th anniversary of Notting Hill and Ealing High School on 16 September 2023; further that the ISI inspectors reported, "pupils' achievement in curricular and extra-curricular activities and their learning is exceptional as is their attainment in national tests at age 11 and at A Levels." Further notes that the school thrives on allowing individuals to express themselves.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to celebrate the achievements of Notting Hill and Ealing High School, and to recognise the historic and important role it has played in supporting girls' education.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002856]

Residential Co-operative Power Production

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

4.10 pm

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): I am grateful to have secured this debate to champion reform that is not only innovative but pragmatic: an idea that encapsulates the essence of empowerment, economic prudence and the responsible stewardship of our environment. At the heart of this vision is the unequivocal call to reconsider our approach to funding residential co-operative power production, in particular by not imposing green levies on individuals who choose to invest in their own renewables, no matter where in the country they may be. It is not just about fiscal prudence, but about putting the power to shape our green energy future back into the hands of the people.

We live in a time where large-scale wind and solar energy have emerged as the United Kingdom's most viable sources of renewable electricity. Yet what truly sets this era apart is the exciting realisation that ordinary people, like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and me, can now own a share of a wind farm or a solar park. This is not merely a financial transaction; it is an opportunity for each of us to become an active participant in shaping the trajectory of the UK's energy landscape—a vision reminiscent of the transformative privatisations of the 1980s by the revolutionary Thatcher Government.

Consumer ownership of green energy assets goes beyond mere financial gains; it empowers individuals to play a pivotal role in the transition to net zero emissions. It makes tangible and accessible our personal contributions to, and the benefits from, that shift. So, how does it work? The process is simple: as individuals, we can purchase shares in a renewable power production initiative, alongside thousands of others. We receive our share of the electricity generated, delivered directly to our homes via the national grid. We experience tangible savings on our electricity bills each month for the entire lifespan of the asset.

A growing number of consumers, both households and businesses, have taken the bold step to invest in their own off-site green energy generation. They are not just securing energy independence for themselves; they are contributing significantly to the UK's environmental targets. These consumers invest by purchasing shares in residential co-operative power production initiatives, bearing their portion of upfront construction costs. Owners of these shares receive their share of the electricity generated, delivered to them via the grid. Importantly, their energy suppliers purchase this electricity at the low operating cost of the co-operative, rather than at the fluctuating wholesale market prices. The resulting savings are then applied directly to the owners' bills each month, stabilising costs over the long term.

However, a glaring issue demands our immediate attention. Consumers who invest in their own renewable power production have energy levies integrated directly into their electricity bills by virtue of the fact that they are purchasing from the grid. Contracts for difference, feed-in tariffs, green levies and so on all come off their bills. Paradoxically, the levies mean that consumers who own their own green energy assets effectively subsidise

[Dr Jamie Wallis]

the green power consumption of others. The energy levies serve as a significant deterrent to investment in consumer-owned residential co-operative power. They hinder people from directly reaping the rewards of the UK's transition to net zero—a counterintuitive outcome, to say the least.

My proposal is simple yet powerful: consumers who own shares in off-site renewable power production should be granted an exemption from the levies. Such a step could potentially reduce their bills by a remarkable 44%. That would create a compelling incentive for consumers to invest in their own source of green power, unlocking a new wave of personal private ownership of UK infrastructure. Moreover, there is another aspect that warrants attention. A portion of the savings that consumers accumulate on their electricity bills is currently liable to taxation. The savings are treated as interest, and if they surpass their owner's annual interest allowance they become subject to taxation. The taxation of these savings serves as a significant deterrent to investing in energy ownership, as it adds complexity and uncertainty to the financial picture. In developing a sustainable future, taxing consumers' bill savings from off-site renewable energy ownership is also counterproductive. I propose that we rectify it by exempting all bill savings from off-site green energy production from taxation. That would bring this into line with the treatment of home solar, creating a level playing field for all renewable energy investments.

Members may be wondering about the potential cost impact, so let me be clear: if these energy levy and tax exemptions did not induce people to invest in their own energy assets, there would be no cost at all to the Treasury or to other consumers. The scale of the cost impact hinges directly on the scale of the adoption of green energy ownership within the residential co-operatives. If people do not invest, there will be no costs. To put that into perspective, if just 10% of consumers decided to invest in such a manner, the levies imposed on other consumers would increase by approximately 11%—approximately £15 a year. These costs would be deferred and the Treasury's revenue would be neutral for, probably, the next five or six quarters.

To underscore the real-world impact of this proposal, let me share with the House a compelling case study. It concerns a wind farm launched by Ripple Energy, not far from Cardiff and near my constituency of Bridgend, in Porthcawl. It was one of the first consumer-owned wind farms, owned collectively by 900 individuals from across the country who invested an average of £2,200 each. It has been generating clean electricity since March 2022, and has saved its owners an average of £320 on their electricity bills, with projected savings of about £970 in its second year. These substantial savings are attributable to the recent surge in electricity prices. Importantly, ownership of the wind farm has shielded those individuals from the price spikes that have burdened other consumers in recent times.

If we look beyond the immediate financial and logistical benefits, we see that this proposal carries even more profound significance in the context of our nation's future. It positions us on a path to energy independence and resilience against global energy price shocks—vulnerabilities exposed by international conflicts and wars such as what we are currently witnessing in Ukraine.

In post-Brexit Britain, this initiative is emblematic of the British public taking back control—taking control of their energy future; taking control of their financial wellbeing; and taking control of our contribution to a greener, more sustainable world. It encapsulates the very essence of British self-reliance and national pride, aligning perfectly with the spirit of autonomy that Brexit has come to symbolise.

Beyond the immediate fiscal and environmental benefits, this proposal has the power to shape our society. It can foster a sense of collective purpose and unity as people from all walks of life come together to invest in our common future. Imagine communities rallying around the prospect of owning a share of a local wind farm or solar park. Imagine schools and universities engaging students in the process of renewable energy ownership, educating them about the importance of sustainability and self-reliance. Picture a future when our energy landscape is dominated not solely by faceless corporations, but by the collective will of the people—a tapestry of interconnected, community-owned energy assets that serve as symbols of resilience and sustainability.

Furthermore, in line with the Government's commitment to grow the economy, this initiative can act as a catalyst for innovation and job creation. As more and more consumers invest in green energy ownership, the demand for renewable energy technologies will soar. This will spur research and development in the UK renewables sector, creating new opportunities for scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs. Simultaneously, the growth of the consumer-owned green energy sector will lead to the establishment of local energy co-operatives and businesses, generating employment and economic growth in regions across the UK.

In a world where the challenges of climate change loom large, where global energy prices are subject to geopolitical disruption and where the public's desire for self-determination has never been more pronounced, this proposal is a testament to our ability to take control of our lives. It is a resounding declaration that we, the people of the United Kingdom, are not mere spectators in the unfolding drama of our energy future; we are its authors and its protagonists.

In conclusion, what we have before us is not merely a fiscal proposal, but a transformative vision; one that empowers individuals, safeguards our energy future, and solidifies our commitment to a sustainable tomorrow. By not taxing green levies on those individuals who choose to invest in their own renewables, we would be giving power back to the people, and ensuring that everyone could partake in our collective journey toward a more sustainable, fairer and more resilient tomorrow.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) on securing this important debate, and thank him for sharing his thoughts during the conversation that we were able to have ahead of it. As we heard in his moving and well-thought-out speech, he has continued to be a champion in this regard. I want to begin by assuring him that the Government recognise the importance of empowering local communities to come together to deliver renewable energy projects for their areas, be that putting solar panels on school roofs,

setting up electric vehicle chargers in local communities or developing residential power production using hydro, say, to power a village.

My hon. Friend has raised a concern that people who invest in their own renewable energy are still required to pay the green levies that are part of their energy bills and he made an appeal that they should cease to do so. Levies more than pay for themselves by driving investment in renewables. He mentioned the fact that large-scale renewables have driven down costs enormously over the last decade or so, not least through our contracts for difference scheme, which this Government are very proud of. These levies provide vital support to low-income and vulnerable households and, because of the way they have been used in the system, they have saved consumers money on their energy bills overall over the past 10 years.

Having a fair system relies on everyone being part of it. If consumers anywhere are reliant on the infrastructure that is developed by the whole, there is a strong case that they should contribute to that whole; otherwise, there is a danger of creating a system that is the opposite of what my hon. Friend seeks—namely, a system that is less fair, in which people can buy their way out of a system that is designed to cater for all.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the cost of the UK's transition to net zero is fair and affordable for all energy consumers and, over the past decade, environmental and social schemes have been instrumental in driving the decarbonisation of the system. It is fair that all consumers should contribute towards the cost of these schemes, as the UK's transition to abundant low-carbon energy over the coming decades will bring benefits to households and businesses everywhere. Our recent exposure to volatile global gas prices underscores the importance of our plan to build a strong home-grown renewable energy sector in order further to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, but one that, importantly, ensures that everyone everywhere, whether or not they can invest in their own local renewable energy, is protected and looked after.

Some billpayer-funded schemes are important for tackling fuel poverty by providing financial support or home upgrades to low income and vulnerable households. We do not wish to see a system in which people can withdraw from supporting that. Ofgem, the energy regulator in Great Britain, administers renewable energy and social schemes on behalf of the Government and ensures that policy targets are met in as economical and consumer-friendly a way as possible. A list of the current environmental and social schemes that are funded through those bills can be found on Ofgem's website.

In response to my hon. Friend's point about changing the tax rules specifically on bill savings from off-site renewable ownership—he will know what is coming—I have no choice but to comment that taxation is a matter not for me but for the Chancellor. However, I would like to reassure him that we see value in, and support, community energy, including co-operatives that come together to create community energy projects such as Graig Fatha, which he mentioned. They play a role in our efforts to eliminate our contribution to climate change.

The Government offer a range of support to that type of project, perhaps just slightly different in nature to the ones that he has so passionately espoused today. They include the brilliant new £10 million community

energy fund. This enables both rural and urban communities across England to access grant funding to develop local renewable energy projects for investment. The community energy fund follows on from the success of the rural community energy fund, which was delivered through our local net zero hubs and has funded several innovative projects. An example is Swaffham Prior in east Cambridgeshire, a pioneering project in a village of around 300 homes. It is one of the first villages in the UK to install a heating network into the existing infrastructure. In order to get more brilliant projects such as Swaffham Prior set up, we are aiming to launch applications to the community energy fund as soon as possible.

I recognise that the community energy fund is open only to communities in England. This is because the devolved nations have their own support schemes for community energy. For instance, the Welsh Government have the Energy Service, which works with both the public sector and community enterprises to reduce energy use, to generate locally owned renewable energy and to reduce carbon emissions. Similarly, the Scottish Government's community and renewable energy scheme supports communities across Scotland to engage with, participate in and benefit from the energy transition to net zero.

Community energy funding is available alongside UK-wide growth funding, and we encourage community energy groups and residential co-operatives to work closely with their local authority to support the development of community energy projects within these schemes. The UK shared prosperity fund supports interventions that reinforce our commitment to reach net zero, and that includes £2.6 billion of funding for investment in places, including for community infrastructure projects. An example of that is West Devon District Council, which has been among the local areas to benefit from this type of UK growth funding. It received £1.1 million under the shared prosperity fund, which includes provisions to support community energy groups, helping them to bring projects forward and to access funds to support their goals. I entirely share the vision and the aspiration set out by my hon. Friend, and we have measures in place to ensure that can be brought to reality.

Beyond this, Ofgem also supports community energy projects and is now welcoming applications from community interest groups, co-operative societies and community benefit societies to the industry voluntary redress scheme, which is much more helpful than its name suggests. This allows groups to apply for funds to deliver energy-related projects that support energy consumers in vulnerable situations, that support decarbonisation and that benefit people in England, Scotland and Wales.

We also regularly engage with the community energy sector through the community energy contact group. This is our central engagement method to stay in touch with community energy, to hear from the voices of that community and to allow the people involved to feed into Government policy.

I know many Members, including my hon. Friend, will have supported the Local Electricity Bill and the amendments on community energy that were tabled on the Energy Bill. During the passage of the Energy Bill, which I am delighted to say has now completed its Commons stages, the Government carefully considered

[Graham Stuart]

the amendments that sought to ensure a right to local supply. We set out the reasons why we were unable to accept those amendments and why it was not right to do so, which included ensuring the best outcomes for consumers and the sector overall, but the Government recognise that community energy projects have real benefits for the communities in which they are based and for the nation as a whole, and we are keen to ensure that they deliver value for money for consumers nationally and locally alike.

We have worked closely with many parliamentarians and the community energy sector to develop commitments that will better support the development of this type of energy. These commitments include the launch of the £10 million community energy fund, which I have already mentioned, alongside which we have committed to publishing an annual report and to consulting on the barriers that the sector faces when developing projects, precisely to ensure that we can have more of them.

We are working with the sector through the community energy contact group so that we have the most effective routes available and so that we make it as easy for communities to understand the help that is available in the system.

I close by thanking my hon. Friend for securing this important debate and for the manner in which he opened it. I am proud of the wide range of support that the Government offer to community energy groups across the country. This support enables local community groups to come together to deliver renewable energy projects for their area, including in residential co-operatives. I share the vision that my hon. Friend set out, and I look forward to working closely with him, in Wales, Scotland, England and right across the United Kingdom, to see that vision made even more of a reality than it is today.

Question put and agreed to.

4.28 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

That the draft Windsor Framework (Enforcement etc.) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 434, Noes 10.

Division No. 325]

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Afolami, Bim
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Fleur
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Betts, Mr Clive
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brennan, Kevin
Brereton, Jack
Britcliffe, Sara
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Rob
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carter, Andy
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, rh Alex
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Cooper, rh Yvette
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Coyle, Neil
Crabb, rh Stephen
Creasy, Stella
Crosbie, Virginia
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Daly, James
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies-Jones, Alex
Davis, rh Mr David
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Dixon, Samantha
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Double, Steve
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duffield, Rosie
Duguid, David
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Elliott, Julie
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias

Elmore, Chris
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Chris
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Colleen
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foord, Richard
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fovargue, Yvonne
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Mark
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glen, rh John
Glindon, Mary
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Grundy, James
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Hardy, Emma
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Henderson, Gordon
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinds, rh Damian
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollern, Kate
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howarth, rh Sir George
Howell, Paul
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Kim
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Darren
Jones, Fay
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Jupp, Simon
Kane, Mike
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadbeater, Kim
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lightwood, Simon
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mak, Alan
Malhotra, Seema

Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGovern, Alison
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mearns, Ian
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, David (*Proxy vote cast
 by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Oppong-Asare, Abena

Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Powell, Lucy
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mary
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat

Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael

Trickett, Jon
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

NOES

Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Girvan, Paul
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Lockhart, Carla
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Paisley, Ian
 Robinson, Gavin
 Shannon, Jim
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 13 September 2023

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Railway Ticket Offices

9.30 am

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Before I call Chris Loder to move the motion, I want to give Members as much advance notice as possible that the time limit will be a maximum of two minutes. I will try to get everybody in, but I want to get to the Front Benchers no later than 10.30 am.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered railway ticket offices.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. We know that the future of railway ticket offices is important; the level of attendance here today and the fact that the Transport Committee is, in parallel, currently receiving evidence about this matter confirms it. It feels like the old days, when I was a member of the union having a union meeting, to see so many friends and colleagues from across the House here, and I warmly welcome them all to take part in the debate.

I am here today on a mission. That mission is to ensure that the staffed hours at West Dorset railway stations are protected and definitely not slashed by more than 50%, as is currently proposed by South Western Railway in its station change consultation.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Scunthorpe is another station that will see a huge reduction in hours under the proposals. I know the Minister will address this, but does my hon. Friend share my worry that staff clearly cannot get out from behind the ticket office and do any work around the station if their hours are cut, because they simply will not be there?

Chris Loder: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend that there is a lack of understanding about this issue, and I shall look to expose that later in my speech.

I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, but not because I have been bankrolled by a trade union and feel obliged to speak; I know that some Opposition Members present are in that position and that union cash—*[Interruption.]* Union cash has gone into the back pocket of some Members who are here, to the value of tens of thousands of pounds. That is not why I am speaking. I am speaking because before I was elected I worked for the railway for 20 years, and that career started as a station assistant—the very role that is affected by these proposals, and in my case the proposals from South Western Railway.

The trade unions and particularly the RMT—the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—have for many years blocked meaningful reform of station staff's conditions of service, even though those reforms may have been beneficial to staff. That has meant that when ticket offices are quiet and no

customer is there, staff have in many cases not checked the car park, cleaned the station or helped those in need on the platform, often because they were instructed by their union not to undertake any other responsibilities or, indeed, not to fully undertake the responsibilities they have. That is nothing new, but I am very proud to say that it is not an issue at the stations in West Dorset.

No one can say that I do not believe staff are important. They are, and much more so than some train operators and others have given them credit for. For the record, I would like to thank those members of staff, many of whom are former colleagues of mine, who continue today to diligently and carefully look after the many thousands of passengers who pass through their stations. To Judith and Winifred at Dorchester South, to Colin and Bob, who both retired from Sherborne a few years ago, and of course to Anne, who has worked at Sherborne station since I was a little boy, I would like to tell you all today that as your MP I shall stand up to protect not just your employment but the cherished service that you give, which is so welcomed by the hundreds and hundreds of local people you help every single day.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. I assure him that I am here not on behalf of any trade union but on behalf of my residents, particularly those who have a disability or who need special tickets, such as extensions to freedom passes, and women travelling late at night on their own. The new measures will see highly used stations, such as Whitton and Teddington in my constituency, reduced to only 20 hours of staffing a week. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that without an equality impact assessment and ticketing modernisation, we should not be pressing ahead with the changes?

Chris Loder: I will highlight some of the issues in a moment. There is clearly a veil, behind which is hidden an enormous reduction in staffing hours at stations, which is a key issue that I shall address in a moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To completely alter decent ticket services for constituents is wrong, primarily because of what the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) said, but also because the impact will be even greater in rural areas across the United Kingdom, particularly for elderly constituents and those who are not au fait with the online system. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as the hon. Member for Twickenham said, we need a review and for everybody to be able to input into the process before the Government and the Minister progress with the changes?

Chris Loder: I will address those points later, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me.

Moving staff from being solely behind the ticket office window to being more visibly present on the station, and directly helping passengers with purchasing tickets or helping people on and off trains, is a good concept. In principle, it is an initiative that I support, but behind the veil is the reality: at Sherborne station, the overall staffed hours will be 40% less than today; Crewkerne station in south Dorset, which serves the rural west of my constituency, will have its hours slashed by 50%; and the reality for Dorchester, the county town

[Chris Loder]

of Dorset, is that South Western Railway currently proposes to slash the staffing presence at Dorchester South station by 55%.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Staff cuts are also proposed at Barnes, Earlsfield, Putney and Wandsworth Town stations, which serve my constituents. Does the hon. Member agree with me and my constituents, who do not understand why the Government seem to be pushing for this change and why the potential changes to the ticketing and settlement agreement made earlier this year have forced the changes on the rail companies? Does he agree that many people are concerned that this violates the Equality Act 2010?

Chris Loder: Some of the hon. Lady's questions are for the Minister to address later, but I agree that a number of aspects have not been taken into account in the current consultation and proposals, which is why I called for this debate and am making this speech.

The disingenuous veil of moving staff from behind the ticket office window to be out on the station, with no change in staff hours, is patently untrue in West Dorset. This is not reform but inequality against not just those with mobility issues, but the elderly and those who are often without access to technology, driving issues of rural isolation still further.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and I congratulate him on securing the debate. There is a still more fundamental issue here: we are stripping life of human interactions and connections between people, in both the private and public sectors—in everything from shops to banks and now railway stations—and in doing so we are unpicking the threads that bind us together and make up the tapestry of civilised life. This is a time to think again and take a stand.

Chris Loder: I thank my right hon. Friend, who I think is entirely in agreement with a lot of what I have to say. I shall elaborate further in a moment.

The proposed changes will compound years of really poor service to the people of Dorset. South Western Railway has previously slashed the train service, totally cutting us off from direct trains to London for prolonged periods, removed all on-board catering for train journeys of almost three and a half hours, and dumped passengers, at all times of day or night, with no way to travel forward just to save a few minutes in delay. Those are just some examples of what my constituents face day to day.

I recognise that proponents of the scheme say that it is vital to progress de-staffing and ticket office closures because only 12% of all tickets are sold at ticket offices.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Those wishing for closures argue that only 12% of tickets are bought at the ticket office, but I know that my hon. Friend has travelled through Thornaby's brilliant little train station, where almost 25% of tickets are still bought at the ticket office. Does he agree that those 25% of people are often the most vulnerable, and that Thornaby's ticket office must stay open?

Chris Loder: Anyone would think that my hon. Friend has had prior sight of my speech. Yes, I agree with him, and am about to articulate why.

In West Dorset, South Western Railway has refused to tell me what the percentage of tickets sold at ticket offices on both the Weymouth and Exeter lines actually is—I wonder why. Operators that have wanted to do the right thing have been open and shared that information because it is in the public interest. Regardless of the background, we have some realities to face. The real question that my constituents are asking is: does a national figure of 12% of all tickets being purchased from ticket offices warrant them all being closed down?

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): On that point, I am staunchly against the proposals for not only a reduction in staffing hours but the closure of ticket offices in Keighley and Ilkley. Given that the proportion of tickets sold at Keighley and Ilkley is higher than the national average—it is one in six, as opposed to the lower national trend—does my hon. Friend agree with me that the proposal to close Keighley and Ilkley ticket offices is absolutely wrong?

Chris Loder: I agree that my hon. Friend shares many of the same difficulties and challenges that I face in West Dorset. I will be pleased to articulate further why I agree with him.

The fact that nationally 12% of tickets are purchased from ticket offices does not necessarily warrant them all being closed down, particularly as the percentage for many rural stations and among higher-age communities is much higher than the national average, and no more so than in the south-west. The demographics of constituents in my West Dorset constituency are such that 30% of the population is over 65, which suggests that more people than average use ticket offices. That totally busts the myth that only 12% of tickets are sold at all stations. For example, at Barnstaple station in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), 45% of all tickets are sold at the ticket office.

In Dorchester, even if the company gave me the stats they would not offer an accurate picture because such is the level of management incompetence that the ticket office door was closed for in excess of three months last year, awaiting repair. That will undoubtedly have skewed the statistics and is, quite frankly, questionable in itself. The only reason why that situation got sorted was because I complained about it.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I have an email from a whistleblower who works for Abellio Greater Anglia. The key thing it says is that

“the ticket offices are used much more than people realise. Although the figures say only 12% of tickets are issued by ticket offices, this is an average...Stations like Billericay, Wickford and Raleigh are selling over 500 per shift at weekends.”

So people who work for the railway and who know the truth would agree with everything that my hon. Friend just said.

Chris Loder: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution and support.

There is a significant Access for All bid in for Dorchester South, for a new footbridge to make the station accessible. What company of any moral standing would propose a

reduction in staffing hours of 55% when half the station is inaccessible, and when the company refuses routinely to change the platform to help those in the greatest need?

Typically, when we buy our tickets online through retailers such as the Trainline, we assume that they are working in our best interests as fare-paying passengers, and that they automatically search for the cheapest fare possible, perhaps through something called a split ticket. I can tell the House today that that is not the case, and I shall offer an example or two.

The cheapest way for rail passengers to get from London to Plymouth is to travel via London Waterloo and change at Exeter St David's. They should buy a ticket from Waterloo to Axminster, and another ticket from Axminster to Plymouth, which in total will cost £93.90 for a return, and with a railcard just £64.50. Any Members present with a smartphone should feel free to have a look for themselves. I checked this before the debate. If they enter London to Plymouth on the Trainline, they will be given the option of taking the 10.04 am from Paddington to Plymouth, and offered a ticket for a staggering £158.70. That is almost £100 more than the cheapest alternative, which is actually on the 10.20 am from Waterloo to Exeter, and then change.

Why is that? It is because anti-competitive online digital algorithms have been set to block certain ticket combinations, in this case on the Waterloo to Exeter line. To be fair, it is not just on the Trainline app that this happens. Those who want to should have a look on South Western Railway's website and try to book the same fare. Put in those details—why not even try specifically to put London Waterloo to Plymouth? It will not give them the cheapest combination either; it will send them to Paddington and make them pay more.

Do not think that the issue is reserved to the south-west alone. This time last year, I called out Avanti West Coast and the Trainline for similar behaviour on the route between Manchester and London, where the supposed walk-up fares were quota-controlled if bought online. If the ticket quota had sold out, the customer would be redirected to a more expensive online fare, or the cookies on their smartphone would tell the system that they wanted that ticket and it would automatically charge them more.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend seems to be describing my journey home this evening. He is outlining the reason why we need people in our ticket offices: so that we can ask for advice and guidance, how to get about, and how to navigate the system, which is so badly orchestrated for those buying tickets online. Can he go further in telling us how we might provide a solution for that system?

Chris Loder: My hon. Friend is taking the concluding words of my speech out of my mouth.

If a customer went to the ticket office, where the regulations require that the cheapest ticket is to be sold, they could indeed buy the cheapest ticket there at the advice of someone in the ticket office. What is really disgraceful about all this is that the issue I highlighted on the west coast main line this time last year happened during the period of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II lying in state, when so many people wanted to travel to London. It is pure commercial disdain, and it makes me sick.

Frankly, this is a scandal. After the debate, I will be writing to the Competition and Markets Authority to ask it to investigate, and I hope the Minister will do so as well. If any other Member, regardless of which side of the House they sit, would like to co-sign my letter, I will be delighted to hear from them after this debate.

I remind the House that I am here to make the case for station staffing hours to be maintained, not just because we need these experienced and knowledgeable members of staff, but to ensure that, in this cost of living crisis, passengers can get the cheapest fare, rather than rely on manipulative apps and online digital prices that overcharge them. The one person who can be trusted to provide the cheapest fare is the ticket office clerk.

Proposals for reform should not just improve efficiency; they should enable a growing railway for the future and access for all. The Secretary of State kindly gave me the assurance last week in my Westminster office that the sort of duplicity that is being proposed could be vetoed. Those of us here are making that point on the record; I hope the Minister will be able to concur.

I am not averse to reform. In fact, it is important to recognise that I think it is good, but, as the constituency MP for West Dorset, I request that the Minister stops these ridiculous proposals from South Western Railway and ensures that we do not see a reduction in staffed hours at Sherborne or Dorchester South. I expect other Members will make similar requests.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): As everyone can see, this is a heavily subscribed debate. I want you to help each other. I have 18 people on the list, which makes two minutes each, without interventions. If anyone intervenes, that is nothing to do with me but it may restrict the number of people who can speak. That is all I ask. Without interventions, everyone on the list will get two minutes.

9.52 am

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing the debate. I agree with a number of his points but disagree entirely with his characterisation of trade unions. It will come as no surprise that I declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests regarding my membership of several trade unions.

Time is limited so I will make only two or three key points. According to the Financial Conduct Authority, there are 1.1 million adults in the UK with no bank account, of whom one in five is aged between 18 and 24. One of the regions with the highest number of unbanked people is Greater Manchester, where my constituency lies. With the proposal to close ticket offices and given the unreliability of station ticket vending machines, how are people who are predominantly cash based meant to purchase tickets? What provision is the Minister proposing? Would not simply keeping the ticket offices be the best solution to any potential problems of creating a more inaccessible rail network? What about part-cash, part-card payments? What about refunds for tickets purchased with cash? There are 467 stations managed by Northern Rail, of which 449 have cashless ticket machines. It seems that people who want to pay

[Navendu Mishra]

with cash or part-cash are excluded from this new, in theory modern railway network. I hope the Minister will address that point.

The ticket offices are the only form of regulated station staffing. If they are closed, there will be no more statutory regulation for staffing at stations. The RMT union tells me that that will undoubtedly mean that train companies proceed with a massive reduction in staffing across the network. Does the Minister accept that such a move will mean job losses for thousands of railway workers? I have three train stations in my constituency: Brinnington, Heaton Chapel and Stockport. Two of those do not have disabled access. The idea that the Government are working towards a more modern network is complete nonsense, because there is no access available.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Navendu Mishra: Unfortunately, my time has run out; I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me.

9.54 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing the debate. In a longer session, it would be worth looking at how things such as contactless travel could be extended, particularly incorporating railcards into that offer.

In the time I have, I will focus on the situation at the ticket offices at Torquay and Paignton stations. Although the national average is about 15%, the consultation document confirms that at Paignton 41.3% of tickets were sold at the ticket office. The high percentage of passengers purchasing a ticket at this ticket office shows that demand and need for this service are still strong. It may partly reflect the fact that Paignton and the neighbouring areas are communities with a higher than average percentage of people aged over 70, who may be unfamiliar with online booking methods. Similarly, many tourists use the ticket office not just to buy a ticket but to clarify which tickets are available and the validity of their tickets, and use some of the GroupSave options that may be harder to get from a machine.

At Torquay station, 29.4% of tickets are still sold at the office, but I recognise that the situation is far from ideal for passengers. The ticket office is on the down platform, from which the only destination is Paignton station. Most people therefore depart from the up platform, which has the self-service ticket machine—though often with a large waste bin right behind it—no indoor waiting area and no staff facilities whatever.

I hope that, as part of this process, the Minister will look at feedback about facilities as well as the ticket office issue. I would be particularly interested to hear from him whether the response will be a blanket one, or one that considers the situation at each station. Will thresholds be considered to give more clarity to the level of usage that would see a ticket office retained, and will there be action where the consultation highlights issues such as a lack of other suitable facilities at a station?

9.56 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. As the SNP disabilities spokesperson, this topic is very important to me. For disabled people, particularly those who are learning disabled, the proposal is appalling. Transport for All has given me a very full briefing on this issue. At no stage in the consultation on the recommended closures has there been any consideration at all of disabled people and their requirements.

The equality impact assessment has been mentioned. Has the Minister any idea how the proposed changes will affect disabled people? Has he spoken to disabled people or his Department's disability champion? I am glad to see that the Minister is nodding, but I fail to understand why he has not considered the fact that the notification and advertising of the consultation is severely impacting disabled people, some of whom could not read the notices.

Chris Loder: Will the hon. Member give way?

Marion Fellows: No.

None of this is of any use to people who are visually impaired or deaf, older people, people with no access to anything but cash, or people in wheelchairs, who at present cannot get the required discount from the self-service machines in stations. There is only one answer to this whole mess: for the UK Government to do as the Scottish Government have done and nationalise rail operators.

9.58 am

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing the debate and highlighting this important issue.

Southeastern and Southern, the two rail operators in my beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye, have made proposals that were subject to consultation. I have urged constituents to engage in the consultation to ensure that their views are heard and taken into account. I have also met representatives from Southeastern and Southern to highlight my concerns and those of constituents who have contacted me.

Southeastern's proposal is to close the ticket offices at St Leonards Warrior Square and West St Leonards and have station staff visible and available to provide a wider range of customer support, including accessibility and safeguarding. Hastings station is to be a travel centre, where customers will have access to help, information and all ticket-selling facilities currently available at a ticket office, including a face-to-face service. I welcome the proposal for Hastings station, which is one of the busiest on the rail network, serving a highly diverse range of customers, including tourists arriving and departing or changing trains.

Southern proposes to reduce the opening hours at Rye station and, worryingly, to close all ticket office facilities on Sundays. This proposal is unacceptable. Hastings is to be a travel centre because it has a large volume and range of customers, including tourists, during both the week and the weekend, but this is also true of Rye. I am advocating for Rye station to be made

a travel centre because Rye is also primarily a tourist town, and has an older demographic that is not always adept at using online services or ticket machines. One size does not fit all.

Although I am acutely aware of the financial constraints following on from covid, the reduction in passenger numbers and the huge subsidies provided by the Government, I ask train operators to tailor their plans according to local need. I have asked them not to judge local response to their consultations, as people might not know about them or they might be unable to respond for some reason, even though they care about what happens. It is important that train operators listen to local residents and, importantly, to their staff on the ground as to what they consider to be an essential ticket office service for a given locality.

10 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I want to discuss my opposition to the proposals that would close or reduce the opening hours of most train station ticket offices in England. Ticket office staff provide the human face of a complex system and play a vital role in helping passengers understand their travel options, buy the right ticket, find the right platform and secure assistance for those who are disabled. It would be sheer folly to cut or remove such a vital service.

Many of my constituents have expressed that view. One, who works in a railway station ticket office, is concerned about what this will mean for her job. She is right to be concerned. According to the RMT, the proposals put 2,300 station staff jobs at risk. Another constituent who has a severe visual impairment has been in touch with me to say that for blind and partially sighted people, the support provided by ticket offices and staff is vital. She has expressed serious concern, saying:

“Ticket office closures will see even more visually impaired people excluded from travelling independently by train.”

That chimes with the results of a survey by the Royal National Institute of Blind People, which showed that only 3% of blind and partially sighted respondents said they could use a ticket vending machine without problems.

We must also remember the impact of the proposals on those with poor literacy and numeracy skills. In England, 7.1 million adults—that is 16.4% of the adult population—are functionally illiterate. It is a matter of extreme concern that the Department for Transport refuses to release its equality and impact assessments regarding the potential closures. The Government must make the assessments available; people have a right to know what is in them.

Public transport must be inclusive. It is vital for employment, leisure, accessing healthcare, visiting friends and the operation of the economy. Making it harder to travel by train simply makes no sense.

10.2 am

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The second highest number of signatures on the petition against these proposals comes from my constituents in Rayleigh and Wickford. I have been pressing the Minister for months for figures on ticket office sales in my constituents' stations. They arrived yesterday afternoon.

At Hockley, he says they sell an average of 219 tickets a day, in Rayleigh 461 and in Wickford 480, but the email I read out from the Abellio whistleblower—by the way, I have no faith in Abellio's management—says that in fact, and particularly at weekends, the figures of ticket sales are even higher. I ask the Minister to listen to my constituents and to people who work on the railway.

In my reply to the consultation exercise on 24 July, I said:

“In summary, I do not believe that what is proposed will provide significant savings for train operators but will conversely provide serious disbenefits to passengers. In other words, ‘the game is not worth the candle’. I very much hope...that these proposals will be reconsidered and eventually dropped.”

That “very much” remains my view.

I have had the privilege of being a Minister, and the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), is a fair Minister, I know. In all seriousness I offer him and the Government some genuine advice: look around. The proposals are completely unloved. They are not popular even among Conservative Back Benchers—quite, quite the opposite. I urge the Minister to accept that mistake has been made. It may not have been his mistake, but I say to him: take the hint, drop it, get rid of it and retreat gracefully. Do not press forward with this. The House of Commons does not want it and nor do our constituents.

10.4 am

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing this important debate.

Looking through the correspondence I have received from my constituents on this issue, it has become clear why the public consultation was originally intended to last just three weeks: the train operators knew they would not get the response they wanted. Of course, I have not had the opportunity to see all the submissions made—over 460,000 of them—during the three months in which the consultation was open, but if the overall public response is anything like the response that I have seen in my constituency, it will have been emphatic and nearly unanimous. The verdict of the British public is clear: they do not want the ticket offices to close.

I am grateful that in my constituency of Birkenhead, not a single ticket office is slated for closure. That is because they are all operated by the Merseyrail network, which is under the leadership of Steve Rotheram, the Metro Mayor, who has announced Merseyrail's ambition to become the most inclusive rail network in all of Britain. Just as it did in its approach to the pay dispute, when it sat down with the unions to reach an equitable deal, Merseyrail has chosen to break with the scorched earth tactics of the Rail Delivery Group and will instead pursue a path that works in the interests of both passengers and rail staff. When travelling within and out of their community, my constituents will still be able to rely on the expertise, support and assistance of ticket office staff.

According to research conducted by the Royal National Institute for the Blind, only 3% of blind and visually impaired people reported being able to use ticket machines without problems, while 58% said that it was entirely

[Mick Whitley]

impossible for them to use ticket machines. Ticket offices are indispensable to ensuring that everyone can access our rail network, but the bleak reality facing many people who are blind or visually impaired is that if ticket offices close, their world will grow smaller because their ability to travel freely and independently will be constrained. The Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), should recognise that ticket office closures represent a profound threat to the progress that has been made in fighting for equal opportunities for all in this country.

10.6 am

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): My constituency has three railway stations: Warrington Central, Warrington Bank Quay and Warrington West. The latter two will see their manned ticket offices close, and although Warrington Central is one of the few stations where ticket offices will not be shut entirely, there will be a reduction in staffing hours there.

This public consultation is one of the poorest public consultations I have seen, because there is simply no explanation for the vast difference in the way that two stations that are less than a mile from each other are being treated. Warrington Bank Quay, which is the main line station on the west coast main line, will have no members of staff at its ticket office, yet Warrington Central will have a fully staffed ticket office. That makes no sense at all.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) cited a figure saying that 12% of tickets last year were sold through a ticket office. That really is an oversimplification of the situation, especially when we consider just how many journeys are made annually. The latest figures for 2018-19—pre-pandemic—show about 1.8 billion rail journeys taking place in the UK. If we accept the 12% figure, that means that 200 million tickets were purchased through a ticket office. That is a huge number, but we are simply to withdraw ticket offices from around the UK. The 12% figure also does not take account of the conversations that take place at ticket windows when a ticket is not purchased but advice is sought about the best route, or details are given about buying a ticket at a later date. All these things are not being taken into account.

I will not take up any more time in this debate, save to ask the Minister one question. Can he explain to me why there is a difference in the way that Warrington Bank Quay station, which is run by Avanti, is being treated and the way that Warrington Central, which is run by Northern, is being treated?

10.8 am

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies.

I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing this debate. He made an excellent speech, although he will not be surprised to learn that I disagree with him about his characterisation of the trade union movement. Labour Members are very proud to be associated with that part of the labour movement—and of course, to the extent that we are

funded by unions, it is the cleanest money in British politics. [Laughter.] Some colleagues laugh, but I will sure we will have a look at their entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The proposals we are debating today are appalling. Let us get this matter into some perspective. These 13 companies are planning to close nearly 1,000 ticket offices. That will leave 2,300 working people in our constituencies right across the land out of work. I am concerned about the ticket office staff in my constituency of Middlesbrough and my constituents who use the service, but the same situation applies right across the country. About 25% of the staff will be lost.

As a former shadow Rail Minister and shadow Transport Secretary, I wholeheartedly agree with the remarks of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). This is about a human relationship with the railways. People find it very difficult to travel in any event. To strip that out would be a disaster.

Sir John Hayes: I wondered whether my former shadow might raise that issue. The people in Spalding in Lincolnshire want that human interaction. The hon. Gentleman and I worked closely to pursue transport policies in the national interest and for the common good. That is what this is about. This is about the common good of the communities we serve: Spalding, the hon. Gentleman's constituency and elsewhere.

Andy McDonald: That was so well articulated, but the reality is that companies are issuing section 188 notices and advertising premises to let now, while the consultation is under way. I ask the Minister, who is a good man and who thinks about these things very deeply and has good intentions in this regard, to really think about this matter.

I find myself in total agreement with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). There is universal condemnation of these proposals, and there is an opportunity to retreat and consider a better way forward. Of course we want to see technological advances, but it is not an either/or; that human contact can still be there, with more people on the platforms but also in ticket offices. Let us think outside this box.

Transport for London have the most remarkable system of fares and ticketing. That is the sort of initiative that we should be rolling out across our country. I have recommended Labour's plans for ticketing and fares before, and I encourage the Minister to look at those carefully. We have got the ability and the algorithms to do it, but it cannot be at the cost of losing that human contact that so many people—disabled, vulnerable or otherwise—depend upon.

10.10 am

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing and so ably leading this important debate.

Darlington station's ticket office sold 133,785 tickets in 2022. That is 368 a day. I recently spoke to one of the ticket clerks there, and they have been sending a member of staff out on the platform to work in the proposed

way. This is not scientific, but the clerk estimated that 50% of the people they tried to help still needed to come into the ticket office to be properly assisted.

As the Minister is aware, Darlington Bank Top station is in the process of a £139 million transformation, including the construction of new platforms that will significantly increase the station's capacity and the number of people it serves. It seems madness to close the ticket office at Darlington at this time and undermine the important Government-funded redevelopment.

The Minister has already heard my concerns on this issue. I have raised a number of issues with him, including the siting of ticket machines, the unavailability of tickets via apps and machines in the minutes before boarding a train, and the anxiety caused to passengers threatened with penalty fares.

There is tremendous cynicism in our society these days as to what a consultation means. It is now almost a universally held belief that, when a consultation is commissioned, the decision has already been made and the process is conducted solely to pay lip service to the public's views. I am grateful to the Minister for listening to me on this issue and for his reassurance that this is a genuine consultation, that the voices of my constituents will be heard loud and clear, and that Darlington Bank Top station can keep its ticket office.

10.13 am

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. In rural communities like the one where I live in Devon, ticket offices play a role that extends way beyond selling tickets. By being able to speak to a real person and talk through journey options, it means that people can avoid online vendors ripping them off. I would like to hand my platform over to a couple of constituents who have written to me about how the changes will affect the four stations in my constituency: Axminster, Honiton, Feniton and Tiverton Parkway.

I received an email from Marian. She lives with a visual impairment and is deeply concerned about how these changes will impact her and other people who are blind or partially sighted. She wrote to me:

"Without ticket offices, we will have to purchase tickets online or through vending machines at stations. These are often inaccessible, so improving this basic accessibility should be the first priority, not ticket office closures.

Ticket Office staff are usually my first point of contact at my local...station where staff are exceptionally knowledgeable and helpful, taking time and trouble to be as informative as possible."

Chris Loder: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the bizarre things about the proposal affecting Axminster is that its station will actually get more staffing hours rather than a reduction?

Richard Foord: People who live in Axminster recognise that the station will be poorly served, and they as constituents will be poorly served by the changes. They will mean that blind and visually impaired people such as Marian will not know where to go in the station concourse.

Another constituent, Josie, describes herself as an "active pensioner". She wrote:

"The staff provide an invaluable service, giving accurate up-to-the-minute information especially during disruption of trains due to adverse weather, cows on the line, bridge damage, engineering

work and strikes. They provide reliable advice in advance for other services and for fares. They print out timetables and have at hand leaflets for obtaining railcards."

Those are just two testimonies, but they show the real, human impact of this appalling proposal to close ticket offices in rural places such as my corner of Devon.

10.16 am

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): My constituents, rail user groups and I are absolutely flabbergasted by these proposals. We are frustrated and deeply angry. It is fair to say that the way in which the consultation has been handled is suboptimal. Three weeks would never have been long enough and that has undermined a lot of public confidence.

Five railway stations in my constituency will be affected by the plans, four of which are on the great eastern main line. My constituency is proudly in the middle of Essex. We are growing; we have more commuters across villages such as Hatfield Peverel, Kelvedon and Witham town. I use Witham railway station myself. I buy my tickets in the ticket office; I am proud of the staff there and the service that they offer. The point is that we rely on rail services as a commuter constituency in the heart of Essex. We feel safer and more reassured by the outstanding service that station staff provide, and we want to support them during this time.

The Minister knows that commuters on our line and our franchise have been at the forefront of innovation. We believe in innovation. For over a decade, our commuter groups and rail users, supported by MPs, have focused on flexible season tickets, 15-minute delay repay, more online ticketing and investment in our railway. We believe in those things, but not to the detriment service delivery. That is why I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for convening this debate and for his authoritative opening. This is about people and rail users.

If I may say so, the Minister is one of my favourite Ministers in this Government because he engages and listens. I urge him to consider the nature of this debate and the points he has heard, and readdress the concerns. I invite him to Essex and to my constituency to visit our many rail stations.

10.18 am

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I have been vocal in my opposition to this proposal. Indeed, I have responded to the consultation, setting out the many reasons why I oppose ticket office closures. If closing ticket offices was really about customer service, it would not be happening. It is a reduction in service, which is not wanted by any rail users I know or, I suspect, any of the nearly 700,000 people who have reportedly responded to the consultation.

The chair of the English Regional Transport Association, based in Bedfordshire, spoke for many when he said that members are

"opposed to the closure of local ticket offices generally as a cut and closure of an amenity many people still find useful and which with creativity can double up as a local information point bridging on-rail and off-rail information."

I agree with him that closing tickets offices is a stupid proposition.

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

As a frequent rail user, I enjoy the flexibility of being a digital ticket buyer and a regular ticket office user. A huge number of rail users either do not have access to digital services, or cannot or do not want to use them. The plans are discriminatory, especially against older people, people with disabilities and those on the margins who cannot afford a smartphone or the average cost of tickets. The Government should be working proactively to encourage people to use public transport to travel, but instead they are restricting people.

Afzal Khan: Northern rail proposes to reduce ticket office hours at Levenshulme and Gorton stations in my constituency by 70%. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is purely a cost-cutting exercise, and yet another example of the managed decline of our railways?

Mohammad Yasin: I fully agree with my hon. Friend's important point. What happens when a ticket machine does not work for whatever reason? That happens quite often; it is not unusual. How will a machine advise us on the best or cheapest route? People want to talk to informed people, not machines, to address their queries and concerns. Ticket offices and well-staffed stations are absolutely essential to ensure safe travel for customers and to keep our rail network accessible for disabled and vulnerable people.

These mean proposals are not about improving the rail service. They are all about putting profit before people. The British public are sick and tired of being taken for granted, and having to pay more for less in return. I hope the concerns raised by the hundreds of thousands of people who responded to the consultation will be listened to and acted on, which should mean that this ill thought through proposal is fully derailed.

10.21 am

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): This is an excellent debate and I am delighted that it was raised. Supposedly, the driver for closing ticket offices is the reduction in sales to 12%. In coastal and rural areas, that is clearly not true. Certainly, in Newton Abbot 22% of sales are at the office, while at Teignmouth it is 26% and at Dawlish it is 34%. Therefore, why am I being told that ticket offices at two of my three stations will be closed this year, and the other one will be closed next year? We have just spent £80 million getting that line up and running. The line is key to the local economy—the line is about the economy. Those closures will damage not only the economy but access for people, such as the disabled, the visually impaired and the vulnerable who can only use cash, as well as our tourist industry, which is hugely dependent on ticket offices.

Chapter 6 of the ticketing and settlement agreement states that changes to opening hours can be made only if

“the change would represent an improvement on current arrangements in terms of quality of service and/or cost effectiveness and members of the public would continue to enjoy widespread and easy access to the Purchase of Rail Products”.

Minister, that test has not been met. We have had 680,000 responses to Transport Focus. We know it is going to be referred to the Government, so in his reply

the Minister should not tell me that this is nothing to do with them and that it is a private matter for companies. Government play a huge role in the matter of funding; it will be referred and the Government will have to take a view. When the Minister is asked the question, he should—please—say no. It is clearly about money, not about stations, so find another way.

10.23 am

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing this important debate.

I wish to make a few points the short amount of time available. First, my constituency, which is in south London, has only one tube station, so we are overwhelmingly reliant on services from the 11 railway stations in my constituency to be able to get to work, visit friends and family, get to school, and for shopping and leisure activities. Those commuter rail services are vital for London's economy as well as for the convenience of my constituents. Only one of the stations in my constituency currently has step-free access.

Secondly, we have seen the erosion of our rail services in recent years. Timetables have been cut, services have become progressively less reliable, and the use of short trains has increased, with consequent overcrowding. My residents are thoroughly fed up at the quality of the rail services they receive week by week, while the costs of those services have continued to spiral.

Thirdly, cuts to ticket offices will have a disproportionate impact on disabled or visually impaired constituents. I am listening to my constituents. My constituent who is a wheelchair user explained to me that when he arrives at a station and needs assistance, he will visit the ticket office, where help can be easily called. How is he to find somebody to help when there is not that single anchor within the station?

Fourthly, the proposed model is set up to fail. We saw this with police stations. When the police closed all their front counters in my constituency and popped up in supermarkets once a week, residents could never find them, so the service was never used and it declined. I put out a survey to my constituents, and 96% are opposed to these measures. I implore the Government to listen to residents up and down the country, scrap these measures and keep our ticket offices open.

10.25 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I congratulate my good friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing the debate. My constituents do not have to use the train. They choose to, to avoid congestion; to avoid high parking charges when they arrive anywhere by car; to reduce their carbon footprint; because it is easier; because they enjoy the journey—anyone would, coming down to west Cornwall; and because we like and value the staff. All that is at risk by the ludicrous proposal to close the dedicated ticket offices in Penzance and St Erth.

Rail groups' own figures confirm the value of Penzance ticket office: as a proportion of ticket sales, a third more tickets are sold at the station in Penzance than in Exeter St David's or Plymouth. There is huge support for Penzance ticket office, which will be demonstrated by

the level of engagement in the consultation. Even the big boss of RMT came down to Penzance in the summer to see what all the fuss was about.

People use the dedicated ticket office to plan their best route, get the best connection, get the best price, get the best and most convenient ticket, and navigate the connections. The reason is that Penzance is the start of the British rail network. Real people are needed to advise and help plan our journeys.

The Government have invested millions—as we heard in relation to the Dawlish route—in the rail network since 2015, in track upgrades, new rolling stock, delay repay compensation, the train care centre in Penzance and station upgrades. Let us not cast a shadow over that impressive investment by closing dedicated ticket offices where they are needed. That will do nothing to increase passenger numbers on our rail network or get to net zero.

10.27 am

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Both the proposal and the process have been carried out incredibly badly, and both, I would argue, are discriminatory. The proposal to close all these ticket offices is bad for passengers and the public in general, and it will disproportionately impact disabled people, women and other minorities. That is one of the reasons the public object to it so much.

We then turn to the process itself. How can we have a situation where the Government are pushing through a discriminatory proposal with a consultation that, itself, is discriminatory? The National Federation of the Blind of the UK said that the public consultation was not accessible, and that is the extended one—first it was meant to be 21 days, and then it was extended, but even then, the consultation was not fully accessible to many of those who will be most adversely impacted by this dreadful proposal.

Despite that, nearly 700,000 people have registered their objection to this proposal. If the consultation had been carried out more sensibly and more accessibly, that figure would have been even higher. There have been 13 train operating companies and 25 email addresses, with variation in the level of accessibility of documents, and yet 700,000 people still made their point. Many more out there feel very strongly about it.

The heart and soul is being ripped out of our local shops, our local railway stations and our communities. Human interaction is so important. There are more important things than profit. Community and accessibility are both very important, and they are being ridden over by this proposal.

10.29 am

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am fortunate to have 10 railway stations in my constituency, but only one, Cleethorpes, currently has a ticket office. TransPennine, which manages Cleethorpes station along with neighbouring Grimsby Town station, has issued the following statement:

“If a customer specifically needs station staff assistance to access rail services, by providing help through the station, then outside station staffing times, alternative transport to the nearest accessible station or to their destination will be provided”.

That is complete madness. Not all journeys are planned: an elderly lady might receive a call at 4 o'clock in the afternoon from her daughter saying, “My husband's

gone into hospital and I need your help,” or some other scenario. How is that lady to get a ticket, arrange a journey and somehow get TransPennine to provide a taxi or—the dreaded words—a replacement bus service? This is nonsense. How is it going to apply?

Considering that TransPennine and other railway companies are subsidised by the taxpayer, who is actually going to pay for the taxi driver or the ticket? Is the taxi driver going to collect money on behalf of TransPennine? Is it ever going to reach the company? The whole thing is a nonsense. Grimsby Town station, which is used by many Cleethorpes residents, had its ticket office modernised a few years ago in partnership with North East Lincolnshire Council. Public money was used to modernise the ticket office, which is now proposed for closure.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for rail, I can tell the Minister that the officers of the group have met and are unanimously opposed to this. It is madness. Stop it now.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I thank colleagues for their co-operation while we got through so many speeches.

10.31 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing this debate. The fact that so many Members are present, representing a lot of political parties across the House, shows how much interest there is in the debate.

I am afraid that I do not share the trade union-bashing rhetoric of the hon. Member's speech. I am a proud trade unionist. The trade union movement plays a vital role as a social partner in helping so many workers to improve their pay and working conditions. It is fascinating that while the hon. Member was speaking, I was reading the RMT briefing, and all the points made were similar—in fact, there was unique agreement between the RMT and the hon. Member. In seriousness, he is correct, and the points he makes are widely accepted not just by the trade union movement and by hon. Members, but by the wider public. They are important points that I want to address.

As the hon. Member and others have said, there is real concern about whether or not this is an actual consultation. Will it make changes, or is it a fait accompli? It is concerning to hear and read that as soon as the consultation happened, a section 188 redundancy notice was issued to the trade unions, putting 2,300 station staff jobs at risk. I commend the hon. Member for saying that he is supporting his former colleagues in the workplace, because these are people's jobs and livelihoods. It is also concerning to read that at least one train company, Avanti West Coast, is already proceeding to make arrangements for letting agents to put out their ticket office spaces for rent. I hope that the Minister can tell us whether the consultation is a real consultation or a fait accompli.

The hon. Member and others mentioned the role of ticket office workers. We should listen to what ticket office workers are saying, which is that 97% of them believe that closing ticket offices will make it harder for passengers to get the best-value fare for their journey. The hon. Member made an excellent contribution on that point: he mentioned the Trainline app and others,

[Chris Stephens]

and the fact that when there is a ticket office, people get the cheapest fare. That was a very important part of his speech, which I hope the Minister will answer.

Some 98% of ticket office workers say that closing ticket offices would worsen accessibility for disabled, deaf and older people, a point that was made very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows); 98% say that closing ticket offices would worsen the quality of service provided to passengers; 94% say that closing ticket offices would worsen passenger safety and security. That is a very real issue that a lot of Members have mentioned—people feel safe when tickets offices are staffed.

Andy McDonald: A few moments ago the hon. Member talked about ticket pricing, and staff do assist passengers through that minefield. Does he agree that when there are 55 million different products on the market in the rail industry, it is imperative to have people in ticket offices able to navigate the complexities of the system?

Chris Stephens: That is absolutely correct. The staff have the experience and knowledge to do that. It goes back to the points made about human interaction, but it is also about knowledge. Ticket office staff have that knowledge to be able to say, “If you buy a ticket to this place and then this place, that works out much better value for money.”

We have to take into consideration that ticket offices help people who are unbanked—there is still an issue in society around cash. We are having a debate in my constituency about bank closures, for example, and there was a bank closure debate in the Chamber last week. The points raised in that debate could easily be raised here. Ticket offices allow people to make part cash/part card payments because not everybody has online access to make those purchases.

There are real perceptions around how passengers feel safe at stations. Some train stations, sadly, have antisocial behaviour, often requiring police attendance. If there are no staff at the stations, that makes people feel unsafe and they believe it is inevitable that the situation would worsen.

Why, Mr Davies, is the Scottish National party intervening on ticket office closures in England? I know you are asking yourself that question, as many others are. It is because there are threatened ticket office closures in Scotland. Avanti West Coast wants to close the office in Glasgow, and London North Eastern Railway is proposing to close the ticket office in Edinburgh. It is ridiculous, as I heard someone say. The move to close almost all rail ticket offices in England would be disastrous and should be rolled back immediately. The Scottish Government’s advisers on accessible transport have described the move as “entirely unacceptable”. It appears that some Tory Ministers knew how bad the move would be for their constituents because it is reported that the Chancellor tried to protect his own constituency from closures before they were even announced.

Transport for All, a disabled people’s rights group, has called on people to reject the plans in the consultation as they will harm the rights and access of disabled people to transport. I do not believe in the private sector model in rail provision. I think the privatisation

of rail has been a backward step for many people. I hope the Government will consider following Scotland’s lead and bring rail back into public ownership, because it is time we had a rail service for all that was for people, not for profit.

10.38 am

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for opening this important debate and for his work as the chair of the APPG on South Western Railway. He is a former member of staff in the rail sector—I believe as a ticket office clerk and a train guard—so his contribution is particularly valued here today.

As someone who used to commute from Fratton station to London Waterloo five days a week, I want to start by paying tribute to all the ticket office staff in Portsmouth and across the country who have helped me and, I am sure, many others at times of high stress. Hearing constant speculation about their job security in recent months will have been deeply worrying to many, but I hope the words of colleagues today, as well as the 680,000 responses to the recent consultation, show how much they are valued by the British public.

The debate has been popular with valuable contributions from Members of all parties. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) made the important point that we cannot forget about the 1.1 million British adults with no bank account, who increasingly face barriers at cashless stations. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) made helpful comments about the inadequacies of the consultation, and the impact on those with literacy and numeracy issues and on people with disabilities—a point also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley).

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) said eloquently that the issue is about people and human interaction, which is why we must find a better way forward on ticketing and fares, and rethink these plans—a view shared by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), who said that these proposals are about putting profit before people. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) made the case powerfully against closures in London. I thank all Members for their insightful remarks about the proposals and the process.

As Members have highlighted, throughout the process the Government have shown no respect to rail staff, passengers and vulnerable people who will be most impacted by the decision. Ministers initially tried to force through these enormous changes, affecting more than 150 million rail journeys a year, with a consultation period of just 21 days. This was evidently designed to be a rubber stamp for a decision that had already been made with the most vulnerable cut out. It was only following an incredible demonstration of widespread opposition—from organisations including Disability Rights UK, the National Federation of the Blind, Transport for All, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People and Guide Dogs UK—that the Government issued a chaotic last-minute decision to extend the deadline. Even countless

Conservative MPs have spoken out, in addition to 680,000 responses to the consultation, which I suspect are not all glowing endorsements of the Government's plans.

In contrast, the only support the changes have had has come from Conservative Ministers. Yet, despite that, Ministers seem determined to press ahead regardless—but why? Despite what they say, given the ditched plans for Great British Railways, we know that this is not about reform; given the Government's dismal record on contactless ticketing, we know it is not about modernisation; and given the huge disruption this will cause, we know it is not about improving the service for passengers. Given the Government's record on our country's rail services, we know that it is about lowering quality and running our rail network further into the ground—all to the detriment of passengers.

Many Members have spoken eloquently about key concerns raised by passengers and staff across the country regarding the closures, so I will focus my remarks on the mounting evidence that the Government are not being straight with the public on this matter. Specifically, there are three claims used by the Rail Minister to justify the closures that I simply do not believe stand up to scrutiny.

First, the Minister has put on record that “no currently staffed stations will be unstaffed”.—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2023; Vol. 735, c. 929.]

However, the evidence from train companies shows that thousands of staff hours will be lost, with stations across the country becoming unstaffed. To name but a few: East Midlands Railway has 16 stations that would become unstaffed, with just daily or weekly visits from mobile teams and a loss of at least 728 staffing hours a week; and South Western's proposals would see 135 instances where stations that currently have ticket offices in operation are no longer staffed on certain days of the week. For example, Worcester Park ticket office is currently open for 12 hours on Fridays, but would become unstaffed on this day under the proposals. The list goes on: Greater Anglia's proposals would result in a loss of 730 hours a week; Avanti's 350 hours; c2c's 200 hours; and Northern's a whopping 6,500 hours a week compared with its current ticket office hours. The question, therefore, is not whether currently staffed stations will become unstaffed, but whether Ministers know this to be true and are pressing ahead anyway, or whether the plans have been so rushed that Ministers do not even realise their true impact.

As we have heard this morning, one in nine tickets are sold at physical ticket offices. Many of those are to disabled and elderly people, infrequent passengers and people with language difficulties, for whom getting public transport can already be a tricky experience. As we have heard, 23% of disabled adults are unable to use the internet, and only 3% of blind people are able to use ticket vending machines without problems.

The second claim that the Minister has used to justify closures is that

“staff will still be there to provide assistance and additional support for those who need and want it”.—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2023; Vol. 735, c. 929.]

Operators, however, have admitted that that may not be the case. Avanti has said that this project may lead more customers to use the ticket vending machines, which are not accessible for some disabled customers, including those with visual impairments. Northern has admitted:

“some customers with disabilities may not receive assistance during hours where the staff presence has been removed. This may discourage some passengers from using the railway.”

What a shocking indictment of the Government's plans. At a time when we should be encouraging as many people as possible to use our trains, the Government are actively making it more difficult, particularly for those who rely on public transport the most.

Members have rightly raised concerns about the impact of closures on job security. The Minister's third claim to justify the closures is that the proposals were not about job losses, but that

“the aim of these measures is to redeploy staff who are currently underutilised and who are not seeing the passengers that they used to”.—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2023; Vol. 735, c. 936.]

Yet analysis of rail operator plans shows that 2,300 station staff jobs are at risk, representing nearly a quarter of all station staff at those companies. It is time the Government saw sense and rethought the plans, as called for by Labour.

In the midst of a cost of living crisis, the least station staff deserve is honesty and clarity from the Government about their futures. The Minister must set the record straight today. Will he confirm whether he stands by the following statements? First, he said that

“no currently staffed stations will be unstaffed”,

despite evidence showing that thousands of staff hours will be lost with stations across the country becoming unstaffed. Secondly, he said that

“staff will still be there to provide assistance and additional support for those who need and want it”.—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2023; Vol. 735, c. 929.]

despite operators admitting that customers with disabilities may not receive assistance during the hours where staff presence is removed. Thirdly, he said that the proposals are not about job losses, despite analysis of rail operator plans showing 2,300 station staff jobs are at risk.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks. I restate my thanks to the hon. Member for West Dorset for securing the debate and to all hon. Members who contributed.

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for securing this important debate on railway ticket offices. I also give a warm welcome to his new role to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan). I look forward to working with him.

I will give my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset two minutes to wind up, but in the time I have allotted to me I want to set out a little more detail about the consultation, as many of the questions I have been asked have had that in mind. I will also discuss the rationale for the moves. I will try and take the odd intervention if I can, but, if I cannot, I will ensure that I respond to all right hon. and hon. Members who made their points.

I thank Members for their kind remarks and I enjoy working with everybody across the divide. I want to continue to work with all those who have railways at their heart, and at the heart of their constituencies, to make the railways work. I am a passionate advocate of

[*Huw Merriman*]

this, but Members are the champions and I want to continue to work with all Members. I recognise that some of my points will be accepted while others will not, but we will continue to liaise and engage, hopefully with the good spirit and kindness that I have been shown this morning.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Huw Merriman: I will make some progress and then I may have some time to take interventions.

Together with the rail industry, we want to improve and modernise the experience for passengers by moving staff out from behind the ticket office screens to provide more help and advice in customer-focused roles. As hon. Members have recognised, there has been a huge shift in the way in which passengers purchase their tickets at railway stations, with about one in every 10 transactions taking place in ticket offices in 2022 to 2023, although I take the points that that differs across the estate. Despite that change in passenger transacting behaviour, stations have hardly changed in the past 10 years, which means that staff are constrained to work in ticket offices, although they could serve passengers better on station platforms and concourses. Ten years ago, the ticket office proportion of sales was one in three and it is now almost one in 10.

Andy McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Huw Merriman: Yes, even though I said I would not do so for a while.

Andy McDonald: On the point about growth in the industry, the Minister and I both know that the growth in real passenger numbers will come from leisure. That means people making not regular but irregular journeys. Is it not more likely that they will need assistance at ticket offices, rather than online? Is that not the case?

Huw Merriman: To keep some structure to my speech, I will come later to a response that I hope will address that point about ensuring that passenger interaction remains, despite the changes.

The rail industry launched consultations on the future of ticket offices under the ticketing and settlement agreement process, which gave the public and stakeholders an opportunity to scrutinise the train operating companies' proposals to ensure that they work in the best way for passengers. As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Portsmouth South, my shadow, the consultation was extended. The 21-day period that was first used was the requirement under the ticketing and settlement agreement, which predates 2010. The volume of responses and interest in the consultation meant that it was recognised that it was right to extend it. I am glad that it was extended.

The train operator consultations ended on 1 September and, as has been mentioned, yielded more than 680,000 responses. Now, the independent passenger bodies—Transport Focus and London TravelWatch for stations in London—are engaging with train operators on the consultation response received and the criteria

set out. In the past week, I have spoken to the leads of the passenger bodies to ensure they have the resources and to discuss some of the points they may make. I also spoke yesterday to the train operator managing directors to discuss where these proposals may come out. Of course, I have no role in the consultation at this stage, because it is for those two parties to look for an outcome on each station—on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset—by the end of October. I expect the train operators to work collaboratively with the passenger bodies in the coming weeks, to respond to the concerns raised and to refine their proposals accordingly.

There has been much discussion about reduction of hours and expertise at stations with ticket offices. At this stage, I do not expect a material reduction in the number of hours where ticketing expertise is available at stations, in the manner that some have described. That has been set out in the consultation. I expect that by the end of the process, there will be a differing design. When we talk about redeployment, it is important to note that the volume of hours is similar to what we currently have.

Where agreement cannot be reached between the operators and the passenger bodies, individual cases may be referred to the Secretary of State for a decision. That is the next stage of the consultation. At that point, he will look to the guidance under the ticketing and settlement agreement. That guidance was updated in April 2022, following targeted consultation with stakeholders, and was published in February 2023.

The update was made to ensure decision making could account for differences between stations and modern retailing practices. That included replacing the numerically “busy” ticket office sales threshold with a wider range of factors that should be considered, including how proposals would impact customer service; security at stations; modernising retail practices, such as availability of pay-as-you-go ticketing, which continues to be rolled out; and support for passengers with disabilities, accessibility or other equality-related needs.

Marion Fellows: Will the Minister give way?

Huw Merriman: Sorry, I will not give way due to the time available.

It remains important that we reform our railway to enable staff to provide a more flexible, agile and personal service, creating the modern experience that people expect. We should also look for ways to ensure value for money for the taxpayer. I know from listening to constituents and parliamentarians that there is great interest in what will happen to ticket office staff should there be any changes. The changes are about modernising the passenger experience, by moving expert ticketing staff out of ticket offices to be more visible and accessible around the station.

As for the points that have been raised, if only 10% of tickets are being sold across the ticket counter, crudely that means that 90% of passengers are not in contact with a member of staff. The idea is to take the member of staff on to the platform or concourse to help passengers where they need it—as opposed to at the ticket office—and to provide extra information, reassurance and additional security for all passengers—[*Interruption.*]

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. The Minister must be heard.

Huw Merriman: Thank you, Mr Davies. Crucially, the Secretary of State and I have been clear in our expectation that no stations that are currently staffed will be unstaffed as a result of the reform. I have made the additional point about the hours not changing materially either, with staff still being there to provide assistance and additional support for those who need and want it. That would include advice on tickets and assistance in buying them. Should ticket offices close following the process, we would expect staff to be redeployed and multi-skilled in order to provide advice and assistance across the stations. Exact arrangements will vary operator by operator, and will be the subject of collective bargaining with the trade unions.

It is vital that our railway is accessible to all. I have engaged directly with accessibility groups, and will continue to do so, including at a meeting I have this afternoon with our Department's own lead. Alongside that, train operators are required to take into account the adequacy of the proposed alternatives in relation to the needs of passengers who are disabled, and to include that in the notice of the proposal sent to other operators and passenger groups.

Turning to the position in Scotland, I believe that ScotRail consulted on proposals for major changes to ticket office opening hours at 122 stations in 2022. Their opening hours had not changed, by and large, for 30 years. As part of that process, ScotRail was seeking to redeploy staff to provide enhanced customer service on the frontline. I understand that ScotRail amended some of its proposals in response to passenger and Transport Focus feedback. We also have the experience with London Underground, which has also moved away from ticket offices.

I make that point to all hon. and right hon. Members, because if the situation is changed whereby passengers are transacting in a different manner and are thus not seeing a member of staff regularly, my ultimate aim is to design a system in which all passengers can see members of staff and can get assistance with ticketing as well as the other assistance that passengers need. It is with that in mind that I will continue to engage with passenger groups and train operators. I want to ensure

that the passenger gets the best experience, that the staff have roles where they are fully occupied and fulfilled, and that the railway embraces change. I know that there are concerns, but I reiterate that I will continue to listen, engage and work with hon. Members. I reassure them that this is a genuine consultation, which has some stages yet to go.

10.57 am

Chris Loder: I thank the Minister for his response, and every Member for their contribution. My question to the Minister earlier was a request to stop the proposals from SWR to ensure that we do not see a reduction in staffed hours at Sherborne or Dorchester South. I think I have got a "not materially changing" response, which is progress from what we had before. I say to the Minister that I will continue to challenge him and make the case on behalf of my constituents to ensure that staffing hours do not reduce at both of my stations. I am sure that there are other Members who feel similarly.

The railways make an enormous net contribution to society and to the economy in this country. Before covid, on the South Western network, 40p of every £1 that was spent on train tickets came back to the Exchequer. Invariably, that was redeployed elsewhere across the country to support railways or other parts of the Exchequer spend. I fear that some of those wider economic benefits have not been considered in the proposals from train operators. Regrettably, the current set-up does not necessarily encourage that either.

It is clear that across the House we have quite a lot of things in common. That is partly because I was a station assistant at the beginning of my career, and for those who did not know, I am a former member of the RMT. I did not read the brief, but I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for pointing it out—I appreciate it very much. If people need a sense check on the fares from what I said earlier, brfares.com is the fact checker. It will be able to call them all out if they are wrong.

I thank everybody for what they have contributed. I thank the Minister for—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Border Target Operating Model: Food and Biosecurity

11 am

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I will call Mrs Natalie—*[Interruption.]* Order. Can people please be quiet as they are leaving the room so that we can get on with this debate? Thank you. I will call Mrs Natalie Elphicke to move the motion and then I will ask the Minister to respond. Hon. Members will be aware that, as is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate.

11.1 am

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Border Target Operating Model for food and biosecurity.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Today is Back British Farming Day. However, supporting our farming and food producing industries is not just about buying British and replacing EU subsidies; it is also about our food security, and protecting our biosecurity is an essential part of that. We must support our farmers and food producers with a level playing field and high quality standards. Why do border checks matter? This has been very well expressed by the National Farmers Union:

“Proportionate and effective controls are necessary if we are to prevent outbreaks of pests and diseases that threaten human, animal and plant health, the safety, quality and biosecurity of our food products and the confidence of our trading partners.”

Those dangers to our food and biosecurity are there every day at the border. Spot checks at the Dover border have highlighted some very serious concerns.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. She is outlining some of the problems and she will also be aware that the outstanding issues with the remnant of the insidious Northern Ireland protocol and Windsor framework have yet to be addressed. How will the model that she is describing and the suggestions that she is making ensure free and fair passage of food to Northern Ireland without reams of paperwork checks and other wastes of time and money that are designed only to pacify Europe and which harm Northern Ireland business? Surely we are in a worse boat than anybody else.

Mrs Elphicke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is exactly right, as ever, in bringing out the very serious issues with the management of the Northern Ireland issue. Controls have to be modern, proportionate, effective, and fair to business. He makes that point very well.

What we have seen on the Dover border is rancid meat, seeds with dangerous levels of pesticides and meat that could contain livestock-infecting diseases. All of these have been detected coming through Dover from the EU.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): My hon. Friend is exactly right. It is fitting that the debate is taking place on Back British Farming Day. Biosecurity is pivotal to protecting UK farming. As she has mentioned,

infectious disease is coming in. We know the implications of foot and mouth disease and African swine fever. Does she agree with me that getting this targeted border operating model up and running and working is critical to the nation's biosecurity, animal health and welfare and public health, and that pivotal to all that is to ensure that we have the Animal and Plant Health Agency resourced and staffed so that it can monitor the borders properly, and also to upgrade the facilities at Weybridge in Surrey, its disease HQ?

Mrs Elphicke: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is incredibly knowledgeable on this issue, as we have just heard, and he is exactly right. We cannot wait any longer. I will be explaining how, at the Dover frontline, we have had a ready-to-go, state-of-the-art facility mothballed for 18 months. It should be put to work straightaway to protect our nation. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to put these facilities and these new measures in place urgently.

What are we finding at the moment? With global food disruption and increased costs of production getting worse because of the war in Ukraine, threats to food safety are on the increase. It is not just food. Farm animals are threatened by the diseases carried in infected meat. We need to be very clear about that. This is not the odd rogue import. Dover Port Health Authority has found it happening on an industrial scale—tonnes of this stuff. It has formally warned the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the increased risks and findings.

This meat does not meet our—or even Europe's—required standards for slaughter, storage or import. It is not just unhealthy, but dangerous. The danger is not just to humans, but to our livestock and therefore to the livelihoods of our farmers and food producers. That is because this rancid, illegal meat can contain live viruses of some of the most serious threats to our animals. As we have heard, diseases such as African swine fever have steadily spread from eastern Europe to Germany and now France. The NFU has said:

“A breakdown in biosecurity is one of the most serious risks we face as a nation.”

I agree with that.

It is welcome that the Government have, at last, published the border target operating model. However, the long delay and continued uncertainty around the new arrangements is worrying. Concerns have been raised with me by Kent-based import-export businesses, national food and drink trade bodies, the British Poultry Council, the NFU and the Dover port health authority. As I mentioned, it is some 18 months now since Dover's ready-to-go, taxpayer-funded, state-of-the-art post-Brexit facilities were mothballed, awaiting the publication of the proposed target operating model for the border. At the time, the model was expected in some weeks. In the end, it was published just a couple of weeks ago, on 29 August 2023.

Almost a year ago, last October, I led a debate in Westminster Hall on this subject. The then answering Minister said that for traders, the target operating model “will explain what must be done upstream of the border before goods arrive at it, and what must happen at the border—including border control posts”.—*[Official Report, 18 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 271WH.]*

We finally have the border target operating model, but in relation to the short straits, which means the port of Dover and the Eurotunnel, we have no confirmed border control posts even now.

The target operating model says that a decision will be published soon and that facilities will be operational in April 2024. However, as I have outlined, the Dover facility has been ready to go for some 18 months. April 2024 would represent a delay of some two years from when the facility was due to be made live, during which time the operating environment for food and biosecurity has significantly deteriorated, as DEFRA has been told time and again.

Given the importance of these issues, the delay is unacceptable. The state-of-the-art facility at Dover needs to be opened right away. Dover has the expertise needed to secure our borders, but it is not being supported as it should be. Dover needs to be backed in its vital role in keeping our country's food and farming safe. Government action is needed now to ensure that we are properly protected from dangerous food and diseases coming into the UK. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm when the new Dover facility, which is so obviously needed, will be opened.

I would like to address why things have taken so long and what needs to happen. There are three issues. The first is the dreaded phrase "cross-governmental working", which, in layman's terms, means that no one person is in charge and the buck does not stop anywhere. As I have before, I make the case for a Department for the border to draw together all the border-related functions, as many other countries do, including America and Australia. It would be a single window under a single Department responsible for order at the border. From customs to trade, and from biosecurity to visa entry and migration, there is an urgent need for a single Department in charge of setting policy, overseeing operations and—importantly—taking responsibility for what is happening at our borders.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, particularly about being joined up. We are talking about the risks, but there are also opportunities for UK businesses. If we get the level playing field right—if we get a post-Brexit regime that not only deals with all the UK concerns and needs but provides a level playing field for businesses here and abroad—it is a great export opportunity for small businesses such as Tozer Seeds in my constituency.

Mrs Elphicke: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. If we can get the import border checks right, we will boost our export potential as well, whereas if we have weak import controls we will put at risk the very businesses that should be taking the opportunities provided by our new trading agreements in our post-Brexit world. I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention.

The need for a single department and a single focus at the border also applies operationally, because accountability matters. It is imperative that Dover continue to be the sole port health authority responsible for the short straits. Anything else would weaken accountability, introduce new risks in our border controls and make our country less safe. Dover is best placed to manage resources between multiple facilities to keep trade moving and manage the ebb and flow of volume traffic movements.

It is well used to doing so and is the most cost-effective and sensible option to manage the border. I am aware that Dover port health authority has written to Ministers to express its strong wish to oversee all relevant border control posts for the short straits in order to manage and control the risks. I hope that the Minister can give some update or assurance on that issue today.

The second issue is that the Government hope to introduce so-called digital borders. Unfortunately, that has not proved possible to achieve quickly, as the Government's own wonderfully named ecosystem of trust evaluation report, which was published last month, sets out. Let me be very clear. Having digital borders is a very good idea that I am very keen on—later today I will be chairing the all-party parliamentary group on blockchain, and I wholeheartedly agree that the future border is a digital and even a smart one—but there is a problem. At the moment, neither industry nor Government are ready for digital borders. That is made clear by the ecosystem of trust evaluation report in relation to biosecurity and food security. Page 8 of the report says:

"The UK government believes that transforming the border means moving physical processes away from the frontier wherever possible."

As a border MP, I cannot see any logic in the suggestion that the starting point would be moving checks away from where the goods come in. Checking at point of entry is regarded globally as the gold standard for border control, with very good reason: to stop bootleggers and smugglers and to contain the risk of contamination of the food chain. Those risks are not trivial. The evaluation report makes it crystal clear that digital borders, at this time, will not work. There is no effective substitute for the physical border checks that need to happen. Page 4 of the report says:

"The pilots show us that new models are not yet ready to replace traditional mechanisms of border control."

The reasons for that are not high-tech. As pages 22 to 24 of the evaluation report set out, they are very basic things like descriptions of the load and weight of a consignment being available only in formats that are not machine-readable by digital border systems or are "incompatible with government-systems specific risking rules."

What does that mean? It means that they cannot be read by the IT system, so we cannot have an intelligence-led, risk-weighted approach. We therefore cannot, at this time, have a digital borders programme.

The report says that "there was no way to replicate identity and physical checks. Defra notes biosecurity assurance capabilities from consortia"—the pilot partners—

"are limited and do not provide the same level of information/assurance as regular import processes."

The report also identified gaps, one of which was

"Lack of transmission data (ie likelihood of a disease hazard surviving on a commodity)."

That could mean rancid meat carrying a serious disease, which cannot be found through these digital processes. There is also a lack of "mitigations and prohibitions data"—information about whether there is a disease outbreak or an export ban in the country that the food is coming from. That is a very serious concern that I hope the Minister will address.

For the Food Standards Agency, the information gathered through the digital process was described as being of "little value". The report concluded that there are serious threats that need to be addressed and that an

[Mrs Elphicke]

“effective import regime is therefore essential to protect domestic food safety and animal and plant health and welfare.”

That brings me to my third and final point. The evaluation report is clear that physical border checks will be needed for the foreseeable future to keep our country safe, and that that is the right and responsible thing to do. Digital borders will come, but not yet.

Much has been made of the costs of making checks at the short straits—we still await the final charging structure, which is expected at some point in autumn 2023—but against them we have to set the cost of doing nothing. We cannot allow toxic food to enter the food chain. We cannot risk disease threatening our national livestock herds. We know how much this costs, because we have been here before. The costs are even set out in the Government’s own report, at page 56: the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 cost an estimated £8 billion, the horsemeat scandal of 2013 cost £120 million, and ash dieback in 2014 cost £15 billion.

There needs to be a level playing field—that is important. The British Poultry Council has said that its industry is paying £55 million a year to export to the EU, while imports to the UK are free for EU exporters. That is unfair and undermines our British farmers and food producers. DEFRA needs to stand up for our farmers to have a disease-free level playing field with the highest food standards. As we have touched on, if we import from a country that is suffering an outbreak, we can expect that other countries may ban our own produce. That could affect our ability to make the most of the trade agreements we have made, so it is important that that does not happen.

The bottom line when it comes to border security on food and disease is that we must invest to keep our food, our farms and our exports safe and secure. We cannot rely on the EU to check our food for us. We are an independent trading nation, so it is right that we now do this for ourselves. That is the clear lesson from the evidence found at the Dover frontline.

I ask the Minister to join me in thanking the Dover Port Health Authority team, under the leadership of Nadeem Aziz and Lucy Manzano, who is here today, for the work they do every day to protect our country from food and biosecurity risks. They need to be better supported, particularly with the immediate opening of the new Dover facility. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government will keep our country safe and, on Back British Farming Day, keep our farmers and their livestock safe and biosecure.

11.16 am

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) for securing a debate on this important topic, and I thank all colleagues who have come along. I join her in paying tribute to the team at Dover, who do so much to protect our borders and who work hard on our behalf.

The recently published border target operating model is a very important milestone for the UK, reflecting a long period of intense work across Government, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about it

today. Introducing biosecurity controls on imports is not optional. They are critical to protecting us from harmful diseases such as African swine fever, but they are also essential to protect our international trading interests; our trading partners want to be reassured that we maintain the highest biosecurity standards. The overall ambition of the BTOM is to introduce robust controls that protect biosecurity while reducing administrative and cost burdens for importers.

Following our departure from the EU, it was for us to establish a controls regime that worked for us. That is set out in the BTOM, published on 29 August. We issued a draft BTOM in April 2023 for the purposes of consultation with stakeholders. During that period, we had about 10,000 participants at multiple stakeholder events, received over 200 written responses through our online portal, and had over 650 detailed responses at focused sessions with food retailers, producers, the logistics sector and many others. We have listened to that feedback and have adapted the model accordingly. To give businesses more time to prepare, which their feedback made clear was important for them, we have moved back by three months the phased introduction of controls.

The new controls will be introduced as follows: on 31 January 2024, health certification will be introduced for imports of medium-risk animal products, plants, plant products, and high-risk food and feed of non-animal origin from the EU.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I would like some clarity. Let us imagine I have had a career change and am bringing a lorryload of qualifying Northern Ireland goods from Northern Ireland to GB. Under the new model, will I be free to drive off the ferry and proceed on my onward journey without being stopped?

Mark Spencer: Being stopped in Northern Ireland, as you are crossing the Irish sea?

Carla Lockhart: Going from Northern Ireland to GB.

Mark Spencer: The Windsor framework sets out the criteria for trade between GB and Northern Ireland. We are keen to facilitate that border and to work with businesses in Northern Ireland. We want Northern Ireland to feel very much part of the United Kingdom, as I know the hon. Lady does, which is why we are trying to make sure that that trading operation flows as freely as possible.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I think the Minister may have misunderstood the question. It is not about GB to Northern Ireland. Now that the border control model is going to refer to goods going into GB, will there be any checks on Northern Ireland qualifying goods going from Northern Ireland into GB—or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) asked, will people be free to drive through without any checks at all?

Mark Spencer: I am not quite sure that I fully understand. Is the right hon. Gentleman talking about trade coming from Northern Ireland to the European Union?

Sammy Wilson: No, to GB.

Mark Spencer: Let me take another intervention and let the right hon. Gentleman try to explain the question again.

Sammy Wilson: We are talking about trade from Northern Ireland into GB—trade that the Government have said will be totally unfettered. Since the border operating model will require goods going into GB to have checks, the question is: will Northern Ireland goods then be subject to checks going into GB?

Mark Spencer: My apologies; I now understand the question that the right hon. Gentleman is asking. The TOM does not change controls on qualifying Northern Ireland goods. They will still benefit from completely unfettered access. It should not affect that at all.

Let me just return to what we are doing on the new controls.

Sammy Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Spencer: I will take another intervention, but I do want to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover.

Sammy Wilson: There will be goods travelling from the Irish Republic via Northern Ireland—through the port of Larne or through Belfast—into Cairnryan. How will a distinction be made between loads of Northern Ireland qualifying goods and goods coming, for example, from the Irish Republic, which is part of the EU, through Northern Ireland and into GB? What criteria will be put in place to ensure that those goods are checked but Northern Ireland ones are not?

Mark Spencer: I am very conscious that this is a debate about the Dover straits, and I do not want to be diverted into a debate about the Windsor framework, but I understand the right hon. Gentleman's passion on the topic. We are setting out how the Windsor framework will operate in the future; as I have said to him, we are very keen to ensure that trade is as free as possible between Northern Ireland and the rest of GB.

Let me return to the controls that we are introducing. On 31 January, we are introducing health certification on imports of medium-risk animal products, plants, plant products, and high-risk food and feed of non-animal origin from the EU. On 30 April 2024, we will introduce the documentary and risk-based identity and physical checks on medium-risk animal products, plants, plant products, and high-risk food and feed of non-animal origin from the EU. We will also begin to simplify imports from non-EU countries. On 31 October 2024, the requirement for safety and security declarations for imports into Great Britain from the EU or from other territories will come into force. Alongside that, we will introduce a reduced dataset for imports, and use of the UK single trade window will remove duplication.

In response to the feedback on the draft TOM, we have also improved the trusted trader offer for animal products, designed a new certification logistics pilot to support movements of goods from hubs in the EU, and provided further information on how we will support importers using groupage models to move sanitary and phytosanitary goods into the UK.

We are confident that the decision to move controls back by three months achieves the right balance between supporting business readiness ahead of the introduction of the controls and mitigating biosecurity risk to the UK. In the meantime, DEFRA has implemented controls on the highest-risk imports of live animals and plants from the EU. We will continue to support and fund port health authorities to manage UK biosecurity, including controls to protect against African swine fever.

As was promised when we published the UK 2025 border strategy in 2020, the TOM introduces a range of technological advances to ensure a fully 21st-century border that facilitates UK trade. The development of a single trade window will make the process for importing to the UK simpler and more streamlined, enabling importers to meet their border obligations by submitting information only once.

Let me turn to the facilities in Kent. To implement the SPS controls regime, we need the right infrastructure, particularly in Kent, where the port of Dover and the Eurotunnel are the main points of entry for the majority of EU SPS imports. Further to the publication of the TOM, and based on data gathered, the Government are reviewing our BCP needs in Kent and reviewing whether two inland BCPs—one at Sevington and one at Bastion Point—are needed to serve the volume of SPS goods transiting the port of Dover and the Eurotunnel. As the infrastructure was constructed for a previous border model, which required more intensive checks, it is only right that the Government review the operating arrangements to ensure that they are proportionate to our needs and are cost-effective for traders using the short straits.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover for sharing her views on the matter in such a forceful way. She is a passionate advocate for her constituency, which is important to the UK's security. As she knows, we will be in touch shortly with a decision on this important matter. I thank her again for securing the debate, and I thank all colleagues who have participated.

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is making an important speech about the new regime, and much of it is welcome. He has made the point that pests and disease do enormous harm to crops. Maize crops can suffer losses of up to a fifth from any outbreak of pests or disease. I would be interested to know a bit more about what the Government will do on surveillance, because that is the most important way of preventing diseases from coming into the UK in the first place.

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend raises an important point: we need to make sure that we are using surveillance. As he will be aware, it is often best not to talk too publicly about the methods we use to protect our borders and detect diseases, but I can give him an assurance that we take the issue very seriously. We use intelligence to detect where the risks will be, but we also have robust regimes in place to make sure that we can pick things up as they come into the country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) mentioned, African swine fever is moving across Europe. It is vital for our pig sector that we protect ourselves from the disease entering the UK, which is why we are introducing robust regimes to make

[Mark Spencer]

sure that we protect our border, back our farmers and back our food production system. Working together, that is what we will do, moving forward.

Dr Hudson: Does the Minister agree that if we get a fully operational border target model, it will not only protect the nation's biosecurity, but help to unearth the illicit movement of animals in and out of the country? That includes puppy smuggling, the smuggling of heavily pregnant dogs and those that have had their ears horrifically cropped, and horses being illegally exported to Europe for slaughter. Can he reassure me that the new model will help to stamp out some of those practices?

Mark Spencer: Those are all things that we want to achieve. The way to do so is by having a very efficient border point where we can check things, deter criminal activity—let us be clear that some of this stuff is criminal activity—and prevent inadvertent infection through diseases and pests at the same time.

We have had a really productive debate. Once again, I put on the record my thanks to the team at Dover for keeping us secure, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover for her support.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

High Street Heritage and Conservation Areas

[YVONNE FOVARGUE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered high street heritage and empty properties in conservation areas.

I am delighted to have secured this debate and to hold it today with you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. Five years ago, I led a similar debate on town centre heritage action zones. At the time, it had recently been announced that Stoke-on-Trent would enjoy a zone that, while encompassing every surviving bottle oven in the Potteries, would focus mostly on Longton in my constituency, one of the six historic pottery towns that make up the modern city of Stoke-on-Trent, and home to the largest localised collection of bottle ovens.

Since the Clean Air Act 1956, the bottle ovens are no longer fired, but they are key to our identity as the Potteries, the authentic world capital of ceramics. They are the picture-postcard view—or, more likely these days, the selfie. As I said five years ago, the paradox of the international tourism market is that when people can travel anywhere in the world, they actually want to go to places that are unlike anywhere else on earth. Well, there is nowhere in the world like Stoke-on-Trent for bottle ovens, and there is nowhere in Stoke-on-Trent like Longton for bottle ovens.

The trouble is that if a bottle oven cannot be used for firing pots, what can be done with it? We have lost hundreds of them while struggling to find an answer to that question. The work of the HAZ in bringing together the owners of the remaining bottle ovens with local academics, experts from national bodies and the city council has been really positive in helping to exchange ideas and build a more coherent narrative for the role of historic ovens in our city's future sense of place.

I am delighted that Stoke-on-Trent will be the home of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' new flagship arm's length body, the Office for Place. I will say more about that later in my speech, but I note that its mission is to help councils to create beautiful, successful and enduring places. I have to say that our city council does indeed need help, and we must recognise that. There is a shortage of officers with the right skills in the field of heritage—a skills shortage that hampers councils of all political colours across the country. Historic England has experienced similar issues in filling highly skilled roles. It also hampers us as Members of Parliament when we need expert information that is just not there, whether for responding to consultations or bidding for additional funding.

For example, Stoke-on-Trent City Council recently ran a public consultation on the boundaries of each conservation area in Stoke-on-Trent. I responded to that consultation on the proposals for the conservation areas in my constituency, but time and again I was hampered because no character appraisal was available for the conservation areas within their existing boundaries. Such appraisals should surely be the basis for deciding

what would be in character for any new boundaries to embrace. Where appraisals are available, they are sometimes decades old.

This really matters, because conservation areas must be meaningful; there must be some evident logic about what they are there to conserve. Optimally, in Stoke-on-Trent they will actively conserve and enhance the historic fabric of our city, with its unique character as the Potteries—the world capital of ceramics, and one modern city of six historic towns and numerous subsumed but distinct villages. An expert character appraisal is vital to determine how successful conservation areas are in achieving such an aim.

In the end, for this particular consultation I relied on my own appraisal from my years of being out and about and getting to know the character of each area and how areas are defined in the heads of local people. This is not necessarily how they appear to be defined in some cases, in which the areas defined seem to be aimed primarily at achieving convenient, bureaucratic tidiness.

There was a particularly ludicrous suggestion that certain out-of-character post-war housing in Fenton should be brought into the Albert Square conservation area. No explanation has been given as to why no character appraisal of any age is available for this conservation area, despite it having been declared in 1987. That really matters, because bringing someone's house into a conservation area is so restrictive. If it is not obviously for heritage reasons, it looks arbitrary. This unpredictability as to what the council wants to achieve hinders necessary economic development.

Some of our current conservation areas are visibly in a very poor state. The focus should be on getting them into a much better state, rather than simply widening their boundaries or merging them for no good reason, other than perhaps to be seen to be doing something on paper that ticks the heritage box. But something on paper is not enough. Ultimately, both the enforcement action and the resources needed to address properties of concern have been insufficient.

Virtually no enforcement took place during the pandemic, and things have not got much better since. Effective enforcement action needs to be properly resourced, with increased use of section 215 notices. As the Minister will know, the Government guidance makes it clear that such powers should be used proactively, rather than just being complaint-led. Indeed, the guidance also makes it clear that authorities that use the powers proactively have been more successful in achieving wider regeneration benefits. The guidance says:

“Experience has shown that authorities that interpret the scope of s215 widely also tend to be more proactive and successful at using the powers to achieve wider regeneration objectives.”

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. This topic is close to my heart, and we can see from the Members present that the Midlands and the Black Country feel strongly about heritage buildings.

Members may be aware of what happened to the Crooked House pub. With your indulgence, Ms Fovargue, I will bring up some of the related issues. On the role of local authorities in all this, my research has quickly established that it is voluntary for councils to maintain a register of heritage buildings—not all local councils do it. In fact, when councils do have a register, it is a

document that sits on a shelf and can quite often be forgotten about. What does my hon. Friend think about making it compulsory for all local authorities to have a register of buildings that might tick the box for being of heritage value, and for that register to be reviewed annually or biannually to make sure it is maintained and up to date? Unfortunately, the Crooked House was not on such a local authority register.

Jack Brereton: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. I very much agree that more should be done to document important historic buildings, because they are very emotive. That shocking incident in particular—the destruction of what was an important local historic asset in the south of Staffordshire—has had a massive impact on the local community. We have seen a massive outpouring because of the damage that has been done. I agree with my hon. Friend about the important role that local authorities should play when it comes to heritage and the maintenance of a designated list of the historic buildings within local areas.

Sticks like section 215 are sadly needed because sometimes even generous carrots, such as funding from the heritage action zone schemes and partnership schemes in conservation areas, are an insufficient lure. This is especially the case when it comes to absentee landlords, often overseas, who are interested solely in land value and are sometimes, I suggest, waiting for heritage buildings to get into such a poor state that they are able, or required, to demolish them, as we saw with the pub that my hon. Friend just mentioned.

We have actually had buildings falling into the street in Longton. The latest one, on Market Street, could have killed someone. I and others made multiple reports to the council about the perilous condition, but action was not taken until it was too late. The whole of Longton conservation area is on the heritage at-risk register, and is rated as very poor by Historic England. The whole of the historic Trent and Mersey canal through the city, including where it runs down the west of my constituency, is also registered as at risk. This is the culmination of decades of inaction, under-investment, decline and a preference for tinkering at the edges. It has to change.

Where there has been a proper focus, such as on Trentham mausoleum in my constituency—the only grade I listed property in Stoke-on-Trent—the situation has greatly improved. There is now a clear path for getting the mausoleum off the at-risk register, on which it is now listed as being in a “fair” condition and described as “generally sound”.

Hopefully, the Office for Place will help to focus minds further. I certainly look forward to engaging with it and talking through where I think our sense of place in the south of the city is being undermined. I have done the same with Historic England and am grateful to that body for ensuring that parliamentarians are involved and informed. Having made the case to win funding from the Government, it is right that MPs play an important role.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Stafford has a number of similar challenges, with heritage buildings being closed on my high street, which is why I campaigned for the Shire

[*Theo Clarke*]

Hall to be reopened—the Government recently gave us £1.6 million to do that. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must do more to regenerate and reopen these historic buildings in Staffordshire, and that we must invest and level up in the west midlands?

Jack Brereton: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and commend the work she has been doing in the town centre to bring some of those buildings back into use; they have such an important role. I know that Stafford faces challenges similar to those faced by many of the high streets across Staffordshire and the country, so I very much commend the work that my hon. Friend has been doing to raise these issues and encourage new usage in Stafford town centre.

We have been working hard in north Staffordshire—in Stoke-on-Trent—to attract Government funding. It is good that levelling-up bids and, indeed, the bids for the restoring your railway fund require the sponsorship of MPs for local projects to win national funding. We often see a bigger picture and are able to raise the hopes and concerns of constituents at a local level more broadly. It seems to me that the bigger picture is what the Office for Place is really all about. The bigger picture I see is that ceramics is not just our past, but our present and our future. Industrial heritage properties give our city a sense of place, but it is manufacturing, of which ceramics is most emblematic, that gives our city its sense of purpose.

It is that sense of purpose that means that our place in the world is more than just a kind of permanent stage, or a film set for a period drama. Of course, it is excellent for those purposes too—from time to time—but we cannot live in a period drama, and particularly not a gritty one. I am sure that the Office for Place gets that and recognises the huge potential of cities like Stoke-on-Trent, which have grown faster economically than other areas in recent times. I hope it shares my excitement that the UK has overtaken France to be the world's eighth-largest manufacturer. Industrial decline must be left as a fiction for the movies.

The renewed sense of purpose in the manufacturing of our world-class goods is key to levelling up our city, and the sense of pride that we take nationally in our manufacturing base helps to drive that purpose locally. We like the fact that people all over the world still place extra value on ceramic goods that have “made in Stoke-on-Trent” written on them. I emphasise to the Minister that it is important for her to think of her mission as levelling back up, reversing decline and restoring our heritage and skillset to where they belong, which is at the very forefront of international manufacturing, engineering and technology. It is that rooted sense of purpose that built what is now our industrial heritage in the first place.

If the Minister were to walk around the Longton conservation area with me—she is very welcome to do so; I invite her to join me—she would see that that sense of purpose is still there in part, just as our sense of place is still there in part, but that it needs to reach its full potential. In the Potteries tradition, there are fantastic manufacturers of ceramic wares, such as Duchess China 1888, which makes world-class tableware that can be bought in the House of Commons shop, and across the

road from that firm we have Mantec Technical Ceramics, which makes an array of advanced, technical and specialist products.

The Minister will know, because I say it often enough, that the gross value added of the ceramic sector has doubled in real terms since 2010. Its revival, and the revival of our wider local economy, is keeping alive heritage buildings that would otherwise be in the same state that the Crown Works is sadly in, following the loss of the famous Tams business, which occupied it until the financial disaster of the last Labour Government saw it close.

The Crown Works is a landmark building that I have been determined to save from gradual dereliction and all-too-frequent arson attacks. I cannot thank the Department, or indeed the Prime Minister, enough for the levelling-up fund. It has enabled me to work with the city council and OVI Homes to get together a scheme to save this heritage asset by repurposing it as retirement housing, which will in turn mean greater footfall and more town centre living. Thankfully, we are now seeing actual delivery at the Crown Works, which is the necessary final step.

As MPs for Stoke-on-Trent, we have frankly busted a gut to secure much-needed funding for a range of schemes across the city. We have had to watch with frustration as covid lockdowns and inflationary pressures delayed so much of what we believed, and were promised, could have been delivered by now. I hope the Government will look carefully at what has been delayed and work with councils—a number of councils, not just ours—to adjust the timeframes for the delivery of projects that sadly could not be met for reasons that were totally out of our control.

I am particularly keen to get the accessibility improvements for Longton railway station finalised and under way. If we look at the visitor numbers for the Gladstone Pottery Museum, and then the numbers of passenger entries and exits at Longton, we see a correlation in the ups and downs. If we look at the visitor surveys, we see causation too, with visitors opting to take the train to Longton and walk up to the museum. Perhaps as much as half the passengers who have used Longton station recently have been visitors to the museum. Preserving the beauty of this cherished asset, even with all its warts—such as the recent saving of its rare sash windows from a bygone age of long-outlawed industrial practices—is integral to Longton's wider success as a must-see destination and working centre of contemporary manufacture. It is a living destination, steeped in the full narrative of ceramics history.

By preserving our unique industrial heritage, we continue to attract today's leading international ceramicists—practitioners who could base themselves anywhere in the world—to Stoke-on-Trent, as the authentic world capital of ceramics. However, Stoke-on-Trent, including Longton, is sadly also an area of multiple deprivation, and we had been running up a down escalator just to stay still—never mind advance—even before covid hit. The council tax base is the second lowest in the country after Hull, which poses significant challenges in leveraging restoration funds from the private owners of heritage buildings. Of course, the Government understand that, because they have granted us national funding to help, including funding to reinstate residential accommodation above shops.

The delivery of schemes is now key. The schemes will be sustainable if, alongside wider public realm improvements, they encourage people to use the buildings that are saved on Market Street, Commerce Street, and up to the Gladstone Pottery Museum, for interesting new business and residential uses. Currently, though, the pedestrian journey between the station and the museum is unacceptably poor. Longton station has steps, but not lifts or ramps, and the historic Victorian ticket hall is boarded up—the transforming cities fund is supposed to be unlocking it. Transport is not the Minister's Department, so I will not rehearse my frustrations with Network Rail and the council with her, except to say that if she wants to see a case study of how delivery has been stymied by covid, by inadequate resourcing and skillsets and by the intransigence of other bodies, she could use Longton station as an example.

The Government are driving levelling up by enabling funding, but they have caught councils and other bodies on the hop because submissions for funding are often reactive to the funds and are not part of an active wider local agenda that is driven by a coherent sense of purpose. I get why that is—the Government want to deliver on national priorities for their own sense of purpose in levelling up—but many councils do not have local schemes that are remotely shovel ready and perhaps bid for funds without really knowing how they will deliver them if something goes wrong. Some councils are not resourced to meet the match funding requirements of some national schemes, and some lack the specialist officers or the time to deliver what is agreed, for whatever reasons.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly important point about councils not having the plans in place to move forward. In Rother Valley, for instance, the Land Trust had quite a detailed outline plan in place for Dinnington high street, so when the levelling-up fund went ahead we could bid for it, but other high streets in Rother Valley such as those in Thurgroft, Swallownest and Maltby do not have that outline plan; the council has not done it, which means it cannot bid for the money. Does my hon. Friend agree that councils should have a duty to put together outline plans for all our high streets—heritage and otherwise—to ensure that when pots of money become available, they can secure them?

Jack Brereton: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We absolutely need that coherence. There are often many different pots of funding, but we need something to bring them together to increase the benefit—[*Interruption.*]

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for a Division in the House.

2.51 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.15 pm

On resuming—

Jack Brereton: As I was saying, some councils are not resourced to meet the match funding requirements of some national schemes, while some lack the specialist officers or time to deliver on what is agreed, because of

skills shortages or churn in personnel or for some other reason. The Government have been amazing in enabling funding to come forward for projects in Stoke-on-Trent and unblocking some of the barriers often presented by national bodies. It would be a tragedy if rigid timescales and problems at the council led to a failure to deliver what the Government have provided funding for.

Fundamentally, there needs to be a plan for enhancing the character of the conservation area in Longton that is deliverable and is delivered. There are several pots of money, and of course more money in those pots would be gratefully invested; I am thinking particularly of Historic England's PSICA programme. There also needs to be a coherent plan for re-establishing a more obviously pedestrian-friendly town centre environment, especially along Market Street and the Strand, to link better into the big pedestrianised 1960s Exchange shopping arcade.

I am glad to say that, thanks to investment by the owners of the Exchange, some of the empty shops there are now being turned into small-scale units for independent retailers and potters selling their authentic local crafts. On Saturday, I was particularly pleased to see the opening of Keep It Local, a new shop selling products that are nearly all handcrafted by local artists and craftspeople. I wish it every success: we need to see more of that in our town centres.

Historically, Longton's lower market square, which is now called Times Square, was joined to an upper market square by Market Street. That upper square is now all but lost to traffic flows, but when it last served its purpose it was called Union Square. I want to bring back Union Square with that sense of purpose to enhance the sense of place of Longton as a town centre.

Much of the current highway infrastructure is from overengineered and unsympathetic post-war traffic schemes and is detrimental to the surrounding historic town centre street scene. It appears to come from a mindset that Longton had a future as a place to drive through, but not to stop in. For many who do stop, the current poor urban environment, particularly the narrow pavements in places, dissuades footfall. That, in turn, dissuades future uses of many of the heritage buildings. There is none of the dwell time that we see in other towns that have ripped out the 1960s road configuration to make them places to be, not places to pass through. Decline has encouraged crime and antisocial behaviour. We have too many broken windows, and all that the broken windows theory predicts will follow, including the problems related to monkey dust that I have raised in a separate debate.

Future proposals for the reorganisation of the road layout, including through the as-yet-undelivered transforming cities fund, should pay serious attention to making a positive impact on the conservation area and encourage footfall along Market Street. We need to link our town centre together better, especially along Market Street and the Strand, bringing together the station, Gladstone Pottery Museum and the main retail centre. I am waiting to see what proposals the new administration in Stoke-on-Trent will come forward with once it has finished its process of re-evaluating the projects that it inherited mid-delivery.

It is not just the buildings of Longton that need their attractive heritage rediscovered; it is also the squares, the roads and the public realm. They need to serve people and to be places that people will visit, live in and

[Jack Brereton]

work in, encouraging new uses and more investment. I hope that that is something that the Office for Place will be able to inspire, catalyse and advise on.

Alongside having the right permanent public realm, I suggest that one way to unlock development is to simplify the restrictive planning use categories. Face-to-face businesses such as cafés and independent shops like to set up where the public realm attracts customers and staff. Where possible, those businesses like to be in historic buildings that add to the customer experience. Developers know that, but they also know that planning use categories can be a minefield.

Giving a historic building new life through a change of use should not be overly difficult. It should not be hard to host a temporary event such as a music or theatre event. We need to look at where such liberalisation might be possible to encourage new uses in our town centres. I would like local authorities to be given powers to designate all commercial properties within town centre boundaries to class E, mixed use. That would make it far easier to attract new commercial uses and remove the bureaucratic hurdles caused by the need for change-of-use applications.

In summary, these are my key asks of the Minister. We need more investment in Longton's local heritage, particularly from Historic England. We need more time to get on with work delayed by covid and inflationary pressures. We need greater focus on enforcement, with better resources, including skills that relate to the enforcement by local government of section 215 notices and the upcoming measures in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill for compulsory rental auctions and so on. We need planning rules on change of use to be freed up, especially with greater powers to expand category E use in town centres. We need to take a good look at how the Department can keep an overview of how the various pots of national money can be better co-ordinated into local schemes. It would also be appreciated if the Minister could give us any further information about the Office for Place, particularly on the benefits that it will bring to its proud home in Stoke-on-Trent and, from there, to the rest of the country.

With the right sense of place, driven by a rooted sense of purpose, we can turn our declining high streets and conservation areas around. Coherence, delivery and enforcement are key, as is an enticing mix of a quality permanent public realm and interesting temporary events. If the public sector gets that right, it will attract the right businesses from the private sector, with the dynamism to build and respond to a loyal base of local consumers and an eager market of visitors from further afield, levelling back up with new opportunities and bringing the living heritage offer back to life.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they need to bob if they wish to be called.

3.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on high street heritage and empty properties in conservation areas. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on

setting the scene with detail, information and evidence that encapsulates all our thoughts and puts on record what he wishes to see for his town.

It is a pleasure to see the strength of support from—I am not sure if this the right word—the Stoke cabal, who are all here. I mean that in a good way, because they have worked together very well and are a team. I have been impressed by them over the past few years, so I am really pleased to see everyone here and of the same mind. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) will be coming to Newtownards, if God spares us until March next year. He will be my guest at a dinner, and I very much look forward to showing him a wee bit of Newtownards, so he will know for himself just what it is like.

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. She has been in the vanguard, because she came to Newtownards last summer to see what it is like. We talked about her visit before she went and while she was there, and I know that she was in the Ards peninsula and in Newtownards town. She will understand well what I am going to refer to.

I am very proud to have an office in Newtownards town, which boasts a rich history as a market town. It is the major town in my constituency of Strangford. In 1605, Hugh Montgomery was granted the lands and set about rebuilding what was then known as Newtown; it was later expanded to Newtownards, because it took in the Ards district and the Ards peninsula, and that is the name that we have today. Official records show that the town was established in 1606. Montgomery built a residence in the ruins of the old priory, the tower of which remains, just off the main shopping street and its satellite streets with their smaller boutiques.

I have seen changes in Ards over the years, but I have also seen a commitment, from a Department that is not the Minister's responsibility, to retain the high street's heritage and some of the empty properties that needed extra attention. Newtownards became a market town, with the Market House in Conway Square constructed in 1770. The Market House is known today as the town hall, but the market still operates in the square every Saturday, come rain, snow or shine. It is very much one of the attractions of Newtownards, bringing lots of people into the town from not just the surrounding area but further afield. It is cosmopolitan: you meet people from all over the Province on a Saturday morning in Newtownards.

We have one of the few high streets to have bucked the trend. Of course, we have a shopping centre mall, but our high street is thriving—indeed, it won the high street of the year award last year and a bronze award this year. The right hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) visited when she was a Minister, during the covid period, and we were all greatly impressed. Her engagement with the chamber of trade, businesses and elected representatives has left a lasting impression on us in Newtownards. Even today, she always asks how we are getting on in Newtownards; I always say, "Come back, and we will refresh your memory." Hopefully, that opportunity will arise.

We have a rich blend of culture and couture, with numerous small boutiques and independently owned shops, which people from throughout Northern Ireland travel to and make the most of. The historic Saturday market has the oldest market cross in Northern Ireland.

It was built in 1636, but destroyed by the Commonwealth troops in 1653. The present replacement building was finished in 1666—I am going back a few years there. Its conical roof was probably used as an office or shelter for the town's nightwatchmen. Townspeople say that the cross used to flow with wine—it may still do so today—at the birth of a royal baby. That tells us a wee bit about the history. I know that all right hon. and hon. Members in this Chamber are, like me, committed to the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the royal family have a key role for us in that.

The market cross is the only surviving 17th-century example in Northern Ireland. The original cross resembled a similar structure in Edinburgh, being octagonal with a flat roof and was topped by a stone column some 20 feet in height, on which there was a carved lion. It is a rich piece of history in the middle of a thriving high street.

Carnduff Butchers, the only butcher in the town, employs some 45 people. There are bakers, shoemakers—yes, we have them all—and a variety of other shops. Warden Brothers, the biggest shop in Newtownards and one of the last independent stores, is 146 years old. It was established in 1877 and employs some 55 people.

These are all reasons why the right hon. Member for Rochester and Strood came over. She appreciated the abundance of variety in Newtownards town, and I know that the Minister will appreciate that as well. It has culture and modern shops, with something for everyone, all under the very energetic direction of the chamber of trade, led by its president Derek Wright.

However, as with most high streets, there are difficulties with some of the empty lots. We are fortunate that some of the empty lots are starting to fill up, as there is demand for properties in the town. I commend Ards and North Down Borough Council for running a scheme for the upkeep of those properties with frontage, which is so useful. That needs to be funded; I am ever mindful that how the streets in Newtownards and elsewhere in Northern Ireland are funded is not the Minister's responsibility, but I know from our conversations that she has a deep interest in Northern Ireland, and these are things that we are concerned about.

On the funding that should be provided for these properties—especially for the listed buildings, additionally to the historic ones—I have a simple question for the Minister. I know she will come back with a positive response, as she always does. What engagement has taken place with the relevant Department in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can move forward together, sharing ideas and schemes perhaps, to maintain that cultural heritage in the high street that we so much wish to have?

Our high street is only as strong as the crowds who flock to it. Newtownards has much to offer, and the chamber of commerce and the local council must be commended. They have a strategy and they have a plan, but they must be supported to enable them to continue. That is what is needed from the Department back home in Northern Ireland, but also from this Government and from the Minister here.

I look forward to hearing what other hon. Members have to say. I am always encouraged by hon. Members who push for their towns in the way that they should, as I do for my town back home.

3.31 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I am delighted to take part in this important debate and I congratulate my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), on securing it. I make no apology for the fact that Stoke-on-Trent is 100% represented in this debate, and that we dominate, because we are all incredibly proud of our city of six towns. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who always has something enlightening to say.

Marco Longhi: Don't forget the Black Country.

Jo Gideon: My hon. Friend, whose constituency is in the Black Country, raises an important point. We all hope that the Crooked House is rebuilt.

Conservation areas hold a special place in our hearts because of their historic and architectural significance. They are meant to be protected and preserved, yet empty properties in those areas threaten the essence of what makes our towns and cities special. The sight of boarded-up shops and decaying buildings has a serious impact on our collective sense of pride and identity. We need to encourage growth in these historic places and help our heritage assets to be more productive, unlocking their potential and making them more attractive to residents, businesses, tourists and investors.

In my constituency, conservation areas include the city centre, Hanley Park, our blue-green canal corridors and the old Spode factory, as well as the university quarter. Stoke-on-Trent is a city steeped in the tradition of ceramics. The Potteries has a rich heritage of craftsmanship and artistic achievement, which I am reminded of when I walk around the city centre and look up at the fine examples of architecture.

However, at street level many of those buildings house boarded-up shops and display the scars of antisocial behaviour and graffiti. Those structures, which in past eras would have been part of a proud civic scene, are now suffering neglect. High streets are important barometers of local pride. It saddens me when I see buddleia growing from the brickwork of those once-loved buildings. From Hanley Town Hall to the historic Bethesda chapel—a Methodist sanctuary that once accommodated up to 2,000 worshippers—buildings with a key purpose in times gone by now languish in need of a new purpose that respects their heritage but breathes new life into them.

Hanley features on the list of high street warning lights as one of the 100 towns where persistent vacancy rates have increased since 2015, so I am always pleased to see innovative ideas. For instance, the Potteries Centre in Hanley encourages pop-up shops for small businesses and welcomes community use to attract more people through its doors.

If we are to stop the decline of heritage buildings in our high streets, we must hold property owners to account when their properties fall into disrepair. Councils have a statutory duty to ensure community safety; when buildings are deemed unsafe, action must follow. Councils also have the power to offer discounted rent or easier lease arrangements on their own property portfolio to community organisations and charities. I believe that power should be used to stem the tide of empty buildings.

[Jo Gideon]

In Hanley, I am particularly sorry about the Prince's Trust move from its heritage building in Tontine Street. The Prince's Trust provides a valuable resource to young people, so its departure from Hanley will mean that yet another building will stand empty and an important organisation will be gone from its city-centre base.

Injecting funds is not enough; if there is not community engagement and a bigger vision, well-intended investment in projects is far less likely to succeed. Although I am grateful that Stoke received £2 million in funding from the heritage action zone fund, there is still much more ground to cover. Without community buy-in, our town centres cannot thrive. Indeed, I am a fan of ideas such as the creation of a high street buy-out fund to help communities to purchase empty property on high streets, along with a specific business rates relief for regulated socially trading organisations.

Power is too distant from communities. Polling conducted across England by Power to Change revealed that three quarters of people felt that they had little or no control over the important decisions affecting their local area. We need to develop places that are really valued by the local communities that they serve. For that to happen, we need a collaborative approach and strong local leadership. There is no one-size-fits-all solution here and today's consumer is very alert to something that is inauthentic.

Town centres should be places where we see a mixture of arts and culture alongside the traditional shopping experience. There is a growing consensus that experience will be at the heart of the future high street, whether it is in the form of a greater role for hospitality, community organisations or public services, or in the form of more residential property.

Across our city, many more opportunities exist to repurpose heritage buildings while preserving their distinct Potteries characteristics. In particular, the site of the old Spode Works presents a significant opportunity for intelligent regeneration, and levelling-up funding will encourage further investment. However, the complexity of the Spode site necessitates a sensible approach. Although many buildings should be repurposed, some buildings should make way for a new vision of the site. Revitalising our high streets is not solely about repurposing properties currently sitting empty but about enhancing our heritage. Does the Minister agree that we must show ambition in our vision, to create new heritage for future generations?

3.38 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): First of all, Ms Fovargue, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate.

High streets and heritage are humongously important to the people of Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke, because ultimately they are about having pride in place, in addition to the fact that Stoke is obviously a collection—a federation—of six towns, each one with its own unique identity and new purpose. Some of them are still fighting to become the city centre all over again one day, but hopefully those arguments will not be heard in Westminster Hall today.

I am blessed in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke to represent the mother town of Burslem and the town of Tunstall. They are fine examples of towns where we are proud of our history and heritage, and so much good work has already begun. For example, Tunstall Library—the old library—and Baths has secured £3.5 million from the UK-leading £56 million given to Stoke-on-Trent by the Prime Minister when he was Chancellor. That has meant that we will see new life being breathed into this important historic monument, and lots of new jobs will be created from the investment in our high streets and town centres.

There was also investment under the previous administration of Stoke City Council, under Councillor Jellyman, in Tunstall town hall, which is on the high street of Tunstall. It is an important and historic landmark that has seen a brand-new library and a family hub—one of the Government's flagship policies—helping those aged nought to 19 to come into the town of Tunstall. It is right on the high street, thereby enabling more footfall. We have also had additional support for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent's award-winning market, the Tunstall indoor market, which has many excellent independent retailers and cafés inside for people to enjoy a good, old-fashioned Staffordshire oatcake. It is cheese and bacon for me, with a bit of red sauce—although I accept that that is controversial.

We have recently had Tunstall action days, which means that rogue and absent landlords have been held to account for the damage being done to our high street: some buildings are not being taken care of and some landlords, sadly, have accounts in the Cayman Islands but do not invest in making sure that their properties are watertight. I know that because my office is on the aforementioned high street of Tunstall. I have had plenty of back and forth with the landlord but, sadly, he is not living up to the standards I would expect by protecting and preserving our history and heritage.

We have some fantastic cultural heritage open days at the moment. If someone wants to step out of the mother town of Burslem or Tunstall, Middleport pottery is doing some fantastic excavation work at two of the kilns on site. The excellent Burgess and Leigh pottery is the world's only handcrafted pottery, and "The Great British Pottery Throwdown" was filmed there before being moved to Gladstone Pottery Museum. We have Ford Green Hall, a fantastic Tudor building that many people can enjoy, right by the high street in Smallthorne, which has a fantastic shopping community. There is Moorcroft, the heritage art pottery, and St Bartholomew's church in Norton-le-Moors, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South served as a city councillor before coming to this place.

We have an abundance of opportunity, but I want to go back to the point about the section 215 notice; I place on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State, but also to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill called the Planning (Proper Maintenance of Land) Bill, which was inspired by the dreadful scenes that residents in Longport and Middleport have seen at the Price and Kensington Teapot Works. An individual has allowed the beautiful, grade II* former factory to fall into disrepair and have numerous fires on site. They have allowed waste to be dumped and not allowed Historic England to go and check the status of the buildings,

which means that it has become a major eyesore and dangerous to some of the surrounding roads. The city council had to bring down part of it in order to protect the wellbeing of motorists and passers-by. Despite being taken to court under the legislation, there have been only £72,000-worth of fines, which is not really a big deterrent.

When I introduced my private Member's Bill, I was delighted that the Government accepted it and made it part of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. The current fine, which is capped at £1,000, will be replaced by an unlimited fine for the first offence, allowing judges to use their discretion to determine what level of damage has been undertaken. The second fine will increase from £100 to £500 a day, which will hopefully give bargaining power to local councils in order to hold to account rogue and absent landlords who plague our history and heritage, particularly in conservation areas.

Sadly, Stoke-on-Trent was land banked, as it were, by outsiders. Lead, copper and glass were stripped out of the Queen's Theatre, the indoor market and the Wedgwood Institute before the city council regained them. Buildings were allowed to fall into a state of disrepair, but past administrations bravely stepped in and saved them by at least keeping them in the ownership of the people of Stoke-on-Trent. We are now working tirelessly to find a way forward.

I will quickly mention Chatterley Whitfield colliery, because I forgot to do so and will be in big trouble with the Friends of Chatterley Whitfield as well as Historic England. We recently opened building 30, which has lots of displays from the old tours that used to take place at one of the largest complete coalmining sites in Europe. It is a fantastic site with fantastic individuals, including Nigel Bowers, who recently received an honour from His Majesty for recognition of the work he has undertaken. Again, the colliery is well supported by local councillors such as Carl Edwards and Dave Evans, who have been working tirelessly for a long time and championing the importance of the site. There is a wide-ranging mixture of important, historic buildings, with a huge opportunity to experiment with geothermal energy on site as well as bring back the history that is so important to our area. Josiah Wedgwood did not just choose Stoke-on-Trent because of the clay; it was also the coal that came with it that enabled the ceramic sector to flourish.

Our history is important, rich and diverse. That is why there were tears and mourning in the city of Stoke-on-Trent when we saw The Leopard pub in Burslem tragically burn down only last year. That is still being investigated but sadly no one has been held accountable to date. That important historic monument in the middle of Burslem played an important role in this country's industrial revolution, as the place where James Brindley and Josiah Wedgwood met to discuss the development of the Trent and Mersey canal. We hope that one day we will be able to protect at least the front of the building, but it looks like the damage is so severe that another use will have to be found. I know that plans are being looked at with Historic England, the city council and the owner of the site to look at bringing it back into residential use. I hope that is done in a sensitive way, to take into account the look and the feel of this fantastic town.

We also know that a study was undertaken by Councillor Abi Brown to look at the feasibility of bringing into use the Burslem indoor market, the Wedgwood Institute and the Queen's Theatre. Those three beauties of Burslem will take a large amount of investment, but first we need the funding to make sure the buildings are safe to carry out more extensive investigative works. For the mere sum of £650,000, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities could unlock the opportunity for us to further explore what can be done with those three buildings to bring investors into our city to look at how they can take advantage of the wonderful opportunities before them.

We can breathe life into Burslem indoor market to make it a fantastic performing arts space or a place where people can have street food on match day before going off to watch the mighty Port Vale football club, the dominant football club in our great city, which does such a fantastic job for its community, again in the heart of Burslem—obviously, there is another club down in the south of the city, but I do not want to mention its name. The Wedgwood Institute also provides a fantastic opportunity to look at potential office space, and the Queen's Theatre is a potential performing arts school, wedding venue or whatever it could be.

Those beauties need to have life breathed into them, and I was delighted when Historic England and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities supported the bid by me and others in the local community to protect the indoor market by making it a listed building, enabling us to access pots of funding that we have not been able to access previously. I am, however, a little bit miffed that when I saw the levelling-up fund round 2, there was a separate cultural bid pot of up to £50 million that was not accessible for those who bid in round 1. Stoke-on-Trent has been awarded the most money from the levelling-up fund of any area to date, but when there is an opportunity for more, we always want it in Stoke-on-Trent. I hope that Stoke-on-Trent can bid for the cultural pot in rounds 3 or 4 in future and ensure we can put further funding into our key historical sites. That might be at the Spode works, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) has been tirelessly championing; the Crown works, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South has been championing; or the three beauties in Burslem that can be unleashed and unlocked in our local area.

We have also had good news, with the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery receiving a significant amount of funding. That includes funding from the former Administration of Stoke-on-Trent City Council to bring about the new Spitfire Gallery, in remembrance of how Reginald J. Mitchell, a lad from Butt Lane—where I am proud to live and serve today—invented the Spitfire that enabled us to keep the Germans off our shores during world war two. It is great that we have that fantastic Spitfire on display. I have also been working with all Stoke-on-Trent Members of Parliament to secure around £5 million for the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery to look at how we can put the archives on public display and sell the story of coal and clay in our museum that the public will enjoy. That is how we bring further investment into our high street and boost our local economy, creating more jobs and, crucially, enabling our history and heritage to be preserved.

[Jonathan Gullis]

Finally, although I appreciate that the new Labour administration is understandably taking its time to evaluate existing projects, I was disheartened to see that on day one the levelling-up projects were brought into some sort of disrepute through rumours about potential cancellation or delay, led by Stoke-on-Trent City Council's current leader, Councillor Ashworth. Thankfully, that has now been nipped in the bud, even though the arena that we anticipated for the Etruscan Square scheme has now been written off. That arena would have had an e-sports specialism—the only one outside London—which would have complemented Staffordshire University's role as a leader in video games technology and the digital T-Levels at the City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College.

I am also dismayed to remind the public of Stoke-on-Trent that under the former Labour Administration we saw £30 million to £40 million of white elephant projects, such as new council office buildings, rather than investment in the mother town of Burslem. When they did invest, it was in daft schemes like Ceramica, which did nothing but bring further downfall on the town. Recently, even, threatening to issue a section 114 notice has only driven investment away from our city. Thankfully, Councillor Ashworth clarified at the last full council meeting on 7 September that there is no near threat of such a notice being issued, but the sheer silliness of even putting out the idea that it could happen will have an impact on us trying to get that private sector investment into our history and our heritage; I hope lessons will be learned, because that was not the smart thing to do.

Since 2019, the Members of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent have secured over £100 million of investment into our city—more than any other collective group of Stoke MPs in history. We passionately believe in our history and our heritage. We want our town centres and high streets to thrive, not just survive. But we need the Government to do more, because we have many challenges: many historical buildings, including listed ones; poor land value, which in some cases will put off developers; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South mentioned, being the second lowest council in the country when it comes to what we earn through council tax, so we cannot simply rely on the council tax payer of Stoke-on-Trent to pick up the tab.

I hope that Stoke-on-Trent will be told to bid for the coming round of levelling-up funding, that the cultural fund will be made available to us and, of course, that we will get a nice big chunk of money to carry on making sure that Stoke-on-Trent is the greatest place for people to bring up a family, go to work and live out the rest of their days.

3.51 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is incredibly good to serve under your chairship, Ms Fovargue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing this incredibly important debate. Heritage is the soul of a community—a point that we should remember when we build new communities and regenerate existing ones. It is so good to listen to the passion with which hon. Members have spoken about their communities, not least my hon. Friend the

Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who I think is passionate about everything he does, but in particular about heritage in Stoke-on-Trent.

There has been so much to agree on in the debate. I was particularly struck by the support for the ceramics industry: that is pure heritage in Stoke-on-Trent, and it really comes through in Members' contributions. Indeed, it is not possible to go to dinner anywhere with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North without him checking the plates, and if they are not made in Stoke-on-Trent he complains to the management of whichever restaurant or hotel we are in. It is that passion which drives the community, but that passion needs to be enabled by action and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South mentioned, the action has been slowed by the pandemic, the inflationary pressures we face and so on. The pandemic stole two years of everybody's lives. The effect was especially felt here in Whitehall and Westminster, and that has translated down to frustration in our communities.

A huge opportunity remains. I am passionate about levelling up. We are dishing out billions of pounds to breathe life into left-behind communities through the levelling-up fund, the shared prosperity fund, the towns fund and the future high streets fund. Ultimately, levelling up is a cycle of skills and jobs, infrastructure, services and investment—pump priming from the Government, but corporate investment and foreign direct investment as well. All of that combined goes around to people, communities and the places in which we live. That is the lens through which we need to look, and it is where heritage comes in, because levelling up at its very core is about the opportunities that we create for people and that people can create for themselves. We need to reset the way that we look at this investment. It needs to be looked at through the lens of place-making, and that is where we bring in heritage. It is where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South mentioned, we lack skills in councils and planning authorities. We also lack capacity and—dare I say it—political leadership in councils to look at the bigger picture. We need to look beyond the administrative, bureaucratic and statutory elements of planning and at what an area and a community need. What are the health outcomes we want to address? What are the policing priorities for that area? How do we make a place that is fit for the future, but has the memories and best of our past enhancing our heritage?

We have a huge opportunity. The all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness recently produced a report on empty properties—on conversions from retail and office space into homes for people. The report identified up to 20,000 units in the possession of local authorities around the country that could be converted. That opportunity directly translates to action that we could be taking at a local level, and that could be supported by action from the Government through not just the high streets fund, the towns fund, the levelling-up fund or so on, but funds such as the heritage fund and various others. We need to put heritage at the heart of place-making, but we need to do it in a way that brings through the passion that we see in our local projects and local politicians.

Members might ask why I am passionate about the subject when I am not from the Black Country—I am literally the odd one out in the debate. It is because I have plenty of heritage in my constituency. I have

Olney, which is a beautiful Georgian market town with huge amounts of heritage and listed buildings. Newport Pagnell is, again, a beautiful market town. Tickford bridge in Newport Pagnell is a grade-I listed iron bridge. Wolverton is a wonderful, proud railway town, home of the royal train. We have heritage in all our constituencies that we can pick up and run with when it comes to designing the future. I am incredibly proud that Milton Keynes got £3 million from the shared prosperity fund, which admittedly is not the £50 million that the collective MPs for Stoke-on-Trent got, to regenerate those high streets that I mentioned and to do more to take that heritage through.

There is lots to do, but through the lens of place-making, we can understand and make a tangible difference by bringing the best of the past into our future and designing a vision for our future that works. That vision should take the best out of things such as the community renewal fund and the community ownership fund to help acquire empty properties and to deliver value that reflects our heritage as well. We need to co-ordinate, plan and deliver. We need to breathe beauty into our high streets, understanding our past and embracing our future.

3.58 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I commend the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for bringing this important issue to the Chamber. I sincerely thank all hon. Members who have contributed. We may not always agree politically, and certainly not on red sauce and brown sauce—they have strange tastes—but heritage is deep within our communities and the people we represent. This is not just about the heritage of buildings or industries, but the heritage of who we are, as unique communities across the country. That has been demonstrated admirably throughout the debate, but especially so by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who did so with the characteristic heart he always brings to such debates.

The debate comes in a week in which we have heard in the headlines the troubling news for Wilko. Those shops are often not in heritage sites, but 12,500 jobs are in the balance. Each job is a person watching their livelihood be tossed from one potential administrator to another, with the prospect of more empty premises on our high streets. Mortgages, rents, bills and retirement savings are all up in the air for our constituents. Wilko is the most recent retail chain to succumb to that fate, but all indicators show that it will sadly not be the last. Over the past 13 years of punishing austerity policies, we have lost countless high street favourites, with their empty properties haunting us long after the owners have vacated. Our formerly thriving town centres now sadly serve as business graveyards. It is truly a miserable predicament.

While cases such as Wilko stand out due to their status as major employers, every week small and medium-sized businesses and heritage industries are facing the threat of closure. That is particularly true of manufacturing towns and cities, including Stoke, as we heard, and the town of Luton, which I represent. Manufacturing history runs right through Luton, and we still have businesses under threat. SKF has been in my constituency for well over 100 years, and workers have given their best years of their life to that plant. Without a coherent industrial strategy, we will see the threat continue in the future.

The Federation of Small Businesses has written that

“high street vacancies not only harm the overall perception of the area but also lead to a significant loss of spill over footfall from larger units and national chains.”

That is backed up by findings from the Association of Convenience Stores, which states that empty properties have a “detrimental effect” on existing businesses, reducing customer traffic to retail hotspots and leading to a vicious cycle of more closures. We have seen that across the country. It is crucial that the Minister takes note of the widespread impact that leaving properties vacant can have, both economically and socially.

The decline in the beauty of our high streets leads to a decline in custom and standards of behaviour too. It has been mentioned already that abandoned town centres have become hotspots for crime in recent years. That is why the Labour shadow Home Secretary has committed to reintroducing respect orders, which will hold perpetrators of antisocial behaviour to account and restore community bonds through a social contract. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South was right to talk about the merits of section 215. Hastings Borough Council has been doing something like this for a number of years—decades almost—under the guise of what was called Grotbusters. It has transformed the seafront and the old town and preserved one of Europe’s largest land-based fishing fleets. I know that the council, working with brilliant campaigners such as Helena Dollimore, will continue to work to preserve that heritage.

We all want to see our high streets buzzing with businesses of all shapes and sizes and to make them safe to wander around and attractive to spend in. Strong businesses also mean more job creation. In turn, that means local pounds in the pockets of local people to spend in their local shops. Surely that is something we all want to see. Thriving high streets lead to a revival in our local communities and that is what every community wants and deserves. The glaring failure to reform business rates in the Government’s 13 years of power has led to the decline of our high street businesses on an industrial scale. It was not just covid; the decline started well before then. The Office for National Statistics indicates that the third quarter of 2023 is the eighth quarter in a row where there have been more closures than creations of businesses. What a damning statistic that it.

Labour in power will reform our outdated and ineffective business rates system and bring in wide-reaching reforms to even out the playing field. As it stands, the threshold for small business rates relief is still too low, at £15,000, despite calls from across the House and vocal groups in the sector. Reviving our high streets is not just down to changing business rates. There are other factors at play that are making retail locations unappealing for customers, sending them to online giants rather than local bricks and mortar businesses. In the room next door is the Food & Drink Federation, which spoke of how important it is that we have healthy high streets to ensure that we can compete with online giants.

A pleasant natural environment, a feeling of safety while browsing and easy and affordable transport are all understood by us as key to seeing improved outcomes for our high streets. This is not a pipe dream. Across local government, we are seeing the fruits of our municipal values. Councils such as Sheffield, Southampton and

[Sarah Owen]

Telford are glowing examples of the success town centres and high streets can enjoy when their health is made a priority.

In Sheffield, the Heart of the City development has refreshed the city centre but preserved heritage buildings, keeping beautiful façades, combined with cleaner streets and improved public transport, as well as creating new jobs. That is all bringing shoppers back to the centre in hoards.

In Southampton, which voted Labour into power in 2022, the council is delivering on its promise to regenerate the city centre. Similar to Sheffield, the Labour council in Southampton understood that improving the natural environment with greenery and more eco-friendly transport goes hand in hand with increasing custom in local shops.

Meanwhile, further north, Telford and Wrekin Council has demonstrated its commitment to investing in its Pride in Our High Street programme. Business support grants have given a second chance to struggling businesses, and saved local favourites from financial ruin. It is even holding its own High Street Heroes awards. Nominations for this year's businesses are open until 23 October, so there is still time to get in there.

I know from the popularity of my own Small Business Saturday shout-outs in Luton North, which happen every Saturday—not just once a year—that such support means so much to the owners of the small businesses on our high streets, and to the customers who see their local favourites celebrated. It is fantastic to see the variety of ways that local authorities are championing our high street businesses and preserving our heritage through direct grants and other incentives aimed at the public.

Although MPs such as the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) may publicly state that the Government are not interested in constituencies such as hers, the situation is not the same for Labour. Sheffield, Southampton and Telford are fortunate to have Labour Mayors and Metro Mayors who have been creative and committed in their support for town and city centres. In contrast, Central Bedfordshire Council—under historically Conservative leadership, but now under no overall control—has shown blatant disregard for the role high streets can play in bringing communities together. It has persisted in building housing developments with no shopping areas, no town or village centres and poor infrastructure. People complain about access to GPs, services and schools because of this Government's lax planning laws. Elsewhere, residents are losing their treasured local pubs, places that have been there for neighbours to gather and share connection for hundreds of years. As we have seen in recent events, that has shaken communities across our country. Planning laws that benefit unscrupulous owners are continuing to fail our communities. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined whether there are plans to address that.

Labour is the party of real-life levelling up. We will support small and medium businesses to grow, both in strength and in the ways that they can serve the public and the community. We trust that council leaders are best placed to make decisions for their localities. That is why our plans for expanded regional devolution will include powers to create strong and sustainable local economies. We will revive the great British high street.

We will reform business rates, tackle antisocial behaviour and reduce empty premises, so that shoppers will return to their high streets and we will all be better off.

4.8 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It has been a pleasure and a privilege to listen to this fantastic debate. As a midlands MP myself, it has made me just that little bit more proud of the heritage that I share with colleagues here—as well as with Milton Keynes and, of course, Strangford across the water in Northern Ireland. There is always a lively debate about where exactly the Black Country ends. I am often asked whether there are any bits of Worcestershire in the Black Country—perhaps we will discuss that outside the Chamber.

It is right that I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing the debate, which has shone a light for us all on the diligent work that he does day in, day out on behalf of his constituents. It has also shown his deep knowledge of his area. As he said himself, although he was not able to rely on some established processes to contribute to the consultations he mentioned, he could draw on a lifetime's experience of living and breathing the streets of Stoke-on-Trent South.

Like my hon. Friend, the Government want our high streets to be restored to their former glory, as the beautiful, beating hearts of our communities where people can come together to socialise, shop, work and run businesses in safe and attractive surroundings. The reality is that many of our high streets are struggling—they are blighted by boarded-up shops and antisocial behaviour—but we are determined to break the cycle of decline. We have already started to do so, working side by side with local leaders to achieve our shared goals. Transforming dying high streets back into vibrant places to live, work and socialise is central to our levelling-up agenda, and that will be the litmus test for our success.

Today's debate is crucial to our better understanding what more needs to be done to protect and rejuvenate crucial civic centres, which are rightly cherished by communities up and down the UK. There is no better example of best practice than those that hon. Members shared of the historic ceramic industry and pottery towns of Stoke-on-Trent, which are backed by the Conservative Government. I will turn to the specific points raised by hon. Members at the end of my remarks. The truth is that, in stark contrast to what the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) just said, we have success stories all over the country, backed by billions of pounds of funding from the Conservative Government.

Even with the massive challenges that have emerged in recent years—the exodus to online shopping and the impact of the pandemic—people still very much care about their high streets, as we have heard from all the speakers in the debate. High streets are central to people's sense of local pride and belonging; they are the iconic thing that people focus on. When we ask, "What does levelling up mean to you?", concern about the high street comes up time and again.

Let me talk about some of the actions that we are taking to reverse some of the issues that hon. Members have rightly identified. Our ambitious Levelling-up and

Regeneration Bill will help to tackle the growing problem of empty shops on high streets, which fuels the feeling of decline, through high street rental auctions. Those will empower local authorities to address long-term vacant properties. Landlords will be required to rent out persistently vacant high street commercial properties to new occupants, or face the local authority's stepping in and putting the lease up for auction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South may be aware that, on 27 March this year, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced that £2 million would be made available by the antisocial behaviour action plan to support communities and businesses to bring such derelict properties back into use. That vital funding will cover the cost of refurbishing properties, the cost of the auction and the council's fees, and will enable doors to open again for rapid occupation. High street rental auctions will breathe new life into our much-loved high streets, and the funding will do just that by empowering communities to take control and restoring pride in place.

As my hon. Friend noted, local planning authorities have powers under section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to serve notices that require owners to take steps to clean up their land where it is adversely affecting the amenity of an area. The power applies to both land and buildings, and it is an important tool for local planning authorities, alongside other powers, such as repair notices in respect of listed buildings or dangerous structure notices.

Marco Longhi: Today's debate has been about how we look after our high streets, and one of the best ways of keeping heritage buildings going is just keeping them going. Unfortunately, a number of buildings require extra protection, and there is a pattern, up and down the country, of buildings suddenly becoming vulnerable to arson attacks, and then demolition, when they are either sold or not used as much. The Minister will know why I make that point.

As we are talking about enforcement, one way that we could, perhaps, afford extra protection to such buildings is through the listing process. When an application for listing is made in England, there is no protection until the full process is undergone and a decision is made to protect the building. In Wales, when an application to list is made, temporary provision is made immediately, and then a final decision is made about whether to give full protection. Will the Minister consider that, and perhaps suggest it to the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison)? Will she also consider increasing penalties where there is clear evidence of arson and misuse of property?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend and commend him for all the work he is doing on behalf of his constituents, who I know used to be regulars at the Crooked House pub. We have all watched the situation there with great concern. I will take his ideas seriously and look at what more we can do; I thank him for those proposals.

We have seen some transformational examples of section 215 powers being put to good use for formerly vacant industrial sites, town centre street frontages, rural sites and derelict buildings, as well as more typical

rundown residential properties and overgrown gardens. Local authorities have powers to undertake clean-up works themselves, the cost of which they are empowered to recover from the landowner.

My hon. Friends have called for use classes to be made simpler and more straightforward. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South will know that the class E use class includes a broad and diverse range of uses suitable for a high street or town centre, including shops, restaurants, cafés and offices, as well as health centres and gyms. It also allows for new uses that may emerge in a town centre. The use class applies to buildings in conservation areas and to listed buildings, but unfortunately planning permission is still required for any external works in those areas. We always keep use classes under review, and I am sure it is right that we continue to explore where we may be able to assist my hon. Friend in achieving the objectives he outlined. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) made the point that people like to visit properties in heritage areas, whether they are pop-up cafés or restaurants. That is a vital point.

I am also sympathetic to the frustrations of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South with the implementation of local conservation areas and the boundary lines. I know that he has already taken that up with the local planning authority. I remind the authority that it is duty-bound to review past designations to determine whether former or new areas should be considered to be within the boundary. Planning authorities are responsible for delivering conservation area appraisals, which should be kept up to date.

One of the central policies that we have to enable Stoke-on-Trent to reach its flourishing potential even more than it is at the moment is the Office for Place, which my hon. Friend mentioned. I am thrilled that that newly created arm's length body will be located in Stoke-on-Trent, because it gives me the perfect opportunity to arrange a visit and to have oatcakes with cheese, bacon, red sauce and maybe even brown sauce—let's try them all and see which we prefer. Of course, the vision is to support the creation and stewardship of a beautiful, sustainable, popular and also healthy place, so perhaps we should have a small oatcake.

There could be no more appropriate home town for the Office for Place than Stoke-on-Trent—the city's name in Old English means “place”. We have heard the city's proud heritage and its chance for a prosperous future so passionately and clearly articulated. The levelling-up funding going into the Crown Works is just one part of taking that heritage into a new area. I understand that the Office for Place chair, Nicholas Boys Smith, who is a leading expert in the country, has already met my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), for Stoke-on-Trent South and for Stoke-on-Trent Central, and council leaders, to discuss opportunities for regeneration. He will be working closely with them to help them reinvigorate their city, moving from streets as gyrotories to streets as enjoyable places to be, attracting jobs and taking advantage of the proud industrial heritage.

The Office for Place has already established its office in Stoke-on-Trent, which will benefit the city through its positive impact on the local economy and opportunities for collaboration. It is fully envisaged that it will partner with Stoke-on-Trent City Council, but of course it must

[Rachel Maclean]

also take into account the views of local MPs, who have a broad vision, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South said so well.

My understanding from colleagues in the Department for Transport is that they are still working with Stoke-on-Trent City Council to deliver the transforming cities fund programme, including proposals at Longton station. I encourage my hon. Friend—if he needs encouragement—to continue his lobbying efforts with the Department for Transport.

There has been a lot of discussion of high street heritage action zones. The championship that Members present have shown on behalf of their constituents, who both work in and appreciate the ceramics industry now and in the past, is just exceptional. We all agree that restoring our high streets must include protecting our heritage. The Government remain steadfast in our commitment to doing that, which is why we are investing tens of millions in regenerating historic buildings on high streets and in town centres across England through our future high streets fund. Meanwhile, social enterprises, community groups and charities reusing heritage buildings on high streets and in town centres have been supported through the £15 million made available via the Architectural Heritage Fund's transforming places through heritage programme.

That programme is benefiting local people and businesses. For example, the historic Drapers' Hall in Coventry has opened its doors once more following funding from the scheme as a successful arts venue. Meanwhile, through the £95 million high street heritage action zones programme, we are driving the regeneration of 67 towns and cities, transforming historic buildings and streetscapes. More funding is coming on top of that thanks to the additional £930,000 investment made this year by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to support existing high street heritage action zone projects.

I was delighted, as always, to hear from my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—it has been too long. It reminded me what a wonderful time I had in his constituency. I really valued his tribute to the Union of our beautiful islands, to the royal family, and to moving forward together on our cherished heritage. I strongly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central that we should show ambition for the future, for our children and grandchildren, in terms of our culture and heritage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North is a huge advocate for pride in place. Together with his colleagues, he has driven exceptional, record amounts of funding, in particular into his town of Tunstall. I very much hope that the current Labour administration of Stoke-on-Trent City Council will heed his calls, and those of all his colleagues, to work constructively with the exceptional, record amounts of funding that have been put into their city by a Conservative Government who believe in the future of Stoke-on-Trent after many years of neglect. It is always a pleasure to debate the

Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Luton North, but I will take no lectures from her about Labour councils. I say one thing to her: Birmingham City Council.

Our high streets have been the lifeblood of our communities for generations, and we will not let them wither on our watch—far from it. Instead, we are pulling out the stops to preserve them, protecting our heritage, supporting local businesses, and helping to provide the vibrant, safe civic hubs that our communities deserve, supported by our newly established Office for Place. We have measures to support our ongoing efforts, from planning use classes to high street rental auctions, and we must work pragmatically with local leaders on some of the timescales that have been raised with me due to delays from the covid pandemic. We are laying the foundations for a brighter future by working alongside local leaders to deliver for their communities with exceptional devolution deals that transfer meaningful powers and funding to them as we level up opportunity across the country.

4.22 pm

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for her thoughtful response and look forward to welcoming her to Stoke-on-Trent. We very much want to show her some of the things that we have been talking about as she has a look around our fantastic city. Stoke-on-Trent is very much on the up, and it is the litmus test for levelling up, so we would very much like to show her some of the issues that we have been talking about.

I thank all colleagues who contributed to the debate, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It was fantastic to hear about his town and the rich heritage of Northern Ireland. I also particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who have supported the work that we have been doing to level up Stoke-on-Trent and attract the huge investment that has come into the city.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi). I very much agree with his suggestions about listings. We should look at the process in Wales and whether it could be applied in England to protect buildings under huge threat, such as we saw with the destruction of the Crooked House pub. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), although I will make a little correction: Staffordshire is not part of the Black Country, although part of the Black Country historically used to be in Staffordshire.

I slightly disagree with the points made by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), regarding austerity. Many of the challenges and issues in Stoke-on-Trent have been going on for decades. We saw decades of neglect under Labour Administrations. Some of the challenges now faced by our high streets have been going on for much longer than the issues she mentioned.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

World Sepsis Day

4.25 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Sepsis Day.

It is always a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue.

Dame Cheryl Gillan stood down as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sepsis in March 2021, and I felt so humble when she asked me to become chair. I had always admired Dame Cheryl, who became a dear friend and treated me with respect and dignity. It was a tragedy when she died in April 2021 only a month after standing down as chair. I miss her wisdom and guidance, but most of all I miss her friendship.

I have done my very best to lead the APPG and have had enormous help from the UK Sepsis Trust, particularly from Sarah Hamilton-Fairley and Dr Ron Daniels. I could not have carried out my duties as chair without their constant support, advice and good humour. We have become close friends.

Why did Dame Cheryl choose me? Perhaps it was because she knew that I initially became a member of the APPG in 2017 because I am a sepsis survivor. One day we had a cup of tea together because she wanted to know my sepsis story. In summer 2013 I went to New Zealand to visit my daughter Angharad, who was living and working in Te Anau, South Island. On the flight over I started to have what I thought was toothache in my lower right jaw. After a few days in Te Anau, it did not improve, so I went to the emergency dentist, who took X-rays and could not find anything, but gave me antibiotics and painkillers. There was still no improvement after about a week and the right side of my face became swollen, so I went back to the dentist, who thought it might be an abscess and gave me stronger antibiotics and painkillers.

I got on the flight home. During a short stopover at Singapore airport, I started being sick, but I thought it might be travel sickness. I just wanted to sleep. By the time I landed at Heathrow I was in a bit of a mess, but I managed to get to Paddington and get on the train back to Wales. The pain and swelling had increased, but I was so exhausted I just fell asleep.

I got home, took more painkillers and slept. I live alone. When my friend Jen called to see me, she was really concerned, so she drove me to my dentist, who could not find anything. They thought it was an abscess and replaced the filling. I was on the ceiling with the pain, which I felt through the many injections, which also put me into orbit. The dentist gave me more antibiotics and more painkillers. Nothing improved and I continued to be sick. I had not eaten anything in days and became extremely dehydrated.

Jen called to see me again and took me to the local A&E. The emergency doctors rehydrated me, but did not diagnose anything and sent me home. I continued to be sick and Jen took me back to my dentist, who sent me immediately to the dental hospital at the Heath Hospital in Cardiff. I must have lost consciousness on the journey because I do not remember anything more. Jen told me later that they admitted me to A&E and the duty surgeon, Dr John Jones, identified sepsis. He told Jen that if he did not operate immediately I would die.

He asked whether it would matter if he had to cut my face to get rid of the poison and Jen told him, "Just make sure she doesn't die."

After some time in intensive care and on a ward, I had recovered enough to be discharged, but it took me years to recover my strength physically and mentally. How I caught sepsis remains a mystery. I was fortunate to survive and I owe my life to Dr John Jones, who correctly identified sepsis and acted immediately, to all the wonderful NHS staff who cared for me, and to my friend Jen.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's courage, the contribution she has made and her tribute to Dame Cheryl, and congratulate her on securing this debate on World Sepsis Day. Through her story, she has shown the importance of raising awareness and recognising symptoms of sepsis early. Will she join me in recognising the vital work of the UK Sepsis Trust, whose support made such a difference to my constituent Kamaldeep Sandhu and her family after her brother Rick, whom she describes as the perfect brother, husband and father, tragically lost his life to sepsis last year, aged 42? The family believe that the hospital spotting the signs too late meant that he died, which he might not otherwise have done. I also pay tribute to Kamaldeep's campaigning to try to ensure that what happened to her family does not happen to anybody else.

Christina Rees: I thank my hon. Friend for her important intervention and I am very sorry to hear of her constituent's loss. My heart goes out to Rick's family and friends. I will speak a lot about the UK Sepsis Trust, because it helped me enormously and I want to highlight its work in fighting sepsis.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate and for the very personal story she has conveyed to us all—we are very much moved by it. To reinforce what the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) said in her intervention, sepsis claims some 11 million lives globally each year, or five lives every hour in the United Kingdom. That is more than the deaths from bowel, breast and prostate cancer combined. To give a Northern Ireland perspective, sepsis affects around 7,000 people yearly in Northern Ireland, of whom 1,240 lost their lives to it in 2021. Does the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) agree—I suspect the answer will be yes—that there must be more awareness of the earliest symptoms, to ensure that death from this dangerous and life-threatening disease is reduced as much as possible across all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Christina Rees: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He must have seen my speech, because he has quoted some of the stats that I am going to come on to later.

What is sepsis? It is a life-threatening condition that arises when the body's response to infection causes injury to its tissues and organs. It is a global health concern, but today I will focus on its prevalence, the challenges and some potential solutions in the UK. Sepsis is indiscriminate. While it primarily affects very young children and older adults and is more common in people with underlying health conditions, it can readily occur in those who are otherwise fit and healthy.

[Christina Rees]

Sepsis can be triggered by an infection, including chest and urinary tract infections. It is not known why some people develop sepsis in response to those common infections whereas others do not. Sepsis is often referred to as “the silent killer” because of its ability to strike swiftly and unexpectedly. In the UK, sepsis is a significant public health problem. Each year around 240,000 cases are reported, leading to more than 48,000 deaths.

Sepsis is the leading cause of avoidable death in the UK, claiming more lives than breast, bowel and prostate cancer combined. Unlike data for heart attacks, strokes and cancer, sepsis data is imprecise, because it relies on coded administrative data rather than the granular clinical data of patient-level registries. Moreover, this striking deficit means that not only do we find it necessary to estimate the burden of disease, but we are decades away from precision medicine for sepsis. However, therein lies a paradox, as the UK’s unique healthcare infrastructure means that we are well placed to change that for the world.

Around 40% of people who develop sepsis are estimated to suffer physical, cognitive and/or psychological after-effects. For most people, those will only last a few weeks, but others can face a long road to recovery and develop post-sepsis syndrome. One of the biggest challenges in tackling sepsis is early diagnosis. Sepsis can mimic other common illnesses, making it difficult to spot in its early stages. Symptoms such as fever, increased heart rate, rapid breathing, confusion and extreme pain can be attributed to various conditions. This leads to delayed treatment, which significantly worsens the patient’s chance of survival.

To combat sepsis effectively, awareness is the key. The UK and devolved Governments, healthcare professionals, and organisations such as the UK Sepsis Trust have been working tirelessly to educate the public and healthcare providers about the signs and symptoms of sepsis. Public awareness campaigns and training for healthcare workers have been instrumental in improving early detection. Timely intervention is crucial in sepsis management. The UK Sepsis Trust’s “Sepsis 6” care bundle and treatment pathway includes administering antibiotics, providing fluids and monitoring vital signs, and has been implemented in 96% of hospitals across the UK and in 37 other countries worldwide to ensure rapid and effective treatment. Early recognition and swift action can save lives and reduce the severity of sepsis-related complications, but despite such work, there remain many cases of avoidable death every year.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing today’s debate, and for the very powerful speech she is making. My constituent, a teenager, tragically lost his life. Not only did he display so many signs, his parents were screaming for help, but those calls for help—for further investigation and better treatment and management—were just not heeded. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is now crucial that we introduce Martha’s law, so that parents can be granted a second opinion when they ask for one, in order to save lives?

Christina Rees: I am very grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. I think she must have been looking over my shoulder, because I am just about to come on to Martha’s law. As always, her timing is impeccable.

Over the past couple of weeks, significant media attention has been given to the tragic case of Martha Mills, who died of sepsis aged 13. Martha’s grieving parents have advocated for the establishment of Martha’s rule, which would empower patients to request an immediate second opinion if they feel that their medical concerns are not being addressed adequately. Other preventable deaths include UK Sepsis Trust ambassador Melissa Mead’s son William. The then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), apologised to William’s family after a report found that clinicians missed four opportunities to save his life, and to Jason Watkins, who lost his daughter Maude when she was only two and a half years old.

In order to end these preventable deaths, parents need to feel empowered to advocate for their child—to just ask, “Could it be sepsis?”—and clinicians must be given clear guidance on the appropriate care pathway in cases of suspected sepsis. At the moment, there is room for improvement on the clinical side, because of the confusion created by delays in updating the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence clinical sepsis guideline, NICE guideline 51. In addition, research plays a pivotal role in understanding sepsis better and developing more effective treatments. The UK has a rich history of medical research, and ongoing studies are dedicated to improving our understanding of sepsis. Advances in genomics, microbiology and immunology are shedding light on the complexities of sepsis, paving the way for innovative therapies. Technology is also proving to be a game-changer in the fight against sepsis, with AI-powered algorithms being used to interpret patient data and identify sepsis risk factors early on.

The UK Sepsis Trust is a charity founded by an NHS consultant, Dr Ron Daniels BEM, in 2012. It has led the fight against sepsis after Ron witnessed the tragic and preventable death of Jem Abbots, a 37-year-old father of two. The UK Sepsis Trust aims to end preventable deaths from sepsis and improve outcomes for sepsis survivors. It also strives to raise public awareness of sepsis and works to support anyone affected by this devastating condition with its free, nurse-led support service. It raises awareness by educating healthcare professionals and by instigating political change.

The UK Sepsis Trust aims to protect people by enabling the prevention of severe infection and the treatment of sepsis, while helping to ensure that antibiotics are used responsibly. Its clinical tools are used by healthcare professionals across the country and have been formally endorsed by NICE.

The trust contributed to feedback on a draft update to the NICE clinical sepsis guideline—NG51—in March this year. The final version was due to be released in June, following a request by NHS England to update it in the wake of a statement from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges about the timing of using antibiotics. However, the publication was pulled at the last minute without any obvious reason. The result is that we are left with a NICE guideline from 2016 that conflicts with the position statement from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. This has caused confusion among clinicians, which could lead to patient harm.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and for her powerful and personal speech today. We have heard about the UK death rates

from sepsis, but it is really important for us to bear in mind that sepsis is a global killer; one in five deaths globally are attributed to sepsis and one person dies from it every 2.8 seconds somewhere in the world. A lack of access to medical treatment is often a reason for those figures. Because the symptoms of sepsis are often similar to those of other illnesses, as has already been discussed, it is vital that we increase not only public awareness of it but awareness in clinical settings, too. Does she agree?

Christina Rees: I thank my hon. Friend for her very important intervention, and what she says is why World Sepsis Day is so important. Sepsis deaths are a global phenomenon and we need to do our bit in the UK to fight sepsis, as well as working globally.

Sepsis is a critical healthcare challenge in the UK and across the world, but it is one that we can tackle with determination, awareness and innovation. Early detection, rapid intervention, research and support for survivors are the cornerstones of our battle against this silent killer. I urge everyone to take sepsis seriously, to educate themselves and others about its signs and symptoms, and to support the ongoing efforts of the healthcare professionals and organisations working tirelessly to save lives and improve outcomes. Together, we can make a significant impact and reduce the devastating toll that sepsis has on our society.

On World Sepsis Day, we remember those who have lost their lives and those whose lives have been affected by sepsis. We stand by their families and friends, and we try to support them in any way we can. Their stories must be told. I ask the Minister to meet me, Dr Ron Daniels and Sarah Hamilton-Fairley from the UK Sepsis Trust, to discuss the help she can give to set up a national sepsis register.

When will the updated NG51 guideline be published? Can the Minister update us on the recent announcement by the Health Secretary in the main Chamber that he is exploring the introduction of Martha's rule? He referred to Ryan's rule, which has been successfully established in Queensland, in Australia, and which has prevented several potential tragedies. Ryan's rule provides patients and their families with the opportunity to request a clinical assessment from a doctor or nurse when the patient's health is deteriorating or not showing expected improvements. When will Martha's rule be implemented?

The Swiss Government have recently announced 10 million Swiss francs of state investment—around £9 million—over a five year period for implementing sepsis improvement across five workstreams. The best possible way to mark World Sepsis Day would be for the Minister and the Government to commit to a similar investment in sepsis improvement work in the UK and, in so doing, prevent the UK from falling rapidly behind the international curve, when it should be leading.

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): The debate must conclude by 4.55 pm.

4.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) for introducing this important debate, which is taking place on World Sepsis Day; for her work as chair of the

all-party parliamentary group; and especially for her tribute to Dame Cheryl Gillan, who did so much work in this space. I am sure that Dame Cheryl would have been delighted by the way the all-party parliamentary group has been taken forward under the leadership of the hon. Lady.

I was touched by how she shared her personal experience of sepsis because I think that will highlight to people listening or watching how difficult it sometimes is to diagnose sepsis and the very many circumstances in which sepsis can present. Sepsis is a devastating condition and, while many people who develop sepsis survive, every death is tragic. Patients rightly expect it to be recognised and treated promptly because very often they are feeling so poorly that they are not necessarily in a position to raise concerns themselves. Even as the hon. Member for Neath pointed out, just becoming unwell with sepsis has long-term consequences and it can take many months to recover from an episode. She put that extremely eloquently.

The many interventions have moved us all. Many of us will know people who have become worryingly ill or have died from sepsis. It is especially heartbreaking when the family of someone who has died from sepsis feel that more could have been done to save them. Those cases are hard to hear, but it is important for us to listen and learn at all levels of Government, from officials through to frontline clinical staff.

As has been mentioned, we have all been moved to hear about Martha Mills who was 13 when she tragically died from sepsis despite concerns being raised by her family about her care. On what would have been Martha's 16th birthday last week, her mother spoke about her death and the need for patients and families to be listened to when they think that something is wrong. I echo the words of the hon. Member for Neath. We need to encourage more people to ask that question: could it be sepsis?

I am pleased to add my support to the announcement made by the Health Secretary that the NHS will be exploring the introduction of Martha's rule in the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State is meeting Martha's family later today and is looking at how this could be implemented. I am sure he will be updating the House and I am happy to update Members on the follow-up from that meeting and the work that is being done to look at this.

We anticipate that Martha's rule will be similar to a system in Queensland, Australia, known as Ryan's rule, which is a three-step process allowing patients and families to request a clinical review of a patient's condition if they are deteriorating. Such a system would build on initiatives already being tested in the UK, including the Call 4 Concern scheme introduced in the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Evidence from the scheme suggests that patients and their families find it useful, and that it can make a real difference in outcomes for patient care.

Rachael Maskell: In the light of the fact that people suffering from sepsis can rapidly deteriorate, will the Minister ensure that a review of a patient could also be undertaken really quickly, without it becoming a bureaucratic process?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. That is the point: if families want a review, it needs to be done as quickly as possible. If we are going to look at Martha's law, those

[*Maria Caulfield*]

processes will need to be looked at. It must not become bureaucratic to make a request. It must be a really practical process that makes a difference.

Sepsis is not a single disease and it cannot be diagnosed with a single test. It varies in presentation depending on the source of infection and the individual. I pay tribute to the UK Sepsis Trust, which today has reiterated the signs and symptoms for people to look out for, including: fatigue; not passing urine; breathlessness; skin being discoloured, which is particularly important for ethnically diverse communities, because the skin colour may be different in different communities; fits and shakes; confusion; and shivers. All those symptoms are signs of potential sepsis, so it is really important that people understand to look out for them. We will never fully eliminate the risk of sepsis or other forms of acute deterioration, but we must do everything we can to ensure that clinicians and other NHS staff working on the frontline can recognise a very sick patient.

As many Members know, 100% of ambulance trusts and 99% of acute trusts in England screen for sepsis using the national early warning score or NEW score, which is carried out in clinical care. Following recommendations from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence, we are working to update national guidance on sepsis. I very much take the point made by the hon. Member for Neath about the importance of ensuring that that information is all in step and aligned with guidance across the board, so that there is one clear narrative about recognition of sepsis and the targeted use of appropriate treatment.

Research is key to improving outcomes the detection of sepsis and finding more effective treatments. We are committed to driving the evidence base to improve our understanding, and the Department is providing funding of over £1 billion a year through the National Institute of Health and Care Research to drive forward research

studies in these areas. Since 2017, the national institute has funded 14 research projects on sepsis, with a combined total funding value of £27 million, but further applications will be welcomed, so if there people out there want to undertake research studies, please encourage them to come forward and put in applications.

It is important that I touch on antimicrobial resistance, as the issue is inextricably linked to sepsis. It is critical that we conserve our antibiotics so that if an infection occurs, they remain as effective as possible when they are really needed, including for sepsis. In line with the asks of the declaration, the Government are delivering a five-year national action plan and a 20-year vision to contain and control antimicrobial resistance by 2040.

I am pleased to say that we are working collectively, across the UK, with our counterparts in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales on that antimicrobial resistance national action plan. Hon. Members have touched on international collaboration, because no country or Government can tackle this issue alone. A study published last year by the Global Research on Antimicrobial Resistance Project shows that resistance was associated with the deaths of 4.95 million people worldwide, and many of those cases will be because of sepsis related to antimicrobial resistance. By working together with international partners, we can protect ourselves and help to treat sepsis more quickly and easily.

World Sepsis Day is an important reminder that there is more work to be done. In recognition of that and as a reminder of the importance of the issue, the Department is lit up in pink today. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Neath. I am happy to meet her and anyone she wants to bring with her, because there is still work to be done. We have made great progress, and she is touched on work that is being done, including on Martha's rule, but I am happy to meet her and the APPG to ensure that, by next World Sepsis Day, we have made further progress with this significant condition.

Question put and agreed to.

Energy Supply Market: Small Businesses

4.55 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the energy supply market and small businesses.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. Tourism and hospitality are vital to the local economy of my north Wales constituency. Arguably, it is a centre of tourism in Wales, with attractions that draw millions of visitors each year. We are home to Llandudno, the queen of the Welsh resorts, the UNESCO world heritage site of Conwy castle, and we are a gateway to Eryri, Snowdonia national park.

Welcoming visitors to Aberconwy throughout the year are hundreds—if not thousands—of hotels, restaurants and pubs. Those businesses are at the heart of our local economy and communities. They showcase our local produce, which is among the finest to be found anywhere in the UK, and they provide employment and training opportunities to thousands. The warm welcome that they provide and their consistent high standards are a key reason that people choose not only to visit Aberconwy but to come back.

This summer I launched my Aberconwy pub of the year competition, and over 1,000 people took their time to vote—perhaps a reflection of the importance and value of pubs to our communities. They are truly at the heart of what makes Aberconwy such a great place to visit and, more importantly, a great place to live. But their energy costs are soaring; those same businesses are concerned that non-domestic energy suppliers and brokers are taking advantage—concerns that I have heard echoed by members of the British Beer and Pub Association across the UK. I am sure that these issues apply to small and medium enterprises in all sectors of the economy and throughout the UK. However, I want to take this opportunity to concentrate on the impact of the energy supply market on businesses operating in the hospitality sector.

Let me deal first with pricing. A recent sector-wide survey by UKHospitality found that the average energy price paid by hospitality businesses doubled between 2022 and 2023. A quarter of businesses had to tie in to prices at the peak of the market between October and December 2022, when energy rose from the fifth to the second highest cost to hospitality businesses. Those rises are accounted for in part by an artificial level of risk assigned to hospitality businesses, arguably unfairly, which has been used to inflate energy costs and reduce competition in the markets. I will return to that point a little later.

It is my good pleasure to serve as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary beer group. Last night we hosted a Welsh beer-tasting reception here in Parliament. If Members were not there, they missed a treat. It was a wonderful opportunity to showcase the quality and diversity of Welsh beer. I was delighted to welcome Dave Faragher, the owner and managing director of the Wild Horse brewery in Llandudno, a producer of some superb beers, including my favourite pale ales. Speaking with Dave, I heard once again that same pattern: the brewery's electricity costs nearly two and half times more than it did in May 2021 and gas costs three times more. Based on its current usage rate of 109,000 kWh of

electricity and 24,000 kWh of gas, its energy now costs about £22,600 a year. That is £1,900 a month more than in May 2021.

Businesses—and I—accept that there is a trade-off between price and certainty when entering into a contract. I cannot see an effective way for the Government to intervene in contracts that have been voluntarily entered into. However, I note that wholesale energy prices have fallen considerably since their 2022 peak. I also note that they remain high compared with pre-pandemic prices. I hope the Government keep a close watch on the new prices of renewed deals over the coming months. I cannot move on from pricing without mentioning the increase in standing charges. North Wales has seen some of the highest increases across the whole UK. Surely, there must be some explanation and justification as to why those eye-watering increases were introduced. Surely, we must expect to see a fall in those standing charges when new deals are negotiated.

Secondly—and in many ways a bigger concern—are the behaviours and practices of non-domestic energy providers. The same UKHospitality survey found alarming reports of the behaviours of energy supply companies, including: a refusal to quote to hospitality businesses; increased prices for hospitality businesses, with risk premiums added in; excessive deposits levied on businesses; inflexibility in negotiations; a lack of transparency from brokers; and a refusal to renegotiate contracts agreed at the peak of the energy price spike.

In June, in response to those concerns, I worked with colleagues to launch a “common sense energy supply contracts” campaign—it just trips off the tongue. At the launch supported by UKHospitality, Kate Nicholls, the chief executive, summarised accurately—and, I must say, eloquently—the importance of hospitality and the campaign to the wider economy by stating that

“Hospitality is...the canary in the coal mine”

of the economy when it comes to energy price increases. She said that it is the first to be impacted and the consequences can be seen in the sector before spreading further afield. Those things have compounded the challenges of a global pandemic and a conflict-induced international energy crisis.

Those observations, together, lead me to my third point: I question whether the non-domestic energy supply market is not now operating as a quasi-monopoly. Since launching the campaign, I have heard from colleagues, SMEs and many in the hospitality sector from throughout the UK, who echo what the hoteliers of Aberconwy are telling me.

Glenn Evans is the director and general manager of two hotels in Aberconwy, the Royal Oak and Waterloo hotels in Betws-y-Coed. These businesses provide hundreds of jobs and strengthen our local economy by welcoming tens of thousands of guests each year. Glenn has made clear to me the impact of the failing energy market, saying:

“Our experience of the Non-Domestic energy market is that there is very little if any real competition with suppliers able to name their price and business having to accept on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis with suppliers able to act effectively as a Cartel.”

That should be a great concern if, in fact, it is true that businesses have no bargaining position or ability to negotiate, or that supply periods are extended under pressure from suppliers. Is it perhaps the case that the energy market was created for a time of stability, and is

[Robin Millar]

proving ill-equipped and ineffective in times like these—times of greater uncertainty and turbulence? It cannot be that businesses are forced to raise prices, which increases pressure on inflation, or to enter a game of Russian roulette depending on when they must renew their contract. Suppliers will not fight for customers who cannot go elsewhere. They will not renegotiate contracts as an act of good faith when there are no alternatives for the customer to turn to. I turn, then, to the question of what Governments can do.

In May, at Treasury questions, I said:

“The Treasury was quick to act during the pandemic when hoteliers in Aberconwy told me that banks were directing them to their premium lending products instead of the Government’s coronavirus business interruption loan scheme. Now those same hoteliers are telling me that the energy supply market seems to have failed... They fear that the supplier’s thumb is on their side of the scales.”—[Official Report, 9 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 187.]

Many of our local businesses have also told me how vital the help of the UK Government has been throughout the pandemic. For example, all the jobs at Wild Horse brewery, which I have mentioned, were protected by the furlough scheme. They have told me how important the Government’s support with energy costs was last year at the peak of energy prices, but if small businesses are to flourish, they still need support and to be supplied by an energy market that is supportive, competitive and adaptive.

I leave on record my comments about pricing and standing charges, and market failure questions. I lament the reported unwillingness of suppliers to blend and extend existing contracts. I want to focus, instead, on solutions from the Government-commissioned report from Ofgem into the energy supply market. That has now published, and it identified a series of recommendations. I urge the Government, Ofgem and energy suppliers to implement the recommendations at the earliest opportunity—something that is endorsed by both UKHospitality and the BBA.

The first recommendation is to encourage suppliers to work with hospitality businesses to resolve the issues that many are facing with prices fixed at levels far above current market rates. That should include direct, immediate communication to suppliers from Ofgem.

The second is urgently to enact Ofgem’s proposals to secure greater transparency to customers, deliver more timely responses to customer complaints and drive better practice in setting deemed rates. The third is to deliver wider access to the energy ombudsman to redress the imbalance of power between energy suppliers and businesses, which currently lies too heavily with the suppliers.

The fourth recommendation is to put in place measures to prevent the blacklisting of entire sectors, particularly hospitality, as that dramatically reduces competition and unfairly penalises business; and the fifth is to improve regulation of energy brokers, including extending protections to more businesses, the introduction of a formal redress scheme, and greater transparency around fees.

I want to end by paying tribute to businesses in the hospitality sector, both in my constituency and throughout the UK, for the invaluable contribution they make to our communities and our economy. I thank the Minister

for her engagement to date. I know she is keen to address these points. I can assure the businesses of Aberconwy, and those represented by my colleagues in the common sense contracts campaign, that we will continue to do all we can to support them.

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front Benchers at 5.33 pm. I now call Wera Hobhouse.

5.6 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure, Ms Fovargue, to serve with you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) on securing the debate.

Bath’s small businesses are the backbone of our local economy. They create jobs and are the heart of our local community. In recent years, SMEs have had to deal with the uncertainty of Brexit, the shock of covid and then the energy crisis. What they need is a supportive Government to help them through tough times, but many of our small businesses feel badly let down.

Several companies in my constituency have expressed disappointment that the Government have decided to remove energy support. One pub’s energy bill went up by £35,000. Had the energy bill support scheme that was in place until April continued, the bill would have been reduced by £30,000. However, the Chancellor’s decision to replace that scheme meant that the pub now receives only £3,000. That big gap in support is putting small businesses in my constituency at risk of closing.

Politics is about choices. The Government chose to prioritise cutting tax for big banks over helping small businesses in my constituency. Under Liberal Democrat proposals, small and medium-sized businesses would have been offered Government grants covering 80% of the increase in their energy bills for one year, up to a maximum of £50,000.

As we move into winter, the Government must step up. Suppliers, such as E.ON, have noted that some companies will become unsustainable without Government support, as 15% of small hospitality businesses fear that they might collapse in the next 12 months, with 96% of them saying that energy prices are a significant contributor. Local firms that agreed to new energy contracts in the second half of 2022, have been paying premium prices for their energy since April. That is absurd; they have not benefited from the drop in wholesale prices.

I agree with UKHospitality that the Government must urge suppliers to work with business to resolve the issue. One potential solution from the Federation of Small Businesses is a blend and extend scheme. Blend and extend contracts enable customers to take advantage of the lower wholesale cost under their current contracts: the original contract is extended by a further 12 or 14 months, for example, and today’s rates are then blended with the original contract rates. That will reduce a firm’s energy bill and help to improve its cash flow.

Additionally, the Government must accelerate the review of electricity market arrangements to ensure that households and businesses benefit from lower-cost renewables. That should involve decoupling electricity from wholesale gas prices. Renewables are now the cheapest source of energy, but their price is artificially

linked to expensive natural gas. It is incomprehensible that businesses were unable to benefit from the lower cost of renewable energy last winter.

The Government could also reduce energy bills by decreasing demand. The UK has some of the leakiest buildings in Europe. The Government must give a strong commitment to businesses to improve their energy efficiency. We Liberal Democrats will continue to push the Government to do more, so that businesses become more energy-efficient.

The Federation of Small Businesses suggests a Help to Green scheme to provide direct financial support and advice to companies. That would include a grant of up to £5,000 to allow SMEs to invest in energy efficiency or microgeneration. The independent review of net zero also championed the idea. It would be interesting to know whether the Government have considered it.

Winter is fast approaching. We need the Government to provide the short-term help that small businesses need now and the long-term solutions to stabilise energy costs. The energy crisis has the potential to kill many small businesses in my constituency. We need a Government who are willing to help small businesses to provide the goods and services that are so crucial to our local communities.

5.11 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue, and an equal pleasure to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) on securing the debate. My constituency, like his, is reliant on and very much defined by the tourism sector.

Tourism is an iconic part of Torbay's economy; we are called the English riviera for a reason. It is certainly safe to say that the services that the hundreds of tourism businesses in my constituency provide to the tens of thousands of visitors we get every year are much better than those provided in the comedy series "Fawlty Towers" by our most iconic hotelier, Basil Fawlty. He is based on a real person, but some aspects of the real individual were not included in the character because they would have been too ridiculous even for a comedy. It is safe to say that the hotels, guesthouses and attractions of Torbay offer a much better service than the one that those who had to endure Mr Fawlty got.

Earlier this year, it was useful to work with the team at the English Riviera BID Company, which is the champion of the tourism sector in Torbay, on conducting a survey of businesses' energy costs. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of responses were from the hospitality and tourism sectors. It is worth saying that there are bigger businesses in the sector: of the 60 replies I received, seven were from companies that turned over more than £1 million. Some of our biggest hotels, which are a key part of how tourism operates in the bay, have experienced big challenges. However, half the responses were from those under the VAT threshold, because there are many family businesses in Torbay. Perhaps we could have a separate debate on the impact of that threshold on the growth of family businesses.

It was particularly interesting to see the range of energy prices that were being paid. The lowest price was about 19p per kWh; the highest was 76.3p per kWh.

That is a massive difference between businesses in the same sector, which was mostly driven by when they signed their energy contracts. It will be no surprise to hon. Members to hear that those who had to sign a new deal in the latter part of last year were paying the highest fees, with the majority paying between 30p and 50p per kWh for electricity.

Many respondents said that their monthly energy bill was double or more than double their previous energy contract. Nine respondents experienced an increase of more than 200%. That is pretty eye-watering, but the respondent with the biggest jump in their bill had an increase of 567%: their bill went from £60 a month to £400 a month, placing quite a burden on a small business.

Some said that they found it quite difficult when they came to the end of their contract. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy recalled, many were presented with a "take it or leave it" outcome. A range of complaints were made about brokers and some of their behaviours; some people felt that they had to pay up front, and others found that they literally could not get hold of them. One had their broker go out of business in the process of their trying to renew the energy contract, and some cited some fairly underhand tactics. One said that they did not particularly want to extend the contract—certainly not for the whole period suggested—and then found their voice notes being used to claim that they had signed an agreement for three years.

There are some sharp practices, on top of the obvious impacts. For some hotels and businesses, it sounded similar to the challenges they faced with banks during the financial crisis, when they suddenly had to refinance or take out swap products that they did not want or need, but the only alternative in the middle of a credit crunch was to find multimillion-pound financing deals literally overnight. Some businesses say that exactly the same tactics are being used now. Brokers knew these were distressed purchases, so they exploited them rather than working with customers.

It is not all negative. Some cited being offered things like blend and extend, which in one case cut a gas rate from 23p per kWh to 8p per kWh. Some providers are making a difference, but it is clear that far too many are not. These costs just cannot be easily absorbed. Yes, consumer prices can be put up, but that will inevitably have an impact on the number of people who can take a holiday or use a business, particularly given the wider issues in the economy.

From the survey, the question that occurred to me—I am particularly interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on this—was what thought is being given to extending access to the energy ombudsman. As has been touched on, although many of the businesses are commercial customers, they are not far off being a family looking to buy energy. Some businesses will also be the family home—for instance, a guesthouse that doubles up as the family home. They are not complex corporate organisations that can avail themselves of a wide range of advice when signing up for a deal. What thought is being given to the regulation of brokers? We have already heard examples of sharp practice, and that certainly came up in my survey.

I join the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) in her comments about finally breaking the link between gas and the electricity price. More types of generation, both renewable and, in the very foreseeable future,

[Kevin Foster]

major non-gas generation—that is, nuclear power at places such as Hinkley Point C—will make the specific link between gas and the electricity price increasingly irrelevant and outdated. It would be interesting to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

This has been a useful opportunity to outline some of the impacts on businesses in Torbay.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Hon. Members have suggested a range of options, including reducing the energy price for small businesses, but in my constituency I have found that SMEs in particular have looked to turn from being consumers to becoming suppliers by installing renewable sources, for example solar panels. Those would not just reduce bills, but provide extra supplementary support for the local grid. Esher Theatre is just one example in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that as well as support with bills, that kind of transitional support, particularly given the high capital costs involved, would go a long way?

Kevin Foster: I could not agree more. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that for some businesses there is an option not only to be a consumer of electricity but to become a generator. One business that responded to my survey said that it wanted to look at solar, but it got turned down for planning permission by the then Lib Dem-independent coalition-run council. Some businesses say that there is therefore a need to look at planning rules and the balance there.

No one is going to argue that a listed heritage building should suddenly have something inappropriate added to it, for example, but we need to think about how we can make it a practical proposition for companies to mitigate the impact on their own bills by generating from their own buildings where possible. Solar power is the obvious option that some people will reach for but, given how diverse this area is, there will potentially be other opportunities for generating their own renewable power and having support to do so. I fully agree with my right hon. Friend's excellent suggestion.

Tourism is an iconic industry for Torbay. The summer months have shown us some of the challenges facing the leisure industry. I am really keen to ensure that people who had to sign fixed-deal contracts at a time when the market was at its highest are not now unduly penalised, particularly given some of the sharp practices in the sector. That must not become a reason for those who are locked into high energy costs to have to switch the lights out on their business.

5.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) for setting the scene so well. He has done so with knowledge and expertise, as have other Members who have participated. I look forward to the shadow Minister's contributions and particularly to the Minister's.

Across the United Kingdom, we have all witnessed a dramatic increase in energy prices, both domestically and for our local businesses. I have been contacted regularly—I suspect it is the same for you, Ms Fovargue—by

numerous local business owners about their energy bills. The increases in what they are expected to pay are financially destructive. There is much more to be done on the issue as we approach the cold winter months ahead.

I have been contacted by Colin Neill of Hospitality Ulster and Glyn Roberts of Retail NI, who are spokespeople for the food and drink sector. Just last Friday night, I had the opportunity to attend an event. It was one of those idyllic occasions—we did not get many of those this summer, or not in Northern Ireland anyway. It was a promotion by the Ards and North Down Borough Council, which employs an officer to promote local food and drink and eating out in venues across the whole council area and in my constituency of Strangford.

It was a lovely sunny night in Orlock, just off Groomsport. We were able to sit out in the fields with all the tables set out. It was almost regal, to tell the truth; it was beautiful. Unfortunately I could not stay for the meal, which was a terrible pity because Stephen Alexander—the farmer who organised the event with his wife and family, in conjunction with the council—had beef from Dexter cattle on the menu and there is nothing quite as tasty, but I had forgotten that I had another event to go to later on. My point is that my council is committed to promoting food and drink and the hospitality sector in my area. That can only happen in a way that produces jobs and an economic boost if there is support.

It is right to put on record our thanks to the Minister and the Government for what they have done so far, but when the hon. Member for Aberconwy was setting the scene, he indicated that we need to take a significant and specific look at how we can do it better. I hope to work alongside the council to promote tourism, economic benefits through jobs and gains in people's wage packets, but we need that help. The spike in energy prices since the start of the war in Ukraine has hit hospitality particularly hard. The hospitality industry saw large falls in turnover because of the restrictions, and consumer spending has fallen. UKHospitality estimates that the average energy price paid by hospitality businesses doubled between 2022 and 2023.

I will give two examples, to give hon. Members an idea of some of the causes. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) referred to an increase of some 560%. A new Japanese restaurant started in my constituency about a year and a half ago. Its electricity bills went up to £7,000 per month—£84,000 a year, which is impossible to cope with. The electricity bills of a restaurant in the town of Holywood, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), went up to some £10,000. Those are examples of how it is just not possible to sustain these energy prices.

As well as the increases in energy prices, there have been inflationary pressures on key cost lines, particularly food, drink and labour costs. Food and drink inputs have risen by some 22%, and wages are 11% higher than last year. Many businesses in the hospitality sector have engaged closely with the Government and have made policymakers aware of the issues they face, including the refusal to quote to hospitality businesses, inflexibility in negotiations and increased prices for hospitality businesses, with risk premiums added.

Ofgem has published its review into the energy supply market and has identified a series of recommendations,

including encouraging suppliers to work with hospitality businesses to resolve any outstanding issues, to deliver wider access to the energy ombudsman in order to address the imbalance of power between energy suppliers and businesses, and, most importantly, to offer greater transparency to customers.

With all those things in mind, I want the hospitality sector in Strangford and across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to do better. We need Government help to make that happen. The Government have previously stepped in, and we need some input from them, because energy suppliers do not always understand the real issues in the hospitality sector.

The hospitality industry and our high streets are only as strong as we enable them to be. So many businesses have suffered financially from the impacts of the Ukraine war and the pandemic, neither of which is the Government's fault. As we approach this winter, we must ensure fairness and greater communication between our local businesses and the energy providers. If we want to see our society succeed, to promote jobs and to put wage packets in people's pockets, which we do, we need help. I look to the Minister for that help.

5.27 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) on securing this debate on energy and small business.

Wholesale energy prices are falling, which must be welcomed, but this cannot be used as a reason to justify reducing support for businesses' energy bills. Despite the falls in wholesale energy prices, many businesses—there are thousands of them in Scotland alone, and this is an issue right across the UK, as we have heard—are still stuck on contracts based on prices that were fixed during last year's energy price peak. If businesses are to survive, the energy support from the UK Government will continue to be vital. The UK Government must also work with energy suppliers to ensure that they offer more flexible contracts so that businesses benefit from falling prices, rather than being trapped in more expensive long-term fixed contracts.

Energy prices reached record levels in the third quarter of last year. Wholesale prices have reduced since then, with prices halving between January and June this year. However, the average wholesale gas price was around double the price in June of the five years up to 2021. The energy bills discount scheme provided much less support than the previous energy bill relief scheme, despite the fact that companies on fixed contracts signed during a period of record high energy prices. The impact of falling wholesale energy prices on small businesses is inconsistent and varied. Indeed, the Federation of Small Businesses found that 13% of small firms fixed their energy bills between July and December last year, which means that they are paying three times the current rate per kilowatt of electricity.

Far too many small firms are now entangled in high fixed tariffs, and 93,000 of them say that they could be forced to close, downsize or radically restructure because of a reduction in support with their energy bills. Every single MP in the House of Commons will have had small businesses contacting them every week because they are so concerned about the impact of energy costs

on their viability. Of course, energy bills are only one—a vital one—of a tidal wave of challenges that businesses are currently facing, with high interest rates, low investment, high costs, and labour and skills shortages. That is even before we factor in how customers have less money to spend on non-essential items during the cost of living crisis.

Eighty-two percent of businesses in Scotland admitted to being concerned about energy costs going into the third quarter of this year. That is hardly surprising when one considers that non-domestic energy customers in Scotland have higher energy prices than any other country in the UK. Prices in north Scotland and central and southern Scotland are the second and third highest of any region in the UK, with central and southern Scotland also paying the highest standing charges of 89.5p per day.

It is particularly galling when Scotland is an energy-rich country producing more energy than it uses, yet Scottish businesses are offered above-average market prices, unlike their counterparts in the rest of the UK. Figures released by the National Grid highlighted that by 2026-27 Scottish generators will have to pay around £465 million per year in transmission charges, while renewable developments in England and Wales will receive a subsidy of around £30 million per year. How can that be anything but a barrier to renewable energy companies setting up in Scotland?

As for the beleaguered hospitality sector, which we have heard much about today, the situation continues to be critical, with almost half of those who signed an energy contract at the peak of the energy crisis fearing that their business is at risk of failure. Pubs, bars and restaurants saw their energy prices surge by 81% in the year to May 2023, on top of the soaring cost of food and wages rising. Attempts to absorb those costs has bred unsustainable business practices that cannot indefinitely continue. Every day we know of players in the hospitality sector going to the wall, sometimes after a lifetime of building up a business.

It is vital for small businesses across Scotland and throughout the UK that the UK Government fully recognise the scale of the challenges. They must work with Ofgem in the wake of its review of the energy market and take on board its range of recommendations for changes to regulation, to increase transparency and rebalance the power between the energy supplier and small businesses. I look forward to the Minister agreeing with that when she gets to her feet.

I have said this in a number of debates: it remains the case that there was little point in the UK Government supporting businesses as they did during the covid pandemic only for those businesses to be broken on the rocks of unsustainable energy charges shortly thereafter. As the Minister will know, businesses need some certainty after these tumultuous times. I hope that when she gets to her feet she will provide some of that certainty.

5.33 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I thank the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) for bringing this important debate to Parliament. He came up with quite a comprehensive list of asks for the Minister, so I hope she has time to respond to them in full. I endorse many of the things he said.

[Kerry McCarthy]

As the hon. Member for Aberconwy suggested, the energy supply market seems stacked against hospitality businesses in particular, and we need both short and long-term action. Today's debate has reflected the fact that although the actual peak of the energy bills crisis has dampened a little, the problems are still out there. Just because it is not on the front page and we are not having urgent questions every other day in Parliament, that does not mean to say that the problem has gone away.

As has been said, small businesses in the hospitality sector have faced an onslaught of difficulties over recent years. We had the pandemic, which obviously hit them very hard, we have had a rise in rents and interest rates, and we have had soaring inflation, yet sky-high energy bills remain one of small businesses' main concerns. I have certainly seen that in my own constituency and across Bristol.

The Christmas period should be a boom time for hospitality companies, but in Bristol we saw several go under, including a brewery that was forced to stop production after a 500% increase in energy bills. That was the last straw after everything else they had had to contend with. Thankfully, there are other businesses that are just about surviving, although they are very much struggling with their bills. An independent bakery contacted me to say that it had received a final demand for an energy bill that was in the thousands—way more than they had been paying in the past. It managed to get the money together to just about pay when the final demand came in, but the bailiffs were still sent in and disconnected it. It is now having to rely on a noisy generator, which is understandably upsetting the neighbours. That is not how it wants to conduct its business, but it has no choice.

An independent café told me about the problems it was having. The neighbouring café is part of a big nationwide chain, which can negotiate an energy bill contract that goes across all of its outlets. The little independent café found that the energy companies do not want to talk to it at all because it is not a big enough customer. As we have heard, too many small businesses are locked into expensive multi-year energy supply contracts that were perhaps taken out at the peak of the market. The fact that many of them have been denied service altogether because they are deemed to be too high risk is an issue on which we need to hear from the Minister.

The Government and Ofgem must work in tandem with suppliers to ensure that the disproportionate hit that hospitality is taking does not continue. The hon. Member for Aberconwy quoted the CEO of UKHospitality, Kate Nichols, talking about a canary in the coalmine; last month she said:

"The Ofgem review last week was crystal clear that many of the issues facing businesses lie at the door of the energy suppliers. Whether it is refusing to renegotiate contracts, demanding enormous deposits, or simply refusing to supply the sector, it's clear that some energy suppliers are mistreating the sector."

We have heard about how extortionate security deposits and unfair contracts are holding businesses back. Labour's view is that we need to start reforms to the market to ensure that the cheap price of low-carbon energy is passed on to consumers. We also support calls for decoupling gas and electricity, which is something that we have mentioned many times before.

It is good to hear that Ofgem has been encouraging suppliers to work with hospitality businesses to resolve the issues they are facing with fixed prices that are far above the current market level. However, that sort of voluntary approach is not good enough. The British Beer and Pub Association has been calling on Ofgem to ensure that, beyond voluntary measures for suppliers, there is also

"recourse to more binding mechanisms to ensure expected standards of conduct and behaviour are met and maintained."

The context here is important. It is not a crisis that has come out of the blue. The situation in Ukraine has had an impact on global energy supplies, but that is not the only factor. From getting rid of our gas storage—unlike any of our European counterparts—and slashing energy efficiency installation rates, to banning onshore wind and crashing the market for solar, the Government have failed to prepare and protect Britain. It is families and businesses that have paid the price.

The extent of that failure was laid bare last week during the auction round for contracts for difference for offshore, which saw zero bids because the price was set at an unrealistic rate. There was the potential there for 5 GW of wind, which could have powered nearly 8 million homes and saved consumers £1.5 billion a year compared with the cost of electricity from gas. That is a real lost opportunity to bring cheap and clean power to many more houses. We had an urgent question on that in Parliament yesterday.

Hospitality businesses need immediate short-term support, and we heard good examples from the hon. Member for Aberconwy about delivering that within the supply market. Until we transition to clean, cheap and secure renewables, however, we will remain exposed to the same energy market that forced the Government to cap energy bills. Analysis from Labour revealed that over the summer 300,000 businesses have been forced to cut hours directly as a result of inflation, with 17% of hospitality firms reporting reducing staff work because of price rises. I think we have all seen that: anyone who went down to places like Cornwall or Devon over the summer will have seen cafés that we would expect to be open at the peak of the tourist season having to close early because they cannot get the staff to maintain seven-day-a-week opening.

Despite record energy profits, the Prime Minister continues to refuse to implement a proper windfall tax, which we have been calling for. Our green prosperity plan would cut £53 billion off businesses' energy bills by 2031. In the short term, we would help businesses to cut their plans for good, with vouchers for energy efficiency measures. The hon. Member for Aberconwy is right to raise the deficiencies in the energy supply market. Soaring energy bills are a threat to livelihoods up and down the country. I reinforce his calls for the Government to not just sound sympathetic but actually take action to help SMEs to survive.

5.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) for securing this incredibly important debate, and I thank all who have taken part.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy has been working tirelessly to try to ensure the best outcomes for businesses in his constituency and more widely. I was a beneficiary of that when I went to Conwy earlier this year on holiday with my daughter and granddaughter. He will know from our recent meeting that for me, as Minister responsible for energy consumers and affordability, it is really important that both domestic and non-domestic customers get the service they deserve. That is and always has been one of my priorities. Yesterday I met Kate Nicholls from UKHospitality, whom I have met on many occasions. I will continue to meet representatives from all sectors to understand their experiences and find out how we can support them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy knows that the energy crisis has impacted households and businesses alike. Despite volatility in the energy market, exacerbated by Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the non-domestic energy market has remained more stable than its domestic counterpart. In part, this can be attributed to the factors that differentiate the non-domestic market from the domestic market, such as different supplier hedging strategies, risk sharing with customers, and bespoke contracts for businesses with different energy requirements.

However, we do recognise the difficulties that businesses continue to face, with energy bills much higher than historical norms. That is why the Government have stepped in to provide unprecedented levels of support for business energy costs. The energy bill relief scheme provided £7.4 billion of support for more than 1.9 million energy contracts. Obviously, it would have been unsustainable for the Government to continue to support such large numbers of businesses at the level of the energy bill relief scheme. The Government have been clear that the levels of support provided under the energy support schemes are time-limited and are intended as a bridge to allow businesses to adapt.

We believe that the energy bills discount scheme provides balance. With wholesale gas prices now at lower levels than before Putin's invasion of Ukraine and having almost halved since the energy bill relief scheme was announced, the energy bills discount scheme supports businesses until April 2024 and limits taxpayer exposure to volatile energy markets. The Government are also committed to providing the right tax environment for businesses to invest and grow. In his autumn statement, the Chancellor announced that the Government are going further to support high street businesses by reducing the burden of business rates with a package worth £13.6 billion in total over the next five years. This included freezing the business rates multiplier for another year to protect businesses from rising inflation, and increasing relief for retail, hospitality and leisure from 50% to 75% for 2023-24—up to £110,000 per business.

In addition to financial support, I have been clear in numerous meetings with energy suppliers and in my ongoing meetings with Ofgem that it is essential for energy suppliers to provide all customers with clear communications to enable them to understand their energy contracts and the options available to them. I continue to encourage all suppliers to proactively reach out and speak to their customers. As a result of our work with suppliers, we have seen some offering, as has been discussed throughout the debate, a blend and extend option, where some costs are reduced and payments

are spread over a longer period. It is, of course, the responsibility of the supplier to ensure that customers can make an informed decision, including understanding the impact of the renegotiations—such as blending and extending their existing contracts—and what that means for their entitlement to energy bills discount scheme support, and the costs and benefits over the short and longer term.

I know that specific concerns have been raised about the hospitality sector, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy raised them again today. As I discussed with UKHospitality yesterday, although these are commercial matters I will continue to press suppliers to ensure that they treat all businesses based on their individual circumstances and do not take a blanket approach to the sector. The changes that Ofgem is already making following its recent non-domestic market review, and the work that we in the Government are doing, will improve the situation for all sectors, and I know that UKHospitality is supportive of all the measures.

The non-domestic energy market has not required much intervention in the past, as it broadly delivered good outcomes for business customers. However, the energy crisis has exposed areas where consumer protections can be improved for business customers, especially our small and medium enterprises, as everybody in the debate has mentioned. Ofgem conducted a review into the non-domestic energy market. It published its report findings in July, alongside policy consultation questions related to its proposals. We welcome its findings and believe it is vital that businesses receive good customer service and support from their energy supplier and any third-party providers.

Ofgem is investigating potential breaches of licence conditions and rules for certain suppliers through its compliance processes, and it will not hesitate to take enforcement action if necessary. However, we know that it is not just about compliance against existing rules. We want to ensure that businesses understand how they receive their energy. Ofgem's non-domestic review findings proposed several regulatory changes that will improve a business customer's experience with their supplier and energy broker, such as expanding transparency on energy broker commissions to all businesses and expanding access beyond microbusinesses to the alternative dispute resolution service for third-party intermediaries such as energy brokers.

The changes, along with other initiatives—such as a new code of conduct for third-party intermediaries being developed by the Retail Energy Code Company—will address some of the key challenges we have heard from businesses. We will closely monitor progress in this space to see whether further Government action is needed. We understand that the Government can play an active role in improving the experience of businesses with their energy contracts, which is why we are exploring how the energy ombudsman can support more businesses with their energy issues by expanding access to dispute resolution between customers and suppliers to more than just microbusiness customers. We plan to consult on any proposed changes to ensure that stakeholders can express their views before any final changes are enacted. We are already in discussions with interested groups and will continue to engage proactively.

I reiterate that the Government and I are committed to improving the retail energy market for households and businesses alike. We have recently set out a new

[Amanda Solloway]

vision for the future energy retail market to ensure that it works better for all consumers, while guaranteeing that the market returns to a resilient and investable state and supports system transformation. I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy for securing the debate and for the work he has carried out on supporting businesses with their energy concerns. I look forward to continuing to engage with him on this incredibly important matter to ensure that our British businesses can thrive.

5.49 pm

Robin Millar: I thank all colleagues for their contributions; I have learned from the debate and some really helpful points have been made.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who continues to impress with his diligence on behalf of his constituents and with his grasp of the relevance of this matter to them. In particular, I highlight the observation of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) that every MP in this House will have had businesses writing to them about this. I confess that I am surprised that more people have not been involved, considering how vital this issue is.

I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her comments about the unsustainability of this situation for businesses, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who reminded us of “Fawlty Towers”—perhaps he described quite well the faulty powers that are at play in the variety and indiscriminate effect of energy price rises.

I thank the Minister for her recognition that the energy market does need improvement. Implicit in that is an acknowledgement of flaws. I welcome the reassurance that she will not seek a blanket approach and will encourage a better approach from the energy supply businesses, as well as her acknowledgement that consumer protections can be improved and that Ofgem will undertake the investigation of third-party providers, leaving the door open for future Government action. I have not thought that Governments should ever compensate businesses for loss, but I do believe in fairness in a sector and market that businesses did not create and cannot control.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the energy supply market and small businesses.

5.51 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 13 September 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Northern Ireland Investment Summit

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Yesterday I launched the Northern Ireland Investment Summit (NIIS) in Belfast, which I am hosting today in partnership with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris). The event will be a key moment in the 25th anniversary years of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. This is an opportunity to look to the future, and consider how we can build on the remarkable progress Northern Ireland has made this past quarter century. Northern Ireland is an integral, uniquely positioned part of the UK and is an ideal location for companies to grow. Its combination of a highly educated workforce, competitive operating costs and unique market access make it a compelling proposition for both domestic and international investment. The summit will set out how the UK Government intend to strengthen the UK's already competitive business environment and ensure it remains one of the most attractive destinations for international investment.

The summit, jointly hosted with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and delivered in partnership with Invest Northern Ireland, will bring together over 150 investors from the United States, Europe, Asia Pacific, Middle East, and India, to discover the opportunities available to businesses in Northern Ireland. This event will be an opportunity to promote what Northern Ireland does best, with breakouts covering some of Northern Ireland's key sectors including technology, financial and professional services, life and health sciences, green economy, advanced manufacturing and engineering, creative industries and capital investment opportunities.

It will also mark a key moment to encourage investment into Northern Ireland—the Windsor framework has further enhanced the attractiveness and competitiveness of Northern Ireland as an investment location for businesses seeking market access to the UK and the EU single market for goods. The summit will showcase its strengths across all parts of Northern Ireland to build a sustainable and inclusive economy that will benefit everyone.

The Department for Business and Trade is committed to championing investment across the UK, and this event is yet another example of this Government's commitment to growing the UK economy—as laid out in the Prime Minister's key priorities for 2023.

[HCWS1020]

Shipbuilding Credit Guarantee Scheme Update

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Further to the statement by my hon. Friend, the Minister for International Trade last week, I have today laid the accompanying departmental minute before Parliament describing a contingent liability arising from the launch of a shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme.

The SCGS is a finance instrument which will provide guarantees to banks in respect of loans made to vessel owners and operators seeking to place orders at UK shipyards. The scheme will guarantee a portion of the value of eligible loans, sharing the risk with lenders to encourage offers of finance to UK vessel owners and operators.

The SCGS is one of a number of targeted interventions being taken as part of over £4 billion of Government investment planned through the Government's national shipbuilding strategy refresh, to encourage UK ship owners and operators to place new orders and upgrade their existing fleets with world-leading shipyards that are based up and down the UK. HM Treasury has approved the arrangements.

In addition, I hereby give notice of the Export Credits Guarantee Department's—known as UK Export Finance, UKEF—intention to seek an advance from the contingencies fund. This was made over recess, and I am notifying Parliament at the earliest opportunity. I have previously notified the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Department for Business and Trade Select Committee. UKEF will act as service provider to DBT. It will manage inquiries and applications under the SCGS and DBT will cover resource and other costs. To have the necessary approvals to undertake this work on behalf of DBT, UKEF must apply for a contingencies fund advance.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £105,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a supplementary estimate for UK Export Finance. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £51,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund.

[HCWS1016]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Back British Farming Day

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): British farmers play a crucial role in driving economic growth, supporting national food security, and achieving our ambitious net zero goals. On Back British Farming Day, the Government are proud to celebrate our British farmers and growers who work tirelessly to produce world-renowned, high-quality produce all year round.

British food is the best in the world and this Government want to do all they can to support hard-working British farmers to produce it. We are backing industry-led action that helps customers to “buy British” when they shop online and we are supporting the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board's We Eat Balanced campaign, which endorses the excellent taste and quality of home-grown meat and dairy products.

Across Government, we are taking concrete actions to back British farming and strengthen our domestic food production. Today, the Government are setting out further support for British farmers and encouraging more people to buy high-quality British produce. These latest measures form part of the £3.1 billion being invested into the UK farming sector every year and will help meet our commitment to continue to produce at

least 60% of the food we consume here in the UK. By improving farm productivity, they will also provide a further boost to the economy, with the sector contributing £127 billion to the UK's economic prosperity annually.

Today we are building on the significant progress made with a new package of measures designed to cut red tape, support our farmers to invest in new technologies and build energy resilience, and boost our vitally important abattoir network. Today the Government are announcing:

The Government will support British food, which is the best in the world. That is why we are backing industry-led action to signpost customers to “buy British” when they shop online. We are also proud to support AHDB's campaign, which launched on 8 September, and aims to highlight the exceptional taste and quality of our home-grown meat and dairy produce, and its role in a nutritionally balanced and sustainable diet. We are today confirming that farmers producing sustainable British food under our environmental land management schemes will be able to use them to help meet public procurement standards, benefiting our British farmers and allowing the public sector to benefit from more excellent British food.

The Government will bring forward the planned payment schedules for all those who join the sustainable farming incentive (SFI). The new and improved sustainable farming incentive 2023 – which has 23 actions on offer for farmers—is currently accepting expressions of interest and will start accepting applications from 18 September. Today, in recognition of the challenges faced with inflation and rising input costs, we are confirming that farmers who have a live sustainable farming incentive 2023 agreement before the end of the year, will receive an accelerated payment in the first month of their agreement, helping with cashflow and ensuring SFI works for farm businesses.

Our food and drink exports bring £24 billion to the British economy, and we have had great success stories in recent years including securing access for British lamb to the US. Our network of agri-food attachés play an important role in breaking down barriers to trade and opening up new trading markets. *Following our commitment at the Farm to Fork Summit, we have launched a recruitment drive to appoint an additional five agri-food attachés to boost the UK's agri-food exports,* bringing the total number of dedicated UK agri-food attachés to 16. The new attachés will cover northern Europe, southern Europe, Australia/New Zealand, South Korea and Africa.

The Government will help farmers to reduce their carbon footprint and improve their energy resilience and productivity. As well as producing food for our tables, farmers and land managers play a crucial role in helping the UK achieve our ambitious net zero plans. Through our farming investment fund, we are helping farmers invest in climate-smart technologies that enhance productivity and reduce carbon emissions.

Today, we are pleased to announce an additional £15 million for farmers to invest in solar equipment, opening later this year, backing their energy security and cutting costs in the long term. This funding complements the £10 million already available for cattle farmers under the animal health and welfare infrastructure grant, which included a solar offer alongside grants to improve calf housing.

We are also unveiling plans to allocate an additional £15 million to farmers and growers and in England to fund the purchase of innovative robotic and automated equipment. By supporting our farmers to invest in modern

farming techniques, innovation, and infrastructure, we not only enhance the productivity of the sector, but strengthen our competitiveness in global markets. The second round of our successful improving farm productivity grant, part of the farming investment fund, will launch later in 2023.

The Government want more abattoirs around the country. That is good for farmers and for animal welfare. We are identifying opportunities to remove unnecessary burdens while maintaining our animal welfare standards. We have listened to the concerns of smaller abattoir owners and are identifying opportunities to cut unnecessary burdens, making it easier for them to operate and support farmers in reaching local and international markets while maintaining our world-leading standards.

The Government recognise that a thriving livestock sector depends on a sustainable abattoir network. We are going to support small abattoirs—financially and by cutting red tape. The £4 million smaller abattoirs fund will launch in Q4 2023, to support abattoirs to improve productivity, enhance animal health and welfare, add value to primary products, and encourage innovation and investment in new technologies.

I encourage you to champion our schemes with farmers in your area. Our schemes are about supporting resilient and sustainable farm businesses, preserving and improving the countryside that we have stewarded for generations and putting food on the plates of people across the nation.

[HCWS1019]

Delivering for our Protected Landscapes

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), collectively known as Protected Landscapes, are home to some of our most iconic and beautiful places. These remarkable landscapes support our nation's health and wellbeing and are crucial to delivering our commitments to tackle climate change and restore nature, including our international commitments under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

As we approach the 75th Anniversary of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which legally safeguarded these precious landscapes, the Government are acting to accelerate the recovery of nature in England's National Parks and AONBs.

Delivering enhanced management plans that contribute to our targets

Through the introduction of new legislation in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, we are enhancing management plans and placing a stronger requirement on partners to contribute to their delivery. This will ensure protected landscapes organisations and their partners collaborate effectively, creating a national network of beautiful, nature-rich spaces that can be enjoyed right across the country. We will table an updated Government amendment to the Bill at Third Reading to deliver this and will shortly publish our response to the Landscapes Review consultation which will set out our action plan for these special places.

We will also shortly publish our new Outcomes Framework. The Outcomes Framework will define the contribution that our protected landscapes should make

to national targets to guide local decision-making and prioritisation. This is a landmark step forward in achieving our global goal to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030.

Establishing a new protected landscapes partnership

We are supporting the creation of a new partnership between the National Association for AONBs, National Parks England, National Trails UK and Natural England to deliver a range of exciting projects and programmes on nature recovery and widening access to nature. The partnership will also boost opportunities for private sector investment in our protected landscapes. The first meeting of the partnership will take place by the end of November, and it will be backed by over £2 million of funding.

Enhancing support for farming in protected landscapes

We have extended the Farming in Protected Landscape (FiPL) programme by a further year until March 2025 with £10 million additional funding each year in recognition of the positive feedback and outcomes delivered. In the first two years we have:

- Supported more than 2,500 projects, engaging around 5,000 farmers and land managers.

- Created 41 new farm clusters and supported more than 100 existing ones.

- Funded more than 400 projects to make the landscape more inclusive for visitors, including around 200 projects delivering educational access visits.

- Created more than 40 miles of new permissive access.

- Engaged more than 5,000 volunteers.

- Planted around 100 miles of hedgerow and restored eight miles of dry-stone walling.

- Created or restored 262 ponds.

- Undertaken positive management on around 27,000ha of SSSIs.

- Improved management for biodiversity on around 69,000ha.

- Funded more than 400 projects reducing carbon emissions and other forms of pollution.

- Restored, enhanced and better interpreted more than 300 historic structures, buildings and features.

Improved access to nature in protected landscapes

The £9.3 million three-year Access for All programme in our protected landscapes is now at the halfway point. We have already distributed £3.6 million to our National Parks and AONBs to deliver accessibility improvements across all 44 Protected Landscapes. This has resulted in more accessible paths, more changing places toilets and rest stops, more accessible physical and digital way-marking of paths including access guides for autistic and visually or hearing-impaired visitors, new equipment such as accessible e-bikes, or beach access kits and other accessible infrastructure such as upgraded bridges.

Together with our local partners, we will ensure people and nature can thrive in these special places for the next 75 years and beyond.

[HCWS1021]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Elections Act: Implementation and Evaluation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): My hon. Friend the Minister for Faith and Communities (Baroness Scott of Brybrook) has made the following written ministerial statement:

The Elections Act 2022 is a critical part of the Government's work to ensure the integrity of our elections. I am today providing an update on the implementation of the Act, and the Government's progress towards its evaluation.

Non-party campaigner code of practice

The Act took important steps to strengthen the political finance framework to support the existing principles of fairness, transparency and integrity. Section 29 of that Act created a duty for the Electoral Commission to prepare a code of practice on the operation of controls relating to third party national election campaigns to provide greater certainty for campaigners. It also provides a defence for third parties who are charged with offences under part 6 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, where they can demonstrate compliance with the code of practice.

Following the commencement of part 4 of the Elections Act 2022, the Electoral Commission ran a consultation on a draft code of practice. Responses received from a range of groups were overall positive. However, the Commission made some modifications in response.

The Government have considered the draft code provided by the Commission and is today laying the code, with some minor and technical modifications, before Parliament for approval.

In two areas the version of the code of practice presented to the Secretary of State required modification to avoid providing a statutory defence where no defence is intended by the underlying primary legislation. It is important the code accurately reflects the legislation. The Department worked with the Commission in developing these minor modifications.

The first set of modifications I have made is to insert the words: "the Commission considers that" under the sections on overheads and staff costs. These costs are not explicitly exempted from contributing to controlled expenditure under schedule 8A of the 2000 Act. These modifications will accurately reflect both the legislation and the position that the Electoral Commission takes as an independent regulator.

Secondly, it is important that the code of practice does not suggest a third party is only involved in a common plan if the campaigner intends to spend money themselves, where the legislation is clear that a third party is party to a joint campaign even if the intention is that controlled expenditure is incurred on their behalf.

I have therefore modified the code under the heading "What is joint campaigning" to add the phrases "whether that expenditure is to be incurred by, or on behalf of, each non-party campaigner" and "whether that expenditure is to be incurred by, or on behalf, of the non-party campaigner in question".

If the guidance is approved by Parliament, it will come into force later this year. To facilitate parliamentarians' access to the guidance, the document has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Progress towards evaluation of the Elections Act 2022

The introduction of voter identification for reserved polls at polling stations in Great Britain fulfilled the Government's commitment to protecting the integrity

of our elections through introduction of the policy, and brought the rest of the UK in line with Northern Ireland, where this has been a longstanding requirement.

The local elections in England in May were our first experience of the new voter identification requirements in practice, and the Electoral Commission’s interim report on the May polls showed that 99.75% of voters in polling stations were able to cast their vote successfully under the new rules. The Government are pleased with the smooth roll-out of new practices and processes, and we are grateful for the work of local authorities and other partners in delivering the change in requirements. The Association of Electoral Administrators noted, in their own report of the May 2023 elections, that the polls were “well run” and “run smoothly as usual, without any major issues” and the Electoral Commission found that 90% of voters were satisfied with the process of voting in May’s elections—in line with the most recent comparable elections in 2019, when 91% of voters were satisfied.

We are also committed to ensuring we fully understand how the policy has operated in practice, what has gone well and where there are any areas for improvement in the future. To this end, we are, as set out in legislation, conducting an evaluation of the implementation of voter identification at the local elections in May as well as at the next two UK parliamentary elections.

To provide Parliament with an assurance of progress towards the publication of the first evaluation report in November 2023, I have today published two documents which will provide further detail of the work being carried out.

An external research agency—IFF Research—has been appointed to conduct the evaluation, and the Electoral Integrity Programme Evaluation Plan sets out IFF’s plan for an impact and process theory-based evaluation of the introduction of the new requirements.

As part of this evaluation, research into public attitudes towards and experiences of voting, and perceptions of the changes to the process of voting due to the introduction of the Elections Act, is being carried out by another external research agency, IPSOS UK, through a series of public opinion surveys. The first report of these surveys, published today, indicates that voter satisfaction with voting in elections remains high, with the majority of voters reporting they are confident that the recent local elections were run well and that in person voting is secure.

We will continue to learn from this research, from other sources of data, and from research conducted by the Electoral Commission, to ensure the full picture of the impact of the implementation of voter identification is understood. The Government remain committed to stamping out the potential for voter fraud and ensuring our democracy remains fair, up-to-date, and secure well into the future.

The associated documents will be deposited in the House Libraries.

[HCWS1018]

WORK AND PENSIONS

DWP Estate: Decommissioning of Temporary Jobcentres

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I provided updates on decommissioning temporary jobcentres and expanding our services on 23 March 2021, and expanding our services on 21 October 2021. These statements reaffirmed the Department’s commitment to reducing its jobcentre estate back to pre-pandemic levels by decommissioning these temporary jobcentres—or the additional space in established jobcentres—in a phased approach, where the increased capacity is no longer needed. The full list of temporary jobcentres and their current status can be found here.

As part of this ongoing, phased, approach to decommissioning the temporary jobcentres, the Department is today announcing the fourth and latest phase, which consists of decommissioning a further 26 temporary sites—or additional space in existing jobcentres. Subsequent phases of decommissioning will continue to follow throughout 2023 and 2024 and Parliament will be kept updated. Details of the sites being decommissioned are listed below.

The decommissioning of temporary jobcentres will not reduce the levels of service, or access to face-to-face appointments. Customers will return to being served by an established jobcentre and there will be no reduction in the number of work coaches supporting customers as a result of the decommissioning.

The Department continues to support and update colleagues in a timely and sensitive manner. We also remain committed to ensuring all relevant stakeholders, organisations and Parliament are engaged and regularly updated on our work. Letters are being sent to each MP with changes in their constituency to explain what this means for their local jobcentre, its staff, and their constituents.

The 26 temporary jobcentres or additional space in existing sites to be formally decommissioned are:

Temporary Jobcentre Location	Phase 4
	Address
Barnsley	Wellington House, 36 Wellington Street, Barnsley S70 1WA
Basildon	Church Walk, Great Oaks, Basildon SS14 1GJ
Bedford	Woodlands Annexe, Manton Lane, Bedford MK41 7NU
Blackburn	The Mall, Northgate, Blackburn BB2 1BD
Bracknell	Phoenix House, Cookham Road, Bracknell RG12 1RB
Exeter	Units 1 and 2, The Depot, Belgrave Road, Exeter EX1 2FT
Falkirk	Part of MSU 4, Callendar Square Shopping Centre, High Street, Falkirk FK1 1UJ
Harlow	Unit 58-60 Harvey Centre, Harvey Centre Approach, Harlow CM20 1XR

Temporary Jobcentre Location	Phase 4 Address
Hounslow (Additional space only)	Unit 27, Treaty Centre, 44 High Street, Hounslow TW3 1ES
Huddersfield	Unit 2, 11 Trinity Street, Huddersfield HD1 4DA
Kingston	Anstee House, Wood Street, Kingston upon Thames KT1 1TG
Leeds	123 Albion Street, Leeds LS2 8ER
Leeds	Temple House, Ring Road, Seacroft, Leeds LS14 1NH
London Bromley	129 Burnt Ash Lane, Bromley, BR1 5AJ
London Croydon Borough	Part Grd, 1st and 2nd Floors, Simpson House, 6 Cherry Orchard Road, Croydon CR0 6BA
London Edmonton (Enfield)	10 West Mall, Edmonton Green, Edmonton N9 0AL
London Hammersmith	1 Hammersmith Broadway, London W6 9DL
London Rushey Green (Lewisham)	Old Town Hall, 1 Catford Road, Rushey Green, London SE6 4HQ

Temporary Jobcentre Location	Phase 4 Address
London Walthamstow	Grd, and 1st Floors of Units 9 and 10, The Mall, 45 Selborne Walk, Walthamstow E17 7JR
Newport	Unit 31, Kingsway Centre, John Frost Square, Newport NP20 1EB
Oldham	West Wing Grd and 1st Floor, Oldham Business Centre, University Way, Oldham OL1 1BB
Ramsgate	The Argyle Centre, 9 York Street, Ramsgate CT11 9DS
Reading	Kennet Place, 121 Kings Road, Reading RG1 3FR
Rhyl	7 Bodfor Street, Rhyl LL18 1AS
Scunthorpe	22-24 Southgate Mall, The Foundry Shopping Centre, Scunthorpe DN15 6SU
Southampton	Frobisher House, Nelson Gate, Wyndham Place, Southampton SO15 1GX

[HCWS1017]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 13 September 2023

PRIME MINISTER

G20 Summit

The following is an extract from the G20 Summit oral statement on 11 September 2023.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman went on to raise the announcement about the partnership for global infrastructure and investment. What he failed to mention in his criticism was that that initiative—the PGII—was created by the UK under our G7 presidency. Far from being something that we are not part of, we were the ones who made sure that we were there at its inception. Again, he is, as ever, jumping on the latest bandwagon that he can find. The PGII initiative

will contain a range of different projects. This particular one was also not signed by **Canada, Japan or Italy**, for example.

[Official Report, 11 September 2023, Vol. 737, c. 685.]

Letter of correction from the Prime Minister:

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer).

The correct response should have been:

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman went on to raise the announcement about the partnership for global infrastructure and investment. What he failed to mention in his criticism was that that initiative—the PGII—was created by the UK under our G7 presidency. Far from being something that we are not part of, we were the ones who made sure that we were there at its inception. Again, he is, as ever, jumping on the latest bandwagon that he can find. The PGII initiative will contain a range of different projects. This particular one was also not signed by **Canada or Japan**, for example.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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**not later than
Wednesday 20 September 2023**

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