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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 19 September 2023

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: May I remind the House that this is the final performance of the Clerk of the House? This is the last time we will see him at the Table, but we wish you well, John, and do enjoy your new role.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

*The Secretary of State was asked—
Contracts for Difference Scheme*

1. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the contracts for difference scheme in supporting low-carbon electricity generation. [906448]

2. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential implications of the outcome of the contracts for difference allocation round 5 on the future development of floating offshore wind. [906450]

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): Our contracts for difference scheme is a UK success story, having contracted more than 30 GW of capacity, including 20 GW of offshore wind, since 2014. AR5 delivered a record number of clean energy projects, enough to power the equivalent of 2 million homes, and the Government's commitment to offshore wind remains unchanged, which is 50 GW by 2030.

Peter Aldous: I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place. The great advantage of the CfD scheme is that with forward planning it has the flexibility to adapt to changing economic conditions. Can she therefore confirm that the Government will be working collaboratively and straightaway with industry to ensure a successful round 6 so that offshore wind can get back on track, and UK consumers and the UK economy can benefit from low-cost, low-carbon energy?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend for his long-standing support in this area and I can confirm that we are wasting no time in engaging the sector in advance of AR6. I personally spoke to offshore wind stakeholders following AR5 and confirmed our commitment. The Minister for Energy Security and Net

Zero held a roundtable with the sector on 12 September. We are listening to the sector and annual auctions mean we can respond quickly.

Selaine Saxby: Question 2 please.

Claire Coutinho: I know that as chair of the all-party group on the Celtic sea my hon. Friend is a long-standing supporter of offshore wind. We have announced that AR6 will open in March 2024 and we have published an indicative timetable. We are supporting research and development in floating wind technology via the floating offshore wind demonstration programme, announcing up to £160 million in capital grant funding.

Mr Speaker: Can we work to the order, as it is a grouped question? The question should not be answered in that way. Selaine Saxby should be asking a direct question.

Selaine Saxby: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am keen to understand better what more can be done to assist floating offshore wind in AR6 following what happened in AR5.

Claire Coutinho: I know my hon. Friend is a long-standing supporter of offshore wind. We have announced that AR6 will open in March 2024 and we have published that timetable. We are supporting floating wind technology through different programmes and manufacturing investment schemes too.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): We also welcome the Secretary of State to the Dispatch Box. With many renewable projects built on the strength of contracts for difference, but with reports of many not invoking these contracts and instead benefiting from the higher energy prices, can the contracts in principle be invoked later, when prices fall, or could the Government enforce the invoking of the CfD contracts now, at the start of the generation of these projects, rather than their taking the high prices while they can?

Claire Coutinho: The CfD programme has driven prices down over time to enormous effect, by 70% since they started, which is much more than people expected. I would be happy to take the hon. Gentleman's particular point away but overall this is a successful programme, and our annual auction changes will also make a difference.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Given the unreliable and intermittent nature of both solar and wind-generated energy, we already have more of these projects than the grid can efficiently manage. Does the Secretary of State agree that what we really need is more reliable baseload capacity and that that can only be delivered via fossil fuels or nuclear?

Claire Coutinho: We have a strong focus on energy security, and that means having a just transition to clean energy but also investing in nuclear. The hon. Gentleman may have seen that we have started the capital raise for Sizewell C, and we support the oil and gas industry as a just transition fuel.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I wish the Clerk of the House well in the future, and I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to her new role and congratulate her on her appointment to the Cabinet. I look forward to working together. Let us start with the truth. The offshore wind auction that she inherited was a totally avoidable disaster. It means another lost year for our country and another year of higher bills, and it is because Ministers obstinately refused to listen to warning after warning from industry. RenewableUK estimates that the auction failure will add £2 billion to bills. What is the Secretary of State's estimate of the cost to families of this fiasco?

Claire Coutinho: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming me to my place. I am delighted to serve opposite him and face him at the Dispatch Box.

There are a couple of things I will point out. If we had tried to do what the right hon. Gentleman suggested, we would have delayed the 3.7 GW of clean energy that we secured, which is able to power 2 million homes. If we want to look at what is going to hurt people and their bills, I would point to his disastrous policies, whether it is the ultra low emission zone, which is hitting people who can least afford it, or his borrowing spree, which will raise inflation.

Edward Miliband: I am afraid the Secretary of State is quite wrong about that, because Ireland adjusted the price and had 3 GW of offshore wind. Let us talk about the way that this Government are jeopardising our energy security. They have delivered—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Stuart, I know this is the last day before the recess and you are excited to get some freedom, but let's save it.

Edward Miliband: This Government have delivered the worst cost of living crisis in a generation. There is a pattern here: they banned onshore wind and raised bills, they slashed energy efficiency and raised bills, and now they have trashed offshore wind, raising bills. That is why we are so exposed. I know that the right hon. Lady did not make those decisions, but now that she is the Secretary of State, she needs to tell us, after 13 years of failure, what is she going to do differently?

Claire Coutinho: Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman about the last 13 years. We have decarbonised faster than any G7 country, while also growing the economy. We have grown renewable energy from 7% of our electricity when Labour left power to 50% now. I am proud of what we have achieved over the last 13 years. We have a proud record when it comes to climate change and a proud record when it comes to renewable energy, and I am proud to defend it.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new role. I wish I could have welcomed her to her new role on 5 September, when we had the remaining stages of the Energy Bill, but she was not here. I wish I could have welcomed her on 7 September for the urgent question on the auction round 5 strike

price, but she was not here for that either, so what has the new Secretary of State been doing in the midst of the chronic energy crisis facing our constituents and allowing her Department to see shovel-ready offshore wind go into abeyance? What has she been doing?

Claire Coutinho: I struggle to see how that was directly related to the question, but let me tell the hon. Gentleman what I have been doing. I was here for the Third Reading of the Energy Bill; perhaps he was not. During this time, I have been moving forward with all the Government's priorities on energy security and ensuring that we can move to a just, clean transition.

Dave Doogan: Forgive me if that rendition is not immediately recognisable in offshore wind projects from auction round 5. I hope the Department has learnt some salutary lessons from this mess, but it will be consumers who pick up the bill. Can I ask the Secretary of State for her personal intervention in pumped storage to introduce a cap and floor mechanism, which industry has been clear is absolutely necessary to get this vital baseload energy source into position? Will she intervene personally and get that moving, because it is blowing in the breeze just now?

Claire Coutinho: I am absolutely focused on getting investment into offshore wind. One of the first things I did after AR5 was speak to investors from across the board, to make sure I was listening to their concerns, and there are multiple things they care about. One is having certainty; there was lots of welcoming of the move to annual auctions. The other is connections to the grid. I will be looking at all those things and making sure we can get the investment the sector needs.

Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage

3. **Jo Gideon** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of carbon capture, usage and storage technology on economic growth. [906451]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): We have committed £20 billion to the early deployment of carbon, capture, utilisation and storage, which will deliver economic growth and decarbonisation of our industrial heartlands. Our analysis has shown that it could support up to 50,000 jobs in 2030 and add up to £5 billion to the economy by 2050.

Jo Gideon: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. Following the commitment in "Powering Up Britain" to provide up to £20 billion of funding for early deployment of CCUS, how does she intend to finance that support? Does she recognise that CCUS funding needs to be matched by creating a competitive environment for private sector investment, including a carbon border adjustment mechanism to smooth the path to deployment, as recommended by the Commission for Carbon Competitiveness, of which I am a member?

Claire Coutinho: I welcome my hon. Friend's work as a member of the Commission for Carbon Competitiveness, and she makes an excellent point. The £20 billion will be funded through a variety of sources and will be allocated in due course, and early this year the Government

consulted on a range of measures to support decarbonisation, including a carbon border adjustment mechanism. The Government will provide a response to that consultation in due course.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If the Secretary of State is looking for innovation that will make a real difference to economic growth, will she look at not only carbon capture and storage, but hydrogen? Many of the same universities and research establishments are looking at hydrogen as the new energiser for transport and so much else in our lives. Will she put some serious money into both hydrogen and CCS?

Claire Coutinho: I am interested in innovation in all of those areas, because that is what will get us to the ambitious targets we have set out. I will be looking at hydrogen, carbon capture, and every single other area to see what more we can do.

Methane Leaks from Oil and Gas Production

4. **Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): What plans she has to help tackle methane leaks from oil and gas production. [906453]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The Government have ambitious plans to tackle methane emissions from oil and gas production. With support from Government and key regulators, industry is on track to end routine flaring and venting prior to 2030, in line with the World Bank's initiative.

Paul Maynard: While I welcome the Government's introduction of new oil and gas licences in the North sea as part of a just and graduated transition to more reliance on renewables, the Minister will be aware that methane is a far more warming gas than carbon dioxide. Given that much more can be done, will the Government look at how they can ensure that flaring, venting and leaks are fixed by the new licence holders as and when they occur and, in the context of the North sea transition plan, ensure that the new Affleck oil field is not allowed to flare until 2037, as set out in the permission granted to it? This is all part of how we can reach net zero without it costing my constituents the earth.

Graham Stuart: The North Sea Transition Authority already expects methane emissions to be as low as possible and all new developments to be developed on the basis of zero routine flaring and venting, and that they should be electrified or electrification-ready. Of course, what is required and will help facilitate that is new investment in the North sea facilitated by licences, without which we are unlikely to see the reduction in emissions that we have so successfully driven so far.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister has not really given any reassurance to the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). As we know, methane is a whopping 80 times more powerful than carbon dioxide over a 20-year period, so if the Minister is serious about tackling this issue, will he explain why the Government failed to use the Energy Bill to ban flaring and venting? Why did they whip their own MPs to vote against an amendment that would have outlawed it, and given that the practice has been

illegal in Norway since the 1970s, will he finally recognise that this makes a mockery of Ministers' claims about UK oil and gas being greener?

Graham Stuart: Unusually, the hon. Lady has got her facts wrong: I do not think that amendment was even selected for debate that day. According to the North Sea Transition Authority, flaring was reduced by more than 10% just last year, contributing to a reduction of nearly 50% between 2018 and 2022. As I have said, the North Sea Transition Authority estimates that methane emissions have fallen by more than 40% to fewer than 1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent—a record low. We have old existing infrastructure and are moving with a maximum of ambition to reduce emissions, and we have a successful track record to date.

Climate Change Committee: 2023 Progress Report

5. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her Department's policies of the Climate Change Committee's 2023 Progress Report to Parliament, published in June 2023. [906456]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I am grateful for the work of the Climate Change Committee, and I pay tribute in particular to the commitment of its outgoing chair, Lord Deben. The Government will respond to the committee's report in October.

Liz Twist: The latest Climate Change Committee report found that, out of 50 key indicators of Government progress on tackling climate change, just nine were on track. According to Energy UK, even before the disastrous offshore wind auction, the UK was forecast to have the slowest growth in low-carbon electricity generation of the world's eight largest economies up to 2030. Does the Minister recognise that the Government's failure has cost every family £180 in higher bills?

Graham Stuart: Our climate leadership is measurable and real. We have reduced emissions by more than any other major economy since 1990. We were the first to legislate for net zero. We have eliminated coal, which as late as 2012 produced nearly 40% of our electricity supply—the legacy of the Labour party—and we have lifted renewables from 7% to 48%. We have cut emissions by more than others, transforming our energy system, and we are leading on this issue internationally and domestically. That is exactly what the Government rely on in fulfilling their aspiration to climate leadership.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that one consequence of the Climate Change Committee report is to increase our country's reliance on Chinese technology and raw materials?

Graham Stuart: China has even greater offshore wind capacity than ourselves—it has the largest wind and largest solar capacity in the world—and it has a significant level of production. We recognise that we will need technology from all over the world, including China, if we are to meet our net zero aspirations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): According to the Climate Change Committee,

“the private sector...is being held back...by weak policy signals, uncertainty, and barriers to investment,”

and perhaps we would not need to be so reliant on China if those issues were addressed. Just last month, UK investors representing £1.5 trillion in assets wrote to the Prime Minister, warning that that could mean the UK missing out on 1.7 million jobs. Will this zombie Government listen to investors and their own advisers, look at the game-changing interventions in the States and bring forward a UK version of the Inflation Reduction Act before it is too late to save British businesses and British jobs?

Graham Stuart: Yet another unfunded spending commitment from the Labour party—the party that left us with less than 7% of our electricity coming from renewables and that left us reliant on coal; a party that wants to nationalise the industry and drive out all those companies that have transformed the North Sea basin, led the world in cutting the cost of offshore wind, and made us the European leader in offshore wind and the global leader in cutting emissions. The Labour party is the biggest enemy of net zero and the biggest enemy of the private investment in this country that will help us get there.

Onshore Wind Industry

6. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help develop the onshore wind industry in England. [906457]

13. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help develop the onshore wind industry in England. [906466]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The Government recently announced changes to national planning policy, giving greater flexibility to local authorities to respond to suitable opportunities for onshore wind. The Government also want communities to benefit from hosting onshore wind and have consulted on improving the current system of community benefits for England.

Richard Burgon: The truth is that the Government have failed to properly lift the ban on onshore wind, while bending over backwards to support expensive new oilfields and even giving billions in tax breaks for those polluting projects. That ban has already added hundreds of pounds to people's bills, undermining the investment we need in the cheapest form of energy, and cost thousands of good green jobs. Will the Minister not admit that the Government's failure to properly lift the ban on onshore wind will continue to keep bills higher and makes us less energy-secure?

Graham Stuart: More than 15 GW of onshore wind are deployed in the UK. In our allocation round 5 just the other day, we secured 1.7 GW of onshore wind capacity; allocation round 4 secured 1.5 GW. It is extraordinary: an industry—domestic UK oil and gas—has lower emissions than the alternative from abroad and employs 200,000 people, every one of whose jobs is at risk if the Labour party ever gets into power. Labour

Members are suggesting that there is a negative fiscal impact, when that industry is expected to contribute £50 billion over the next five years. The Labour party is an enemy of the transition to net zero and of British jobs and prosperity.

Helen Hayes: If the Minister will not accept the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), will he at least listen to industry, which described the recent announcement on onshore wind as a “missed opportunity” to end the ban? RenewableUK said:

“The proposed changes don't go far enough”

and would not make up for

“eight years of lost progress.”

When will the Minister listen to industry and lift the ban properly so that we can cut bills?

Graham Stuart: On 5 September, the Government announced changes to national planning policy for onshore wind in England, giving greater flexibility to allocate suitable areas and to address the planning impact of onshore wind. I agree with the hon. Lady; I am an enthusiast for more onshore wind where it goes with the grain of communities, and we will continue to pursue that to make sure that we can realise the benefits that come from it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Minister will know, although he unaccountably did not tell us, that there was precisely no new onshore wind in England in the recent AR5. The Minister claims that the latest compromised wording, which he alluded to, will lift the ban on onshore wind, but he knows really that that is not so and he knows what the industry has been saying about it and why it will not invest for the future. The result is no new onshore wind getting built in the medium-term, higher bills for families and less energy security for the country. Why will his Department not just face down his luddite Back Benchers, introduce fair planning regulations for onshore wind and get the industry restarted across England?

Graham Stuart: As I have just said, we announced changes as recently as 5 September. Like the hon. Gentleman, I look forward to a positive future for onshore wind in England, as well as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Uyghur Region: Solar Industry Sourcing

7. **Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the report by Sheffield Hallam University entitled “Over-exposed: Uyghur Region Exposure Assessment for Solar Industry Sourcing”, published in August 2023. [906458]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Government are determined to ensure that our energy system is not dependent on forced labour at home or abroad. The supply chain and innovation sub-group of the solar taskforce is therefore considering this issue as a top priority.

Alicia Kearns: I start by welcoming my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her place.

What conversations has my hon. Friend the Minister had with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department for Business and Trade on eradicating forced labour from our supply chains? Does he agree that we must ban the worst offending companies from our shores? Will he therefore lead a cross-Government effort to take action on tackling slave labour in our supply chains, just as Germany, America and the EU already have done?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend knows that this issue is a top priority for the Government and for me. A range of tools can be used to tackle forced labour in global supply chains. The Government continue to keep our policy responses under close review, and we are working closely with our partners, including at the United Nations, to hold China to account for its egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang. We have already taken robust action, introduced new guidance on the risks of doing business in Xinjiang, enhanced export controls and introduced financial penalties under the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that answer. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I commend the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on raising this matter. For me, freedom of religious belief in China is paramount and should be a priority for the Government—I think it is. To make it happen, we need clear legislation in this place and real power from this Government, and we need to be assured that no company that uses forced labour in China can have its products sold in this country. Again, I seek confirmation from the Minister that that serious strong will is there.

Andrew Bowie: I concur very much with the hon. Gentleman's view on this matter. The Government are determined to ensure that our energy system is not dependent on forced labour. As I said, we are continuing to work with international partners to do what we can to hold China to account for its egregious human rights violations, and to work with the solar industry to see what we can do to weed out forced labour and ensure that it is not part of that supply chain moving forward.

National Grid Funding: South-west England

8. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What plans she has to provide funding for the National Grid in the south-west. [906459]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): Electricity networks' funding is regulated by Ofgem through the network price control. In the current price control, National Grid Electricity Transmission will be investing approximately £700 million in the south-west. Ofgem has allowed £5.7 billion for the distribution network company covering the south-west, £1.2 billion of which is for the south-west region specifically.

Luke Pollard: May I declare an interest, as one of my brilliant little sisters works in the renewable energy sector? I want to see more renewable energy schemes get off the ground in the far south-west, but I am being told

that schemes greater than 1 MW have to wait until 2027 at the earliest for a grid connection. This means that dozens of renewable energy schemes are gathering dust on paper, when they should be generating clean power. It is wrong and is setting back our net zero ambitions. What are Ministers doing to speed up grid connections for renewable energy schemes, allowing us to build the already approved clean energy schemes that we need, which will create green jobs, cut carbon and reduce soaring energy bills?

Andrew Bowie: As the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) suggests from a sedentary position, we are doing lots and lots. Specifically, the Government are using strategic planning to support investment ahead of the need in the networks, including the south-west. The first example of that was last year's holistic network design, which set out a blueprint for connecting new offshore wind projects to the grid by 2030. An update to the holistic network design follow-up exercise, HND 2, will be published early next year and provide recommendations for the connection of floating offshore wind specifically in the Celtic sea. For the first time, offshore wind developers participating in the Crown Estate's leasing round 5 will receive clarity over their grid connection from the electricity system operator at the same time as a secure seabed lease.

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Lewis.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The Minister may be surprised—[*Interruption.*] Indeed, Question 9, Mr Speaker.

Area-based Home Retrofit Schemes

9. **Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): What plans she has with Cabinet colleagues to help increase the capacity of local authorities to deliver area-based home retrofit schemes. [906460]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): To support English local authorities, we fund an embedded technical assistance facility, providing access to experts, training and guidance to enhance their capability to deliver our domestic grant schemes.

Clive Lewis: Second time lucky. The Minister may be surprised—[*Laughter*]—to hear the following words leave my lips, and I know I am: I agree with the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), in her claim that low and middle-income households cannot afford to pay for the transition to net zero. Where we differ is that I do not believe that we should let the planet burn, as she does. Instead, the wealthy must pay for the green transition. Will the Minister commit to income and wealth redistribution and finally give households and local authorities the ability to transition successfully?

Amanda Solloway: The Government provide a wide range of funding to support local authorities in reaching net zero through the core settlement, grant funding schemes and UK growth funding. The Government are enabling local authorities to tackle net zero goals.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): One of the biggest challenges that we have in delivering home retrofit schemes in Cumbria is not with local authorities but with industry capacity and skills. What are the Government doing to try to send the right signals to industry so that we are getting the right skills into the supply chain to deliver some of these schemes, especially in areas such as Cumbria where we have skills deserts?

Amanda Solloway: My hon. Friend makes a really important point on skills. In fact, we have invested £15 million in subsidised training over the past three years and have provided 16,800 training opportunities. We will continue to support this important industry.

Boiler Replacement Guidance

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Whether she plans to issue guidance to people with oil-fired heating on replacement of boilers. [906462]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The Government have created an online advice service to help consumers in replacing fossil fuel heating systems, including oil boilers, with a heat pump. We are also providing funding through the boiler upgrade scheme.

Mr Speaker: This will be helpful.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Absolutely, Mr Speaker. There is a panic now in Germany as its premature ban on gas-fired boilers approaches. The Minister will want to avoid a similar panic as we approach our own premature ban on oil-fired boilers, won't he?

Graham Stuart: As ever, I thank my right hon. Friend. We are listening. As the Prime Minister set out, we will reduce our emissions in line with our obligations but do so in a way that recognises the challenges that families face. Off-grid households will be supported through the transition, and we will respond to the consultation in due course.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): During the summer recess, when I was touring villages, I found in my corner of Devon that some constituents are worried about whether they should replace their oil-fired boiler in the next couple of years with a heat pump or put their faith in hydro-treated vegetable oil. Some have been encouraged by the pilots of so-called HVO as an alternative source to heating oil. What assurances can the Minister offer that it will be a truly sustainable source of fuel and not made from palm oil, which encourages deforestation? Or should we put 100% of our efforts into heat pumps?

Graham Stuart: As the hon. Member doubtless knows, we have conducted a consultation on the use of HVO in heating, and we are determined to ensure that we decarbonise heat in homes, including off-grid homes, in a way that is practical and aligned with minimising any negative impacts on those families.

Energy-intensive Industries: Decarbonisation

11. **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to help energy-intensive industries decarbonise. [906464]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): The Government have committed £20 billion to support the early development of carbon capture and storage, and £500 million for the industrial energy transformation fund to help industry decarbonise, phase 3 of which is expected to open for applications in early 2024.

Stella Creasy: May I put on the record the thanks of Back Benchers to the Clerk of the House for his work?

Steel accounts for 8% of global carbon dioxide emissions and 50,000 jobs here in the UK. We have no viable alternative to steel, which is why the Government's decision to go with an electric arc furnace only modelled for decarbonisation does not make any sense. Not only does it put at risk thousands of jobs but it makes the industry vulnerable to changes in steel prices, as the UK will have to import it. The Minister spoke about carbon capture, but can she explain why the Government have not gone for a combination of technologies such as carbon capture, or the retrofitting required for hydrogen-based steel production? That way, we would not only decarbonise the industry but protect those vital jobs and the industry in the UK for generations to come.

Claire Coutinho: As the Business and Trade Secretary set out, the Government's deal has provided long-term security for at least 5,000 steel jobs. The investment will grow UK domestic green steel production. I gently urge the hon. Lady to look at her party's plans for industry, which have been described as impossible and decimating the working classes.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Energy-intensive industries come in many forms. Can my right hon. Friend provide any reassurance that the Government will review the classifications of what constitutes an energy-intensive industry? SB Joinery in my constituency contains a large sawmill and planing facility, but has been deemed ineligible for high levels of the energy bills discount scheme. Would my right hon. Friend be prepared to look at that case personally?

Claire Coutinho: I would be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend and discuss that particular case. We keep looking at everything we can do to support business, as we have done this entire time.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): For years people have been calling on the Government to have a proper plan to help our steel industry decarbonise. Instead, the industry has lurched from crisis to crisis, and now the Government are spending £500 million in a deal that will make thousands of Port Talbot steelworkers redundant. Is it not the simple truth that jobs and wealth will be lost because there is no comprehensive plan for steel, automotive or any industry that needs to decarbonise?

Claire Coutinho: I refer the hon. Lady to my previous comments. The investment will provide long-term security for at least 5,000 steel jobs. We have had record investment of £4 billion in the auto industry this year. Again, I urge her to look at her own party's plans. Its industry decarbonisation plans are disastrous, and will push jobs and investment out of this country.

Heat Networks

12. **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): If she will take steps to ensure that consumers do not pay for heat network remediation. [906465]

15. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps she is taking to support heat network customers with energy bills. [906469]

17. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What assessment she has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential merits of introducing a mandatory price cap on heat networks. [906471]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Government are providing millions in support for remedial work through the heat networks efficiency scheme. We are supporting customers with their bills via the energy bills discount scheme. Through the Energy Bill we will appoint Ofgem as a heat network regulator, so that customers benefit from fairer prices.

Dame Meg Hillier: I must declare that I live in a block with a heat network. Many heat networks will be quite expensive to change under the technical rules proposed by the Government for 2024. Given many blocks have also had cladding and other pressures on leaseholders, are the Government looking carefully to ensure that customers are not being overlaid with many more charges to remediate networks?

Amanda Solloway: Through the heat network efficiency scheme, the Government are providing £32 million to upgrade existing heat networks and reduce energy costs. The scheme will upgrade old equipment and help consumers in more than 10,000 houses to reduce their energy use. We will shortly announce the first awards from the fund.

Elliot Colburn: Residents living in New Mill Quarter in Hackbridge in my constituency have been plagued by a litany of problems since they were connected to the Sutton decentralised energy network, including an inability to change tariffs. Does my hon. Friend agree that residents have been let down by the mismanagement identified in an independent report on its poor running by Lib Dem-run Sutton Council? Will she commit to working with me to ensure that heat network customers, who have nowhere else to go for their energy, are protected by new measures in the Energy Bill?

Amanda Solloway: I know how hard my hon. Friend works for his constituents and I thank him for bringing this scheme to my attention. We want all heat network customers to receive a high-quality service and fair pricing, which is why we are appointing Ofgem as a regulator through the Energy Bill and currently consulting on how it will operate. Of course I will meet my hon. Friend.

Janet Daby: Many of my residents are locked into district heat network schemes. They have been paying up to 13 times more than the rest of the UK because

they are not protected by the energy price cap. Do the Government not think it is time to implement a mandatory price cap straight away?

Amanda Solloway: At this moment in time we do not think that a uniform price cap would benefit consumers, given the huge diversity in size and scale of providers in the market. However, through the Energy Bill, the Secretary of State will have powers to introduce a price cap, should one be beneficial in future.

Families in Fuel Poverty

14. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What estimate her Department has made of the number of families in fuel poverty. [906467]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): In 2022, there were an estimated 3.26 million households in fuel poverty. The additional support we provided last year prevented 350,000 households from falling into fuel poverty in 2022. The established targeted support remains in place, while from July 2023 household energy bills have been falling.

Imran Hussain: Over 40,000 families in Bradford have been plunged into uncertainty as the Tory Government lurch from crisis to crisis. More than one in five of my constituents now live in fuel poverty, yet the Minister still comes here today with no real plans or solutions, and no real windfall tax on the booming profits of energy giants. Let me ask the Minister to put herself in the shoes of my constituents. What does she have to say to those who, frankly, have been abandoned and have to choose between a warm home, a full stomach and school uniforms for their children?

Amanda Solloway: Having experienced fuel poverty myself when I was growing up, I do understand completely how the hon. Gentleman's constituents feel. That is why the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that we support people. We have given unprecedented support. We have the warm home discount and the cost of living payment, among many other measures, to help constituents through the cost of living.

Renewable Energy Sector: High-skilled Jobs

16. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to help promote the creation of high-skilled jobs in the renewable energy sector. [906470]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): This is a crucial area. There are already over 400,000 jobs in the renewable energy sector and that will rise steeply over time. We are investing billions in skills, including green skills and including 26,000 training opportunities in energy efficiency and low carbon heating.

Theresa Villiers: May I urge the Government to give real priority to the creation of apprenticeships in the renewable energy and green sector? That way, we can use net zero to create great opportunities for young people and boost social mobility.

Claire Coutinho: As a former Education Minister, I am absolutely passionate about this area. We have delivered almost 5.5 million apprenticeships since 2010. The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) chairs the green jobs delivery group, which will publish a net zero and nature workforce action plan in the first of half of 2024.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her position. Although the UK has the second largest offshore wind capacity in the world after China, Denmark has three times as many jobs in the sector. Many British wind turbines are being built in Spain, Holland and Indonesia. Why are the Government so far behind the curve on the green jobs bonanza that is so possible for our country?

Claire Coutinho: Thanks to Government policy and spending, we will support another 480,000 jobs in the green sector by 2030. As I said, we are leading the way in decarbonising faster than any other G7 country, with the jobs that come with that right across the country.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her place and remind her that we started in this place at the same time, four years ago. Will she highlight the job opportunities in the new renewable energy sector that AI presents for my constituents in Bolton?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about the job opportunities presented by AI, which will undoubtedly have an effect across the country and a beneficial effect in this sector. I would be delighted to meet him to speak about this further, but we will be setting out more detail on our green jobs delivery group and our net zero and nature workforce action plan in the first half of 2024.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Would it not boost skills in renewable energy generation and installation, as well as encouraging more uptake, if all those installing solar energy schemes had to be certified under the microgeneration certification scheme so that the householder, farm or business concerned would be guaranteed payment for surplus energy fed into the grid?

Claire Coutinho: The right hon. Gentleman asks an interesting question. We have explored his suggestion of legislating to make certification mandatory. We have no such plans at this time, as there is a mature approach to certification standards, and most UK domestic solar installations already take place within well-established schemes.

Domestic Nuclear Energy

18. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential contribution of Great British Nuclear to domestic nuclear energy targets. [906472]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The British energy security strategy sets out our ambition for deploying

up to 24 GW of civil nuclear by 2050. We launched Great British Nuclear to help deliver new nuclear projects, starting with a small modular reactor competition. The GBN offer to successful vendors will include funding to support technology development and support with accessing sites.

Virginia Crosbie: May I say “Croeso” and welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her place?

Wylfa is recognised as the best site for new nuclear in the UK—if not in Europe—but a Welsh Affairs Committee report stated recently that ownership of the site is holding back progress. What are the Minister and Great British Nuclear doing to transfer its ownership from Hitachi to an active nuclear developer?

Andrew Bowie: The terms “doughty champion” and “passionate” are regularly thrown about in this place, but when it is a case of championing Wylfa new nuclear, no one comes close to my hon. Friend. When launching the small modular reactor competition in July, the Secretary of State indicated that, as part of a comprehensive offer to industry, GBN would support access to sites for successful vendors, and Wylfa is one of a number of sites that could host civil nuclear projects. However, no siting decisions have been made so far.

Topical Questions

T1. [906473] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): Since my appointment a fortnight ago, the Energy Bill—which will deliver cheaper, cleaner, more secure energy—was given a Third Reading in this House. We have funded a record 95 renewable energy projects, and I have visited our pioneering Culham Centre for Fusion Energy. I have also launched the £1 billion Great British insulation scheme. We have bolstered our energy collaborations with Ireland and Japan, we have made our biggest ever climate finance pledge, and just yesterday we invited partners to invest in Sizewell C, a major component of our nuclear revival.

Priti Patel: I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her new role. She will be aware that the huge increase in offshore wind farms in the east of England has led to an unwelcome proposal from National Grid to put 100 miles of pylons across the area. We do not want that. We need an offshore solution. Will my right hon. Friend meet Members from the east of England to discuss this proposal?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue today. I understand that concerns have been raised by local communities about the National Grid electricity transmission plans for network reinforcement between Norwich and Tilbury. The Minister for Nuclear and Networks, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), has visited the area and will continue to engage with colleagues, but I am also happy to meet local MPs to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): According to analysis by the Resolution Foundation, more than a third of British households face higher bills from the end of this month because of higher standing charges and the demise of the energy bills support scheme, and the people who use the least energy, and those in the poorest households, are disproportionately worse off. At the same time, the windfall tax has massive loopholes costing billions. Would not closing those loopholes and extending more help to people during the cost of living crisis be the right thing to do?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are raising a 75% energy profits levy, and he will also be aware that standing charges are a matter for Ofgem. Let me reiterate, however, that we are mindful of the cost of living crisis and have been providing support with the warm home discount, the £900 cost of living payment, and a raft of other measures to support people through this crisis.

T2. [906474] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): The launch last week of the Great British insulation scheme was very welcome. So as to build on this and to kickstart a mass retrofitting revolution, will my hon. Friend liaise with the Treasury to obtain its support for the introduction of such fiscal measures as an energy-saving stamp duty and an employee benefits scheme similar to the cycle to work scheme?

Amanda Solloway: The Government set the aspiration in the clean growth strategy of upgrading as many homes as possible to energy performance certificate band C by 2035, where practical, cost-effective and affordable. We remain committed to that aspiration. Although tax policy sits with the Treasury, we are considering how to improve energy efficiency for owner-occupied homes and plan to consult by the end of 2023.

T7. [906480] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Energy companies have accumulated hundreds of pounds, if not over £1,000, in consumer credit. When those companies go into administration, the company taking over does not honour that credit and people often with very little means have lost hundreds or thousands of pounds. How will the Minister ensure that they get compensation and get credited by the new company with the amount of money they have lost?

Amanda Solloway: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are in constant conversations with Ofgem on such matters. Although this is a matter for Ofgem, I have a regular meeting to make sure that we are on top of this.

T3. [906475] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Energy from waste requires burning waste and it is therefore not conducive to net zero. The expansion of the Beddington incinerator in my constituency is not needed to meet local demand, so can my right hon. Friend assure me that the Environment Agency will take that into account before making a decision on whether or not to license?

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The Environment Agency's recent consultation on varying the environmental permit for the Beddington

energy recovery plant closed on 1 September. The Environment Agency will carefully consider all relevant responses and issue a final decision in due course.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): In the Select Committee inquiry into preparations for this winter, one of the repeated calls that we have heard from expert witnesses is to support the vulnerable and fuel poor with a social tariff. Will the Minister do that?

Amanda Solloway: Of course we are aware of the challenges that are facing consumers this coming winter, which is why we are keeping the price cap as a safety net. To give the hon. Gentleman reassurance, we will be monitoring the situation in case we need to look at this further.

T5. [906477] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Recent investment in electric vehicle charging and the EV supply chain shows the benefit of the Government setting clear targets so that the private sector has the confidence to invest. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we had similar policy consistency across the whole of the economy, we would see greater investment in green growth and in meeting decarbonisation by 2050?

Graham Stuart: The zero-emission vehicles mandate supports our commitment to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans. By setting it many years in advance and giving clear notice to the market, it provides appropriate stimulus to industry in a way that the ultra low emission zone singularly fails to do, as my hon. Friend will have noted.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Energy Minister got his facts wrong in his earlier response to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), so he might want to correct the record. The Liberal Democrat amendment to the Energy Bill to tackle flaring, venting and leaking of methane was selected for a separate vote. It would have reduced methane emissions by 72 %. Why did his Government vote it down?

Graham Stuart: I stand corrected. On that issue, we have infrastructure, some of which dates from the 1970s, and we are moving at the maximum possible speed. It is technologically and economically challenging to make this change, and yet, as I set out earlier, we are already showing significant efforts, and of course we are champions of the methane pledge, which we plan to exceed. When I am at COP28, I will be urging other countries to follow us in agreeing and supporting that World Bank methane pledge.

T6. [906478] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): The hydrogen industry will, I am sure, welcome the introduction of the hydrogen production business model for green hydrogen, with a further business model planned for next year, but the storage and transportation business model for hydrogen is not due to be finalised until 2025. For customers of companies such as Luxfer Gas Cylinders of Colwick in my Gedling constituency, this is a potential barrier to some projects moving forward. Can my right hon. Friend give some clarity on the sequencing and whether there is scope to bring forward the storage and transportation business model so that the timing is joined up?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the challenge of bringing all the pieces together to unlock opportunity. The Government will promote the whole hydrogen economy—production, demand, networks and storage—and stimulate private sector investment. In August, the Government published the low-carbon hydrogen agreement, setting out the hydrogen production business model's terms. We will award contracts for that in quarter 4 of 2023. My colleagues and I are happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about making sure we get this absolutely right so that we maximise its benefits.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Biodiesel producers in my constituency are being undercut by cheap Chinese imports because of the Government's decision to award them inward processing relief. This is making it difficult for us to support UK industry, so can we have an explanation for why that decision was made?

Graham Stuart: I will write to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Writing for *The Daily Telegraph* last year, our now Prime Minister said:

"On my watch, we will not lose swathes of our best farmland to solar farms."

Yet the industry has not heard that, and vast swathes of farmland in my constituency, totalling 16 square miles, are open to planning, engulfing whole villages and using the best and most versatile land. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how he and the Department can ensure that the Prime Minister keeps his very important promise?

Graham Stuart: I can assure my hon. Friend that planning policy and the associated guidance encourage large-scale solar projects to be located on previously developed or lower-value land. Where greenfield sites or high-grade land are used, developers are required to justify using such land and to design their projects to avoid, mitigate and, where necessary, compensate for any impacts. I hear my hon. Friend's personal testimony, and I will be happy to meet her to discuss this further.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): Almost 20% of the housing stock in my constituency dates from before 1919 and is therefore classified as historical. What plan does the Department have to improve skill levels in retrofitting historical residential buildings?

Amanda Solloway: As I previously mentioned, retrofitting is one of our most important projects. Of course, skills are a real issue, which is why we are delighted that this will enable us to enhance our skill bases.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her new role. Given the vital role that oil and gas play in managing our energy security as demand continues, albeit declining, and the vital jobs, skills, technologies and expertise in that industry, 90% of which are thought to be immediately transferrable to the renewables sector, does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment at today's reports of Humza Yousaf's vow to end Scotland's place as the oil and gas capital of Europe?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right. Last year we were dependent on fossil fuels for 77% of our energy. If we import more gas from abroad, it will be in the form of liquefied natural gas, which, according to a report from the North Sea Transition Authority two weeks ago, has four times the production emissions of domestic gas. The Scottish National party, ably supported by the Labour party, wants to threaten 200,000 jobs, £50 billion of tax revenue over the next five years, and the very subsea engineering and technological capability—not to mention the balance sheets—that we need to develop hydrogen, carbon capture, usage and storage, and the rest of the transition. It is madness, and it is the policy of the SNP.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Yes, we need increased electric arc capacity to reprocess more scrap steel in the UK, but Trostre tinplate packaging works in my constituency needs a grade of steel that can be produced only by the blast furnace process, until green production technologies are developed. With 23 such projects elsewhere in Europe, will the Secretary of State commit to investing in developing these technologies at Port Talbot, thus reducing emissions and keeping jobs in Port Talbot and Llanelli?

Graham Stuart: I share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for keeping those jobs, which is why we are investing hundreds of millions of pounds to ensure that these industries can make that transition. I entirely agree with her on the importance of innovation and making sure it is embedded so that not only do we sustain those industries but so that, through innovation, we can strengthen them in the years ahead.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): A decade ago, the onshore wind industry committed to a community benefit protocol to provide compensation of £5,000 per MW installed per annum to communities for the duration of a wind scheme. So far, solar developers have refused to do something similar, and surely that is not fair. Does my right hon. Friend agree that compensation schemes must be equal, whether wind or solar is involved?

Graham Stuart: It is perhaps typical of my hon. Friend that not only is she asking a question and championing this issue, but she has scheduled a meeting with me immediately afterwards. I look forward to discussing this with her and making sure that we have the most coherent position possible as to where we are set on rewarding communities that host transmission infrastructure and other parts of our transition. I look forward to having that conversation with her in the coming minutes.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Lee Haywood is on a communal heat network, and he and his neighbours saw their price per kWh double last winter. What protection can the Minister give as we come into the next winter, as residents in Dalmarnock are really worried that prices will again soar in this unregulated area?

Amanda Solloway: We have put in place protection to ensure that prices are not going to go up; we have the energy price guarantee. In addition, let me point out that prices are coming down.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Do the Government think the UK is on track to meet the 2050 net zero target? Do the Government think the UK will meet that target? Do the Government even really care?

Graham Stuart: We have, of course, met all our carbon budgets to date. In the progress report, the Climate Change Committee said it had increased confidence in our meeting carbon budget 4 and, yes, this country will meet its net zero targets by 2050. It will do so in line with the advice that we are given, and I am proud of the fact—the hon. Gentleman could share this with his constituents, who may be concerned otherwise—that this country has cut its emissions by more than any other major economy on earth, thanks to the policies of this Government.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This morning, I received a text from one of the leadership team at one of our local hospices. It said that

“there has been no additional support for our energy costs. Costs have gone up while statutory support hasn’t changed... Hospices UK lobbied for additional support...to no avail... We operate 24/7 and have to keep the heating on—you know what the weather is like in Cumbria in the winter!”

When will the Minister come up with a bespoke support scheme for our vital hospices?

Amanda Solloway: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the meetings we have had, and I am mindful of the situation that hospices face. We have given support and I will make sure that I keep monitoring the situation.

Caroline Lucas: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the exchange about the amendment on flaring just now, I do not think I heard the Minister formally withdraw his accusation that I got my facts wrong, and I certainly did not hear him apologise. Given that he has now accepted that he got his facts wrong and my facts were right, I would love him to formally correct the record and perhaps even to apologise as well.

Graham Stuart *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The Minister is desperate to do so.

Graham Stuart: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady is quite right to raise this in that way, and I am happy both to withdraw that and to apologise to her for getting my facts wrong on that occasion.

School Building Closures

12.33 am

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if she will make a statement on the number of schools affected by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and the impact of building closures on children's learning.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan):

As I said in my statement to the House on 4 September, this Government are supporting affected schools and colleges to minimise disruption to education. I thank headteachers, staff, local authorities and trusts who continue to provide face-to-face education to their pupils.

Two weeks ago, we published a list of education settings with buildings affected by RAAC. Before I provide an update, I want to reiterate that our view is that parents and children should find out from their school, not from a list on a Government website or from the media. Our approach has always prioritised that, giving schools and colleges the space to focus on what is important: minimising disruption to education.

None the less, we recognise the public interest. On 6 September we published a list of 147 education settings known to be affected by RAAC. Thanks to the hard work of school and college leaders, all of those settings are now offering face-to-face education, with 126 settings offering full-time face-to-face education to all pupils. We have today published an updated list including a further 27 settings with confirmed RAAC. Of the 174 confirmed cases, 148 settings are providing full-time face-to-face education to all pupils.

As I have said before, we will do everything in our power to support schools and colleges in responding to RAAC in their buildings. Every school or college with confirmed RAAC is assigned a dedicated support from our team of 80 caseworkers. A bespoke plan is put in place to ensure they receive the support that suits their circumstances. Project delivery teams are on site to provide support, whether that is ordering or finding alternative accommodation options or putting in place structural solutions.

We will fund these mitigations, including installing alternative classroom space. Where schools and colleges make reasonable requests for additional help with revenue costs, such as transport to locations, those will be approved. We will also fund longer-term refurbishment or rebuilding projects to permanently remove RAAC, through capital grants or rebuilding projects through the school rebuilding programme.

I want to reassure pupils, parents and staff that this Government will do whatever it takes to support our schools and colleges, to keep everybody safe, to respond to RAAC and to minimise disruption to education.

Bridget Phillipson: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Before I go any further, let me emphasise that the safety of children should rightly be the priority of every Member of this House. However, the question today is not simply about whether that should be our priority, but about the colossal shambles of a Secretary of State who, as we learned from the Education Committee this

morning, did not merely sit on new advice about the safety of school buildings, which she received on 21 August, but did nothing for four days. And then she acted decisively—she went on holiday for the best part of a week. Some 10 days passed from the day she received the crucial advice to the day the headteachers were told to close their schools, causing chaos for parents.

Just a fortnight ago, the Secretary of State's response to questions about the management of the Department's own building was simple and proud, the motto she has made her own:

"nothing to do with me".

She had done a "good job", while others had been sat on their backsides. Does the Secretary of State still think that is good enough? More simply, even under this Prime Minister, weak as he is, and this Government, how on earth did she think she could get away with going on holiday rather than taking any form of action at all? Will she at last take responsibility for 13 years of failure, three weeks of chaos and the years stretching ahead of the children who are sitting under steel girders? When will all our children be back in their own schools and classrooms? Parents, families, staff and, above all, our children deserve answers, and they deserve better from this Government and better than this Secretary of State.

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. As soon as we had information, we took a decision in every case. When we first saw the incident in 2018, we took a decision and we put out new guidance and warnings. We put out new guidance in 2021-22. We started surveys directly in 2022, when the previous Secretary of State started to get more concerned about RAAC in our school estate. We then sent in surveyors directly, because the responsible bodies were not moving quickly enough.

Let me turn now to the initial advice. Three new cases emerged over the summer, and some were subject to advice, as the hon. Lady says, which came on 21 August. I instructed those involved to get more technical information. The last case is really what tipped us into making a decision. It was a very difficult decision—I am not sure the hon. Lady would have made it because Labour do not tend to make these difficult decisions, and the Labour Government in Wales have still not done so—because of the impact on children and because of the impact on our school leaders and teachers. The last case, which was in another school setting in England, took place on 24 August. We went to investigate that to see what had happened.

On my own decision, I went abroad because that was the first time that I could go abroad. I went abroad for my father's birthday, knowing that I would still be chairing the meetings, which I did on Saturday, Sunday and Monday, and then I made the decision—as we had now made a decision—to come back from holiday immediately. My return was delayed by one day because of the air traffic control incident, so I got back to announce the decision on Thursday.

When I looked at the new case, I said that we needed to get technical evidence. The second thing I said was that we needed to operationalise this. I knew that this would be difficult. I did not want to put schools in a position where, if I put out a notice via the media or directly, they would be left with the problem. I wanted

to stand up caseworkers. I wanted to stand up portacabins. I wanted to speak to utility companies to make sure that everything would be in place so that we could minimise the length of time that it took to put up those portacabins. I wanted to put more structural engineering companies in place, because I knew that we would do more surveys. I also wanted to make sure that we had a nationwide propping company, so that we could put the largely horizontal structural solutions in place to fix everything.

When we have to make a major decision, there is no point creating more issues than we need to. We need to operationalise that decision, which is what I decided to do. The time from the last case to the announcement was one week. That is probably one of the quickest decisions that most people have made in this House and we operationalised it, all while I was still working, as I always do.

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

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister with responsibility for the schools system and the permanent secretary for spending two hours this morning with the Education Committee on this issue. They were able to provide a number of useful answers, including on the provision of temporary classrooms.

I have to say that I was very disappointed last night to receive what was a non-answer on that question about temporary classrooms, which had already been asked at the Public Accounts Committee. I am glad that Baroness Barran was able to go further with the Select Committee today. The information that she provided us with was that there were seven cases from before the summer requiring temporary buildings. The Department is now aware of 29 schools that will require some form of temporary accommodation. Eleven have that temporary accommodation in place. As of Friday, there is the potential for as many as 180 single classrooms and 68 double classrooms to be needed as temporary accommodation.

I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that those are provided as swiftly as possible and that schools and responsible bodies have certainty about when those will be in place, so that we absolutely do what she said—to minimise disruption of children's education. A key concern of the Select Committee is children not in school, and anything that can be done to minimise that disruption, to create greater certainty for the teachers and the leaders who have done such an amazing job of responding to this, will certainly be welcome.

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Education Committee. I apologise about the written answer the previous night; we had more recent information at the Education Committee. The cases are always being assessed and the numbers are always being updated, which is why we choose a date to publish the latest information. The numbers are moving very quickly. He is absolutely right: 11 RAAC schools already have temporary buildings that are installed or in use. There is a further 28 sites, I think, that have made inquiries and requested potential orders. As he rightly said, there are 180 single classrooms, 68 double classrooms, plus a mixture of toilet provision.

On the portacabins, I would just like to say that I have been to a number of these schools and met the children. At the first school I visited, the children were all petitioning me to stay in the portacabins, because they actually preferred them to the classroom. The portacabins are very high quality—[*Interruption.*] That is true. I advise the shadow Secretary of State to visit some of them herself.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Perhaps the Secretary of State could clarify whether it is 18 or 28 schools that still need temporary classrooms, because we have heard different figures from her and from her ministerial colleague at the Education Committee earlier. Something headteachers have said to me is that they do not just need the temporary classrooms, but they need some of them kitted out as science labs or design and technology classrooms, for example. There is a cost to doing that. It is not just a question of chairs and tables; it is much more. What is her Department doing to make sure that children have the right classrooms so they can do their assessments, which are already ticking along towards next year's exams?

Gillian Keegan: I confirm that the project directors and caseworkers have made inquiries requesting potential orders for a further 28 sites. There are some specialist requirements for science labs or other specialist equipment, and there are a number of things taking place on that. Schools are sharing science lab equipment in the short term, either with another school or with another part of the school. We are also looking at mitigations. In the school I went to see where the children were very happy in their portacabin, they had horizontally propped and mitigated the science labs first, so they were able to use the science labs in combination with the portacabins. There are also specialist portacabins available, which are being looked at in specific circumstances.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for Schools for all their hard work, but I ask the Secretary of State to do something from the Dispatch Box. Haygrove School in my constituency is a disaster of construction. It is a Caledonian Modular construction and it has gone badly wrong. Will she please reiterate from that Dispatch Box that this is nothing to do with concrete, but is rather about bad construction? Children and parents are still worried that there is concrete in the school, and there is not. Could she please reconfirm that?

Gillian Keegan: I confirm that Haygrove School is not subject to RAAC. It is a Caledonian Modular build, and we are looking at the quality of a small number of those schools. We are working right now on what solutions we can put in place. There is another such school in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, and we are putting temporary school structures in place for those schools.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The crumbling concrete crisis has been years in the making, exacerbated by the catastrophic failure of the Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor, to sign off on the school rebuilding

[Munira Wilson]

programme that Department for Education officials requested. Yet the current Chancellor, as we have heard today, will not give the Department any new money to fix the roofs. So what does the Secretary of State say to the hundreds of schools currently managing asbestos, leaky roofs and cold classrooms, which will be put to the back of the queue for a rebuild yet again because the Treasury still does not understand the importance of investing in our children and education?

Gillian Keegan: As someone who has been the Secretary of State since October and has secured record funding for our schools—going up to £60 billion a year next year, which is higher than it has ever been by any measure hon. Members wish to use—I feel that the Chancellor and the Prime Minister very much invest in our schools.

There has been a lot of nonsense talked about Building Schools for the Future. Opposition Members consistently claim that that would have fixed the issue. I know they are not normally across the details, so I thought they might be interested in a few facts. Park View School in Tottenham, which was recently visited by the Leader of the Opposition, Hornsey School for Girls in Hornsey and Stepney All Saints School in Stepney Green were all refurbished or rebuilt under BSF, but all three are still suffering from RAAC. The Opposition do not even know how to solve the problem when it is right in front of their nose.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been absolutely right to act decisively to put the safety of children first. As the list of affected schools has grown today, what reassurances can she give us on the number of schools still awaiting expedited surveys and the absolute cut-off point by which those surveys will be completed?

Gillian Keegan: Last time I was at this Dispatch Box, 95% of all questionnaires had been responded to. Now it is 98.6%, so the publicity has really helped to drive people who had not already responded, and we are grateful to them. I also committed that all the schools that were waiting to be surveyed would be surveyed by the end of this week, and I can confirm that that will absolutely be done. We have a good rate of surveys; we have eight companies doing them and we now have a process that means that as soon schools come in, we will get to them very quickly to survey.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have a straightforward question for the Secretary of State that I hope she will answer clearly. Will she guarantee that the cost of all the repairs will be funded by new money from the Government, not the current education budget, which is not enough anyway?

Gillian Keegan: As I think I have explained before, there are different parts to the funding. Initially, the surveying work, the mitigations work and the temporary accommodation will all be funded by the DFE's capital budget—we have a budget for that work. There is also revenue budget for additional things such as transport, hiring a village hall and so on—that will also come from a building fund within the DFE. We have already

announced some of the school rebuilding projects, but we have spaces left and some are still to be announced, so some of that will be utilised. Beyond that, as the Chancellor says, we will do everything needed to keep children safe in our schools.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I put on record my admiration for Mrs Sudworth, Tania Lewyckij and Canon Slade School for their monumental effort to ensure the smooth running of the school since the RAAC announcement. Will my right hon. Friend outline how the Department can encourage surveyors who have concerns about buildings containing asbestos to help avoid delays in the installation of temporary classrooms?

Gillian Keegan: I join my hon. Friend in praising the team at Canon Slade School, who have all pupils in face-to-face education. The vast majority of schools identified as having RAAC have all pupils in face-to-face learning, and that is down to the dedication of our school leaders. All schools have an asbestos plan, but if there is asbestos that needs to be moved as part of the mitigation works, it will be safely removed.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): How many publicity videos for party political purposes did the Secretary of State make for Conservative MPs on the day that she found out about the RAAC issue?

Gillian Keegan: I do not recall making any particularly party political broadcasts. On the day when we made the announcements, I did the evening round and the pooled clip and recording, and the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), then did the morning round. That was the focus of our attention in terms of publicity.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The National Audit Office report of 28 June was, of course, agreed with the Department, as all NAO reports are. Given that that report identified that up to 700,000 children were in schools where there were critical safety issues, what was the technical evidence that the Secretary of State said she required some two months later, when that final school collapsed in the way it did?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very good question. The NAO report addressed bids to, and demand for, the school rebuilding programme. On the technical information, what we have done during the surveys—[*Interruption.*] If he cares to listen, there is an important distinction. The surveys that we started conducting from September 2022, when we sent our own surveyors into schools, looked at RAAC and whether it was critical or non-critical. That is why 52 schools had already been closed immediately: they were seen as critical. What changed was that there were three instances where the ceilings had been assessed as non-critical but had failed. I wanted structural engineers—I am not a structural engineer—to go in and tell me whether something assessed as non-critical had failed for another reason. Could they say why it had failed, or did I need to look at every non-critical roof and change my understanding of how we wanted to treat them? I wanted to be cautious. That was what we did, and as a result, we decided to act on all the non-critical ceilings straight away to keep people safe.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Half an hour ago, I came from a meeting with London fire chiefs, who were calling for a national register of buildings containing RAAC. That is a practical ask—will the Secretary of State work with other Departments to ensure that it becomes a reality?

Gillian Keegan: I think the fire chiefs usually work with local responsible bodies to find out how they can minimise fire risks within a local area.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): If I may, Mr Speaker, I will put four questions to the Secretary of State, because the pupils, parents and staff of St Leonard's Catholic School deserve answers. First, can we confirm that the planned rebuild of St Leonard's will now be accelerated? Secondly, when will the venues for rehoming St Leonard's be confirmed and the finances approved? Thirdly, what additional financial and practical provisions will be in place for the most vulnerable pupils, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities and those receiving free school meals? Fourthly, what options for special consideration will exam boards apply to year 11 and year 13 students this year?

Gillian Keegan: I am delighted that St Leonard's now has a mix of face-to-face and remote learning—it has done a fantastic job to enable that, working with local partners. On school rebuilding, we are making those decisions with the project directors we have on site at St Leonard's. We will consider first the short-term and medium-term mitigations, and then when we should do the rebuilding. We have an MPs surgery later for anybody in the House to raise specific cases that they are interested in; I shall be there with my Ministers and officials, and we are happy to go into detail on any case and give Members the latest. It is still an evolving situation, but we will be there and will support St Leonard's as much as possible to ensure that children are safely educated there.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am sure that all the people the Secretary of State told to get off their backsides will be very sympathetic to the fact that she needed to go on holiday while this crisis was in progress.

On revenue and costs, the Secretary of State has itemised a number of things that the Government will cover, but schools face a vast range of potential revenue costs, including surveyors and other costs. Is she saying that all costs relating to RAAC will be covered?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, all the costs that the hon. Gentleman mentions are reasonable costs. Also, I am sure that he is delighted that all the pupils at St Thomas More Catholic Comprehensive School are in face-to-face education.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about my working, I am always happy to work, no matter where I am, and I always have been throughout my very long career.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Ellesmere Port Catholic High School has huge challenges: five classrooms, the chapel, two corridors, changing facilities, kitchens and canteens have been closed, meaning that a number of technical lessons cannot be taught and no hot food can be served. I have a direct plea from the headteacher, who says:

"I cannot understate the urgency of this situation, particularly with the temporary accommodation. We are having real issues getting the Department to approve mitigations so that we can operate for all our students in the short term."

After this statement, will the Secretary of State have a look at this case and talk to officials about getting the approvals that that headteacher needs?

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that case; I will take a note of Ellesmere Port Catholic High School. If he would like to join the MPs surgery later, we can go through that matter in greater detail, or I can write to him about it if his diary does not allow that.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on the source of the funds needed to rebuild the RAAC schools? I ask because repairs to RAAC hospitals are coming from delaying indefinitely other hospital rebuilding schemes, including two in my constituency. Will any future schools capital projects be similarly rescheduled?

Gillian Keegan: No.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Colyton Grammar School in my corner of Devon is one of the 27 schools added today to the list of 147 schools already known to have RAAC on site. The National Association of Head Teachers has pointed out that propping up ceilings with metal poles is clearly not a serious option. I want Colyton Grammar School to be able to open up the small part of its estate that has had to close, but if there is new money, and works will not impact on the existing school rebuilding programme, what impact can we expect them to have on funding pledged last year to schools such as Tipton St John Primary School and Tiverton High School?

Gillian Keegan: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are doing a very professional job. There is no intention of propping schools up with metal poles; they will largely be horizontal props involving tempered beams, which is how buildings are built in the first place—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) shows her absolute ignorance of this. They will be either steel structures or wooden structures that will then have another roof underneath. I urge everybody to go and look at these classrooms, because they will see that there is no vertical propping—not in any of the schools that I have seen so far—and that is certainly not a long-term solution. The hon. Gentleman will be satisfied that these are very high-quality solutions for our children.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): While the dust has settled on media coverage at this time, I thank the Secretary of State for her clear commitment and positivity today in finding a way forward. We understand that there might be some online learning, as experienced during covid, but that can lead to detrimental effects on learning given the importance of face-to-face engagement. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Department in Northern Ireland to gauge the depth of the concrete problems? There is a school in my constituency, but I understand that it has been able to sort out the problems and teaching in school has continued.

[Jim Shannon]

It is important to know whether any extra funding is available, however, and if so, would that be subject to the Barnett consequential so we can also get some benefit?

Gillian Keegan: Immediately when we had more information we shared it with the devolved nations. We had been conducting surveys for over a year at that point but it was clear that that was not happening in the devolved nations so they are still not able to identify where the RAAC is and go on to take the action that we took very decisively at the end of last month. We will continue to work with them and support them, and to share evidence, including on how to mitigate in a way that makes good solutions for our children.

West Coast Main Line Franchise

1.2 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the contractual and operational situation of the west coast main line franchise—and I congratulate the Minister on his promotion.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations. The Minister of State, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), continues to represent His Majesty's Government today in Poland to support UK train companies, among others, at a major international trade fair, and I am therefore replying on his behalf.

The Department has awarded a new national rail contract to First Trenitalia to continue to operate the west coast partnership, providing west coast train services as Avanti West Coast. The national rail contract will have a core term of three years and a maximum possible term of nine years. After three years the Department can terminate the contract at any point with three months' notice.

In October 2022 and March 2023 the Department approved the award of short-term contracts to First Trenitalia operating as AWC to continue to operate services on the west coast main line. Awarding short-term contracts allowed the Department to monitor progress by AWC in improving performance following the withdrawal of rest day working before considering whether it would be appropriate to award a long-term contract. Avanti's performance has improved significantly during this time, and taking into account other relevant considerations, the Secretary of State has decided to award a longer-term contract, as announced in today's written statement.

Over recent months Avanti has made significant progress in recovering from the poor reliability and punctuality delivered in the latter half of last year. In line with its recovery plan and since the introduction of its recovery timetable in December 2022, performance has steadily improved, with cancellations attributed to AWC falling from 13% in early January 2023 to as low as 1.1% in July 2023. Over 90% of trains now arrive within 15 minutes of their scheduled time, an improvement from 75% in December 2022.

Gavin Newlands: Another day, another blow for passengers who use the west coast main line. Fresh from the negative cross-party reaction yesterday to news that High Speed 2 phase 2 is on the chopping block, we have the Department for Transport on the last day before recess—shock, horror—sneaking out the extraordinary award of up to nine years for Avanti West Coast and up to eight years for CrossCountry.

Despite improvements in Avanti's service, it is still not running a full timetable, and the Minister cannot ask us and passengers up and down the west coast main line to simply forget the last few years of horrendous performance. The Avanti service was on the brink, run into the ground by mismanagement and poor labour relations. In his letter to MPs the Secretary of State says

that “Avanti is the most improved operator where performance is compared to the previous year.” Well, that would not be particularly hard—talk about setting yourself a low bar. This award will be seen by most people as rewarding failure.

My criticism of Avanti is in no way reflective of the staff, who have been first class when I have used the service. I was not overwhelmed with confidence, however, when it took me several attempts at last week’s Select Committee to get Mr Mellors to tell me just how many jobs he proposed to cut by closing the Glasgow ticket office.

Given the variable standards delivered by Avanti, we need full transparency. So can the Minister tell me the exact criteria Avanti will have to consistently meet if the extension at the end of the core contract is to be granted? What engagement has the Department for Transport had with trade unions and the Scottish Government in making this decision? What alternatives did the Department consider? Was the operator of last resort considered?

Does the Minister not understand that this award will be seen as Tory “private best” dogma? We have piles of evidence through the operator of last resort and Scotrail that publicly owned and operated railways work. Moreover, with its stake in Avanti, First Trenitalia might well be able to reinvest in Italian rail infrastructure. Is it not time to follow Scotland’s lead and put our railway back into the public sector, where it belongs?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his flurry of questions, and I shall address what he said. He asked for the release of the criteria of the contract awarded; that is a commercial matter and we are not going to discuss that, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Minister of State my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle has met very regularly with the entire industry and has been working on a weekly basis with officials and with Avanti, and therefore has had the matter very much in hand.

On the performance the hon. Gentleman describes, I am astounded that he is not agreeing with the Secretary of State and celebrating the improvement over the last nine months, and six months in particular: cancellations were as low as 1.1% in July; 90% of trains arrive within 15 minutes; over 100 additional drivers have been trained and brought on since April 2022. Each of those is a significant achievement.

It is all very well for the hon. Gentleman to talk about engagement, but the hon. Gentleman has not exactly been shy in writing to the Department, so I asked my officials to scan the letters we have received and I do not think there was a single one from him in the last year mentioning Avanti. If that is an indication of how content he is with the service, I am delighted to hear it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Select Committee Chair.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): As a regular user of Avanti services, I agree that the performance has improved markedly and I pay tribute to the new managing director, Andy Mellors, and his team for turning around what was an abysmal service. I appreciate that the Minister will not be able to talk in detail about

the contract, but will he say a bit about the extent to which this new contract moves away from the micromanaged national rail contracts that have been in place since covid? They were right at the time, but are now stifling innovation in the sector and I hope that this is just the first of the revisions of these national rail contracts.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question; he brings not just personal experience of this service as an MP for Milton Keynes but also his considerable expertise as Chairman of the Transport Committee. He is right to pick up on the point of micromanagement, and that is one reason why, having been in a period of relatively short contracts—a number of two-month and three-month contracts—in order to monitor progress, the Government have now seen fit to move to a much longer framework: a three-year contract but with the potential capacity to terminate thereafter if performance is not sustained. That strikes the right balance between giving the certainty Avanti needs to continue to invest in improving the service and the accountability that the Government rightly demand.

I would add that there is some awareness that in relation to services to Milton Keynes, west midlands and north Wales there is progress to be made, and I think I am right in saying that the new chief executive is very much focused on that issue as well.

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

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): For the second time in two days, the Government have been dragged to the House to explain the state of our crumbling rail network, and for the second time in two days, the rail Minister has failed to turn up. Surely things cannot get any worse for passengers in the north, we thought, but today, the Minister has proved us all wrong by confirming that passengers could have to suffer up to nine more years of Avanti West Coast and up to eight more years of CrossCountry.

The Minister claims that there has been enough improvement to justify up to a decade more of the utter chaos that is consuming our railways thanks to those two failing operators, yet the latest statistics show that Avanti was the second worst operator in the country for punctuality last month, with only 46% of its trains running on time. CrossCountry was the fourth worst, with only 49% of its trains on time. What is the Government’s response to that? More lucrative contracts and millions of pounds paid out in performance bonuses. These decisions have left glaring questions for the Minister to answer. What performance metrics were considered when the Government made these decisions? Have performance payments been restructured in the new contracts, or will they continue to reward failure? Did the Government consider the operator of last resort, which has driven improvements on other lines?

The country is tired of this cycle of failure, with cancellations and delays, and any prospect of reform kicked into the long grass. It is clear that this Government are determined to run our rail network into the ground. Is their plan really to allow for rail services to have another decade of failure under the Tories, with hundreds of millions handed over to shareholders in performance bonuses and fees? If so, it is clear that they are out of

[Stephen Morgan]

ideas and out of time. If they cannot put passengers first, is it not time for them to step aside and let us deliver the change our passengers so desperately need?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Member for that brave shot. Let me just remind him that, far from being dragged to the House, the Government published a written ministerial statement and a press release this morning. Not only that, but to the extent that the Government were dragged to the House, it was by the Scottish National party. This is the second time in two days that the Labour party has been caught napping by another party in this House. As to the availability of the rail Minister, we try to pay total football in the Department for Transport. While Cruyff is haring down one wing, we expect Neeskens to be playing through the centre, and that is how we think about these things.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the previous underperformance, but he is entirely wrong to predict that that will continue, because we see the evidence in front of us. As I have already said, cancellations have been as low as 1.1% in July, and over 90% of trains are now arriving within 15 minutes of their scheduled time. That is part of the basis on which the Secretary of State has decided to award this new contract. If the alternative that the Labour party is proposing is the nationalisation of our railways, I look forward to seeing the budgetary implications of that, let alone any justification that civil servants directed by Labour Ministers would do a better job than this new professional team at Avanti.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): While I appreciate the points that the rail replacement Minister makes about recent improvements in Avanti, does my right hon. Friend accept that the failures of Avanti in recent years have led to consumers voting with their feet and refusing to use Avanti services where they can? In the case of passengers traveling from Birmingham to London, they have been coming on to the Chiltern line instead, which is adding to the overcrowding on that line. What reassurance can he give that there are incentives in the new contract for Avanti to win back that trust, so that we are not maintaining overcrowding on other railways such as Chiltern?

Jesse Norman: With my hon. Friend's minutiose attention to detail, he will recognise that yesterday we had the rail replacement bus Minister, but today we have another rail replacement Minister. That is thoroughly in order.

As regards the effect on customers, again, my hon. Friend is spot on. It is very noticeable how much the new team at Avanti recognise the commercial challenge of wooing back customers they have lost following the disastrous underperformance of last year, which they recognise, understand and accept. That is a vital commercial challenge. We judge that they are beginning to meet that and doing more than beginning to meet that as a matter of service. There is much further to go as regards the extension of the quality of the service. They recognise that, and that is all in the interest of customers and better customer experience.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It seems that this contract has been awarded on the basis that it is a little less crap than it used to be. Is that really the way to

make a decision in Government? The Office of Rail and Road statistics in August showed that Avanti was the second worst performing operator, with only 48% of trains running on time. That is not good enough. I speak as someone who is a customer, and I speak on behalf of my constituents in the north. It is appalling. This is ideologically, dogmatically driven. It is a nonsense.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Member's use of choice parliamentary or possibly unparliamentary language is not something I would want to repeat, even if I thought it was accurate. It is important for him to recognise the progress that has been made. If he does not recognise that, that is a pity, because there is a very considerable improvement. The question now for the House and for Government is how to sustain and enhance that improvement in the longer term. The judgment has been made that a longer-term contract will give the stability in which the company can invest for the betterment of travellers, and that is to everyone's advantage.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It pains me to say it, but I have to tell my right hon. Friend that the decision his Department has made today will be very badly received in north Wales. North Wales passengers have had to endure a substandard service from Avanti for far too long. The prime example of that was this summer—at the height of the holiday season, which is so important to north Wales—when Avanti decided to cut four services and provided virtually no through services from London to the region. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that his Department will be keeping a very close eye on Avanti's performance in north Wales over the coming months and years and that, if necessary, it will terminate the franchise that has been confirmed today?

Jesse Norman: I completely understand the concern that my right hon. Friend describes. As he will be aware, in many of these individual cases, problems lie at the network level, or are a result of driver shortages or other reasons, as well as underperformance by the company, but I absolutely recognise—and Avanti recognises—the point he raises. The answer is that, of course, the Department will remain very firmly focused on continuing to hold this company to account for the delivery of services and the continued improvement of those services.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Once again, we find that Transport Ministers cannot even find friends on their own Benches for these decisions. People in my constituency and in the north of England will be astonished at the decision to reimpose Avanti because of its systematic failure. The Minister did not answer the question he was just asked. Will the Government guarantee that they will cancel Avanti's contract if, once again, it is the poster boy for failure?

Jesse Norman: That was not the question I was asked; I did answer the question that was asked. It is built into the new contract structure that, after the initial period, which allows for the investment that is required to continue to make sustained improvement, there is a recurring three-month capacity to call in the contract as required, precisely in order to exercise the kind of scrutiny and accountability that the hon. Gentleman is seeking.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): I am a regular user of the west coast main line, and the improvements in both punctuality and reliability over recent months have been welcome. The Minister will be aware of the ongoing capacity issues at Preston station that are compromising potential improvements across Lancashire, such as the creation of a passing loop on the South Fylde line, which would double the number of trains coming into Blackpool South every single hour. Can the Minister raise that issue with departmental colleagues, so that we can hopefully break the logjam and create the conditions for improvements in localised services in Lancashire?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for his positive remarks, which give the lie to the previous comments made directly. I can assure him that the Government are focused and will remain available to discuss and consider that point.

Can I also reiterate and double down on a point that I made earlier? One of the functions of being able to provide a longer contract is to allow the introduction of more fleet and, in particular, a brand-new fleet of electric and bi-mode Hitachi trains to replace the current diesel fleet. We expect that there will be sustained improvement at the level of rolling stock as well as at the level of service provision.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Judging by their appearances in the Chamber, I guess that the ministerial team are just like Avanti: delayed or cancelled. Yes, the service has improved, but from such a low level, and it is still a woeful service. Does the Minister truly believe that this is a good outcome for passengers?

Jesse Norman: I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman is referring to, since the Minister was on time. I will not say that it was an improved service over the normal one, but it was hopefully an adequate replacement.

Of course, the Government stand behind this decision. A process of care and attention has been given weekly to the performance of the company, and separately to the contract grant. It has been done with great attention to detail, as the hon. Gentleman would expect.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Holyhead is the second busiest roll-on roll-off port in the UK and, with Anglesey's new freeport status, we are at the beginning of our economic renaissance. As such, it is vital that we have connectivity, particularly now that the Labour Government in Cardiff will not agree to a third Menai crossing. How are Ministers going to ensure that Avanti delivers a reliable service with direct trains from Holyhead to Euston for my Ynys Môn constituents, many of whom shared their frustrations with the rail Minister when he visited Anglesey in the summer?

Jesse Norman: It speaks very well of the rail Minister that he did visit, and engaged with my hon. Friend and her constituents—I think that is absolutely right. She asks how it will be done: it will be done by providing a contractual framework in which there can be more investment; by bringing on 100 more drivers; by recognising that there is considerable scope for further improvement in the service, to north Wales in particular; and by improvements in rolling stock. All of that will make for a better service.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Data shows that the number of trains cancelled across the rail network continues to rise and is at the highest level since records began in 2014. The Minister keeps referring to July's figures, knowing full well just how bad August's are—in fact, statistics show that trains in Ukraine are running more reliably than our services here, despite that country's network clearly being under considerably greater pressure. These problems do not stop with Avanti: persistent issues on the west coast main line have a knock-on impact on any east-west services crossing that line. When will the Minister accept that the current system is simply not working?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there are knock-on effects and that some of those effects bear on east-west services. That is one of the reasons that the Department has separately announced and negotiated a national rail contract for CrossCountry as a rail operator, in order to provide a framework for stable further investment in those knock-on services.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest as a long-suffering user of the Avanti service on the west coast main line. In 2021-22, Avanti had the most customer complaints of any operator and it is consistently rated one of the worst-performing operators on the rail network. Despite that, Ministers spent an eye-watering £4 million of taxpayers' money in bonuses to company executives for customer experience and acting as a good operator. Can the Minister explain when it became Government policy to reward failure?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady is deliberately drawing on statistics from before the recent improvements that the Government are recognising in this contract award. However, there is a further point: it is of course right to raise individual items, but we ought to get away from a situation in which politicians feel that they can micromanage and second-guess decisions made by people at the operating level. The key thing is to make sure that the quality of management is in place to drive continued, sustained improvement, as we expect it now is with the new chief executive, Mr Mellors.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): As a regular user, I recognise that the Avanti service has improved in recent months—although frankly, it would have been hard for it to get much worse—but given the sustained poor performance in the past and the August performance figures we have just heard about, this contract award feels very premature. Would it not have been better to wait and ensure that we see proven, sustained improvement from Avanti before awarding such a long contract?

Jesse Norman: Of course, a variety of considerations sit around any contract award. The attraction of this one is that it allows the most rapid possible progress on fleet improvements and support for the new management team that might be expected. As the hon. Gentleman would imagine, the Secretary of State has spent a considerable amount of time talking to the new management to make sure that they really are focused on improvement, and to hear in detail what their plan for that improvement is. The award was made in part on that basis.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This decision is as embarrassing as it is baffling. The Minister talks about improvements, but my constituents have not seen those improvements. He talks about reducing the number of cancellations: with Avanti having cancelled half of the services from Chester directly to London, that will obviously reduce the number of cancellations. Yesterday, for example, Avanti started a train from Crewe rather than from Chester. That presumably does not count as a cancellation, but that is absolutely no consolation to someone in Chester. It seems to me that the Government know that the companies are playing with the figures and are prepared to accept a second-class service for the people of the north.

Jesse Norman: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern. It is fair to say that, from day to day, there are different issues that interrupt a good service. As I have already said, those relate not just to the availability of drivers and other key staff, but to underperformance from time to time and disruption to Network Rail infrastructure. All of those things can play their role in a highly integrated network.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) and I have worked for many years on the issues surrounding rail connectivity covering Chester and north Wales and, since I arrived in this House in December, I have not seen any improvement. The Minister talked about micromanaging situations, but the reality is that the Government do not seem to have understood what happened to Chester and north Wales during the summer. As the right hon. Member said, the decision was taken to cancel through trains, which fundamentally affected tourism and the visitor economy, not just for Chester but across north Wales. To be honest, that smacks of gaming the figures, and my constituents and residents across north Wales are absolutely staggered that this contract has been re-awarded to Avanti West Coast. I simply do not understand that. This is so business-critical and important to local residents and there has been a failure to take into account the realities of travelling across Cheshire and north Wales.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady did not ask a question, but I understood every word of her speech. Since she is new to the House, she might want to have a conversation

directly with the rail Minister about this: he is highly engaged on these issues, as colleagues across the Chamber will know. If she has not seen any improvement in relation to her constituency, at least she has the satisfaction of knowing that improvements have been recognised around the House.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government have ensured the immediate future of Avanti West Coast, but the same cannot be said for Great British Railways, which has an office but no powers. We urgently need a body to provide oversight and accountability to fix Britain's broken railways. The Government are in favour of that, so can the Minister confirm that legislation to create Great British Railways will be announced in the King's Speech?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady for her tempting invitation, but I am not going to second-guess His Majesty on what he will announce in the King's Speech. What I can say is that this is a topic of great interest to the Government and, as she will know, the Department is making considerable progress in the non-legislative mode that we are in at the moment to achieve many of the goals we all share.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Avanti manufacturing director, Andy Mellors, told the Transport Committee that Avanti would be cutting staff at Glasgow Central station by more than a third and closing its ticket office. Why does a company that delivers such a poor and expensive service, and that holds its customers in such contempt, deserve to have its contract renewed, potentially for almost a decade?

Jesse Norman: What I recall from that hearing is that Mr Mellors said 1% of the tickets at Glasgow were sold through the ticket office, that there would be a full staff in front of the ticket office, that those staff would work from the first train in the morning until the last train at the end of the day and that they would continue to accept cash. That sounds like quite a good service offer to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for responding to the urgent question.

Resettlement of Afghans

1.30 pm

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): Since June 2021, around 24,600 people from Afghanistan have been safely relocated to the United Kingdom. We owe them a debt of gratitude, and in return our offer has been generous. The UK Government have granted all Afghans relocated through safe and legal routes indefinite leave to remain, including the immediate right to work, alongside access to the benefits system and vital health, education and employment support.

Given the unprecedented speed and scale of the 2021 evacuation, we warmly welcomed our Afghan friends into temporary hotel accommodation until settled accommodation could be found. However, bridging hotels are not, and were never designed to be, a permanent solution. Indeed, in a statement to this House in March, I made it clear that it was unjustifiable for around a third of those relocated from Afghanistan still to be living in costly bridging accommodation up to 18 months after arriving to safety in the UK. Long-term residency in hotels prevented some families from properly putting down roots and was costing UK taxpayers £1 million a day. That was not sustainable. That is why, at the end of April, we began issuing notices to quit to the 8,000 individuals who remained in bridging accommodation, making it clear that access to costly hotels would end following a minimum three-month notice period and encouraging moves into settled accommodation.

I am pleased to confirm that, as of 31 August, the Government have successfully ended the use of bridging hotels for legally resettled Afghans. We estimate that over 85% of those who were in bridging accommodation at the end of March 2023 have been helped into homes or pre-matched into settled accommodation. Ending the provision of bridging accommodation was the right thing to do for our Afghan friends, who can now get on with rebuilding their lives, and represents a fairer deal for the British taxpayer. Indeed, it was not right to continue to ask taxpayers to foot the bill for costly bridging hotels when, as we have demonstrated, settled accommodation could be found for the overwhelming majority of guests.

That required a considerable national effort and represents a significant national achievement, and I extend my thanks to colleagues across central Government, as well as to local authorities and third sector partners, who have all played a part. Without dedicated caseworking teams and councils, in addition to the £285 million funding package I announced in March, this mammoth task would not have been possible.

Not only are we on track to deliver 1,200 homes for Afghans through the local authority housing fund, which will help build a sustainable stock of affordable accommodation for the future, but we have mobilised the generosity of the Great British public by creating an innovative new Afghan housing portal, which enabled conscientious landlords to offer their rental properties directly to families. Furthermore, each local authority that receives an Afghan family can access £20,500 per person over three years to provide wraparound integration support, as well as additional funding for English language classes. I urge local authorities to continue taking full advantage of the generous funding offer the Government have put in place.

As I told the House in July, the Government have made time-limited interim accommodation available to a minority of families. That is available only to those for whom a move would disrupt ongoing medical treatment at a specific hospital and those who have been pre-matched to a property that will be available before the end of December. As of 31 August, over 80% of those in time-limited interim accommodation were already matched to a property. We have already seen over 200 people move out of interim accommodation and into settled accommodation, with more leaving every week.

As I have set out, the overwhelming majority of Afghans have now moved into settled accommodation or been pre-matched to a property. That is testament to the significant central Government support that has been put in place. Despite that support, however, some families have moved into temporary accommodation under local authority homelessness provision. That is less than 5% of the 24,600 people we have relocated from Afghanistan. Of those families in temporary accommodation, around a quarter have a property to move into in the coming weeks.

Others in temporary accommodation have, regrettably, turned down suitable offers of accommodation. I have been clear and honest from the outset that, where that happens, another Government offer will not be forthcoming. At a time when there are many pressures on the taxpayer and the housing market, it is not right that people can reject perfectly suitable offers of accommodation and expect to remain in taxpayer-funded hotels. However, in recognition of the pressures councils may face as a result of housing Afghans in temporary accommodation, an additional £9,150 per household has been made available to councils by central Government. That is in addition to the wider £2 billion available over three years to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

Let me be clear: we have not left Afghan families without a roof over their heads. I continue to work closely with central and local government partners to help the small minority of families in local authority-provided temporary accommodation to find settled accommodation across the United Kingdom. However, we must all continue to play our part in delivering a helping hand to our Afghan friends, to whom we owe so much. I encourage those who can do so to offer private rented accommodation, speak to their local council or list their property on the Government's Afghan housing portal, which remains operational.

We also take seriously our commitment to resettling Afghans yet to arrive in the UK, including those eligible for our schemes who are still in Afghanistan. However, our efforts to move people out of hotels has shown how vital it is that they are moved directly into long-term settled accommodation, where they can put down roots in the community. That is why we are taking forward plans to source suitable accommodation ahead of facilitating new arrivals.

Welcoming people who come to the UK through safe and legal routes has always been, and will always be, a vital way in which our country helps those in need. In that spirit, I look forward in the months ahead to welcoming more of those who loyally served alongside the UK's armed forces in Afghanistan, as well as those who stood up for British values, often at great personal risk. I commend this statement to the House.

1.37 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement.

Today's statement is, though, a continuation of a shameful saga of Government failure when it comes to the Afghans who served alongside our forces in Afghanistan. The Minister has come here today looking for a pat on the back for booting people out of hotels, but he fundamentally misunderstands that across this House we gave a commitment to those who served alongside our forces that we would do right by them when they arrived on our shores and that, despite many not being in permanent homes, that commitment is still not being delivered. Thousands are still waiting in limbo in Pakistan, and thousands are still waiting for family reunion. Despite having been asked repeatedly whether his eviction scheme would make any family homeless, the Minister has today confirmed that Afghans in bridging hotels are accessing local authority homelessness support.

The Opposition are proud of our armed forces and of the Afghans who served alongside them in the years in Afghanistan. I pay tribute to all those involved in Operation Pitting, but our commitments were given not just to those who came out on those planes; they were given to people who served alongside our forces and who worked for them. It is that wider commitment that the Minister has not addressed in his statement and that I would like to ask more about. I agree with him that Afghans should not have been left in bridging hotels, but his Government decided to do that for 18 months. Where is the apology from him for that policy of neglect?

I would be grateful if the Minister could now provide more detail on a number of questions. First, how many Afghans and their families are still in a form of time-limited accommodation approved by the Minister's Government? When does he expect that figure to be zero? For any new arrivals on the approved schemes, as tiny as those numbers are, will they be placed in bridging accommodation or will they automatically be given a home straight away? How will that work? Will the financial package for the evictions also apply for those new and future arrivals, and how much has been set aside for that?

The Minister has given no detail in any of his statements to the House about how much this eviction process has cost taxpayers in total, and he has not said where that money is coming from. Is it from the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office or the tiny budget of the Office for Veterans' Affairs? How much in total does he estimate will be spent in clearing up the Government's mess after leaving Afghans in hotels for 18 months?

Why are there nearly 750 Afghans waiting more than two years for their ARAP application to be processed? What is the Ministry of Defence doing to get nearly 600 ARAP-eligible people and their families who are still in Afghanistan out of harm's way from the Taliban? How many Afghans are still in hotel accommodation in Pakistan, paid for by the UK taxpayer? How many of them have been told that the UK Government will not be paying their bills in the future? What are the Government doing to get the people to whom we made a promise out of Pakistan and to safety in the United Kingdom?

The Minister used some unclear language in his statement when he talked about how many people are in temporary accommodation under local authority homeless

provision. He said it is less than 5% of 24,600. In July, I challenged him to say that no Afghan family who helped our forces in Afghanistan would be homeless because of his policy of evictions. The Minister said at the time that, given what was on offer,

"there is no reason why Afghans should present as homeless at the end of this process."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 809.]

We can see that now. Would it not be clearer if the Minister, rather than saying less than 5% of 24,600, said that 1,000 people are accessing homelessness provision because of his policy? Can he give a precise number of how many Afghans whom he has evicted are accessing the homelessness provision of local authorities up and down the country?

We gave a solemn pledge that we would support those people who served our armed forces. The Minister is smiling at that commitment, but 1,000 people accessing homelessness support is not something to smile about. This is not the opportunity for a giggle on the Front Bench; this is an opportunity for us to be taken seriously as a nation, because we promised people who arrived in the United Kingdom, people fleeing the Taliban in Afghanistan and those still in Pakistan that we would provide safety. He has done some of that with his eviction policy, but more needs to be done. [*Interruption.*] I know he is finding this funny, and he is giggling on the Front Bench, but this is not funny.

I know all too well from the casework I have been doing for Afghan families—[*Interruption.*] There is a lot of attack coming from those on the Government Benches, but this is a serious point, so let me finish. I know all too well from the casework I am doing for Afghan families and interpreters based in Plymouth in my constituency that they have family members on the run from the Taliban in Afghanistan who still fear for their lives. We gave a solemn promise to some of those people that we would get them out. Can the Minister set out how we will get those people out and how we will bring them to safety, because that serious promise deserves to be honoured?

The Minister wants praise on this matter, but he should have apologised for the myriad Government failures. There is a chance now to address all of them—not just his evictions policy, but the issue of those in Pakistan and Afghanistan and those who still do not have the safety and promise of safety that we offered.

Johnny Mercer: That was pretty embarrassing from the hon. Gentleman. It was disappointing to receive a typically unpleasant response to the hundreds of people who have worked across the country to deliver this policy. I stood in this House and promised that we would close bridging hotels, which were totally unsuitable for Afghans, by 31 August. I have done that; we have delivered on that promise. I said that nobody would sleep rough, and nobody has slept rough throughout this process. The new arrivals that he talks about, as he well knows, are not within the scope of this statement. He well knows that those questions will not be answered today.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the funding that has been thrown at this issue. If he had been listening to anything that goes on, rather than reading out some student statement in the House of Commons, he would know that none of the £285 million came from the

OVA budget. He said that budget is tiny, but it did not exist at all under his party, and his party has no plans to replace it. It is not tiny in the first place. I will not spend a lot of time on this answer, because it was an incredibly disappointing response to a serious issue. Nobody on the Government Benches was laughing. He comes up with these clips for his social media platform, and it is embarrassing for the rest of us. This Government are committed to delivering on our responsibilities when it comes to migration. We promised that we would close bridging hotels by 31 August.

Luke Pollard *indicated dissent.*

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, because he lives in a different world. All the bridging hotels are closed, and nobody has slept rough. I am proud of the team that has delivered that. We have not done it for him or for a pat on the back from the Labour party; we have done it because it is the right thing to do for the Afghan people, because on this side of the House we believe in something and in doing right by these people, and we will deliver on our promises to them as we continue into the future.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank the Minister for dealing appropriately with the response from the Opposition Front Bench. During the next week I would like him, or one of his colleagues, to follow up the case that I raised with the Leader of the House last Thursday. An International Security Assistance Force commander said of that person that he,

“because of his service in support of the NATO Armed Forces in the Afghan Theatre of Combat Operations...has suffered and continues suffering threats to the life and property of himself.”

I know that is not for the Minister to answer today, but I make that request. I want to be approached by the right person to find out how we can solve that problem.

Johnny Mercer: My office will have heard that today. We will ensure that that individual's case—I saw my hon. Friend's question last week—is raised with my office. We will do everything we can to provide him with an answer and to see where we go from there.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Sabir Zazai, the chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council, has said:

“For every Afghan person who arrived in the UK on a resettlement scheme in the year ending March 2023, almost 90 crossed the Channel in a small boat.”

This is a sign of a Government who are failing in their commitment to Afghans. Every Afghan on a boat should have been able to reach here by the schemes that the Government have set up; it is a sign of failure that they have not.

The Government promised to resettle 5,000 Afghan refugees in the first year and 20,000 over the coming years, but since that announcement only 54 have been newly resettled under the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and the schemes are now apparently dormant, despite a great need for them. To give an example, prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Western Isles-based charity the Linda Norgrove Foundation was supporting 165 female students, including 96 studying medicine. Those women are not allowed to continue

their studies in Afghanistan, and have gone from being trainee doctors to house helpers. Despite that, five Scottish medical schools are very supportive of allowing 20 Afghan students to travel to Scotland and complete their studies, and all have agreed to offer them places, yet the ACRS has not reopened, despite the UK Government saying that it would within a year. There is no commitment for these women to come to Scotland, despite the places being there and those women being welcome, and I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

People have been left behind. I had dozens of families get in touch with me at the fall of Afghanistan, desperate to get their relatives out, but I know of only a handful who were able to make it to Scotland. The Minister has left them behind. Can he tell me about the ACRS? How many expressions of interest have the Government received on the scheme? How many of those are sitting in a pile yet to be processed, because my constituents have heard nothing about their expressions of interest?

Moving to the situation of Afghans in hotels, I understand from the local MSP and Cabinet Secretary Jenny Gilruth that 54 Afghans were given notice to quit from a hotel in Glenrothes. She is aware of no impact assessment and no discussion with local authorities prior to that decision being made. When she raised the matter with the Minister for Immigration, she got nothing but a pat response with no detail on what she had raised. That is clearly not acceptable from the Government; they need to do much better if that is the level of engagement.

We all know from our casework that there are lots of reasons why people might not take up the first offer of accommodation they are given. Is the Minister confident that people do not have legitimate reasons, such as family ties or links to the local community, or many other reasons why they do not want to be thrust out of the accommodation they are in and into somewhere with which they are completely unfamiliar and without a support network? That will cause far more damage in the long run, rather than supporting people properly, which the Government are clearly failing to do.

Johnny Mercer: I do reflect on what the hon. Member says in terms of individuals who remain in Afghanistan. She will know of my concerns in that space. This statement is clearly about those who are here and those for whom we had to do a huge job of work to get out of hotels and into accommodation. There was an extensive engagement process with local authorities—I had all the local authorities on calls many times, and I met many of them face to face—so it is simply not correct that people did not have notice. I am happy to go away and look at her case, but I can guarantee that the answer is that the hotel was given notice and that there were Home Office workers in that hotel, because I ensured that there were in every one.

This has been an incredibly difficult process, but what I will not allow to happen is traducing of the work of those officials in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Office who worked throughout the summer, day and night, to ensure that we met the target. They have done an extremely good job. Nobody would begin to think that Afghanistan is anything but a human tragedy of epic proportions, and we are trying to salvage what we can from that.

[Johnny Mercer]

As for my comments on future movements, it is right that individuals come here and go into settled accommodation and not into hotels, because hotels are unsuitable, as we have seen time and again. As I have said, the Government will honour our commitments to those who served.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Will he join me in encouraging councils and legally resettled Afghans to utilise broader mainstream support such as English language classes and unemployment support, in particular through Department for Work and Pensions work coaches?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. In August, we spent a lot of time going around these hotels, exploring and then confirming some of the support available to Afghans in different areas. Much of that support is included in the package, with £9,000 per family and £7,000 per person. We then have the £20,000 integration fund over three years, and there is £28 per person, per day for up to six months for those still in temporary accommodation. So there is every opportunity for these Afghans to properly integrate into British society, to learn English and those wrap-around skills, and to build a decent life in the UK, as we promised them when we evacuated them in Operation Pitting.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The statement is on Afghan resettlement, so I hope that the Minister can assist me. What progress has been made with councils and other accommodation providers to bring to the UK the cohort of ARAP-approved Afghans waiting in third countries? Has he considered a Homes for Ukraine-style scheme?

Johnny Mercer: I understand what the right hon. Member is getting at. My responsibility was clearly to get these individuals out of hotels so that we could begin that process of bringing people in Afghanistan who need to be here back to the UK. All options are being considered in that space. The Government recognise that there are people in Afghanistan we owe and who should be in the UK, and we will have more to say on that in due course.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his leadership and co-ordination across Government Departments in securing such a positive outcome. The Vale of Glamorgan has been proud to play its part. Afghan families were originally located in the Copthorne Hotel in Wenvoe in my constituency and are now settled and welcomed in St Athan in my constituency—a proud community with many service personnel. I recently met many of those Afghan families—some were translators, some were intelligence officers and some were security guards at the British embassy in Afghanistan. When time permits, will he agree to come and meet those families so that he can better understand the networks needed locally with the Department for Work and Pensions, the jobcentres and social services so that there can be a

better understanding of the practical needs on the ground, as well as to recognise the gratitude they are showing to the UK for that support?

Johnny Mercer: I would love to come and see that work taking place. I know that where individuals have engaged with the Government and the scheme, there are some incredible stories of how Afghans have relocated into these communities. One of the things we did was build a taskforce of Afghan nationals who were driving people around communities in the UK and introducing them to landlords. We really did see something quite special over the summer in that joined-up effort to meet this challenge. I would love to come down to see that. The Government's commitment to this is enduring—there is no point in doing this and then, in three years, finding there is a problem with Afghans sleeping rough—and I will personally see it through.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister again for visiting the Afghans at the hotel in Cardiff with me a few months ago. Will he join me in paying tribute not only to the staff of his Department and others, but to the staff of Vale of Glamorgan Council, Cardiff Council and the Welsh Government, who worked co-operatively to try to ensure that they found homes? Will he give me the exact statistics on how many people were homeless at the end? He promised that none would be, but I understand that a small number in Cardiff and the Vale were. If he does not have that to hand, perhaps he could write to me. What has been done on equivalency of qualifications? At that meeting, many of the Afghans raised with him that they cannot get jobs because their qualifications from Afghanistan are not being recognised. What has he done with the DWP to resolve that?

Johnny Mercer: I will come back to the hon. Member on equivalency in due course. There is an issue with getting the healthcare workers we want to see into the NHS, and we are working on that at the moment. I promised that no one would be sleeping rough at the end of the process, but I never promised that nobody would not apply for homelessness—I cannot force people to live in certain houses. However, I can ensure him that nobody sleeps rough because of this policy or a lack of provision. That target was met, and nobody slept rough.

Of course, I pay tribute to all the local authorities. Some of them did extraordinary stuff during the period. I went on holiday myself, but there were other people on holiday still driving around at 10 o'clock at night introducing people to communities. I pay tribute to those from parties of all colours across the United Kingdom. It really was a galvanising of a national effort. If we do that in future, we can meet the strategic challenge on migration.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement; I know that he cares deeply about this. In the light of the Afghan resettlement update—I know this falls slightly without his remit—to what extent are the Government putting pressure on the Afghan regime about girls and women's education, with it being two years since the ban? He mentioned that there is the opportunity locally for Afghans to learn

English, and we know how important that is for integration. What estimation does he make of that funding so far in their integration?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. There is funding available to do English courses, and every Afghan who has come over has had access to those courses. We are getting to the point, with Afghans having been in the United Kingdom for two years, where they should be speaking English, and we have made a real effort to ensure that happens.

On Afghan politics, I have worked out that the critical thing when working cross-departmentally, whether on veterans or this issue, is that we have to respect the lane we are in. That is clearly an issue for the Foreign Office, which I am sure will have heard my hon. Friend's question. He can approach it for more detail.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his update and for the work that has been done; it quite clearly sounds good. I have a constituent who worked alongside an Afghani, and that outstanding case for resettlement has been turned down. I will not name the person in the Chamber, because I would not want to compromise him in any way, but I cannot for the life of me understand how the scheme has been applied to that gentleman, who is currently in danger, having fled the Taliban. He worked alongside the British Army. My constituent told me all about his duties and what he did, and I am quite clear about it in my mind. This gentleman, alongside his wife and four children, is living in Afghanistan and in danger from the Taliban and others. He helped the UK forces—our forces—when we beckoned and asked for that help. Surely the operation of the scheme must allow for compassion and common sense. May I seek the Minister's help—I mean that honestly—for that honourable gentleman who we cannot let down?

Johnny Mercer: I ask the hon. Member to write to me about that individual today. I am more than happy to sit down and explain the process to him, look at that case and see whether it has gone right or wrong. We know that there are people in Afghanistan who deserve to be here and who we want to be here—the previous Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), mentioned it a number of times. The Government are aware of that, and he will know my personal commitment to that.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to Hounslow Council, my local council, the Feltham convening partnership and others who have played such an important role in supporting Afghan refugees. When the Minister came to the House in March and announced that Afghans would be evicted from UK hotels, about half the 8,000 Afghans in hotel accommodation were children. Will he update the House on how many of those children are now settled in permanent housing as well as on the ongoing strategy for the continuity of their education, including the resources needed for that, such as for trauma and other support?

Johnny Mercer: The support going forward is extensive, as I alluded to earlier. There will be £9,000 per family, with specific reintegration funding of £20,500 per person

to make sure that happens. We had that deadline by 1 September because I do not want people taken out of school. Half these people are children, and they should not be in hotels. Some of the scenes I witnessed at those hotels were unacceptable. I was determined that we stick to that deadline, because it was the compassionate thing to do in the end. I pay tribute to everyone at Hounslow council, which I have visited, for doing a great job. That shows that if we all work together on these issues and take politics out of it, we can meet the challenge of strategic migration.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Let me start by putting on record my thanks to the Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who, after 18 months of begging by me and my team, was finally persuaded to help me bring five British children and their Afghan mother to safety in the UK in June. That was after the father, who had served the previous Afghan Government and worked with NATO, was brutally assassinated by the Taliban. His much younger sister has been left behind. She is an aunt to the children but grew up like their sibling because she is much younger. She is alone with no male relatives, in hiding and in fear of her life because she is a target. Given the Minister's repeated statements about honouring commitments to those left behind, and given this woman has a UK sponsor, a job offer and a home to go to—no hotel—will he meet me to discuss her case so that we can bring her to safety, too?

Johnny Mercer: If the hon. Lady sends me the details, I am more than happy to look at them. I recognise that such cases are out there. We were dealing with an individual over the summer who was known to us. We were trying to help him, but he was captured, tortured by the Taliban and killed in the middle of August. I am well aware of these issues. We will do everything we possibly can to make sure that we act in a timely manner. If she writes to me about that case, I will look into it.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): On Friday I had the privilege of visiting the Refugee and Migrant Centre in Birmingham. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to its great work in housing Afghan evacuees? The issue now is that rents have gone up quite significantly, and the centre is finding it difficult to house people and give them some sort of normality in the community. Will he look at this issue urgently?

Johnny Mercer: The pressures on housing across the United Kingdom are well-known. That is why we designed a clever scheme to increase the local housing allowance and combine it with the local authority housing fund, and at the same time blend that with a service family accommodation provision to make sure that we could deal with the increases. As I said, this is not a fire and forget issue. This nation has an enduring commitment to those families. We wanted to get them into settled accommodation, because that is their best opportunity to get a job. They have a right to work and to build a life in the UK. These are talented people. I pay tribute to those in Birmingham and across the country for leaning into this task, and I am grateful for their efforts.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I commend the Government on the way in which they set up the Ukraine family scheme within a week of the Russian invasion. But the parallel family reunion mechanism for Afghans resettled or called forward for evacuation under pathway 1 of ACRS is still not implemented. I have more than 450 Afghan families in my constituency who are desperate to be reunited with families. Two years on, those families still have no way of bringing their loved ones to safety.

I believe the Minister may know of the case that I have spoken about before in the Chamber, of a constituent who sent me the photograph of his 15-year-old daughter in her coffin. She committed suicide for fear of what the Taliban would do to her, but her four sisters and their mother are still there. Under pathway 1, Afghans here have been given indefinite leave to remain, but that means that they cannot avail themselves of refugee family reunion; anyone applying for that is told that their application has been rejected as invalid. Will the Minister please increase the number of officials dealing with family reunion? It is a matter of honour, but also of huge personal commitment.

Johnny Mercer: I am always looking at what more we can do in this space. It is easy to forget the depth of the carnage in Afghanistan. We had someone in the scheme who was forced to sell one of his children. He emailed us and said, "I am going to have to sell my child tomorrow," and he did. It is horrific. That is why we all need to lean in and work as hard as we can. What has happened there is extraordinary. We will continue to lean into that and do what we can in these horrific situations.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister said that he looks forward to welcoming more of those who stood up for British values at great personal risk, so I want to draw his attention to precisely one of those. My constituent is a former Chevening scholar who has been in fear of his life since 2021. He has, at last, been

provisionally accepted on ACRS pathway 3. On UK Government advice, he travelled to Pakistan with his wife and young family for final checking, but they have been left there since May. Their passports are due to run out in a matter of weeks, and they are petrified that they will be sent back to Afghanistan once they become undocumented. It is simply not right that they have been left there. I have not been successful in raising this issue by email and letter, so will the Minister meet me to try to resolve this urgent case?

Johnny Mercer: I ask the hon. Lady to send me the details of the case directly. As far as I am aware, we have responded to all individual cases. I am well aware of the strategic situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Prime Minister asked me to do a specific job on hotels, which we had to do before we could even think about bringing people over from Afghanistan. We have now done that. The Government recognise their commitments, and we will have more to say on that in due course.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): My constituent's brother trained and fought alongside UK forces. He escaped murder by the Taliban by fleeing across the border, injured and without papers. Can the Minister confirm how many Afghans have been relocated from third countries under pathways 2 and 3 of the resettlement scheme, and explain why his Government still require those allies to seek new documentation from the men trying to kill them, or to arrive on small boats?

Johnny Mercer: Those schemes lie with the Home Office and the immigration system. I am sure that his question will have been heard. It is clear that challenges remain in this space. As was alluded to in the previous question, the consequences of getting it wrong that we are dealing with are particularly horrific. We recognise our commitments and will work continue to work hard to fulfil them.

Birmingham City Council

2.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about Birmingham City Council.

Birmingham is a great city with a wonderful, diverse, creative and enterprising population. It has real economic, cultural and educational strengths. But Birmingham City Council has not served the citizens of that great city as it should have. For years now, the city has suffered as the council has failed to grip underperformance. Poor leadership, weak governance, woeful mismanagement of employee relations and ineffective service delivery have harmed the city. Senior leaders—both elected members and officers—have come and gone, but the one constant has been a failure to deliver for residents who deserve better. I believe strongly in local government, local decision making and devolution of power to local communities. But I also believe that when failures in local government occur, we must act. As we devolve more power to local government overall, we must demand sharper accountability. The need for action in Birmingham is pressing.

On 5 September the council's chief financial officer issued a section 114 notice, which set out the full gravity of its financial situation. As a result, and as I will set out to the House, I am satisfied that Birmingham City Council is failing to comply with its best value duty. In line with the Local Government Act 1999, therefore, I can announce that I am today writing to the council to set out my proposal to intervene and to appoint commissioners, and that I intend to launch a local inquiry in due course. I do not take those decisions lightly, but it is imperative to protect the interests of the residents and taxpayers of Birmingham, and to provide ongoing assurance to the whole local government sector. Copies of the letter have been provided to the Vote Office, and will be deposited in the House of Commons Library and published on gov.uk.

It may be helpful to the House if I outline how we in Government arrived at this position. In 2014, the independent Kerslake report, commissioned after the "Trojan horse" investigation into a number of Birmingham schools, found that successive administrations had failed the city. It warned that the council lacked a clear vision, had failed to tackle deep-rooted problems such as the low level of skills, and was not doing enough to provide consistently good quality services. The report's author, the late Lord Kerslake, also highlighted a culture of sweeping problems under the carpet or blaming them on others, rather than tackling them head on.

The problems Lord Kerslake identified have, unfortunately, endured. In April 2023, the Minister for Local Government, the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) asked the then council leader, Councillor Ian Ward, to commission an independent governance review. He was prompted to act after governance and service delivery concerns were raised by three independent sources: the local government and social care ombudsman, the housing ombudsman, and the Department for Education's commissioner for special educational needs and disability

at the council. The scope of the review was then extended to include two further serious issues which subsequently came to light: the flawed implementation of a new financial ledger system, Oracle; and the council's handling of its significant equal pay liabilities. The council's response to both issues has caused concern, highlighting significant shortcomings in its governance arrangements, and in its ability to identify and resolve areas of weakness. Last month, my hon. Friend wrote again to the leader, seeking assurances about whether the council was compliant with its best value duty in relation to decisions on equal pay and Oracle. To date, there has been no response.

We understand that a number of factors led the chief financial officer of the council to issue the section 114 notice last Tuesday, as laid out in the report. These included concerns raised by the external auditors, Grant Thornton, around the provisions for equal pay in prior year accounts. The independent auditor's assessment was that the revised estimated equal pay liability is likely to be more than £760 million, and there is a risk it could be much higher. That means, in turn, that the 2020-21 and 2021-22 accounts were materially mis-stated, and that the council did not have sufficient reserves to mitigate the cost of the liability due for those years. In addition to the acute financial position stemming from equal pay, the council is dealing with other difficulties. They include the costs of resolving the botched Oracle implementation, estimated at £100 million.

The residents and businesses of Birmingham deserve better. The intervention package I am proposing today is formed of two complementary parts. First, I propose to issue statutory directions to the council and appoint commissioners to exercise certain functions of the council as required. Secondly, I intend to launch a local inquiry to consider the more fundamental questions around how Birmingham got to this position and options for how it can become a sustainable council moving forward that secures best value for its residents.

I am proposing the transfer, to the commissioners, of the exercise of all functions associated with the council's governance and scrutiny of strategic decision making, and all functions relating to senior appointments. As part of the proposed direction, the council would, under the oversight of the commissioners, prepare and agree an improvement plan within six months, which would set out the council's own plans to make the necessary improvements to the whole council to return it to a sustainable financial footing. The commissioners will provide advice and challenge to the council across its operations and will have powers to make decisions directly should they deem that necessary. My hope is that the commissioners would not need to use all those powers. None the less, they must, in my view, have the necessary mandate to deliver the reforms that are required. The commissioners will give me, and I will in turn give the House, a progress report at regular intervals.

I judge that the scale and nature of the failings at the council, its precarious financial situation and its failure to provide sufficient assurance to Government that it is taking adequate action to address these issues are all highly concerning. I acknowledge that the council is working with the Local Government Association on its own proposals on improvement, and I have met the leader of the council to hear his plans, but in accordance with the legislation, I have now informed the council that I am minded to implement the package I set out

[Michael Gove]

today to protect the interests and services of the people of Birmingham, and have given the council five working days to make representations on the proposals I have set out today.

I am specifically minded to appoint Max Caller, an experienced local government professional and commissioner, to lead the intervention. I will also welcome representations from Members of this House and others who may wish to contribute their views. I thank Birmingham's MPs for their engagement over the course of the last week, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook), who has been particularly closely engaged with the issue throughout.

It is important that we all get to the bottom of how we found ourselves in this position. That is why, as well as sending in commissioners, I am today making it clear that we need a local inquiry that can look at all the deep questions, including by assessing the council's ongoing management of issues identified in the Kerslake review in 2014 and the subsequent non-statutory intervention. We will consider options for how Birmingham can improve in the future. I should make it clear that everything I am saying today is not a reflection on the many hard-working staff at Birmingham City Council who continue to deliver essential frontline services for Birmingham residents.

Birmingham is not the only council where we have seen significant local failure. There have been problems in recent times at Liverpool, Sandwell, Slough, Nottingham, Thurrock, Woking and Croydon. The Government have not hesitated to act where poor decision making and governance have been identified. The newly established Office for Local Government, our performance body for England, will have an important role to play in future where local authorities are identified as being at risk of potential failure. It will bring council leaders together with others in local government to explore problems in more detail.

Tougher scrutiny is vital when more decision making and budgets are passing from central Government into the hands of local politicians and officials. When local leaders fail, it is citizens who are let down—whose rubbish is not collected, whose libraries cannot open and whose vulnerable people are not adequately protected. Birmingham's record is of ineffective, inefficient and unaccountable local government, despite our best efforts and significant support. That needs to change. I will take whatever steps are necessary to uphold the good name of local government and to protect the residents of that great city. I commend this statement to the House.

2.17 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement today. It has been a while since we faced each other: 804 days, to be exact. A lot has changed since then. We are on our third Prime Minister, our fourth Chancellor and, of course, our sixth different Minister for Housing. They have crashed the economy, families face the worst cost of living for a generation, and mortgage rates have increased nearly fivefold since our

last meeting. But one thing has not changed: local government has been pushed to the brink. Birmingham is just the biggest, latest example.

This is a deeply worrying time for people in the city. The issues facing the council are difficult and complex, and administrations of all three major political parties have grappled with them in the years since they emerged. Since May, the new leadership in Birmingham have been working urgently on this issue and have been clear that they will take responsibility for tackling the problems facing their city, but they can only make that progress if the Secretary of State treats them as partners, and not as a political football.

I welcome the comments the Secretary of State has laid out today in regard to the action and support he will give Birmingham, but can he assure us that the commissioners will work with the city's elected representatives and leadership to tackle these problems together? Is his Department considering a similar approach to other struggling councils? Will his officials be taking a deep dive into the areas he mentioned in his statement?

In Birmingham's case, the Secretary of State mentioned the large equal pay settlement as the straw that broke the camel's back, but he also told us that governance and service delivery concerns were raised by three independent sources: the local government and social ombudsman, the housing ombudsman and the Department for Education's commissioner for special educational needs and disability. That came after Lord Kerslake's review, which found that successive administrations had failed the city. Yet he provided no support until the section 114 notice. Why does it take that for the Government to take action on this scale?

Like the rest of the country, Birmingham is facing the shock of spiralling inflation and battling a cost of living crisis, but in the face of all of this, the Government stripped away its reserves. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that amounts to £1 billion taken from the pockets of local communities over the last decade? He surely cannot deny that Birmingham has experienced some of the most severe cuts of the last 13 years, and he must recall that it was this Prime Minister who boasted of changing the funding formulas to take money away from deprived urban areas. Now, faced with an eye-watering equal pay claim, with which the leadership are rightly dealing, Birmingham has been pushed over the edge.

As the Secretary of State admitted, this is by no means a single case. Local authorities across the country are struggling, and, after 13 years, he cannot seriously say that it is all their own fault. Perhaps he can confirm that only one council issued a section 114 notice before his party took office in 2010, and that since then eight councils have issued notices, with warnings that another 26 are at risk of bankruptcy over the next two years. Can he tell us why so many local authorities of all political stripes have already issued section 114 notices on his watch? This is not a one-off, so what work is his Department doing to support local authorities that are warning of financial distress now?

The truth is this crisis in local government has been caused by the Conservatives' wrecking ball. With every swing, another local council is pushed to the brink and another local community falls over the edge. That is the difference between us. A Labour Government would oversee sustainable, long-term funding for councils, and we would work with local authorities and push power,

wealth and opportunity out of Westminster. The Secretary of State finished his statement by talking about upholding the good name of local government. Surely we can all agree that central Government have real questions to answer. Will the Secretary of State finally grasp the nettle and take responsibility, or is his message to local councils today that this is just the start of more misery to come?

Michael Gove: It is a great pleasure to be reunited with the right hon. Lady; those 800 days apart seemed much longer. We have certain things in common—both of us have been trade union organisers in the past—but she has been much more successful in internal party elections than I have ever been, so I do have a lot to learn from her. Nevertheless, I must politely remind her that while in my statement I was, I hope, careful and scrupulous in making clear that responsibility goes back quite some time in Birmingham, and responsibility does need to be shared between elected members and officials, I did not mention anything specifically or explicitly party political, because I believe it is vital that we work together across parties and across political traditions to deal with this issue.

Given that the right hon. Lady did mention the party politics of this, I think it important for us to recognise that the intervention in Birmingham, and our interventions in Sandwell and Liverpool, have all been interventions in Labour-led local authorities in which comprehensive mismanagement extended back over years. It is simply not good enough to say that Birmingham has not received the support that it needed. Birmingham has a core spending power of £1,202.4 million. That is a 10.6% increase in the last year, and a 31.8% increase since 2015-16.

Labour local authorities have been supported with funding, and also supported with the help of West Midlands Combined Authority. There is a striking factor in the west midlands: why is it that Labour Sandwell and Birmingham are failing, while the Conservative leadership of Andy Street has seen the delivery of record investment and record house building? If people want to draw political lessons from what we have seen in Birmingham, the message is very clear: if you want effective and efficient local government, trust in Conservative leadership, particularly at a time when we need to recognise that a fundamental problem afflicting Birmingham's finances is an equal-pay problem exacerbated by the actions of trade unions—trade unions which, in many cases, are funding Front-Bench spokesmen for the Labour party. It is vital that Labour politicians use their influence to ensure that we can work together to deal with the problems that that great city faces.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the statement—it is right that the Secretary of State is taking this decisive action in relation to commissioners so that we can get to the bottom of what has actually happened in Birmingham City Council—but can he give me some reassurance that neighbouring local authorities such as Dudley and Sandwell, and council tax payers, will not be picking up the cost of the failure of the Labour administration in Birmingham? Can he also reassure me that projects relating to transport infrastructure and employment creation and skills will not be put in jeopardy by the failures of that Labour administration?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, there are real issues for Sandwell as a local authority, which is why we had to intervene there to deal with years of mismanagement, but it is also the case that council tax payers elsewhere in the west midlands must not be on the hook for failures that occurred in Birmingham. We will have some tough decisions to make. Central Government are prepared to extend additional financial support to the city, but our commissioners will, I am sure, be confronting the political leadership of Birmingham City Council with some necessarily difficult decisions, and I hope that we can take them in a constructive spirit together.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State gave a list of councils where section 114 notices had been served and commissioners had been brought in. Perhaps he can confirm that Thurrock, Woking and Northamptonshire are not Labour-controlled councils. He seemed to miss that bit out when he was justifying his attack on some councils on the basis of their being Labour-controlled.

No doubt there have been problems in all these councils, but does the Secretary of State accept there is some overarching responsibility for a Government who delivered austerity to councils—bigger cuts than in any other part of the public sector—and that while by and large local government has managed extremely well, some councils have gone over the edge? Does he also accept that other councils may now be facing the brink? He has an expert unit in his Department advising him. Can he tell us how many councils he thinks are now on the brink of section 114 notices, and what action he will take to help them in advance?

Michael Gove: I am always grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee. I have already pointed out that in my statement I deliberately did not choose to make political points, but given that my wonderful shadow, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), did choose to insert some party political points, I thought it only appropriate for me to point out that Liverpool, Sandwell, Slough, Nottingham and Croydon had all been driven to the brink of bankruptcy by Labour leadership. It is important to give that context.

It is also important to say that while I will of course continue to fight for local government finance—and, at the last spending review, I secured the biggest increase for over a decade—it is nevertheless incumbent on elected leaders and officers to continue to deliver services efficiently. That is why our new Office for Local Government will hold councils effectively to account while also highlighting the best practice that is so widespread in local government, and which sees many councils continue to deliver high-quality services without getting into the sort of trouble that Birmingham has got into.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that, unfortunately, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook) cannot be here today because of a family matter, but he—like me, and like so many others in Birmingham and the west midlands—wants to make sure that this review in Birmingham is different from some of the reviews that we have seen elsewhere so that we can finally figure out how Labour has repeatedly

[Nicola Richards]

failed in Birmingham, in order to learn the lessons of the past but, most importantly, to protect local services for the future.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We must deepen this inquiry. It is fair to say that it was a Conservative and Liberal Democrat administration that ran Birmingham until 2012, but over the last 11 years there has been a succession of Labour leaders. I do not for a moment move away from the fact that there were ways in which the Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration before 2012 was not performing as it should have been, but this deterioration—particularly when it comes to the issue of equal pay—has occurred on Labour's watch.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Can I ask two questions of the Secretary of State? First, he mentioned one person he is minded to appoint as commissioner. When will he tell us who else he has in mind? Secondly, will the Secretary of State's commissioners' powers to make decisions directly extend to making decisions to raise council tax and to sell off assets belonging to the people of Birmingham?

Michael Gove: I am glad that Max Caller has agreed to be lead commissioner, but in the next few days I want to hear directly from Birmingham's MPs and other representatives about who they believe can act as effective commissioners alongside Max Caller. I am completely open to thoughts and suggestions from hon. Members and others about how we can build the most effective and coherent team. It has sadly been the case in the past with local authorities that have failed, such as Croydon and Slough, that we have needed both to increase council tax in certain circumstances and to dispose of assets, but it is too soon to say what the precise mix of interventions that may be required is. I want to do everything to protect Birmingham's council tax payers and residents by making sure that services can continue.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I moved back to Birmingham after graduating; I chose to do so in 2007. I am a former president of the chamber of commerce and a former local enterprise partnership director—we have one of the most successful LEPs in the area—and to say that I am disappointed by what has gone on in Birmingham is an understatement, not least because it has had over a decade to get to grips with this issue. Does my right hon. Friend agree, though, that there are two stories in Birmingham? There is the story of the political failure that we are seeing at the council, but there is also the story of the youngest-ever city in Europe thriving, with the largest amount of start-ups outside London, a massive life sciences sector and an advanced manufacturing sector. This success is happening under the leadership of Andy Street. Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that my council, Solihull Council, which has projects with Birmingham, will remain unaffected by what is going on there?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has had a distinguished career in business and public service in the west midlands. It is right to say, as I sought to do at the beginning of my statement, that Birmingham as a city has so many

strengths. We can be proud of its people and of its achievements economically, educationally and in so many other ways. The Commonwealth games showed Birmingham very much at its best. This is a specific problem that relates to the council. It requires focused action, and the support of the West Midlands Combined Authority, of Andy Street and of others will be vital in resolving this situation. There should be no adverse impact on residents in Solihull, and I will continue to work with my hon. Friend and other representatives of Solihull to ensure that that local authority continues to get the support it deserves.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Obviously, this is not a situation that anyone would want to be in. I want to understand exactly how the commissioners will work. While everyone is making party political points, it is actually the people of Birmingham who vote for the council and who have put those people in place. Will the citizens of the city get any intervention in this process? How are their feelings going to be heard, or are they just going to have things done to them by people who, let's face it, do not live in Birmingham or know what the city is like? I do not know this fella. I believe he worked in Hackney. He does not live in Birmingham. He does not know anything about what the city is like. And the Secretary of State's praise for Andy Street makes me think that he has never tried to get on the tram in Digbeth. We cannot just have a steamrollering in the city. There has to be some level of accountability also for the commissioners, and I wonder what system that will work on. I have to ask the Secretary of State: what is it about the last 10 years that means he can reel off a list of councils including Thurrock, Northamptonshire and Woking? I believe that his own council is not in cracking shape. What is it about the last 10 years that has meant they have all shown cracks in the roof?

Michael Gove: There are several important points there. I have never taken a tram in Digbeth, but I do know that, thanks to Andy Street, there is significant additional investment in Digbeth and that the BBC is moving there. It is thanks to Andy Street that we are seeing business and culture flourishing in the west midlands. Max Caller is a uniquely experienced figure in local government. In Slough, he managed to deal with many of the defects that had occurred under—I am afraid—a Labour administration. Having talked to the hon. Lady and other Birmingham MPs, I am very open to them as Birmingham's elected representatives co-operating with me to help identify who should join Max as a commissioner. The explicit reason that I am minded to act in this way, and that I have announced only one name, is to get the maximum possible consensus and buy-in for a strong team that can take the steps required. What has happened over the last 10 years? I am afraid we have to look at individual councils and the decision-making within them, and to recognise that there are well-run councils. I shall not name them here, but there are even one or two well-run Labour councils. But it is important to recognise that this is about the quality of local leadership, which, as we devolve more power down, has to rise to the challenge.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Like many colleagues in the west midlands, I seek reassurance that my constituents in Wolverhampton

will not be impacted by a knock-on effect through the West Midlands Combined Authority. Does my right hon. Friend agree that hard-working people pay their council tax to get the essentials done, and that Birmingham, which knew it was in financial trouble, spending £1.2 million on trade union facility time last year seems an expense too far for hard-working people?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for doing such a fantastic job for Wolverhampton. Even though I may not always agree with everything that Wolverhampton Council has done, it has had some distinguished Labour figures leading it in the past. More broadly, there has been a consistent failure to deal effectively with employee relations and trade union issues in Birmingham. We talk about equal pay, and of course equal pay matters, but what we have seen is a failure to effectively confront this liability early enough and a failure to deal fairly and robustly with trade unions.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Birmingham is the eighth local authority to declare a section 114 notice since the Tories took power, causing huge concerns to my residents in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale. Across the UK, councils are struggling with rising prices and limited budgets, and most are being forced to make even deeper cuts next year. Can the Secretary of State accept that local leaders need certainty about their budgets and reassure the House today that every local council will be properly funded by central Government?

Michael Gove: Absolutely; we do ensure that every council is appropriately funded. I know—[*Interruption.*] I know that the hon. Lady served with distinction on Birmingham City Council, so I would exempt her from any criticism, but I do not exempt from criticism others who have served and continue to serve on Birmingham City Council. If we look at each of these specific local authorities, we see failures that require to be acknowledged—failures that even the current Labour leader has been good enough to acknowledge. That is why we need to work together and why this intervention is required.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): The sad case of Birmingham City Council will worry my constituents. As the Secretary of State knows, Warrington Borough Council—a Labour-run council—has borrowings of almost £2 billion, which is 10 times its core spending power. My constituents and I worry about the governance of Warrington Borough Council and about the return on investments that have been made by the council. I am also deeply worried that councillors in Warrington do not understand the decisions they have taken and the exposure they have put my constituents under. Each constituent is now in debt to the tune of £10,000 because of those decisions. Can my right hon. Friend set out the steps his Department is taking to prevent another collapse at a Labour-run council, given that that could occur in Warrington next?

Michael Gove: I know that the Minister for Local Government, the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), has been paying close attention to what has been happening in Warrington, and we will report back to my hon. Friend

the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and to the House on that. He is absolutely right to raise those concerns as there is more work that we require to do to satisfy ourselves about the fundamental financial health of Warrington.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Secretary of State has rightly mentioned the Bob Kerslake report of 2014, a key finding of which was that the role of officers in Birmingham had subdued the role of elected members. John Cotton, the current council leader, has rightly highlighted the accounting and equal pay issues—he wants to make a difference. To resolve the issue with the officers, will the Secretary of State look to bring back the district auditor function, so we can be much clearer about the finances of local authorities?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the very constructive approach he has always taken to dealing with local government and education issues. Yes, the Kerslake report identified a number of weaknesses, including at officer level and, yes, it is also the case that the relatively new leader of Birmingham City Council, John Cotton, has been honest about the need for improvement.

It is also the case, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, that we need to improve the audit function within local government overall. The Redmond report and others have pointed to the need to do so, and I believe that the new Office for Local Government will provide an even more rigorous early-warning system, if things are likely to go wrong, as well as—this is equally important—celebrating those local authorities, of all political colours, that are doing a good job so we can learn from them.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): The problems we face in Thurrock have emerged over the past 10 years, during a decade in which Thurrock has been dominated by three-party politics and a succession of minority administrations in which the UK Independence party held the balance of power. Being brutally frank, it was impossible to make financial cuts or to increase council tax, which has led us to our current situation.

In the light of the best value inspection, which found that the position had been exacerbated by annual elections and constant electioneering, will my right hon. Friend consider whether those lessons need to be read across local government? I remind him that, going back as far as 2019, previous Ministers, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and the National Audit Office all warned Thurrock of the recklessness of its policy, yet councillors and officers failed to act. Do we need to consider statutory powers for a sanction in those circumstances?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a series of very helpful points, and she is right. Obviously, it is not my role or responsibility at this time to interfere in the calendar of elections that local government has enjoyed, acquired or inherited over the years, but I agree that, wherever possible, we should move away from annual elections. Indeed, the work to change the electoral geography and timings in Liverpool has been helpful. She is also right that the particular political dynamic in Thurrock created difficulties, and how we hold people to account in future needs to be reviewed.

[Michael Gove]

My hon. Friend has been a consistent voice in challenging underperformance at Thurrock Council, and a brave voice in attempting to face down populism in her constituency, in order to do the very best for her constituents.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): The situation facing Birmingham City Council is very serious, and those responsible should be held to account. None the less, we know Birmingham is not unique. Many councils across the country, as we have heard, are entering section 114 territory. According to reports, the Secretary of State's local council in Surrey Heath could go bankrupt within two years. What assessment has he made of the financial situation facing councils and of the impact of the £1 billion stripped from Birmingham City Council's budget by the Government?

Michael Gove: The overall health of local government matters hugely, and the financial health of local government matters hugely. That is why we are bringing forward the new Office for Local Government. I think the hon. Lady and I will have to agree to disagree on the root cause of the problem in Birmingham. As I said earlier, Birmingham's core spending power has increased significantly, and other local authorities that have not seen their core spending power increase by the same amount are managing their finances effectively, but I hope we can work together to ensure that, wherever responsibility has lain in the past—we may disagree on that—we can serve the people of Edgbaston and all of Birmingham better in future.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): Labour-run Blackpool Council currently has a budget deficit of more than £23 million, which is one of the largest in the country compared with its revenue budget. Despite this, the council continues to fritter away taxpayers' money, not least in spending £174,000 on six trees and in giving councillors a pay rise. To ensure its financial position does not deteriorate further, will the Secretary of State join me in urging the council to get the basics right, to end its pursuit of ideologically driven projects that are not supported by residents and to end all wasteful spending immediately?

Michael Gove: I love Blackpool and I love trees, but £174,000 for six trees is £29,000 a tree. Some trees they must have in Blackpool.

More seriously, the local authority faces challenges, but Blackpool's two Members have been very successful in securing additional central Government expenditure to help to regenerate the centre of Blackpool and to secure new investment. Whatever views one might take of Blackpool Council—and it does seem as if it is paying slightly more for its trees than it could have paid in most garden centres—central Government have nevertheless shown how partnership and levelling up can secure real change.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the offer to work together, and that offer has been welcomed by Councillor John Cotton this afternoon.

Can the Secretary of State tell us whether we can find a way to have a conversation about fair funding? He is a student of Tory leadership campaigns and, like us, he probably winced when he heard the Prime Minister say to one campaign meeting:

“we inherited a bunch of formulas from the Labour Party that shoved all the funding into deprived urban areas...that needed to be undone. I started the work of undoing that.”

The truth is that richer councils have taken cuts of about £44 per head since 2010, whereas Birmingham City Council has taken cuts of 14 times that amount. There is a conversation to be had about funding, and I am grateful that the Secretary of State is considering one way to fix it, by creating a levelling-up zone and investment zones in east Birmingham, on land between the two High Speed 2 stations.

Can the Secretary of State confirm that those plans will still go ahead? Has he considered creating a development corporation in east Birmingham, for which I have argued for a long time, to lever in significantly larger amounts of money? Can we have a conversation about how we support the combined authority, too? As he will know, Andy Street's budget faces a gap of £29 million next year, rising to £50 million in a couple of years' time, and currently there is a £1.1 billion black hole between the investment programme and the funds available to pay for it.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his very thoughtful question. Although we might disagree politically and have different reflections on what may have been said in the past, he is absolutely right that we need to explore a development corporation and that east Birmingham, in particular, needs additional investment. He is also right that we need to work with the West Midlands Combined Authority. The recent trailblazer devolution deal gave significant additional support to the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Mayor, but we keep what is required under constant review.

The right hon. Gentleman is also right that Birmingham's economic health powers the whole west midlands and is vital to our overall success as a nation, which is why I want to make sure that we get back to strong leadership and effective governance in Birmingham.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the appointment of Max Caller, who has a strong track record of making these difficult decisions and helping councils to turn around, but the Secretary of State will know that task and finish was a big part of what happened in Birmingham. Does he have oversight of which other councils are still doing that? Nearly 30 years ago, at Islington Council, we were looking at those issues and tackling them.

The big issue here—the elephant in the room—is local audit. Some 12% of audit opinions for the 2021-22 financial year have come in, even with the extended deadline. The permanent secretary and the National Audit Office have indicated that we need to focus on the current year and to forget previous years, but these canaries in the mine, these warning signs, were never heard because of the dire state of local audit. This has

all been on his Government's watch. Can he give us any reassurance that he really has a plan to get local audit back on track?

Michael Gove: First, I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words about Max Caller. He is a first-class professional, and I know he will do an excellent job with the other commissioners. Secondly, I think it is fair to say—I do not want to make a party political point—that the local audit situation requires both investment and leadership. One of the first things I sought to do when I arrived in the Department was to ensure that the Office for Local Government can play a system leadership role in helping to reform and improve that process. I completely agree with the hon. Lady on that.

The hon. Lady's central point was about task and finish, which some Members may think sounds like a good thing. A task and finish group is a team that sets out to resolve a problem and dissolves itself when the problem is finished. It seems to be the model of what we should have in administration: not a permanent bureaucracy, but a taskforce. However, task and finish in Birmingham, and indeed in some other local authorities, has basically meant the binmen—the scaffies, as we would say in Scotland—knocking off early as soon as they had claimed that they had finished their task and yet claiming for their full working day. Again, it is not an effective way to run any public service.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Councils across the country are struggling under severe financial constraint and there is no doubt that local government is badly underfunded. However, I want to commend my Bath & North East Somerset Council for having shown great prudence in order to rebuild its finances, and I hope the Secretary of State will join me in praising it. The reform of the audit system has been mentioned, but may I ask him: what timeline can we expect for a reform of that system? When does he think the backlog of unpublished opinions will be cleared?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that and I had the great privilege of visiting Bath recently to look at a housing development. Just as some Labour

councils are good, I believe there are one or two Liberal Democrat councils that are good, although I certainly shall not be naming them at this Dispatch Box now. More broadly, we are taking steps to deal with the audit situation she mentions and my hon. Friend the local government Minister can brief her in detail, should she wish, about that situation.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned core spending power, so it is important to reflect on the first 10 years of this Conservative Government, when 60p in every pound was stripped away from local authorities. The Government then forced councils to rely on council tax as central Government funding was reduced. Places such as Birmingham and Luton can raise much less from council tax, because of their smaller housing stock, than wealthier areas, which have bigger houses in higher council tax bands. Places such as Birmingham and Luton therefore lose out every year. Was his policy just a result of incompetence or is it part of the Prime Minister's stated aim to take funding from deprived urban areas and give it to wealthier towns?

Michael Gove: I do not know how it is possible to sustain an argument that we are taking funding from deprived areas when one looks at the levelling-up partnerships we have in Hull, Sandwell, Blackpool, Blyth, Worksop—[*Interruption.*] A tiny amount? Tell that also to the people in Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, who have benefited from strong Conservative leadership and investment. Tell it to the people in Workington, Walsall and Willenhall. All of them have benefited directly from the levelling-up funding that this Government have secured. Were there tough times in the first couple of years after 2010? Yes. Why were there tough times? It was because Labour had left us in a situation where there was no money left. I am afraid that the lesson of Labour in central Government is that it always leaves office with unemployment higher than when it entered and with the public finances devastated.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for responding to the questions, particularly those from the local Members.

Point of Order

2.53 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, said that allegations that India was behind the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar were “credible”. Hardeep was a prominent activist in the Canadian diaspora campaigning for independence for Khalistan. Sikhs have long suspected that India was behind the recent killing, which appears to have been a grotesque and completely illegal extra-judicial expansion of Modi’s Government, an authoritarian crushing of dissent within India itself. I urge our Government to warn their Indian counterparts that such state terrorism will not be allowed to impact Government-to-Government relations. As the House is due to rise, may I ask the Government, through your offices, to make an urgent statement on this important issue, to assure Sikhs in the UK of the Government’s intentions?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and his forward notice of it. I have received no indication that any Minister intends to make a statement—or statements further to those we have just had today—but if that changes, Members will be notified in the usual way. However, I am certain that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the point of order that the hon. Gentleman has made.

Departmental Response Times

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. Those should be brief questions and not speeches. May I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not to the relevant Minister? Front Benchers may take part in questioning if they so wish.

2.55 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Today, the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee has published a special report on the response times of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to the Committee’s reports. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for kindly granting time to our Committee for a statement on the special report, and I thank the Committee staff for their support to assist us in producing it.

The House has appointed our Committee to scrutinise the Department. The issues that our Committee considers affect the day-to-day lives of constituents up and down the country. During this Session, we have published reports on topics such as adult social care, housing supply and funding for levelling up. We have also investigated damp and mould, and reforms to the private rented sector—two issues that are raised on a daily basis in correspondence to the Committee and in our mailbags as constituency MPs. We have heard evidence from hundreds of witnesses, who have given up their time to share their experiences—in some cases, harrowing and deeply personal experiences—to inform the Committee’s work. They do so in the expectation that our reports and recommendations will influence Government policy and improve people’s experience of public services.

For our scrutiny of Government policy to be fully effective, the Government must consider and respond to our conclusions and recommendations. Sometimes the Government will accept our recommendations and sometimes they will not. What is important is that we receive a response from the Government. Their responses demonstrate that they have considered the views of the Committee and allow the public to see what the Government are doing in response to our inquiries. It is a well-established convention that the Government should respond to all Select Committee reports within two months of publication. We understand that that will not always be possible, perhaps during a parliamentary recess or where recommendations are directed to more than one Department. However, delays should be the exception not the rule, and we expect open and proactive communication from Ministers and officials on the rare occasions when they expect a Government response to be delayed.

The experience of our Committee is that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has historically and consistently failed to respond to our Committee reports within a reasonable time. During this Session, we have published seven reports and not one of the Government's responses has been published within the two-month deadline. On average, Government responses to our reports have been almost six months late. The responses to our reports on funding for Levelling Up, on the Electoral Commission's strategy and on exempt accommodation were all late. The response to our report on adult social care was eight months late; The response to our report on social housing was 10 months late. The response to our report on permitted development rights was one year and eight months late. We are still waiting on overdue responses to our reports on reforms to national planning policy and on reforming the private rented sector. Our Committee staff spend a disproportionate amount of their time, resources and energy attempting to engage with Ministers and officials, through formal and informal channels, to get responses.

Over the years, as Chair of the Committee, I have seen responses being late, but things have got progressively worse. In March 2022, the Chair of the Liaison Committee wrote to the then Leader of the House to highlight cases of "egregiously overdue" Government responses. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was identified as a repeat offender when it came to late responses, and was responsible for five of the 13 examples in that letter.

In January this year, we asked the permanent secretary about his Department's failure to respond. He said:

"We need to make sure that it is an important responsibility of the Department that we respond on time."

We have seen little evidence that the Department has taken this responsibility more seriously. Indeed, in the case of our report on reform in the private rented sector, published in February, the lack of response has been deeply disappointing.

The two-month deadline passed on 9 April. On 3 May, the Secretary of State wrote to the Committee to explain that the delayed response will be published

"alongside the introduction of the Renters Reform Bill".

The Bill was introduced on 17 May, but we have still not received a response to the report. Instead, we have heard that a response will be published "as soon as possible". We have made seven separate formal requests for the response, as well as many informal requests, but we are still waiting for the Government's response. It is now more than five months overdue.

The Committee broadly supports the legislation on private rental reform and has made suggestions for its improvement. We now need to hear whether the Government plan to accept these recommendations, and if not, why not. We expected a response in April; we were promised one in May; we are now in September and still waiting. We are also waiting for the Second Reading of the Bill. We hope to receive the response before Second Reading, although that appears to have been somewhat delayed as well.

It is imperative that the Government fully consider the Committee's conclusions and recommendations in the report, and publish a full response imminently. Our special report calls for a Government response on the private rented sector in the next two weeks, along with

an explanation as to what has caused the delay. We have requested an assessment from the Cabinet Secretary about these matters. Finally, we have asked the Liaison Committee to consider a formal review of Government response times, including our experiences with this Department.

In reality, a Select Committee's powers and effectiveness are significantly undermined when the Government do not fulfil their responsibilities towards it. Ministers must be accountable to this House. We, as a Committee, treat our responsibility to scrutinise the Department and its Ministers with the utmost seriousness. It is time that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities took its responsibilities to our Committee and the House equally seriously. The first step in doing so must be to respond to our principal output—our reports—in a professional and timely manner.

I normally take great pleasure in coming to the House to report on the Committee's inquiries and findings. It gives me no pleasure at all to have to make this statement today. I hope I do not have to make a similar statement in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There is now an opportunity for hon. Members to ask questions of the Chair of the Select Committee.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and all its members for the valuable work they do shaping, challenging and scrutinising policy and holding people to account. My constituents, and those of many other hon. Members, are waiting with bated breath for reforms to the private rented sector. The Committee has produced an excellent and powerful report about it, but can I clarify that a response to that report has been requested from the Department on several occasions?

Mr Betts: Yes. The Committee works on a cross-party basis and our report on the PRS was produced unanimously. We have raised our concerns about the delayed response in person with Ministers at our hearings, and we have also written to Ministers, but still we have not had a response.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I take no pleasure in rising on the subject of the statement either. I have had the opportunity to serve on the Committee and its predecessors for the last 13 years, since I have been in Parliament, and over that period of time we have worked very hard, on a cross-party basis, to make sure our recommendations are agreed on a cross-party basis.

Does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that the Government's response to the Committee's report on exempt accommodation was some six months late? Given that I was promoting a private Member's Bill, which has now become an Act of Parliament, not having a response from the Government was hardly helpful in guiding the House or the House of Lords. Will he confirm that position and that many of the recommendations that the Committee has made would have helped the Government to deliver much better service for all our constituents?

Mr Betts: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He has served on the Committee all the time I have been Chair. We have worked together closely and he has done an absolutely outstanding job, both on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023, which deals with exempt accommodation.

Given that the Committee undertook a report on the issue of exempt accommodation, it would have been really helpful, not merely to the hon. Gentleman but to all Members of the House who were looking at that particularly challenging issue, which we described as a complete mess, if the Government's response to our report had been available in a timely fashion, as it could have informed the deliberations and considerations of the hon. Gentleman's excellent Bill. In the end, we got an Act that is valuable and well supported, but the Government did not help because of their delay in responding to our report.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you, Mr Betts, for your statement—it was almost a 10-minute point of order. I am sure that Members on the Treasury Bench will have heard the points that have been made, not only by Mr Betts but by Bob Blackman.

Import of Dogs

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

3.6 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the import of puppies aged under six months; to prohibit the import of pregnant dogs in specified circumstances; to prohibit the import of dogs with cropped ears or docked tails; and for connected purposes.

I thank the charity Dogs Trust and the many charitable organisations that have done an amazing job engaging with us as Members of Parliament over the years, looking out for the lives of our four-legged friends. The issue of animal welfare is felt passionately by my constituents and, I am sure, all our constituents around the country.

For many years, my constituents have been getting in touch with me about the issue of cropped ears and puppy smuggling. I can understand why there is such a strong feeling about the topic. In moving the motion, I declare an interest, as I am an avid dog lover myself. I have seen at first hand the love, comfort and, sometimes, the hard work that a dog can bring to a house. I am lucky enough to have two wonderful golden retrievers, Willow and Lola, and two Staffordshire bull terrier crosses, Snoopy and Jazz, who have been my constant companions for some time. And I am not alone in that regard.

Indeed, figures suggest that in the 28 million households in the UK there are 13 million dogs, which means that almost half of all households in the UK own a dog. Our status as a nation of dog lovers was plain for all to see last week, when these very corridors of power were filled with barking and numerous wet noses. I am, of course, talking about the Westminster Dog of the Year awards, where we had the chance to see our four-legged friends up close and in action. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) and TJ on their victory.

The 2019 Conservative party manifesto outlined how the Government would crack down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies. That commitment was reconfirmed in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. I understand that the Government have been unable to progress with that Bill because of the scale of the number of amendments that were proposed, so I am proud to be introducing a private Member's Bill to enact the manifesto commitment myself.

The scale of the problem must not be underestimated. The relaxation of the pet travel scheme in 2012 has led to an exponential growth in illegal smuggling into the country. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs estimates that before the relaxation some 85,000 dogs were smuggled into the country, which had increased to 275,000 in 2016. That increase in illegal dogs has also caused an increase in the cases of zoonotic disease, including brucella canis. That is a risk to public health and the country's biosecurity.

Dogs Trust has in recent years conducted five investigations, which found that smugglers are using the pet travel scheme to cover up illegal activities in the UK. The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill had previously sought to stop illegal puppy trafficking by reducing the

total number of animals allowed to travel into the UK within a year. It also sought to increase the minimum age of imported dogs, place restrictions on pregnant dogs and put a complete ban on mutilated dogs.

The original Bill was designed to

“make provision about the welfare of certain kept animals that are in, imported into, or exported from Great Britain.”

However, I know that there is still a determination in this House to right the wrongs currently being perpetrated against animals; to close the loopholes that are available to smugglers, which they continue to exploit; and to strengthen the existing laws and legislation. This private Member's Bill stands to do just that. Although I wish I had the time to acknowledge every Member's contribution, I would particularly like to thank the Minister for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who has done incredible work leading up to this 10-minute rule motion, including holding his own Westminster Hall debate on puppy smuggling, which was centred around the same issues that I am trying to address today.

Back in 2019, when that debate was held, it gathered vast support from all parts of the House, and I hope that this Bill will enjoy the same cross-party support. I know that the British public certainly support this Bill. A total of 65,000 people have previously written in favour of its contents, and a recent study by Dogs Trust found that 83% of all respondents thought that the Government should fulfil our manifesto commitment to crack down on puppy smuggling.

In the past year alone, 485 puppies were found to be smuggled into the country, as well as 110 pregnant dogs. This transportation can have huge effects on a dog's mental, emotional and physical health, causing lasting trauma and health issues—and that is if the dog survives the journey at all—all of which can go on to cost many unsuspecting dog owners greatly, both financially and emotionally, as they seek to rectify such issues.

Dogs bring joy into our homes, but we need to make sure that we are not putting traumatised dogs into people's houses. To illustrate the horrible journey that some of these dogs have had to endure, I shall briefly outline the story of Waffle and her nine siblings. They were crammed into shoeboxes and tied up for almost 20-plus hours on a 1,000-mile journey from Slovakia. They had no food, no rest and very little water. The puppies were severely underweight and infested with worms when they were found. At eight weeks, they were barely half the current legal travel age of 15 weeks.

Waffle and her siblings were luckily rescued by Dogs Trust and have now all been taken care of and rehomed with loving families. However, sadly, more often than not, puppies do not have such a lucky outcome.

The Bill would seek to put an end to such tragic stories and improve the lives of these dogs as well as their owners. It would seek to stop the premature importing of puppies and spare them from the often traumatic journeys at such an incredibly formative point in their lives. It would also go further in helping to disincentivise people from transporting pregnant dogs, as well as hopefully putting a stop to the importation of mutilated dogs, sending a strong signal to stop the inhumane practice of cropping ears and docking tails—although I do recognise that the docking of tails is sometimes necessary in certain medical circumstances.

Dogs have been mankind's companion for millennia—15,000 years, to be precise. The Bonn-Oberkassel dog, discovered buried alongside two humans in Germany, is believed to be the oldest example of the relationship between man and dog. Then there were the hunting dogs of the Palaeolithic era, and the Siberian sled dogs of 9000 BC; right through to the pets adorning many medieval paintings, and, even more recently, the brave four-legged search-and-rescue team members. Dogs have protected us, helped us, provided companionship, and even sought out lost friends and family. Now it is our chance to repay that companionship and that assistance by protecting them. That is what this Bill does.

To conclude, the Bill sets out to right the wrongs currently being perpetrated, to close the loopholes that smugglers continue to exploit, and to strengthen the existing laws and legislation so that we can continue to give love to our four-legged friends.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This would be the opportunity for anyone to speak against the 10-minute rule motion. I have not been notified that anybody wishes to do so—I would be amazed if they did—so I will put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Elliot Colburn, Nick Fletcher, Caroline Nokes, Selaine Saxby, Aaron Bell, Matt Vickers, Dr Neil Hudson, Sir Robert Buckland, Cat Smith, Patricia Gibson, Sarah Champion and John McDonnell present the Bill.

Elliot Colburn accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 368).

Backbench Business

Conference Adjournment

3.15 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I am speaking on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, the Chair of which has asked me to lead the debate in his absence.

I start with some bad news, namely on the ultra low emission zone. We are all incredibly disappointed that, despite the fact that the majority of Londoners overwhelmingly oppose the expansion of ULEZ, the out-of-touch, megalomaniac Mayor of London has gone ahead regardless.

The measure has already had an absolutely devastating impact on thousands of people across outer London. More than 2,000 Harrow East residents have signed my petition and shared their views on this measure. Even after a month of implementation, signatures are coming in faster and more frequently than before the expansion.

The expansion has isolated the most vulnerable in society. With elderly people unable to afford new vehicles, having spent their pensions on a car when they retired, they are now unable to make necessary journeys—going to the doctor, the pharmacist or the hospital, visiting family or doing grocery shopping—without having to pay £12.50 each day. One resident recently wrote to me. They said:

“I’m disabled and my wife is a pensioner and people will no longer visit because of the ULEZ tax, leaving us isolated from family and friends.”

How utterly tragic is that?

Once the daily charge has been incurred, it is not even a simple procedure to pay it. This is heightened for the elderly who are notoriously less tech savvy. That is assuming that they have access to the internet in the first place. If the charge is not paid within a three-day window, a £160 fine is incurred. To complicate matters further, there is an increasing presence of scam websites, which are posing as Transport for London to take ULEZ payments, but are actually frauds, with absolutely no association to TfL and it seems that no action is being taken against them.

Many of those on the lowest incomes, typically working night-shifts, are unable to update their cars, particularly as non-compliant cars have crashed in value—I spoke to some people at the weekend whose cars are now worth less than £50 even though they are perfectly serviceable vehicles. Public transport links at the times when people need to travel for night-shifts are also not available, so just to get to work and back they are forced to pay £25 per shift, £12.50 each side of midnight. That cannot be described as fair, particularly as the Mayor drives a gas-guzzling large Land Rover, which is non-compliant, yet he has given himself an exemption so that he can continue to drive his car while incurring no ULEZ costs. What a shambles.

The expansion will also drive up the costs of other services. I spoke to a gardener over the weekend, who says that he now charges his customers £12.50 on top of his daily charge just to get to work and back again. Furthermore, many charities will lose out because volunteers

will no longer be able to get to the charity headquarters or deliver for local food banks. Yet again, this leads to the most vulnerable losing out.

The ULEZ is only the latest of a barrage of ludicrous ideas from the Mayor of London. I recently launched a consultation to hear the views of residents on his tenure, and I urge everyone to visit my website and submit their thoughts. It has never been more important, in my view, to elect Susan Hall as the new Mayor of London in the elections next May.

I move on now to the monstrosity that is Edgware Towers—a truly ridiculous proposal to build a cluster of 29 high-rise buildings, one block of 29 storeys and 14 others in excess of 20 storeys, in Edgware Broadwalk. That would totally change the character of Edgware, morphing it into a Canary Wharf twin and overwhelming the current infrastructure. It is important to note that I am supportive of reasonable development, but certainly not outrageous developments such as this. Ballymore Estates is trying to put in an amount of housing that would take up the entire area of St James’s Park on the space occupied by Edgware bus station. It is a nonsense.

There are many ludicrous things arising from the proposal. Construction would take more than 10 years, completely killing the small and medium-sized enterprises on the high street. The underground bus station poses a major threat to people’s safety, particularly women and girls, and then there is the fire safety issue with electric bus batteries. It would be the first place anywhere in the world where electric buses would be left underground overnight. There would also be very limited parking, with none for residents—and residents will need cars to travel east to west. It is all very well if they want to travel into the centre of London, but if they want to travel anywhere else, they will need a car. There will also be an impact on traffic, because all around the area will have to be controlled parking zones, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, because there will be no controls on the residents in those particular properties.

The proposals completely ignore public opinion. My recent survey received more than 1,000 responses, 96% of which were against the proposals. Last week, I met Ballymore Estates to discuss its unacceptable proposals. It is fair to say that we had an interesting discussion, but I made clear my opposition to their plans. The sheer scale of the development is complete codswallop, and it is clear that the developers are not listening to the views of local people and businesses. They plan to submit the application to the local authority by the end of September, so it is vital that residents share their views and voice their objections as soon as possible. Again, I make clear that we are not against development; we are just against development of the scale and density proposed here.

I was pleased recently to meet Alex Dewsnap, the managing director of Harrow Council. We discussed the ways my office can work with the council to ensure better service for residents and swift and productive responses to casework; I have to say that that has not always been the case when dealing with Harrow Council. I am pleased that under the new Conservative administration, the council has begun a comprehensive plan for road resurfacing across the entire borough, ensuring that the quality of roads for residents is safe and not littered with potholes, as has previously been the case.

As I have raised in this Chamber last year, the Labour council was complicit in a huge corruption scandal, with contractors and officers sharing £2 million for

themselves, money that was earmarked to fix dangerous pavements. I am frustrated that, while the investigation continues, the police are refusing to take action against the fraudsters because they consider the crime to be too small. I am afraid that, to me, £2 million of taxpayers' money is no small deal at all.

One of the principal problems for the council is houses in multiple occupation, with unscrupulous landlords falsifying documents and cramming people into unacceptable tenancies, so that many residents then complain about the antisocial behaviour of people living in those cramped conditions. I am encouraged that the council is looking to buy 140 houses for use as social rented properties and is taking action to ensure that supply meets demand for vulnerable residents. Furthermore, there is a planning case awaiting a decision for 140 new houses to be built in the local area, showing that appropriate, sensible and realistic development will always be supported by local authorities, meeting the needs of residents and adhering to sustainable development—quite contrary to Edgware Towers!

Looking at international issues, the situation in Iran remains at a critical stage. Last Saturday marked exactly a year since the tragic murder of Mahsa Amini by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps—the devastating death of a young lady for simply wearing her hijab incorrectly. Mahsa's legacy lives on, and the uprisings in Iran and by the diaspora around the world continue, calling for a free and democratic Iran. She has inspired a historic movement, "Woman, Life, Freedom", but the threat from Iran remains. Over the last year, more than 30,000 political protesters have been arrested and over 750 executed.

Furthermore, the IRGC continues to pose an unprecedented threat to the international community and to British interests across the world. Only a week ago, I jointly hosted a press conference with the National Council of Resistance of Iran, where my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) revealed that MI5 has intercepted more than 15 terrorist attempts directly linked to the IRGC in the last year alone. On top of that, the Home Secretary has outwardly declared the IRGC as the UK's largest security threat.

I am encouraged that the Government have recently proscribed the Wagner Group. While there has been progress from the Government in introducing tougher sanctions on the IRGC, that is frankly not enough. The settled view of all parties in this House is that we must proscribe the IRGC in its entirety. It is a clear terrorist operation, directly threatening individuals across the world, including in the UK, supplying weaponry to the Russian forces for use in the Ukrainian war, abolishing free speech, executing thousands and thousands of innocent civilians each year and inhibiting the rights of women.

In better news, a free trade deal with India will be a tremendous opportunity for both the United Kingdom and India. It is disappointing that we do not have the trade deal yet, since it was initially anticipated for Diwali 2022. However, I agree with the Prime Minister that we should not sacrifice quality in order to do a deal quickly. The Government have assured the House that the majority of the negotiation conversations were concluded by the end of October last year, so I hope that this deal is still being prioritised to obtain a mutually satisfactory conclusion as soon as possible—and certainly not in a perfunctory manner. Along with many Indian

residents in Harrow East, I look forward to a trade deal that will be the first of its kind for India, the first free trade deal that the country has done, hopefully as soon as Diwali 2023—so we do not have long—and certainly before the upcoming Indian elections.

I hosted 50 students in my constituency office over a two-week period for the annual work experience programme. The students were a real asset to the constituency, enthusiastically getting involved in a range of tasks from surveying residents to volunteering at London's Community Kitchen, engaging in lively political debates and helping with some of the office admin. I want to say thank you to all the residents who took the time to answer the students' surveys, as their contributions were truly helpful in assisting their learning—and none of those excellent students could be described as ragamuffins.

During this week, the students gathered over 1,045 surveys and delivered letters to nearly every ward in Harrow East, learning the importance of data collection. That helped my casework statistics to reach a staggering 66,000 since I was elected MP for Harrow East.

As a thank you for all the students' hard work, we concluded with a day in Westminster. We had a tour around Parliament and a trip to Conservative campaign headquarters, followed by an interesting talk from members of the team and the party chairman. The day concluded with a visit to 10 Downing Street and a great photo opportunity.

I continue to run my weekly tours, as do many other colleagues, giving residents an opportunity to ask questions of me and allowing me to show off this wonderful establishment. Since being elected, I have welcomed more than 6,000 residents here and I look forward to continuing that after the recess.

Another area that I am passionate about is smoking cessation. Four years on from the initial Smokefree 2030 commitment made at the Dispatch Box, we are not on course to achieve it. I welcome the recent announcement that disposable vapes will be banned, because they encourage children to use tobacco products. I am pleased that the NHS will begin targeted lung cancer screening to help detect cancer sooner and speed up diagnosis for those with a history of smoking. Both my parents died of that, so it is a personal issue for me.

However, there is a long way to go. The Khan review last year demonstrated the need for urgent action if we are to get anywhere near the 2030 target. Research by Cancer Research shows that, despite significant momentum over the past few years, we have recently gone backwards on the number of people smoking. That is not good enough. Each day that the Government fail to take action is another day when 150 people will be diagnosed with smoking-related cancers. I was pleased to join representatives of Cancer Research UK as they presented to the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street a petition of more than 13,000 signatures urging the Government to provide more funding to help people quit smoking.

I wish all colleagues in this House and the other place, the staff in our teams, the security teams, the catering teams, and everyone else who plays a key part in keeping everything afloat, a very restful, jolly and fruitful conference recess, spending time with family and—for those of us who are going—at our various party conferences, and, most importantly, serving our constituents over that period. To those who celebrated

[Bob Blackman]

last week, I wish a happy Rosh Hashanah and Jai Jinendra. To those celebrating this week, I wish a happy Ganesh Chaturthi. Finally, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I was going to say “Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker,” but I should now say thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for presiding over it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for opening the debate. I remind colleagues that they should stay for the wind-ups. I call Siobhain McDonagh.

3.30 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is now 12 weeks since my sister Margaret died of a glioblastoma brain tumour. May I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for attending her funeral? Since her death, I have made it my mission to make sure that glioblastoma has a cure. I would not wish Margaret’s experience on my worst enemy.

Through caring for Margaret for 19 months, I have learned a few things. Through Margaret’s treatment and campaigning on this issue, I have met industry experts, trade bodies, Ministers, charities and scientists. It is a topic that I know far more about than I would ever have wished to. And the biggest insight I have gained is this: the treatment of brain tumours in the NHS has not improved in 30 years. When a person is diagnosed with a glioblastoma, they get eight weeks’ radiotherapy, followed by as much chemotherapy with temozolomide as they can manage. That drug was introduced in 2005, and it is called the gold-standard treatment in our NHS. I can tell you that it is not gold standard; it is not even plastic standard. It does not cure anyone; it extends the life of very few people. Margaret could take only four to six weeks of it before her kidneys collapsed.

What else are you offered? A lifetime of paying your taxes, working hard, doing your best, and there are no drug trials; there are no alternatives; there is no hope. Perhaps the unspoken advice is just to go home, lay down and wait to die. The only hope that does exist is in other countries. Families crowdfund and spend their life savings travelling all over the world. In my case, I took a very ill Margaret on a plane to Germany every month.

Over the last decades, we have seen a transformation in hope and life expectancy in relation to some cancers, but absolutely zero progress for brain tumours. Members do not need to take my word for it; they just need to check the facts at a glance. The average life expectancy for the 3,200 people who will be diagnosed with a glioblastoma in the next year is nine months. The five-year survival rate is only 12.9%. The sad facts speak for themselves: nothing has changed; nothing has improved; and if we keep carrying on down the same path, nothing will ever improve.

On Friday, I received an unsolicited text from Cancer Research UK, which told me that together we are beating cancer and powering progress, and I was to see how far we have come. You can imagine the irony with which I read that text.

But it is not the same for all cancers. We know that great things have been done. For lung cancer, in 2010 the five-year survival rate was 10.3%, not dissimilar to the survival rate for glioblastoma; the difference, however, is that by 2020 the five-year survival rate for lung cancer had doubled to 21%. In 2020, the five-year survival rate for breast cancer was 85.9%. There has been a concerted effort by clinicians, charities, the Government and families to make sure that people with breast, lung and bowel cancer live longer, as they should. The sad truth is that brain cancer has been forgotten about, and because only 3,200 people are diagnosed each year it is not profitable for the pharmaceutical industry to invest in it and find a cure.

I promise that this speech will get a bit brighter. I said earlier that the biggest insight I have gained through this process is that the treatment of brain tumours on the NHS has not improved in 30 years. The next thing I learned is equally important: it does not have to be this way; there are solutions, we just need to try something new. And here is my something new: my four-point plan to transform the outcomes of people diagnosed with a glioblastoma.

First, we need a target of getting 200 glioblastoma patients into clinical trials each year on a drug that has the potential to change the course of the disease. That would be 1,000 patients over the lifetime of a Parliament. With those trials, we can begin to understand what works and what does not.

Secondly, the NHS should repurpose every drug already licensed to deal with other tumours for clinical trials on brain tumours. That has not happened yet, because glioblastoma is a very small target market for the pharmaceutical industry. The Government must either encourage or ultimately force the pharmaceutical companies to provide the drugs for these trials. Repurposing those drugs would be a cheap way to make a huge difference. It is the only way that we can make a difference.

Thirdly, the NHS should ensure that every neuro-oncology multidisciplinary team has a medical oncologist who is a core member and is required to attend meetings to discuss patients, so that brain tumour patients are not left in a corner of the ward because there is no specialist arguing for them. Unless a neuro-oncologist is in the room, we will not benefit from their ideas or expertise.

Fourthly, the NHS should require that every doctor training to be a medical oncologist should go through a mandatory course on brain tumours. At the moment, the Royal College of Physicians requires no compulsory training. Doctors have to take two courses on bowel cancer as part of their training, but nothing on brain tumours—believe me, they do not take the brain tumour option. The reason why there is nobody on those wards and the research infrastructure is not there is that nobody is being trained or is excited to do the job.

If we can do those four things, we can have some hope. I have spoken to Dr Paul Mulholland, the fantastic oncologist at University College Hospital, and he feels that he could find a cure within seven years. But it is not going to happen on its own, and it is certainly not going to happen if we carry on trying the same things we have been trying for the last 30 years. Einstein famously said:

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

I think we are getting to that point with the treatment of glioblastoma. It is time to break the mould, take a risk and try something different. Margaret's life requires nothing less.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole House in passing our condolences on to you, Siobhain, and your family. Your dedication in caring for Margaret was unsurpassed—we all know that—and your bravery and energy in the campaigning you have done since, at a time of such grief, is truly inspiring. We are all thinking of you, and thank you for making such a brave speech. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

3.39 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): This is the second time that I have heard the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talk about glioblastoma in a debate. I am exceptionally close to my sister, and I think I would be doing exactly the same thing if she was poorly, as Margaret was. At the time of the previous debate, Margaret was still with us, and now she is not, and I wish to send the hon. Member all my love from this side of the House. I had never heard of glioblastoma until we had that debate in Westminster Hall. I have been a beneficiary of the advancements in the treatment of breast cancer, and I want her to know that I am here if she wants cross-party support in any campaign for her four-point plan. I will stand with her to make sure that that happens, because I think it is really important that we work together to support each other on issues such as this. Many of our constituents will unfortunately face the same situation that Margaret faced and will not have the voice of a relative who stands up and speaks so powerfully. I am with you on this campaign.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I pause momentarily to remember our dear colleague David Amess, who without doubt would have been here to speak today. David and I shared a passion for animal welfare and were often at the same briefing events here on the estate. It is the ongoing badger cull that I wish to speak about today.

To be honest, I have often felt very lonely in opposition to the badger cull on the Government Benches. My first speech on the subject, standing up for the voiceless badger from the same position that I stand in today, was met with some aggressive groans from those sat within touching distance and followed by outrageous briefings against me both inside and outside the Chamber. Many of those colleagues have now left, and those who remain who differ in their view do so respectfully. We have had some much better toned debates on the badger cull since, but I have not changed my view that the cull is wrong. If anything, I feel vindicated that, some 10 years since it started, there is little proof that it has, by itself, worked. The only thing that has changed is the population of badgers, which in some places are sadly now near extinction.

Why, when there are many local and national issues that I could be stood here speaking about, am I choosing to talk about the badger cull today? The simple answer is that yet again, the goalposts have been moved, only this time not by those pesky badgers but by the Government themselves. It was reported last week that the Secretary

of State told a National Farmers Union reception here in Westminster that she had scrapped any arbitrary deadline for when we stop culling, contrary to the exit strategy of the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), which would have seen an effective end to the cull by 2025.

It is important to reflect briefly on the history of the cull. Since first becoming involved in this debate through the lens of wildlife protection, I have often heard with great sadness about the immense financial and emotional pain that bovine tuberculosis causes farmers up and down the country. The devastation for a farmer when a skin test comes back positive, virtually condemning their herd of cattle, is utterly heartbreaking. The groans at my speech aside, the testimony of colleagues from rural south-west constituencies in particular on behalf of their farming communities has been hard for them to articulate and for others to hear. However, it has shown that the fight was as much about ensuring that farmers are supported by the Government in implementing the wide array of countermeasures to prevent TB as it was about protecting badgers, which are an iconic species in the UK.

With the support of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth, we have seen investment in cattle vaccinations, funding of gamma testing, vastly improved farm management practices and additional biosecurity measures. All of that has contributed significantly to the reduction of bovine TB; there is little evidence that the cull has done the same. The Secretary of State said last week that she would be led by science, which is also what the Government said in 2010 when they first announced their intention to introduce badger culling. However, when the science is saying that badger culling has had no significant impact, it seems wrong to scrap the strategy that would have ended intensive culling.

My primary mission over the years has been to stand up for a much-loved and legally protected species. What we know now, after years of this cruel cull, is that the vast majority of bovine TB in cattle comes as a result of cow-to-cow infection. It is spread within intensive farming production systems, spills over into the wider environment and continues to infect animals, whether wild, farmed or domestic. Thoughtful and considered improvements discussed by DEFRA officials have helped to manage, improve and control the spread of disease, and some farms—supported by animal welfare campaigns such as the Save Me Trust, the Badger Trust and Born Free—have BTB-free farms without the need for culling. The sad thing is that many badgers who are culled are actually free of TB. One statistic that I recall seeing is that of the 102,000 badgers culled between 2013 and 2019, 900 were subjected to post-mortems and tests for bovine TB. Of that number, less than 5% were found to have bovine TB to a degree where they posed a risk of infecting other badgers, or possibly cattle.

Furthermore, the method of culling innocent, disease-free animals causes great pain. Badgers are sentient, and the inhumane cull methods used cause them fear and pain. Over three quarters of the badgers culled in 2020 were culled by free shooting, where cull contractors shoot badgers at night from a distance with a high-powered rifle. That method of badger killing has increased year

[Tracey Crouch]

on year, and has risen to be the primary method: it used to be that half of badgers culled were subjected to death by free shooting, but now that figure is over 77%. The independent expert panel formed by the Government to monitor the efficacy and humaneness of the badger cull during its first two years found that free shooting was inhumane, due to the length of time badgers could take to die. The IEP reported that in the first year of the cull, between 6.4% and 18% of badgers shot took over five minutes to die of bullet wounds, blood loss and organ failure. That panel made a number of key recommendations to improve the humaneness of culling operations, but it was disbanded in 2014, preventing any further independent oversight of the cull policy. The British Veterinary Association has since withdrawn its support for that method.

In my view, the cull remains cruel, inhumane, and unnecessary in the fight to eradicate bovine TB. Badgers are the scapegoats—the victims of politics, rather than science. The way to solve bovine TB in cattle has always been to focus on cattle-based measures, including investment in cattle vaccination, proper testing, and continuous improvement in farming methods. Of course, that requires Government funding, but if we were not spending tens of millions of pounds each year on culling, that money could have made a real difference elsewhere. I believe that DEFRA was looking to do so through the policy announced in 2021 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth.

My constituents care passionately about animal welfare issues, and while my heart breaks for the farmers condemned to lose their herd due to bovine TB, I have always been of the view that the inhumane and intensive culling of badgers is not the answer. It was never supposed to be forever, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), the current Secretary of State, says that she will be led by science. I agree: let us be led by the science and end this indiscriminate badger genocide.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): May I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words to my friend, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), and for what she said about her wonderful sister? I believe that the hon. Lady herself is rather a doughty campaigner on breast cancer, having climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and raised £153,000, so congratulations to her and her team on doing that. I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro—a lot of years ago, I have to say, but there we are.

3.49 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), because it must have been very painful to bring what she told us before the House, and I think that everybody who was listening will stand as one with her. Those of us who knew Margaret know that she did not deserve to experience what she did, and we remember her with affection. We are also committed to helping my hon. Friend with her campaign.

May I begin by speaking about the International Seabed Authority and deep-sea mining? That might be a slightly odd topic for this afternoon, but it is nevertheless

important and dramatically in need of bringing before the House and the world authorities. As we know, there are those who would seek to exploit the world's seabeds for commercial reasons. The purported logic is that we need to find the rare metals we use in our batteries, mobile phones, electric vehicles and so on. However, there is increasing concern in the scientific community that exploitation of the global seabed is a great risk. First, we know little about the seabed, and we do not know how much carbon is sequestered there. We also know little about the impact that the toxic waste produced would have on life in the oceans and on life we as yet do not understand.

Some 60 scientists have written to our Prime Minister asking that he be part of a global coalition for a moratorium on exploitation of the seabed, and I hope that he and those on the Government Front Bench will listen seriously to those views. Those scientists said in very straightforward terms that the consequences of exploiting the seabed would be potentially severe and irreversible, impacting on the marine environment, its biodiversity and its ecosystem. Given the lack of science available at the moment, we simply cannot take the risk, and it is right that we have a moratorium in the short run—not a permanent ban, although that may well be where we should head. I say that because little was decided at the International Seabed Authority conference in July, except to defer decisions about potential exploitation until next year. That means that our Government now have time to join France, Sweden, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and a host of other countries in making sure that the science is there before we even contemplate this destruction, which we will not be able to reverse if we allow it.

That brings me to something else I want to raise in this pre-conference debate: the lack of global progress on climate change. The recent United Nations report indicated how far behind the world is on progress towards doing what we need to do to stop the catastrophic temperature rises we are already experiencing. As we know, we have to do more in this country—I do not want to make this into a bipartisan political debate, and although the UK may not have done enough, it has made considerable efforts on climate change—but we must also be part of the global coalition that recognises that this issue cannot be solved in just one country. I heard an Environment Minister boasting this morning that we are in the lead, but it is not good enough to be in the lead; we need to be in the pack, making sure that the whole world is safe, and that means transferring the technologies and resources to the developing world, which simply is not being done today.

The third little hobby horse I would be grateful to get off my chest is HS2. I was not able to be here yesterday for the urgent question on HS2, but let me just say that HS2 has long been promised to the north of England and the city of Manchester. It would liberate enormous economic potential in Manchester, but as importantly—perhaps more importantly—we know that the capacity of the west coast main line is very near full now. It will not be long before we simply cannot ship our manufacturing goods from the north of England to the south and on through into Europe. This is not some slight argument about the pride of the north, although I am a proud northerner. It is not even about whether we can shave a few minutes off the journey time between Manchester

and London; it is about whether our manufacturers are in a position to take advantage of the railway system and whether environmentally we are shifting those heavy goods vehicles off our motorways and roads and making sure that our rail system has the capacity to carry those things. That is no small issue, and it should not be resolved by a Prime Minister and Chancellor huddled together and a Government who were not prepared to come before the Chamber yesterday to give any definitive answer.

As you will know as a northern MP, Madam Deputy Speaker, it would be seen as a colossal betrayal of the north if we were to see HS2 abandoned. By the way, that sentiment was expressed by Government Back Benchers as well as by Opposition Members. Whether the line is up to Scotland or to different parts of the north, there is the feeling that if the Government abandoned the north in this way, it would say nothing at all for the future of the levelling-up agenda.

I will finish on a slightly happier issue. I was not able to be here when tributes were being paid to the outgoing Clerk of the House, John Benger. I join those tributes, because I think John Benger has been not only an excellent Clerk of the House, but an excellent servant of the House over the many years that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I have known him. I am delighted that he occupied that place. He has done this House credit, and he will do great credit in his new role, and I look forward to him, as a good supporter of Manchester United, now being able to play a significant role in the fortunes of our club, which are perhaps not as good as the fortunes of the House of Commons.

3.57 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I will raise three matters in my brief remarks this afternoon: public transport, specifically in relation to schools; antisocial behaviour; and the rebuilding of Ukraine post-victory.

In order to ensure that pupils and students do well in school, clearly and obviously we must first ensure that they can get to school safely and on time. I have been contacted over the summer by many concerned parents about some local bus services being cut, which makes it difficult to get their children to school on time or, in some cases, at all. The West of England Combined Authority has received £105 million for a bus service improvement plan, but it has decided that the 459 and the 460 bus service will be served by the same vehicle. That leads to some children who attend Winterbourne Academy in particular arriving either absurdly early or very late. While some services have been cut back, other crucial bus services have been axed entirely, such as the 458 from Fishponds via Downend and the 936 from Patchway, Bradley Stoke and Little Stoke.

My constituents and I would like to know where the £105 million to enable bus services to improve has gone. Unfortunately, while essential bus services for children were being cut, the vanity scheme of the West of England mayor was being rolled out: the birthday bus pass scheme, which provides taxpayer-subsidised bus travel for passengers travelling throughout the month of their birthday. It is clear to me that the Mayor of the West of England and South Gloucestershire Council are not sufficiently prioritising supporting children's bus services. I implore the West of England Mayor to stop wasting

taxpayers' money and to answer my call to work with South Gloucestershire Council to deliver enough transport provision so that our children can get to school and back. The bus services that take our children to school are an important factor in reinforcing the fabric of our community, reducing pollution and reducing commuting traffic, in addition to maintaining parents' peace of mind. I have been working closely with my excellent colleague Councillor Liz Brennan on this issue and look forward to meeting the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), to discuss local bus provision.

In recent months we have seen an increase in antisocial behaviour in Patchway and Stoke Gifford in my constituency. We have seen the vandalising of children's playgrounds and the reckless driving of cars and e-scooters, which has led to several accidents—some of them were serious—not to mention the burning down of a playground in Stoke Gifford park by arsonists. What is more, locals in Patchway have fallen victim to being terrorised by thugs in balaclavas, smashing car windows and causing great distress to residents. I have met the police and crime commissioner, Mark Shelford, to discuss the rise in antisocial behaviour and what Avon and Somerset police will do about it. In addition, my colleague Councillor Gupta has raised the issue locally. I echo his concerns to the Government. While some may choose to dismiss that as low-level crime, it must be dealt with swiftly and robustly so as not to create the space or environment in which the same criminals could commit even worse offences.

I recently went on my third visit to Ukraine so far this year. I attended the Yalta European Strategy conference, at which we discussed the power of Ukraine's ideals, how helping Ukraine in its hour of need is best for global economic and political stability and security, and how we may bring this illegal and terrible war to an end. Crucially, I would like to offer the House some ideas and solutions on how Ukraine may rebuild after Russian forces are expelled from Ukrainian sovereign territory.

The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy has proposed a system of multilateral asset transfer as a way of providing reparations to Ukraine and international partners who have helped in the struggle. That would involve the United Kingdom and our allies identifying and transferring all Russian state assets within our jurisdictions to a central bank account, or to be held in trust. With Russian assets securely held in trust, allocation procedures would be introduced in line with transparent multilateral agreements. Another useful proposal is for a tax incentive for companies investing in the UK and Ukraine, meaning that more jobs and investment would come to the UK. That would help with some degree of infrastructure rebuilding in Ukraine. Some of that could well be funded by the private sector. A third proposal is for Ukraine to receive some funding from the overseas development budgets of allied nations.

We must endeavour to build powerful bilateral relations between our two countries, including our institutions of trade and cultural exchange, defence manufacturing and logistics firms, and the industry of other sectors. A strong bilateral relationship based on defence, security and trade with a long-term vision can help to keep Ukraine safe, sovereign and secure.

4.2 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I associate myself with your words about Margaret McDonagh and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh)—I let my hon. Friend know that we are all here for her at any time of the day, whenever she needs us. It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) back in his place.

Like the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), I want to channel Sir David Amess. He would always start his speeches by going around his constituency, and I hope to do that too. I welcome the Treasurer of His Majesty's Household, the right hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), to his place—we are graced with his presence—and the new deputy shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith). I think they will find that this is one of the nicest debates they will have ever responded to.

I start with Bescot Stadium station, which has a footbridge linking one platform with the other. However, those with disabilities cannot access the platforms, so Walsall's disabled supporters have to take the train into the town centre and come back just to get to the football ground. I met with the Minister of State at the Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who was helpful. He made the point that there had never been an application for Access for All funding. I find that disconcerting, because these people are the most vulnerable in society and need access to the station. I hope to have a meeting with Network Rail, but could the Whip kindly find out whether there is any obligation under equalities legislation that would enable us to appropriate those funds immediately, rather than having to wait for the next round of Access for All funding? We would like to do it sooner rather than later. Even parents with prams find it difficult to access the station.

Walsall station will keep its ticket office, but sadly Bescot will lose its one. In the Westminster Hall debate, the Minister admitted:

“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.”—[*Official Report*, 13 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 346WH.]

The logic is not quite there. I am not clear why expert ticketing staff are moving away from their jobs. Could the Government please look again?

The second issue I want to raise is not about reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete but about the condition of my schools in Walsall South. Joseph Leckie Academy was allocated £17 million under Building Schools for the Future, but that was cancelled. The then Secretary of State mentioned that he made a mistake by cancelling Building Schools for the Future. That school has had to bid every time for funds. Given the issues going on with RAAC, the asbestos in the school and the condition improvement fund, I wonder whether the Whip could ask the Education Secretary to ensure that schools are given the funds allocated immediately so that they can deal with the problems. Blue Coat Academy had to apply to the condition improvement fund just to fix the roof. It seems sensible that, rather than having to bid every year and waste money on surveyors' fees and

other costs, they just have the funds already allocated to them. They are bidding against each other, which is an appalling situation for schools to be in.

My third issue is about buses, like the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti)—I forgot to say that it was a pleasure to follow him. We, too, have a vanity project—called the Sprint bus phase 2—of the west midlands Mayor. I do not know what it is about Mayors, and why they need to have vanity projects. The Sprint bus has been withdrawn from major cities because it is not safe, but the Mayor seems to want to proceed. In fact, local authority tried to cut down trees, but the community fought back and that was stopped.

Now the West Midlands Combined Authority and the west midlands transport authority want to widen the bus lane. My constituent Zena Owen has worked out that it will shave off just one minute from the travel time. We have the excellent X51 and 51 bus routes, which go from Walsall to Birmingham in 20 minutes. My constituents are really happy with that. I cannot see the logic of phase 2. It will waste money, it will not cut time and passengers are happy with the current service. In fact, we were not even sure whether the X51 and the 51 services would continue. Could the Whip please raise this issue with the Mayor, to tell him that we would like that vanity project to be stopped?

My fourth point is about Government policy on foreign national offenders. A foreign national offender was convicted of attempted murder of one of my constituents. I have raised this issue many times with Ministers, and I have been told that he cannot be deported because he is engaging his article 3 right to prevent torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. The foreign national offender can engage his article 3 rights, but my constituent cannot engage her article 2 right to life. The balance has been skewed in favour of the foreign national offender. I want to know exactly what Government policy is. Is it for the offender or for the victim? I understand that this foreign national offender will not be deported to the first country because there is an issue, but the Minister does have the discretion to look for another country that he could go to. My constituent lives in fear. Yes, she has been told roughly where he is, but he could be anywhere. She was a public servant trying to help him when she was stabbed in the neck. She nearly died. I do not think it is appropriate that she should continue to live under that fear.

Sadly, I am coming on to another very difficult issue. I met my constituent, 10-year-old Sami, who was savaged by a pit bull terrier. He went out with his football to play in his front garden and the pit bull terrier, which lives two doors down, came out and stuck its teeth into his arm and would not let go. Sami is lucky to be alive. If it had been his baby brother, who is smaller than the dog, I do not think he would have survived. Sami's mother and a friend came out, but they could not get the dog off him. Sami had to wait 16 hours in Walsall Manor Hospital to get any treatment. His mother says he cannot sleep at night—it is really difficult. Sami is extremely, extremely brave. I want to add my voice and ask the Minister to raise with the Home Secretary considering banning dogs that are bred to attack and dogs that have attacked humans, whether children or adults. It is not sufficient just to muzzle the dogs, because attacks can take place in the home. These dogs are incredibly frightening, so that is my ask. Sami is

making a recovery. He goes to Reedswood Academy. I know he would be very pleased if the whole House joined me in wishing him a speedy recovery.

Finally, I want to mention two public servants. Glen Barnham, a colleague of mine, has sadly died. He was a councillor and we served on Ealing Council together. He was a remarkable politician. He was first elected in 1971 and retired in 1990. He was chair of social services when I was vice-chair and the budget was always protected. Glen had an amazing way with his constituents. When I went round to anybody's house in his Heathfield ward in Acton, there was always a picture of Glen, as though he was some sort of film star. That was apt, because he was a full-time organiser for Equity and played his part in ensuring that people had decent terms and conditions when they worked at the BBC. In fact, he suggested that I become a member of Equity—not for my acting skills, but when I had a stint on “Network East”.

Glen was a director at the Brit School, and a director of Equity's charitable trust, and was involved with lots of other charities, such as the Marr-Munning Trust, which supports overseas development in India. He was a great negotiator who was called on by charities and the Labour party to resolve disputes. He loved jazz and was a member of the all-party parliamentary group on jazz. He stood for Parliament in Ealing and Acton twice, so he could have been one of us. He was passionate about the arts, and was an adviser and volunteer at the Questors Theatre in Ealing. Everyone who met Glen—the many people who served on Ealing Council and are now MPs—always remember him with a smile. May he rest in peace.

I was unable to be here when we paid tributes to the Clerk of the House. He first arrived in the House in 1986, when I was first elected to Ealing Council. In his understated way, Sir John took over at a very challenging time. That is a mark of leadership. During the covid pandemic, he literally had our lives in his hands. He had to balance decisions on whether we had to come back or stay away. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, because we all served on the Commission together, that he allowed Parliament to function. It is a mark of his leadership that when he encourages people to do things they make changes, just as we did with the way we vote.

Sir John also put together the “MPs' Guide to Procedure” because he wanted to ensure that everything was clear. Joanna Dodd did amazing work in putting it together, but it was Sir John's idea and I am sure everyone would agree that it is excellent. When I was shadow Leader of the House, he was always there to answer questions and support me in the interests of Parliament. He quietly ensured that equality and diversity took an appropriate place and he mentored quite a few people who have taken up leadership positions. I bumped into John late one evening, after he had done a full day's work in the House, and asked him, “Are you going home now?” He said, “No, I am going to give a lecture. I am going to talk to students”—I think it was at City University—“about how Parliament works.”

I am sure that the Catz community—Catz is a nickname for St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and, for the benefit of the Official Reporters, it is spelt C-A-T-Z—will be regaled, at their sherry parties and dinner parties, with all sorts of stories from the House, and I just say to Sir John, “Please make sure they are all anonymised.” Sir John, we wish you all the best in your new career: it is an extremely exciting step.

Let me finally thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all the House staff. I have seen the carpets that are ready to be put in place in the old shadow Cabinet Room. Staff are not going to be away having a nice time; they will still be working here. They make our life very easy with all the work that they do, so I say, “Thank you all very much.”

4.15 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I want to focus on three local concerns. First, there is some good news. I warmly welcome yesterday's announcement of £5 million for a new community diagnostic centre at Congleton War Memorial Hospital. The security of the hospital's future has always been a priority for me, as the local Member of Parliament, not least because I know how much it means to my constituents.

Congleton War Memorial Hospital was funded by local subscription. Many people agreed to deductions from their pay packets to help with the building of the hospital, but its future has not always looked secure, which is why not only I but my predecessor MPs have consistently campaigned to keep it open and, indeed, secure its future. I am delighted that that consistent campaigning has been successful. It was in May this year that—on the most recent occasion—I asked the Health Secretary in the House for the expansion and modernisation of facilities. I am delighted that £5 million of national funding has been provided to ensure that healthcare provision in Congleton will remain, and that work is planned to start soon and be finished very quickly, by autumn next year.

There is to be a new “one-stop shop” offering NHS diagnostic tests, scans and checks close to home. East Cheshire NHS Trust has been awarded the £5 million by NHS England to re-engineer and expand the existing facility owned by the trust on the Congleton War Memorial Hospital site. The new centre will provide multiple additional diagnostic screening rooms in addition to improved patient waiting facilities and other amenities. The services delivered will focus on imaging, X-ray and non-obstetric ultrasound, and cardio-respiratory physiological testing such as electrocardiography, echocardiograms and other physiological tests. They will also include some tests and studies that can be taken away and performed from patients' homes. Further testing from the site will be developed over time. This really is welcome news for the Congleton residents who feared for many years that their local hospital was in jeopardy, and I pay tribute to all the residents who have campaigned and raised funds to support the hospital.

Let me now turn to a less happy local issue, which rears its head periodically over the years and which first came to my attention even before I was elected, in 2010, as Member of Parliament for Congleton. I refer to the threat of the imposition of car parking charges in the towns of Alsager, Middlewich, Sandbach and Holmes Chapel. The argument being put forward by Cheshire East Council is based on rationalisation, but one size does not fit all. It is true that there are some places in Cheshire East where charges already apply, but larger towns such as Macclesfield, Crewe and even Nantwich are completely different from smaller communities such as Holmes Chapel, which is actually a village, and I strongly support residents' objections to these proposals. We have fought this off before, and we can fight it off

[Fiona Bruce]

again. I therefore urge residents to lodge objections on the consultation section of the Cheshire East website, which opens tomorrow, 20 September, and closes on 1 November.

As Alsager Town Council has said, the negative impact on the economy of imposing these charges would far outweigh the revenue anticipated from them. Small independent shops and cafés would be particularly vulnerable to a reduction in people coming into these centres and, as we know, many small businesses live on the margins. The significant loss of community spirit that could ensue has also been highlighted by Alsager Town Council, so I urge all residents concerned about this issue to contribute to the consultation, to make their voices known and to object.

I shall turn now to a happier local issue and take this opportunity to pay tribute to a number of residents who have been granted the freedom of their towns this month. Just two days ago at the annual civic service in Middlewich, held at St Michael and All Angels church, three residents were granted the freedom of Middlewich. I am not sure whether any of them have any sheep that they can drive down the high street, but I want to pay tribute to all of them, whom I know well. They are Janet Chisholm BEM, who founded the Middlewich Clean Team; Ken Kingston, who has done so much work with the British Legion; and David Cooke, who has helped to run the Boys Brigade in Middlewich for many years. I know at first hand the substantial contribution that all three have made to local community life, and by granting them the freedom of Middlewich, the mayor of Middlewich, Councillor Colin Coules, has recognised their contributions in a way that they all very much deserve.

I would also like to pay tribute to Ronald Tyson, who is better known to all of us locally as Ron Tyson. Earlier this month, at St Mary's Alsager, he was granted the freedom of the town of Alsager for services to the community. He served for 28 years on Alsager Town Council and the Alsager Institute collectively. He served as chairman of the town council three times, and this award to Ron is very well deserved. My heartfelt congratulations go to them all. It is interesting that last Sunday at the Holmes Chapel community service, which was organised by the parish council and held at St Luke's parish church, Councillor Chris Jackson said that it was a measure of the healthy community life in Holmes Chapel that invitations to the civic service had been extended to over 100 local community groups.

It is a privilege for me to serve the constituency of Congleton, with its strong community life, and it was a particular pleasure today for me to welcome one of those community groups, Holmes Chapel Youth Council, who have been in the Gallery to listen to some of this debate. Some 14 of those young people came to Parliament today and asked me some very taxing questions. I concur with Councillor Chris Jackson that it really is a measure of our healthy community life that we have such a strong youth council in Holmes Chapel. My thanks go to all my constituents who contribute so greatly to the quality of life in my constituency.

I just want to put on record that I am very sad that the town of Middlewich has been removed from my constituency by the Boundary Commission, because it

is a wonderful local community with many strongly committed residents, such as those I have spoken of today. I will very much miss representing Middlewich if I am re-elected at the next general election.

4.24 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to begin by saying how much I admired the way in which you so sensitively and generously responded to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) when she spoke about her campaign on glioblastoma in memory of her sister. You really did speak for the whole House, and it was greatly appreciated.

The pleasure of participating in such a debate is in the range of topics covered, and I agree with many of the subjects that have been chosen. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) spoke very well about the badger cull and the importance of science, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) spoke very well about the importance of science in deep-sea mining.

Sometimes we need to fact-check our speeches, and I took the opportunity to fact-check the complaint made by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about the Mayor of London giving himself an exemption on his car. I am reliably informed by the Mayor's office that this is not the case, and that the Mayor's own car does not have an exemption. As we think of Sir David, who was such a part of this particular debate, we need to temper our criticisms so that people who are as high in public life as the Mayor are not unduly targeted.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for correcting the record. It is so important that Parliament, above all, has correct information. We cannot let misinformation flourish, given how social media goes round and round very quickly, which can be detrimental to the public discourse.

Barry Gardiner: I challenge the House to fill in the missing word. As safe as—[HON. MEMBERS: "Houses."] Members have said it but, for too many people, that saying has become a rather sick joke. Today I want to share the story of my constituents for whom their house, their home, has been anything but safe.

Damask Court, a block of flats in my Brent North constituency, was completed in 2014. I was first approached by residents in March 2019, and they reported that their building was "swaying." The floors were moving and, in high winds, the whole building shook. I was told that the roof was leaking so badly that water poured through the electrical sockets and the windows had dropped by 8 cm in two months.

As the House could imagine, I immediately visited the property and took photographs of water streaming through the light fittings and dripping on to a child's bed. The same day, I wrote to the chief executive and the chair of the board of Apna Ghar Housing Association, which owned the block. I also wrote to Steve Wood, the chief executive of the National House Building Council, which had provided the warranty for the development.

Six weeks later, on 1 May 2019, NHBC replied stating that these structural issues had been reported by tenants to the builder, Parritt Bellamy, within its two-year

liability period, but that Parritt Bellamy had gone into administration and the original development company, Asra Housing, had simply sold up and walked away. The NHBC visited the property to assess the structural issues under part B of its Buildmark warranty, and this is where the problems should have stopped. They did not. They were only just beginning.

At the end of November, I discovered that: essential supports for the core of the building were missing; the floors were overstressed, causing the swaying movement when residents walked across them; the roof had been incorrectly fitted, causing the leaks; the floors throughout the flats were bowed; and the balcony floors were defective.

Apna Ghar, the new owner of the development, advised residents in December that it had submitted a claim to the NHBC. It also advised that its chief executive was leaving the housing association “with immediate effect.” As the problems unfolded, this became a repeated pattern. Everyone simply walks away, except for the tenants, of course. They are trapped—trapped in an unsafe building.

In 2019, I asked the NHBC to clarify when the investigation work would be completed. I requested a copy of the full report when it became available and asked for a date when the remediation would commence. I did not receive a copy of the report, but at the end of July 2019 the NHBC said the investigations were complete and that it had offered Apna Ghar two options to settle the claim. At that point, Apna Ghar went incommunicado, so in October I arranged to meet two representatives from the NHBC. They were apologetic, they fully understood the serious concerns raised by residents and they were anxious to do everything possible to resolve the matter. They promised to revert to me and provide a full update. I felt reassured, but I was mistaken, as I never did receive their full report.

During the general election period in December 2019, another tenant contacted me, and she was extremely distressed. Her letter said that

“the building is constantly shaking, my home floods whenever it rains and I am unable to sleep for fear of the building falling down. I and my three children go to bed fully clothed, with our shoes on, in case we need to leave the building quickly.”

I was so concerned that I immediately visited her home, and it was truly shocking. I demanded a meeting with the new chief executive of Apna Ghar and showed him the photographic and video evidence of what I had witnessed—and then the country went into complete lockdown. I continued to write to Apna Ghar throughout 2020 and 2021, but I received no responses. The reason I was eventually given is that after our meeting the chief executive had resigned and not been replaced—another person had simply walked away.

I learned from another resident that Apna Ghar had written to them claiming that it was in regular contact with NHBC and that there were no reported structural issues within the building. That was a lie. I again demanded that Apna Ghar should provide me with a copy of the independent report, but, again, there was a total failure to respond. It would not even provide copies of the first and second stage complaints, which would have allowed me to refer the matter to the ombudsman. In March of last year, another resident in the block advised that because of the leaks and the water damage, which had not been repaired for seven months, her three children were all sleeping in one room. All these families have

been failed at the highest level. There has been a total disregard from Apna Ghar of its legal obligations under section 11 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 and under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and of the duties set out in section 4 of the Defective Premises Act 1972.

In January of this year, when one of my constituents lodged a formal complaint, she received a response from solicitors employed by Apna Ghar, who acknowledged that she had indeed reported that her bathroom floor was damaged in December 2021 and admitted that this had not been fixed by September 2022. However, they claimed that because the member of staff who received the original message no longer worked there, they could not help. The same legal team has claimed that it is not Apna Ghar’s fault, because their client acquired the block from another registered provider of social housing. What my constituents want to know is: when Apna Ghar acquired Damask Court, was it aware of the structural problems that had already been reported to the builder and the developer? What due diligence was undertaken before taking ownership of the block? Did it purchase Damask Court at a discounted price because of the problems?

The same solicitors have now also advised me that there are

“ongoing discussions with the National House Building Council (NHBC) regarding the defects affecting the block.”

That is strange, given that I had already been told back in 2019 that the NHBC had made an offer to the housing association to pay for the remediation of the whole building. Four years on, the solicitors are apparently instructed that the NHBC claim will “need to be resolved”, that remedying the defects is going to require

“a significant programme of works”,

but that all complaints to date have been

“handled within a reasonable period of time.”

That is nonsense. The fact is that nobody, not the quantity surveyor, the project manager, the building control officer, the builder or the developer, and not the NHBC, should ever have signed off that building as fit to live in—it never was. Parritt Bellamy, the builder, walked away; Asra Housing Group, the developer, walked away; two chief executives of Apna Ghar walked away; and yesterday I received from a resident a copy of a notice from the acting chief executive of Apna Ghar Housing Association, advising the residents of Damask Court that

“your new landlord will be Tamil Housing Association”.

Yes—finally it seems that Apna Ghar is walking away too.

The Building Safety Act 2022 provides no relief to my constituents in Damask Court. The Government know there are thousands of families going to sleep tonight in unsafe apartment buildings—going to sleep like that little family who confessed to me that they went to bed fully clothed and with their shoes on, just in case they had to get out quickly in the night. I have just one question for the Minister: when will the Government act to end this misery?

4.35 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), and it is always a pleasure to contribute to debates that raise matters before an Adjournment,

[Aaron Bell]

because they are so eclectic and we can learn so much about the constituencies of other Members. Like other Members, I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her very moving speech. All our condolences are with her, as she knows.

I want to take the opportunity to talk about my constituency and the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, as this year marks the 850th anniversary of our charter, which is a significant moment. I am not the only MP for the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme. The famous Kidsgrove and Talke, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) appends to the name of his constituency, are also in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) also have small parts of either end of the borough in their constituencies. However, I have the honour of representing the vast bulk of the borough, including the town of Newcastle-under-Lyme, and on this 850th anniversary I want to put on record a little of our history and to thank some of the people who are enhancing that history even now.

The leader of the council, Councillor Simon Tagg, our mayor, Councillor Simon White, and all the council officers have put in a huge amount of work to commemorate this historic year. We have had an action-packed calendar of cultural and heritage activities throughout the year, including a celebration of some of our famous and influential residents, past and present. We have had civic events, exhibitions, film showings, talks, a medieval day in the town centre, educational content and a range of family-friendly activities.

I put on record my thanks to Jim Worgan, who is the most passionate and prolific of local historians. He has done most of the heavy lifting in putting together the history of Newcastle-under-Lyme. Back in 2021, it was appropriate that he was awarded the freedom of the borough—I was there at the ceremony. He is a local community stalwart, who worked in the mining industry for 32 years, which I will come on to discuss, and he has been a key member of various organisations, including the Philip Astley Project, the Newcastle-under-Lyme Civic Society and the Friends of Brampton Museum. I pay tribute to Jim Worgan for all he done to keep the historical memories of Newcastle-under-Lyme alive.

Our story, over the past 850 years, has been one of reinvention. Many towns are having to reinvent themselves yet again, as I will discuss. We have been a market town, a major coaching stop on the London to Liverpool road, a place for making hats and clay tobacco pipes, the engine of the potteries next door in Stoke-on-Trent, and the home of brickmakers, iron casters, engineers and, perhaps most famously, miners since the 19th century, although there has been coal for a lot longer than that.

In 1173, King Henry II granted Newcastle-under-Lyme its royal charter, and it is that charter that we are celebrating this year. The charter released the up-and-coming town from the control of the prior of Trentham and turned Newcastle into a borough—the ancient and royal borough, as we now know it. With the charter came new rights and responsibilities. In exchange for an annual fee to the King, a privileged few were allowed to

set up their own shops and market stalls on burgage plots, initially by Upper Green and later on the higher ground of the High Street. They were also provided with common fields on which to grow crops.

Those early inhabitants of the town were called burgesses. They enforced local laws and collected taxes on behalf of the King. I am pleased to say that only this year, as part of the 850th anniversary of the charter, and with a little bit of pressure from myself, if I may be so modest, we managed to get women to be allowed to be admitted to the burgesses. That was not before time—850 years on—but that change required the burgesses themselves to vote for it and they had been reluctant to do that in the past. I am glad that we have made that progressive step now, in 2023.

Thirteen subsequent charters, between 1173 and 1970, extended and confirmed the town's rights. The Gild Merchant Charter of 1235 created a closed shop in which only Newcastle people could sell certain goods and services in Newcastle. We on the Conservative Benches are not much in favour of closed shops, but given that it happened in the 13th century I think we can perhaps be forgiven for mentioning it. By the end of that century, Newcastle was a thriving small town, with a castle, a church, a priory, a guildhall and a market, and many of those are still in evidence today.

For much of the next few hundred years, we were the most important town in north Staffordshire, predating Stoke-on-Trent—those upstarts to our east—by some centuries. Our location on the north-south route made us an important stopping place for horse-drawn coaches going from London to Chester and Liverpool. We were also a centre for clockmaking, mining, early porcelain and agriculture.

By the 1800s—I am skipping forward a bit because the House probably does not want to hear about every century in great detail—we were a bustling and prosperous town. [Interruption.] Oh, my hon. Friends do want to hear about every century. I am very happy to share Jim Worgan's entire document with them if they want to know more about Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Newcastle flourished as a market town, serving both local residents and overnight travellers who rested at the many coaching inns and hotels along the high street and the Ironmarket—again so called because of the iron there, and that is where my constituency shop is today. We were also a centre of culture, which continues today. We had many market days and fairs, attracting showmen, carnival performers and all kinds of outdoor entertainment. Indeed, the founder of the modern circus, Philip Astley, who predates Barnum by a century, was born in Newcastle-under-Lyme. This summer, we had an exhibition about the history of circus in Newcastle-under-Lyme and all the show folk who have contributed to that heritage.

As I have said, we are also well known for our hat making industry. During the 19th century, we were producing pottery, which is more associated with Stoke-on-Trent next door. We had canals in the area. The industrial revolution changed the landscape of Newcastle, culturally, economically and physically. With the plentiful reserves of coal and iron in the mines, our burgeoning industries had the fuel they needed to power their mills.

Although mining has taken place in Newcastle since the Roman times, it was the industrialisation of mining that led to the significant growth of the borough. I

referred to that in my maiden speech, so I will not repeat it today. None the less, our coal was among the finest in the kingdom, which is why Stoke-on-Trent and its kilns are where they are. That industrial and mining heritage in north Staffordshire is proudly remembered. The last pit to close was Silverdale in 1998. I always knew that the work that the miners undertook was hard and dangerous, and we did suffer more than most with major disasters at Diglake in 1895, Minnie pit in 1918, and Holditch in 1937. There are frequent memorials, where we remember the names of those people who lost their lives in those tragedies. That is a real part of our cultural and emotional heritage in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Notably, there was an attempt in this House in 1930 to extend Stoke-on-Trent by amalgamating it with Newcastle-under-Lyme and Wolstanton, completely against the wishes of the people of Newcastle. This House passed that measure, but, happily, we were saved by the Lords. A postcard poll taken at the time showed that residents opposed that Bill by a majority of 97.4%, which is a pretty good outcome. I am glad that the Lords saved us from being swallowed up by the people of Stoke-on-Trent, because otherwise we would not be having these 850th anniversary celebrations today.

Traditional industries have declined, and that is a story that many of us in this House share—I know that you know about that in Doncaster, Madam Deputy Speaker—but new industries are taking their place. We have seen a huge growth in the service sector and in high-tech industries in my area. Of particular note is the spectacular success of the science park at Keele, where some of the first covid vaccines were manufactured. In 1999, we started a single innovation centre, which now has multiple buildings, including a management centre. Keele University has become a leader in green energy, housing a smart energy network demonstrator. Wind turbines and a solar farm all contribute to the way in which universities and other public buildings will be able to power themselves in future.

We still have a number of very good engineering firms on our business parks, particularly in metalwork. Sadly, though, the past two decades have seen a significant decline in town centres across the country, and Newcastle is no exception. That has been something bigger than politics. It is about shopping habits; it is about the internet. First, it was about people shopping in supermarkets, but, increasingly, it has become about people shopping on Amazon. The stalwarts of the high street of the past—Woolworths, Debenhams and British Homes Stores—are all gone. This Government are doing something about that through the future high streets fund and the town deals. The borough is due to benefit from more than £50 million of investment from those funds in the coming years. That work is happening right now. We had £35 million to regenerate the town centre; £11 million through the future high streets fund has already been used to demolish the old civic offices, which were riddled with asbestos. That area will be rebuilt soon with residential and commercial premises on the Ryecroft, which has been left empty for too long, and we will bolster the town's shopping and leisure facilities with a new, more modern and more welcoming market.

Some of that investment is already visible. An employment, training and skills hub has opened in Lancaster Buildings, and the subways to get under the

ring road, which unfortunately does circumscribe the town centre a bit, have been given a spruce-up with some fantastic artwork. We will also see some major construction projects, particularly the redevelopment of York Place, coming soon. We are getting a new multi-storey car park, new open plazas and public spaces, and better pedestrian and cycle connections to the residential areas.

The town deal—as the town's MP, I am obviously a member of that board—has been given £23.6 million. That funding will be allocated across nine separate projects, including improved public transport, better digital provision, the renovation of gateway sites into the town centre, new housing and investment into some of the most deprived communities in Knutton and Chesterton. It will also be used to improve both digital and transport connectivity locally. The Government funding will be matched by other investment, in a programme that we hope will ultimately total more than £135 million.

On top of that, we have commissioned a statue of Her late Majesty the Queen to go into Queen's Gardens, which are so named because of the enormous and beautiful statue of Queen Victoria there, just opposite my constituency office and in front of the council offices. We will now have two queens, Victoria and Elizabeth, side by side, and I look forward to the unveiling.

Finally—I am conscious that I have spoken for a while in going over the history—we are still blighted by Walleys Quarry, which I have mentioned many times in this House, including in previous debates before Adjournments. The smell is quite a lot better, though it does still smell on occasion, but we now really need to see accountability. Only last week, there was yet another category 2 breach reported against the operators of Walleys Quarry Ltd, whose parent company is Red Industries. Environment Agency guidance suggests that a prosecution should follow.

I cannot pre-empt the Environment Agency's investigations, but I know everyone in Newcastle wants to see it draw both its regulatory and criminal investigations to a conclusion and achieve proper accountability for what people have been through. As I have told this House many times, the situation has been completely unacceptable and we really need to see some accountability.

Overall, I remain committed to ensuring that the future of our town, which I am so proud to represent, is bright and prosperous. I will continue to work with the council, especially the council leader, Simon Tagg, in any way I can to bring more investment into Newcastle in the years ahead, to enable the improvements that we all want to see.

4.47 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell). I am glad to hear how progressive, historic and industrial his area is and about his work to stop that stink.

It is a huge pleasure to represent the wonderful constituency of Dover and Deal, which has a similar mining heritage to the one my hon. Friend outlined. However, like any community, it is not without some challenges, so before the coming Adjournment I want to touch on the areas of work that I have been undertaking

[Mrs Natalie Elphicke]

to bring service improvements and investment to Deal, Walmer and the villages, an area that makes up around half of my constituency, with some 30,000 people.

First, there is the water and sewerage system. Part of Deal has an old-style Bazalgette system to deal with its water and sewage, which has contributed to decades-long flooding, particularly around the Albert Road area of Deal. I jointly lead the Deal Water Action Taskforce, having put that taskforce together with Southern Water to try to come up with some technical, sensible, practical solutions to the problem. We are working to put the situation right, with more than £500,000-worth of flood reduction investment already made in the town and further engineering and nature-based investment in our local water and sewerage system to come.

Not only will that investment help with the decades-long flooding in Albert Road, but it will make our community an early adopter of the Conservative commitment to end sea sewage discharges. There is a parliamentary showcase upcoming, and I hope some hon. Members might be interested in coming to learn more about the cutting-edge work that we have been doing in that vital area. Perhaps one of the Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs might attend too.

Secondly, I come on to law and order. While ours is generally an area without the level of crime and disorder seen elsewhere, which were described earlier in this debate, there have been specific issues of antisocial behaviour, with dangerous motorbiking in Nonington and car racing around Betteshanger, while Deal has seen some frankly unpleasant youth activity in Victoria Park and the cemetery. Fly-tipping has been on the increase, too.

Following my representations to our Conservative Police and Crime Commissioner Matthew Scott, I am pleased to confirm that he is implementing a new community policing response, supported by the extra funding and resources provided by the Conservative Government. The response will see a “front-counter” police presence in Deal, open to local residents. I am pressing Matthew Scott for the recruitment and opening of that initiative to be accelerated. It will be a significant new one-stop shop for local people in the town. There will also be a new dedicated antisocial behaviour taskforce and a boost to very important rural village policing. Many villagers often feel overlooked by local policing, and the police and crime commissioner is working hard to address that. The new measures will mean that Deal, Walmer and our local villages will benefit from specific police support to tackle important local policing and community issues.

Better healthcare is a key issue that I am working on for Dover and Deal as a whole. Later today, I will present a community petition about the closure of phlebotomy services at Deal hospital and the move to a GP-only blood testing service, which has not worked and is letting our community down. Over the last two years we have had a hard-fought community campaign to reinstate these vital services, with petitions, candlelight vigils and a community consultation that attracted the interest of more than 14,000 residents across Deal, Walmer, Sholden, Kingsdown, Ripple and Great Mongeham.

The consultation, which I led, working with the Deal blood action taskforce group, found that residents were having to travel four or more hours for a blood test, and at great cost. Some residents paid more than £30 to travel to get a local blood test. I say “local blood test” because the commissioning condition from local health chiefs was that, after the move from Deal hospital to GPs, every resident would have access to local blood tests, but that is not happening. Specific groups of people have been particularly affected by the decision to close phlebotomy services at Deal hospital, including residents with diabetes, cancer and long-term health conditions; older residents with mobility or financial challenges; and children, for whom no provision was made following the closure, and who are missing school—and their parents missing work—to get their blood tests done outside the area.

Blood tests are not just a nice to have; they are a fundamental and basic part of our health system. Not having timely access to local blood services can prevent early diagnosis and intervention, and result in patients remaining on the wrong medicine, harming their health outcomes. Such blood services are important, so I am pleased to report that the Kent and Medway integrated care board has now agreed that the needs of the priority groups identified by the deal blood action team must be addressed. The ICB says that it will procure blood services again shortly, with a view to restarting them in 2024. I welcome the long overdue and slow recognition of the immense harm that that decision of nearly two years ago has caused local residents. Given the seriousness of the issues, it is obviously most sensible to reinstate the services at Deal hospital without delay. That is what my petition will set out.

From policing, flooding and potholes to restoring high-speed rail and protecting the important marine habitat of the Goodwin Sands, it is a great pleasure to represent Deal, Walmer and our local villages. I am pleased to have updated the House on the work to secure improvements for and investment in our lovely corner of east Kent.

4.54 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to speak in this Adjournment debate.

This Government were in part elected on a promise to level up to ensure that my constituents in Blackpool receive exactly the same life chances as people in every single part of our United Kingdom. My local authority is statistically the most in need of levelling up; indeed, I probably represent the most deprived constituency in England, and I am delighted to say that, thanks to the unprecedented commitment and support from this Government, our levelling-up progress is going from strength to strength.

An additional revenue and capital investment of £300 million has flown into Blackpool South as a consequence of the faith and confidence from this Government in the work going on locally. It is easy to speak about levelling up and sometimes political figures from different parties will want to see evidence of what is actually happening—spades in the ground—to address some of the systemic challenges in Blackpool and many other left-behind towns. Levelling up is not a four-year or five-year project; it is an intergenerational challenge

that will take commitment from both main political parties over decades and decades if indeed it is to bear any substantial fruit. Thankfully, the investment we have received is leading to spades in the ground in Blackpool and we are now reaping the reward of the confidence the Government have shown in us.

I could be here until midnight discussing all the different funding pots this Government have provided to Blackpool South, but I will take just a few moments to give the House a flavour of some of the positive initiatives taking place in my constituency: the largest towns deal in the country, with £39.5 million coming into Blackpool to deliver a plethora of projects; a new sports village at Revoe in conjunction with Blackpool football club; an upgrade to the world-famous Illuminations; helping to create thousands of jobs at the Blackpool enterprise zone; and a new start-up hub in the town centre.

Moving on, there is £40 million for a brand-new multiversity skills complex from the levelling-up fund, which will not only change immeasurably very deprived parts of Blackpool but will lead to a breaking down of some of the educational challenges and put a stop to the brain drain when our youngsters leave key stage 5. There is £8 million from the levelling-up budget to convert a derelict hotel in the town centre, and £8.6 million from the future high streets fund to fund developments to the Houndshell shopping centre and the Abingdon Street market, both of which are well under way. There is an additional £40 million to relocate the court complex, allowing the largest single private-sector development project in Lancashire to go ahead over the next few years. There is also £300 million-worth of capital investment coming into Blackpool to create millions of pounds of additional consumer spend every single year and thousands of extra jobs. That is all thanks to this Government's commitment to levelling up Blackpool.

But we will not stop there, because the list is endless: £10 million extra in education funding because we are an opportunity area, helping to close the gaps that have emerged as a consequence of the covid pandemic; a £25 million new upgrade to our A&E, meaning the front door of A&E has been completely rejuvenated, leading to shorter waiting times in A&E, and helping patients move throughout their journey in the hospital; £67.8 million in writing off the historical debt to Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, meaning more money can now be freed up for the frontline to spend on patients, rather than in debt receipts; £20 million for new electric buses; £9.5 million from the bus and light rail fund; £4.8 million for Project ADDER, to help remove off the streets of Blackpool some of the drug gangs that cause misery to my constituents; and in only the last few weeks we received a multimillion-pound funding settlement to help youth offending initiatives in Blackpool, led by the exemplary Dave Blacker and the Blackpool boys and girls club—a brilliant initiative that will change the lives of people in one of the country's most deprived wards.

In addition to that—I have nearly finished—we have £118 million in flood defence work going on in Blackpool, which will secure the front of the world-famous Blackpool seafront; over £5 million helping to address rough sleeping and homelessness; and £4.8 million from the culture recovery fund being spent by a variety of projects, including the fantastic Blackpool theatre group. All in all, there is £300 million of investment coming into Blackpool.

It is easy to reel off a list of the different investments coming into a particular area, but I can honestly say, having seen at first hand the changes this money is making, that it is turning people's lives around. It is helping to address the educational challenges and give people who have been out of the jobs market for years a new foothold and a commitment to our society, to find a job and to contribute. It is addressing some of the systemic health inequalities that have plagued Blackpool for decades, which mean that in parts of my constituency life expectancy is 20 years lower than in the most affluent parts of our country—something that successive Governments, red and blue, have tolerated for years but that, thanks to the commitment from this Government, we are finally serious about addressing.

Those are some of the brilliant initiatives going on in Blackpool, but as ever, Blackpool being Blackpool, we always want more. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench are listening to my final few requests for funding in Blackpool during this Parliament and the differences it will make to our local economy and the lives of my constituents.

The first of those is housing-led regeneration in the Bond Street, Waterloo Road and Revoe areas of my constituency, which are among the 1% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. My right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) has been fantastic in his commitment to Blackpool and, indeed, levelling up more generally over the past few years. The £30 million package that he is working on in conjunction with Blackpool Council will help to change those areas forever, giving them a new lease of life and addressing some of the systemic challenges that residents in those communities have faced for years. I hope that work will continue and that we will get a commitment from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to that funding, which is badly required.

My second request is for a commitment to Blackpool airport. Owned and run by the Labour-run council, it used to operate successful commercial passenger flights throughout Europe, but that is no longer the case, due to a lack of interest from the council. The Government have brought in several changes that have revolutionised the landscape of domestic aviation and regional airports—not least the cut to air passenger duty—but further work is required around public service obligations to ensure that we can maximise the economic potential and job-creating growth of places such as Blackpool airport.

My final request is on more of a national issue, but it is worthy of a mention, considering that not a day goes by when I do not receive several emails from constituents about the lack of NHS dentistry. I have unfortunately spoken to some constituents who have told me harrowing stories about having to take pliers to their children's teeth because they cannot afford a private dentist, and there are no longer any NHS dental practices in Blackpool that are open to new patients. It is quite a shocking story, considering we are in the 21st century. The Government's recent changes to the NHS dental contract are welcome, but there is far more work to do to address the issue of NHS dentistry, particularly in so-called dental deserts, such as Blackpool, where few dental practitioners want to work.

[Scott Benton]

The House has indulged me for far too long. Madam Deputy Speaker, may I take this opportunity to wish you and Members an enjoyable recess?

5.3 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I am the very proud MP for Bury North, but I was born and brought up in Huddersfield. Before I got into politics, two things struck me as the first political questions. They might not seem to be political questions, but when we think about it, they are.

One is Bradley Mills cricket club, which was founded in 1875 in an industrial, disadvantaged part of Huddersfield. It went through two world wars, the great depression, the Boer war and everything the world could throw at it over 100 years. The local community saw it as a focal point and an identity; it was who they were, what they were and what they were about. It was a place where families went and people met, and it was central to that community. In the late 1990s, the local community gave up on it, and a huge green area—a field that had been used by children, families and people playing competitive sport—was lost forever. I could never understand why the community kept that club and what it represented to them going for that whole period of time, but in the 1990s something happened and it fell apart.

Like many of us, I spent my youth following my dad around. He played amateur football, and the best team in Huddersfield were called Brackenhall. They played football on Leeds Road playing fields, not very far away from Bradley Mills cricket club. That team were based in an area of disadvantage, but they were a team full of local people, a proud symbol of what Brackenhall was about. That meant something to people—looking back at the old photos, we cannot quantify that now, but it meant something. In the 2000s, that was lost. Why does this matter? It goes back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) was talking about: unless we have civic pride—unless we have some feeling for the area we are from—our areas are going to fail. We are not simply individuals, linked only by how close we live to each other or who we come into contact with. We have to have shared, collective experiences, and there must be symbols of those shared collective experiences that link us and bind us.

I could read out a very long list of what has come into Bury during my time as a Member of Parliament, but I just want to make the point that through the efforts of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Bury football club was resurrected at Gigg Lane. That is the 12th oldest sporting stadium in the world, but it had been left abandoned by bad management, bad regulation and the league, and was at real risk of being sold to developers. By providing £1 million, this Government saved that stadium, and it is now a facility that is run by the fans for the people of Bury and the local community. I will use those three examples to touch on what we should be talking about in this place.

We in this place are incredibly bad at talking in any terms other than monetary ones. We talk in monetary terms about everything, all the time. Clearly, that is incredibly important, but we do not often hear speeches like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, celebrating and lionising their community

and saying, “There is something else within this community that you can be proud of.” How do politicians take advantage of that? Some 5,500 people attended the first match at Bury—5,500 people in one place. There is no other facility in the metropolitan borough of Bury where 5,000 people can come together in one place. As politicians, we can say, “That’s just the way it is. That’s football; it’s a nice pastime.” Or we can say, as this Government did, “Let’s work in partnership. Let’s take those things that matter to people and look to invest in that stadium and that community.”

Gigg Lane proudly sits in an area with a wide variety of people from different backgrounds. How do we ensure that those 5,000 people have access to the best facilities, services, options and advice that they can get? We put them in the football stadium. We do not put them in a town centre or a long way away: we bring facilities and services in partnership to where people want to be, and where they are receptive.

In life, we all need a little bit of hope and inspiration when we get out of bed. When Bury football club disappeared from my town, a little bit of hope disappeared in a lot of people. With that club coming back, there is hope and a certain inspiration to want to play for town. That is important. What Brackenhall and Bradley Mills lost when they lost their community was very important, because nothing replaced it. At this moment in time, we are creating a society of individuals who are linked by money and talk to each other on social media. We no longer interact as local communities. Politics starts when you walk out of your front door—when you open that door and you nearly trip over that pavement that needs to be fixed. You see the pothole on the road that needs to be sorted out. You see the lamppost where the light is not working and the bus that is probably going to be late. All those things matter to people, and if you see those things around you, does that mean that your community is a proud community, one that is working at its best for each other? No, it does not. We need the symbols of civic pride.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you are from the great city of Doncaster; we are from nearly the same part of the world, the north of England. These are the great industrial centres of the north of England. When I say to people that I was born in Huddersfield, they often say, “You’re not born in Bury? How can you understand what it’s like to be from Bury?” Of course, you can. People in these industrial centres of the north were all linked by the same thing in their hearts—the same passion for where they were from. In the first world war, we saw the Accrington Pals and others like them going to war together, but we do not do things as a community any more, and we never talk about community in this place.

I would like to see an understanding of how investment in community, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme talked about, and investment in facilities and symbols of civic pride can impact the political process, and I would like to see that pushed up the political agenda. I am proud for many reasons to be an MP in this Government, but levelling up is a political idea of genius because it gives money to local people to invest in facilities and services that can benefit them. If services do not link people in to wanting to see their area improved, it is all a complete waste of time, but the Government have funded numerous projects that have

given a sense of identity, pride and passion back to the community we live in, which was ignored in the north of England for the 40 to 50 years before that.

We should invest more in sport, invest more in public health and invest more in our culture, and then we will have a better political system.

5.11 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate before the forthcoming Adjournment. It is also a pleasure to follow the absolutely outstanding speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly).

I pay tribute to the member for Mitcham and Morden for her really heartfelt speech—it was a real honour to be in the Chamber to listen to it. I know a little about what she is going through, because my father also died of a brain tumour. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), I will work with the hon. Lady, if she would like that, to bring her plan forward. Hopefully it will be taken up, because it is a jolly good plan, and I know what she is going through.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, because I get to talk about Peterborough—my favourite thing to talk about. I am going to do that very briefly at the start, and then there are several other things I want to mention. However, before I go on to the meat of my remarks, I want to mention a little lad called Louie Clarke, whom I met relatively recently. He raised a considerable amount for a little girl who was particularly ill and suffering from a rare genetic condition. He cycled from one side of the city to the other, raised about £300 and contributed it to the fundraising effort. Overall, this little community raised over £16,000 for that little girl. I just wanted to put that on the record before I talk about other matters relating to my city.

I am incredibly proud of my home city of Peterborough—the city I grew up in—but I am not blind to the challenges associated with it. We do have challenges, and the good people of Peterborough expect me to come to this place and raise them. The issue I want to raise relates to St Michael's Gate, a street in Parnwell. Parnwell is a lovely community, with streets such as Keys Park and Finchfield, which are occupied by more elderly residents. It also has family homes on Martinsbridge and Whitacre and socially rented homes on Henshaw and Whittington. It is a community that just kind of works.

However, since August 2022 there has been increasing concern in my city about St Michael's Gate. Other local authorities are utilising this area to house homeless households to meet their own statutory duties under the Housing Act 1996. These are not Peterborough people; they are, inevitably, being shipped from London and housed in my city on behalf of councils that are basically disregarding their duty to house their own homeless families.

The legal constraints regarding moving households and placing them outside the local area are governed by section 208 of the Housing Act, which acknowledges that accommodation should be provided in an authority's own district as far as reasonably practical. Peterborough City Council has therefore written to local authorities known to place households in this way, asking them to

be mindful of this legislation, because the situation is having a serious impact on the community I just talked about.

The short-term solution being put upon this community in Peterborough is having a severe impact on local services. Local areas cannot cope. There is a great local school, the Lime Academy, that specialises, believe it or not, in Traveller children. The number of children it is being forced to accept from outside Peterborough is having a serious impact on the equilibrium of that school. It has a huge impact on Stars nursery, a huge impact on the GP surgery, which is closed at the moment, and I will come on to that in a minute. The situation is having a huge impact on the whole community, and many local residents and business owners have raised concerns about antisocial behaviour in the area.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his offer of help. I would love to accept that offer and any help he can give in finding a cure for glioblastoma.

I appreciate the problems he must have in Peterborough, and I am sure many London councils are placing homeless families there. To put the situation in context, the reason for that happening is that there are currently 104,510 homeless families, in London including 131,370 homeless children. One in 50 Londoners is homeless, and one in 23 children in London is homeless—that is one in every class. The pressure for all London councils is how to meet their legal responsibilities and find homes for people on a temporary basis, and his town is feeling the impact of that.

Paul Bristow: Peterborough is not just feeling the impact; it is feeling a colossal impact on local services. It is also sometimes not fair for the vulnerable people being moved from London—inevitably—to places such as Peterborough. How a particular council in London seeks to deal and cope with this problem is also a postcode lottery. In certain areas, the council recognises that these placements are having an impact on Peterborough and will work with the local authorities in Peterborough to deal with it, but others simply wash their hands of it. Something has got to give. I will do what I can to prevent Peterborough from being a place where local councils can offload what I would say is some of their homeless and what they would consider to be their problem residents. It is not the right attitude, and we need to do something about it.

I also want to talk quickly about park home residents. Many of my constituents across Peterborough have raised concerns over a law that allows park home landowners to claim 10% commission on the resale of a home. There are many park home sites across Peterborough, including Fengate mobile home park, Keys Park, Pioneer in Eye, and sites in Werrington. That is why I felt compelled to raise this issue today. That 10% commission is wholly unfair on what is typically people from the elderly generation who own their own homes. Some of the impact may be short term, but unfortunately all cannot make back what they have put in due to this law. I have seen that the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign has created a petition that has gained tens of thousands of signatures. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on his support for this cause. We must make sure that we protect

[Paul Bristow]

everyone from exploitation and call out unfairness wherever we see it. Taking 10% off someone's home on top of any other taxes they may pay is just wrong.

I just talked about Parnwell and the surgery there, and I put on record my congratulations to my constituent Rahul Ramechandra, who started a petition to save that GP surgery, or for it to reopen at the very least. Far too many people are taking taxis to Ailsworth, and the closure is having a profound impact on that local Parnwell community. I am sure that those on the Front Bench would agree that two years or 18 months is long enough to solve this building problem, and I am concerned that inertia has set in and we will see the situation go on and on.

I want to raise a slightly different issue. On Sunday 10 September, just over a week ago, I attended the celebration of Gibraltar National Day just below the great Rock of Gibraltar with many other Members from this House. The first national day was held in 1992 to mark the 25th anniversary of the 1967 sovereignty referendum. It is now a wonderful annual celebration of the national pride of Gibraltarians. Gibraltar is one of our overseas territories and was ceded to Great Britain under the treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

The Spanish maintain a claim to Gibraltar. Following talks between our two countries, the people of Gibraltar themselves were asked to determine their future in a referendum in 1967. Some 99% voted to remain British, compared with only 44 votes for Spanish sovereignty. That is an incredibly special thing. Armed only with ballots and pencils, the people of Gibraltar stood up to General Franco's Spain and asserted their right to self-determination. I was honoured to join the people of Gibraltar and be part of the celebrations. I know that the proud people of Peterborough stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Gibraltar in thanking them for their military service and celebrating their freedom and self-determination.

Before I finish, I want to mention two more issues. First, fireworks are being set off at all times of the night and at all times of the year. It has become a serious issue in Peterborough. These are not one-off incidents but a recurring nightmare, plaguing many of my constituents. They are not merely an annoyance; they cause misery to many. The law regarding fireworks is crystal clear. However, it is evident that a substantial number of individuals choose to flout the regulations with impunity. Many of the reports I receive are about fireworks occurring in the early hours of the morning—a blatant violation of the law. Despite bringing that to the police's attention many times, these incidents still continue. In a recent survey that I did online, more than 1,000 constituents responded, and there was overwhelming support for a ban on fireworks other than on bonfire night and new year's day. The results are clear. We need to look at a change in the law to resolve this problem.

Finally, I want to talk about bipolar disorder. A friend of mine who works for Bipolar UK, the bipolar charity, asked me to support his initiative to bring more attention and awareness of bipolar disorder to Parliament. It was a pleasure to be part of the Bipolar UK parliamentary reception, hosted in November last year. Along with 21 other commissioners, we helped to launch the Bipolar Commission, with recommendations on

diagnosis and care pathways. The commission's aims are to reduce the risk of suicide and to transform healthcare for people living with bipolar disorder while improving diagnosis times.

Bipolar used to be known as manic depression, and it can take up to 10 years for a diagnosis. It is estimated that 1.3 million people—one in 50 people—in the UK have bipolar, which increases an individual's risk of suicide by up to 20 times. We have come on leaps and bounds as a country on mental health, but there is always room—lots of room—for improvement. Mental health conditions such as bipolar affect people's careers, their quality of life and their relationships with family and friends. We need to ensure that diagnosis is fast and that appropriate support is available immediately so that people with the condition can live better and fulfilled lives. Bipolar is life-threateningly serious in some cases; our response should treat it that way.

It has been an absolute pleasure to speak in the debate. Again, I wish all hon. Members, and certainly you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a very happy few days of recess.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

5.23 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to lead for the SNP in this debate, which is sometimes called "Whinge-fest". I cannot possibly think why it ever got that nickname. This afternoon's debate and the issues raised were of a high quality. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said how important it is that visitors come to Parliament. I had the pleasure of welcoming Glasgow South West constituents Donald and Tracy McColl, who were down last week as part of the reception run by Kidney Care UK on the importance of organ donation. I know that Donald and Tracy are passionate about that, and it was a pleasure for me to welcome them to Parliament. It is not as easy for Glasgow South West constituents as it is perhaps for Harrow East constituents, given that Glasgow South West is more than 500 miles away, but it is always a pleasure to see constituents here.

Like everyone, I pay tribute in particular to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her speech. As she talked, I reflected on my great aunt Winnie and my grandpa Charlie, who sadly both succumbed to brain tumours. If there is anything I can do for the hon. Lady in this regard, I will be more than happy to do so. It was pleasing to hear the hon. Member's tribute to her sister, who was a brilliant political mind in her own right, and the affection that she had for her. She made a fantastic contribution to the debate, and I thank her very much on behalf of the whole House.

The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) started her remarks on the removal of ticket offices. That is not an England-only issue, as we discovered in Westminster Hall last week, because there are plans to close ticket offices in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. I hope that the Government listen not just to the hon. Member but to the many Government Back Benchers who contributed to last week's debate, who made their thoughts on that topic very clear. They also intend to

continue to raise the issue, because people are concerned about whether the consultation is actually a consultation at all. People have doubts about that when they hear that the workers involved have been given notices of potential redundancy, and that some train companies are already advertising and investigating letting out the spaces where the current ticket offices are. I hope the Minister will give the House an assurance that there is genuine consultation on the proposals. I believe they should be scrapped, and I think that belief is shared by a number of Members across the House. I look forward to the Minister's response to that.

As someone with a trade union background, I think it is important to visit picket lines. It is an opportunity for Members of the House to hear what constituents have to say about such disputes. I hope the Minister will hear me out when I say, as chair of the PCS parliamentary group, and as my party's justice spokesperson, that I am concerned about the dispute in the courts of England and Wales about security guards and outsourced workers. They have been given a derisory pay offer, and I hope the Minister will be able to tell us what the Government are doing about that.

I note that even the newspapers are going on strike, including those who work for National World, which includes *The Scotsman* and other papers. I offer them full solidarity and support. It is amazing to see that even the newspapers are going on strike. The reason they are is very simple: the continuation of the cost of living crisis. Far too many people across these islands are struggling with the cost of food. Many of them are in work, many are receiving state support, and many see that state support deducted every month in universal credit deductions—a crazy system—yet they also see supermarkets posting record profits. Far too many people are struggling to make their mortgage payments, yet they see the banks posting record profits. Far too many people are struggling to pay their energy bills, yet they see the energy companies posting record profits. Something has to give. The focus of the House when it returns surely needs to be on dealing with that imbalance. While that imbalance exists, more people will suffer unnecessarily.

As I said, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) has given me the pleasure of being the justice and immigration spokesperson, and I feel it is necessary to raise the issue of Mears, the Home Office provider of asylum seeker accommodation. I am concerned to hear about the changes it is making to how it provides asylum accommodation and, more importantly, how about it evicts people in that situation. Two things seem to be going on. First, when someone receives a negative decision, it evicts them right away, by instituting what is called a lock change eviction. There is a real problem with that, as I discovered from one of my constituents. Mears handed them a letter saying, "You have a negative decision and therefore have to leave the property." But that constituent had not received a Home Office decision. That constituent is still waiting on a Home Office decision, yet was given a letter from Mears asking them to leave the property.

Then there is how Mears treats people who have been given refugee status. People who have been given the status of sanctuary on these islands are now receiving court orders to the sheriff courts to tell them that Mears will evict them. Frankly, if we are welcoming people to

the United Kingdom and saying to them that they have citizenship and status to remain in this country, why are companies—Home Office providers—taking individuals to court to evict them and dump them on to the local authority, which then has to find them emergency housing? That is not, I would suggest, an appropriate way to deal with anyone, let alone those who have been given refugee status.

I want to wish all Members a pleasant recess. I also want—I always deliberately take the opportunity to do so—to thank not just my constituency office staff, but the constituency office staff of every single Member. While we are here having the great debates of the day, they are the real heroes sorting out constituents' problems on a daily basis. I want to pay particular tribute to Scott, Roza, Raz, Linsey, Tony, Keith, Alistair, Dominique and Greg for all the work they do on behalf of the best constituency office in these islands, which is of course found in the great constituency of Glasgow South West.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Deputy Leader of the House.

5.31 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for leading today's debate. He took us on a canter around north-west London, the middle east and south Asia. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who made a good contribution. I thank all those who have participated in the debate. It has been an excellent opportunity to hear Members' concerns and their passions.

It is right in this debate to reflect on colleagues who have recently passed away. There will be an Adjournment debate later today led by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), but I would also like to pay tribute to the late Ann Clwyd. Ann was a friend and a mainstay of our Labour family in south Wales. We used to sit together on the backest Back Bench at the top of the seats below the Gangway behind me. We would often chat about Welsh politics and foreign policy. Ann was an expert on the middle east and a global human rights figure. Over many hours we would put the world to rights. Ann was both gentle and made of stern stuff. I will miss her as a friend and as a comrade. I send my condolences to her beloved family.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke movingly about her late sister, Margaret McDonagh, and the treatment for brain tumours. I send her all best wishes for her four-point plan. We all know that the McDonaghs have a famous fighting spirit. It is good to see cross-party support for this important endeavour.

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) provided a powerful account of her campaign against badger culls, emphasising the importance of research, good data and good farming methods. Good wishes for the future on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) gave a compelling case for a better understanding of the seabed and scientific concerns over its exploitation.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) reflected on bus services for local children and on his visits to Ukraine. He had excellent cross-party ideas on reparations from Russia to Ukraine to help its rebuilding.

[Nick Smith]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who is fiercely passionate about this place, spoke well on the challenges faced by her constituents, including access to transport, crumbling schools and dangerous dogs. We all give our best wishes to Sami after he suffered that terrible attack.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) talked about her local hospital campaigning. The diagnostic one-stop shop sounds great.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) related a terrible saga of poor-quality housing in his constituency. He has been a great advocate for local people.

The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) reflected on the history of his constituency. It sounds like a lovely place, with a great history of mineworking—which provides me with a neat segue into south Wales. I have ambivalent feelings about mineworking; my grandfather, George Winter, was badly crushed in a coal fall, but I am still proud of my coal and steel family background.

Colleagues have made great play of the different places and people in their constituencies, so I will take this opportunity briefly to do the same. On Friday I will hold a surgery at Blaina library, which is a great venue, not least because it is home to a wonderful local history museum. I pay tribute to the Sirhowy food share: in difficult times such as these, it serves its community in Tredegar with warm, open arms. Its volunteers, alongside those in other food banks in Blaenau Gwent, are truly the best of us. May I also give a big thumbs-up to the members of the Ebbw Valley brass band? Last weekend they became the first section national champions, which is a huge achievement.

I am pleased to respond to this debate on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition, but as we ponder this parliamentary term, it is important that we reflect on the disastrous Budget of 2022. What have we got to show for it? Soaring mortgages, food inflation, a weaker pound and a broken Britain, with ordinary working people paying the price for Conservative ideology. This is a tired Tory Government, on the down and on the out. People have had enough. After 13 years of Conservatism, Britain needs new ideas. Only Labour can offer the change that our country desperately needs, with a Government who will end the cycle of sticking-plaster politics and bring forward national renewal. We will, for example, make Britain a clean energy superpower to create jobs, cut bills and boost our energy security. We will prepare Britain for the future.

As I draw my speech to a close, I want to congratulate Sir John Benger on his new role as Master of St Catharine's College, Cambridge. It was sweet to witness a group of Clerks clap out the outgoing Principal Clerk as he left the Chamber for the last time earlier today; it really was lovely. I also want to thank everyone who keeps this House moving and operating as effectively as possible, and I particularly want to thank Wayne Jenkins and our Doorkeepers. Wayne is so helpful: he even found some gaffer tape to wrap around my cross-country running shoes one year.

As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I want to thank the parliamentary Select Committee staff who help us to scrutinise Government work. The

National Audit Office team in particular do a great job, and in that context I congratulate the NAO's parliamentary lead, Adrian Jenner, and his wife—one of our Clerks, Sarah Petit—who recently welcomed their new baby girl, Cora. I also want to thank my Blaenau Gwent team, Sara Baker, Mandy Platt, Gemma Badham, Dominic Jones and Callie Lewis. I thank them for always going above and beyond, and I am sure that many Members feel the same about their teams.

Finally, I wish everyone an exciting conference recess. In the weeks ahead, all our parties will seek to gain the trust of the British people. That is an important democratic endeavour—and, of course, I look forward to seeing everyone return for the autumn term.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will be leaving the Chamber shortly, so before I call the Minister, I want to give big thanks to everyone who has paid tribute to Sir John Benger. I absolutely agree with everything that has been said. He has been a great servant of the House, and we will miss him, but we wish him all the very best in his new endeavours.

5.39 pm

The Treasurer of His Majesty's Household (Mr Marcus Jones): I am delighted to be responding today on behalf of the Government. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is not usually the convention for Whips to speak at this Dispatch Box. As you also know, I spend a lot of time as Deputy Chief Whip running in and out of this Chamber telling Ministers to be more pithy, to sit down and to get the votes out of the way and done, so I will endeavour—[HON. MEMBERS: "Get on with it!"] I will endeavour to get on with it and to address the points raised by hon. Members.

I remember fondly my time on the Backbench Business Committee with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and our great friend, David Amess, who would have been thrilled that we are having pre-recess Adjournment debates on the cusp of half-term, as we do now, as well as at the end of a full term. I know he would have been very happy about that. I recall one occasion, when I was on the Committee, when Sir David went absolutely ballistic when the Government had the temerity to programme Government business on the last day before a recess and deny the House this debate. I will never forget his rage at that.

This has been a wide-ranging debate, and I will respond to as many colleagues as possible. First, I want to respond to the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith). I welcome him to his position and I welcome the tribute he paid to Ann Clwyd, who was a fantastic Member of this place. I will never forget the time she asked a question about the treatment that her husband was receiving in hospital in Wales all those years ago. It was very moving.

The hon. Gentleman raised many matters, but I do not recognise his characterisation of the Government. We have put 37 Government Bills through the House during this Session, and 23 Members have had their private Member's Bill successfully go through the House. Among the Government Bills, we have had the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which has scrapped unwanted regulations from our time in the EU; the

Victims and Prisoners Bill, in which we are strengthening the rights of victims of crime; the Online Safety Bill, in which we are protecting children and vulnerable people from online harms; the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, in which we have put legislation in place to stop Labour's union paymasters holding public services to ransom; the Public Order Bill, in which we have stopped organisations such as Just Stop Oil attaching themselves to our roads and preventing hard-working people from getting to work; and the Illegal Migration Bill, in which we have worked hard to reduce illegal immigration, which is down nearly 20% in the last year. We are working hard to do that while Labour looks intent on making illegal immigration legal and on taking us back into the EU by the back door.

The hon. Gentleman talked about what a Labour Government could deliver, but we just need to look to Wales, where there are mandatory blanket 20 mph speed limits and longer waiting lists in the NHS than we have in England; to London, where the hated ULEZ has been imposed on hard-working people; and to Birmingham, where the Labour council is bankrupting the city. This just shows that the Labour party always runs out of other people's money when it is in office.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East made a fantastic speech and laid out the case for his petition on why hard-working people should not be held to ransom by the megalomania of the Mayor of London and his ULEZ charge. My hon. Friend mentioned the challenges of houses in multiple occupation in his constituency, and I am sure that many of us have felt some of those challenges. He talked about the difference that his Conservative council was making in taking on a lot of additional social housing as well as making significant progress on road resurfacing. He also mentioned the India trade deal, and I am really pleased that the Government are making progress on that. It is extremely important, now that we have left the European Union, that we get trade deals with the fastest-growing economies in the world, and India is certainly one of them.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made a very moving speech about her sister, Margaret, who I know was regarded very fondly in this House as well as in the other place. The hon. Lady made some extremely moving comments about her sister's last few months. One of my good friends sadly died this year from a brain tumour, and I think the sentiment of the House is that more needs to be done on this subject. There is a long way to go on the treatment and diagnosis of brain tumours. I know that the hon. Lady had a debate on this subject, and it was responded to by the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). I will make sure he knows about today's debate and understands the sentiment of many Members in the Chamber today.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on her massive effort to climb Mount Kilimanjaro and raise over £150,000 for charity. She mentioned the badger cull, which is a very emotive subject. This is not only a massive issue for cattle and farmers, as nobody wants to see a badger die a miserable death from bovine TB. We all hope that the significant work that is taking place brings about a vaccine as quickly as possible.

I also welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd). Protecting the seabed is extremely important, and he will know that we are bringing in a number of protected marine zones around the UK. The matter requires further debate and discussion, and it needs to be taken extremely seriously.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) mentioned antisocial behaviour, which many of us suffer in our constituencies. We now have a record number of police officers on our streets, and the Home Secretary has been very clear that even what has hitherto been considered quite low-level crime should be investigated and dealt with by our police. I certainly hope that is the case in my hon. Friend's constituency.

When the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) was shadow Leader of the House, we always enjoyed her duels with the then Leader of the House. She mentioned Bescot Stadium station, of which I have some experience, having visited Bescot stadium on a number of occasions to watch the mighty Coventry City. Unfortunately, though, I have only gone away happy on one of those three occasions, which is not good news. She raises a very important point about accessibility at the station, and I will make sure it is fed back to the Minister. She mentioned several other issues on which she is looking for a response from Ministers, and I will make sure those matters are fed back.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) championed her area, and it is great news that she is getting the diagnostic centre at Congleton War Memorial Hospital. This is one of a series of diagnostic centres opening across the country, and I am glad to report that another of those centres is at the George Eliot Hospital in my Nuneaton constituency.

The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) mentioned an extremely worrying housing case in his constituency and, through the work he is doing here, I very much hope that both the housing association and the NHBC will take responsibility and seek to remedy those issues as soon as practicable. If that does not happen, I hope that residents and tenants have a sufficient response to their complaints so that they can take their case to the housing ombudsman, which is extremely important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) mentioned the 850th anniversary of Newcastle-under-Lyme, and he paid tribute to Jim Worgan, the historian. Local historians often do a massive amount of unpaid work, and they are so valuable to our local areas. I pay tribute to the local historian Peter Lee, who has written many books related to my constituency and its industrial and mining heritage, and to Mark Palmer, who runs a Facebook group called "Nuneaton Memories," which puts out a massive amount of nostalgia about Nuneaton—that is fabulous to see.

It is also good to see that after 850 years women are allowed to be burgesses—that is long overdue, but it is better late than never and it was good that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) identified that. His speech was a fantastic advertisement for the culture and heritage, particularly the mining heritage, of his area. It is great to hear that it is not just dwelling on the past but instead is living in the future and doing a massive amount to bring forward the latest industries and create new jobs. He has been a great

[Mr Marcus Jones]

champion on the issue of Walleys quarry, it is good to see that progress has been made, but clearly there is more to do and I hope that he succeeds in his mission.

It was great to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) about Dover and, particularly, Deal. I am glad that she is making progress on the phlebotomy service in Deal and the surrounding villages. Clearly, the integrated care board there is starting to listen, but I understand why she would want quicker progress, as will her constituents. The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) made an illuminating speech, with a list of things that the Government are providing for Blackpool that was larger than the Blackpool tower itself. It looks as though a massive amount of support and regeneration is being provided in Blackpool. It is extremely welcome that one of our seaside towns is getting that sort of support, after many years when it has not had the support, rejuvenation and regeneration it needs.

We heard a lovely, impassioned speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), who identified the importance of civic pride in our areas. I talk about that in terms of my area time after time. It is fantastic to see that he has achieved getting Bury football club, the Shakers, back to Gigg Lane. That is a massive achievement, because civic pride comes across more than anything through sport. I very much hope for him and the good people of Bury—and a gentleman I know in my constituency who used to have a Bury season ticket and to travel there up the M6 every week—that Bury can get back into the Football League as quickly as possible. I know how difficult a journey that is likely to be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) again showed what a champion he is for his area. I was sorry to hear about his father passing away from a brain tumour. I spent some time in Peterborough as there was a by-election in my hon. Friend's constituency, so I know it a little and I hear what he said about the importance of local authorities standing by their duty to house their local residents in their local area. There is a bit of debate on this, but I know how difficult it is in many areas for social housing to be provided. On London, I just point out that, as I understand it, in his first two terms the current Mayor, Sadiq Khan, provided 7,500 affordable homes per year, whereas his predecessor, Boris Johnson, provided 12,000 per year in his time. So there is a lot more to do and a lot more that can be done to give people housing, particularly in our capital.

I hear what the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said about Kidney Care UK and organ donations, which is an extremely important subject for many people. He mentioned his family members who have sadly passed away from brain tumours. As I said, I can sense a growing movement across the House on that issue, which the relevant Minister will have heard as a result of today's debate. On rail ticket offices, the relevant Minister will respond to that consultation in due course. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the cost of living, which has been an extremely important issue and still is for many of our constituents. I point out that the Government have provided a record package in our history of £94 billion, helping every household in some way but particularly the most vulnerable, giving

them support with their heating bills and so on. It just shows the strength of the UK as a bloc in regard to being able to support all parts of the UK in a better way than would be the case if the hon. Gentleman got his wish to break up our successful United Kingdom.

Another point the hon. Gentleman made was about mortgages. Clearly, there are challenging times for many mortgage holders, but I recommend that anyone facing those challenges speaks to their mortgage lender, because 90% of mortgage lenders have signed up to the mortgage charter. I am aware of a case where someone who was hitherto a mortgage prisoner, unable to get a better deal from their lender, has secured a fixed-rate deal at a significantly lower cost than their previous rate. If people are having challenges, I implore them to speak to their mortgage lender.

As we break for the conference recess, I pay tribute to the Clerk of the House, John Benger, for his long and distinguished service. For many of us, the recess will include not just the conferences, but a lot of constituency work and knocking on doors for two by-elections, but I hope we will all have a happy and safe recess.

Nick Smith: I look forward to seeing the right hon. Gentleman on the doorsteps in Tamworth. I have been reliably informed that Mr Phil Howse is our Principal Doorkeeper, so may I correct the record? Wayne Jenkins is the Deputy Principal Doorkeeper and together they do a great job.

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Member. He is absolutely right that our Doorkeepers do a great job. They are a font of all knowledge to many Members of the House. Quite often, the Doorkeepers know when votes are coming before a lot of Members, so Members rely on them rather than their Whips, which they should not necessarily do, for their experience and knowledge. I thank our Doorkeepers, our Clerks, all of the staff on the parliamentary estate, our staff in our constituencies and in our parliamentary offices. Those staff do a massive amount at the coalface to support our constituents; without them, we would not be able to do our jobs and support our constituents as Members of Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you a good conference recess and I hope that everybody has a happy and safe conference recess.

5.57 pm

Bob Blackman: With the leave of the House, I thank all 13 Back-Bench Members who spoke in the debate, including one who intervened, and the three Front-Bench Members who contributed. I remind my right hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) that when we persuaded the late Sir David Amess to join the Backbench Business Committee, he did so on one proviso—to safeguard the end-of-term, pre-recess Adjournment debate—only to find that the Government had reneged on the deal.

I particularly thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her speech. One of my opponents in the 1992 general election very sadly died of a brain tumour some six months after the election. He was a very young man and it happened suddenly. It was a tragedy for all concerned, especially his family. I extend my sympathy to the hon. Lady.

The benefit of these debates has been shown by the contributions—local, national and international—made by Members from across the Back Benches. I will take back to the Backbench Business Committee the desire for the whole House to continue these debates at all costs.

As my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), said, I should correct the record. The £300,000 gas-guzzling Range Rover Sentinel, in which the Mayor of London drives around London, is exempt, because it was registered in 2020. That is why it is exempt; there is no special exemption.

May I say to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) that I envy him for having such an elastic budget that he can employ so many people who are doing such brilliant work in his constituency office.

Let me thank and wish a good conference recess to all the staff—everyone who keeps this House going, all our constituency staff, everyone who works for Government Ministers and all the civil servants. I hope that our conference is successful—I am not sure about the other conferences. We will be enjoying the opportunity to get together with friends whom we have not seen for a while and debating issues of political importance. But most of us, I am sure, will be working hard in our constituencies on behalf of our constituents, which is, after all, what we do best. We look forward to coming back in the autumn for another round of opportunities for Government legislation, the King's Speech and going into the last Session before the general election. Indeed, I look forward to joining those debates and making the fullest contribution I can from the Back Benches, as I have been doing for the past 13 years.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

PETITIONS

Face to Face Banking Services

6.1 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of my constituents in Hornsey and Wood Green who are furious at yet another bank branch closure—this time the Halifax in Muswell Hill, coming just a couple of months after the Halifax closure in Crouch End. I have been contacted by an 80-year-old resident who told me that they have been a victim of fraud and are anxious about online banking. Similarly, a disabled resident told me that they rely on counter staff, and they would struggle to get to another branch, as it is an hour round trip on public transport. All expressed concern that this is part of an endless stream of bank closures. Almost half of all banks that were open in 2015 have closed across the country. That is a matter of extreme regret and an urgent issue that the Government should be addressing. We can see that our high streets are dying.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to act to protect essential in-person banking services.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Hornsey and Wood Green, Declares that the petitioners are extremely disappointed at the announcement of the closure of Halifax's Muswell Hill branch in November 2023, further notes that bank branches are the heart of communities, and are relied upon by local communities, especially old and disabled people, those who need access to cash and those without internet banking; further notes that they are also vital for local businesses.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to act to protect essential in-person banking services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002857]

Travel Costs Support for Young Cancer Patients

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Getting children, teenagers and young adults with cancer to their treatment costs. Families spend, on average, £250 just getting their child to treatment let alone their lost earnings. Young people with cancer deserve proper Government support. Nearly 12,000 people have now signed this petition, including many of my constituents in East Dunbartonshire. Mr Deputy Speaker, I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on children, teenagers and young adults with cancer, and as a young cancer survivor myself.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure all young cancer patients are provided with a Young Cancer Patient Travel Fund, which is easily and universally accessible from the point of diagnosis and throughout the duration of their cancer treatment.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that more needs to be done to support young cancer patients and their families with the cost of travel to receive treatment; that it is unacceptable that they are going into debt, struggling to pay their bills, and missing or delaying treatment as a result; and that the current support available is proving inadequate in covering these travel costs.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure all young cancer patients are provided with a Young Cancer Patient Travel Fund, which is easily and universally accessible from the point of diagnosis and throughout the duration of their cancer treatment.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002852]

Phlebotomy Services

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I rise to present a petition submitted by my fantastic Deal health campaigners Anne Matthews, Marsha Horne, Councillor Trevor Bond and Councillor Tony Grist, whose petition has attracted some 3,000 signatures of people concerned about the closure of phlebotomy services at Deal hospital.

The petitioners state that,

[Mrs Natalie Elphicke]

“the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board, at long last, finally recognised that older, poorer, clinically dependent people and children in Deal and Walmer have been inadequately provided for following the closure of blood testing services and the hospital in October 2021”,

and notes that it is

“yet to reinstate the blood testing services at Deal Hospital.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to ensure that Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board reopen blood testing services at Deal Hospital immediately.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of Deal and Walmer,

Declares that the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board, at long last, finally recognised that older, poorer, clinically dependent people and children in Deal and Walmer have been inadequately provided for following the closure of blood testing services and the hospital in October 2021; notes that residents in Deal and Walmer should have local access to these essential blood testing services; further notes that the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board are yet to reinstate the blood testing services at Deal Hospital.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to ensure that Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board reopen blood testing services at Deal Hospital immediately.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002859]

Ann Clwyd

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

6.5 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Thank you for granting this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. First of all, I thank Ann’s family and friends, some of whom have joined us in the Gallery, for their support as we in the Chamber pay tribute to Ann Clwyd. Croeso i chi—welcome to you. I did not know Ann as well as many of those present this evening, having met her on only a handful of occasions. However, since I was elected I have had many positive conversations with local people and activists who knew her. Others will have had much more direct experience of working alongside Ann, and I thank them for coming to pay their tributes.

When I look back at Ann Clwyd’s life and career, I so much respect her work, and I think so much of it resonates with what we face today. Ann was a strong, independently minded woman, an advocate for women’s rights, international human rights, the Welsh language, good-quality public services and so much more. She was the first woman to be elected as an MP for the south Wales valleys, so I take pride in having had the opportunity to follow in her footsteps in Cynon Valley.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Having sat for many years next to Ann on this very spot on the Back Benches, and on the other side of the House as well, I want to echo my hon. Friend’s remarks about Ann’s incredible passion, pride and sense of justice, but I also want to mention her sense of mischief and the twinkle in her eye. She brought both passion and humour to this Chamber. She is sadly missed, and we are all greatly diminished by the lack of her presence in this House. In Cardiff West, where in her latter years she was a very active constituent and correspondent with me as her local MP, I certainly miss her letters, even though they created a great deal of work for me here in this place.

Beth Winter: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

Ann understood the need to keep jobs in local communities. Tyrone O’Sullivan, leader of the Tower colliery buy-out, who sadly also passed away earlier this year, spoke at an event for Ann that was organised in March last year by our local Labour women’s branch in Cynon Valley. Tyrone acknowledged and celebrated Ann’s contribution to the fight for Tower colliery, and he reminded me, only weeks before his death, of the importance of the working-class struggle for today. They showed the way to build local economies, creating local wealth for local people, not encouraging local people to leave in order to get on in life. I share that vision and I try to carry on in the same vein with my work on the local economy in Cynon Valley.

Ann fought battles on behalf of miners. When she became MP, our constituency was in the throes of fighting to keep the mining industry alive. Next year, we will remember 40 years since the 1984 miners’ strike—the year when Ann became MP for Cynon Valley. I was, as a child, on the demonstration through the town of Aberdare with Ann. In her maiden speech in Parliament, Ann said that the miners’ strike was

“a symbolic fight, a fight against the two Britains—the haves and the have nots. It is a protest on behalf of a lost generation of young men and women who have never been able to find a job in the valleys of South Wales.”

That fight continues. Public service workers, rail workers and health workers today are fighting against two Britains—the haves and the have nots.

Ann also fought tirelessly for compensation for miners suffering health problems as a result of their work. As she said in the same speech:

“It is a heartbreaking experience—I wish that Conservative Members could share it—to see a miner gasping for breath even while using an oxygen mask. Yet, because he has not been diagnosed as suffering from pneumoconiosis, he does not get a penny in compensation. That is more than wrong, it is cruel and unjust.”—[*Official Report*, 7 June 1984; Vol. 61, c. 476-77.]

I, like other Members in the Chamber, am currently involved in the ongoing battle for miners’ pension rights and compensation, so again the fight goes on; the thread of history continues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. I know that I have not been in the House as long as other Members who will speak, but I just wanted to add a very quick contribution if she will allow me.

When I came here in 2010, Ann Clwyd would sit just about there, and I sat here. She was always a very strong and determined lady—I found her a lady of strong will. Although she was always charming and had a lovely smile, I always figured that it would not be a good thing to get on the wrong side of her. I have always been surrounded by strong ladies so I know how to adapt to that.

Here is a story. Ann was sitting here one night during an Adjournment debate, with just the Minister, the previous Mr Speaker and—as usual for the Adjournment, as everyone knows—myself in the Chamber. Her phone went off and was ringing quite loudly. I looked up at her and she never flinched. The phone kept ringing. I looked at Mr Speaker, and he mumbled something to me like, “Get the handbag!” So I took the handbag, with the ringing phone, out the back and left it there. I could still hear it ringing away, but I could not get it turned off—that was part of the problem.

I have one other quick wee story. Ann loved cats with a passion, as does my wife, so when Ann brought in her bags with cats on them, I said, “You and my wife would get on because she loves cats as well.” Ann left an impression on me, an MP since 2010, and I think it only right that the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) has secured this debate. It is lovely to see Ann’s family—I had never met any of you before tonight. I say well done to the hon. Lady. We have fond, fond memories of a special lady.

Beth Winter: I thank my hon. Friend.

Ann also advocated strongly against cuts to benefits, recognising the need to fight against poverty and any policies that would further impoverish people. Her stand on any attempts to cut benefits is an ongoing battle that many of us continue to fight as the cost of living crisis hits the poorest the hardest.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of Ann’s important work in standing up for victims of abuse? Ann was a constant voice for the

survivors of the north-west Wales care home abuse scandal, some of whom were her constituents. When others ignored those voices, Ann spoke out, not just once but many times, at a time when victims were often disbelieved, sometimes with tragic consequences. Does my hon. Friend agree that that speaks to Ann’s courage, fearlessness and commitment to human rights?

Beth Winter: I thank my hon. Friend. Ann was indeed fearless. This afternoon, we had the privilege of spending some time with her family, and we talked about her involvement with and advocacy on behalf of those suffering abuse, for whom she fought tirelessly.

Ann’s opposition back in 1997 to the abolition of lone-parent benefits was something she spoke passionately about. She said at the time:

“There is great concern in the Parliamentary Labour Party. Even people who voted with the government went into the lobbies feeling very distressed. They don’t want to see it happen again.”

Again, Ann’s opposition to cuts to benefits and her advocacy on behalf of the disadvantaged resonates strongly with us today, in particular the stand that many of us are taking in the parliamentary Labour party against the two-child benefit cap. I believe that Ann, too, would have supported this week’s Right to Food campaign, which is being led by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), and the fightback against the cost of living crisis.

It would be remiss of me not to say that Ann and I would not have agreed on everything. I believe she was wrong about the Iraq war. I will always also respect her stand in support of the rights of oppressed people throughout the world.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I knew Ann for 40 years, and above all else, she was an internationalist; she cared about people and human rights. I remember that on one occasion she was dismissed from the Front Bench because she went to Kurdistan to show solidarity with the people there, without permission from the Whips. She was a passionate believer in the rights of people throughout the world. She should be remembered also for her commitment to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, of which she chaired the British group. Her support for human rights throughout the world, whether in Iraq, Kurdistan or anywhere else, was wonderful.

Beth Winter: My hon. Friend’s intervention is very timely, because I was just coming on to the point that Ann was renowned for her internationalism, from Cambodia to South Africa, to East Timor and Turkey, and of course, her commitment to supporting the Kurdish people. She was for over 20 years chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group which continues to raise awareness of serious human rights violations throughout the world. She was also a member of numerous parliamentary Committees, including those on International Development and Foreign Affairs, and she headed the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians throughout the world. As my hon. Friend said, Ann was sacked not once but twice from the shadow Cabinet.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): May I thank my hon. Friend for securing this Adjournment debate and express my condolences to Ann’s family and her many friends? I thought that, with that reference

[Angela Rayner]

to the shadow Cabinet, I should come in. I know that Ann was very keen to say that she was not sacked for incompetence.

I could always rely on Ann for support and wisdom. I even tried to repay it—I played an important role in Ann's successful campaign for Westminster Cat of the Year, as her campaign manager for the ginger tomcat Alfie. Does my hon. Friend agree that, with her commitment to social justice and to the most vulnerable both at home and abroad, there will not be another MP like Ann again, but that does not mean we should not all try to be like her?

Beth Winter: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend's sentiments.

Ann was opposed to the sale of arms to oppressive regimes. These fights, again, sadly continue, and we continue to live in a dangerous world.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving a fantastic tribute to Ann, who so many Members on both sides of the House, as well as her constituents, loved so much. Ann was Labour through and through, very principled and a lovely person. Does my hon. Friend agree that she also represented the best in our party's tradition, this Parliament's tradition and our democracy's tradition of independent-minded public service and being a true conviction politician? As my hon. Friend said, not everyone would have agreed with everything that Ann said, but that is fine—that is what our democracy is all about. We can all learn from Ann when we think about how we go about our politics, and I thank my hon. Friend for paying such a well-deserved tribute to somebody we loved so much.

Beth Winter: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Again, I could not agree more.

Ann was 100% right in the stand that she made on those humanitarian issues and so many others, such as ending female genital mutilation, and she was not afraid to take unpopular positions on issues she felt very strongly about. Nicole Piche, who was co-ordinator and legal adviser to the all-party parliamentary human rights group when Ann chaired it, said:

"Although she was firmly rooted in and a staunch advocate for the Labour Party, having held a number of Shadow portfolios when Labour was in opposition, she did not hold back when she disagreed with its policies, and was happy to work cross-party to advance the many causes she espoused."

As we all know, Ann was not afraid to speak her mind without fear or favour. Agree with her or not, whether on the Iraq war or her stance on Brexit, we all have to admire her forthrightness and her ability to keep to her beliefs.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I apologise: I am speaking at a rally in a few minutes' time, which Ann would have agreed with, so I will have to leave.

The one thing about Ann was that she never gave up, and if you ever crossed her, she never gave up either. I was on a Select Committee last year that was interviewing someone—I will not go into the detail of it, but it was someone she had come across in the 1980s with regard

to Vietnam and Laos. She noticed that we were interviewing this individual, so she sent me a 20-page briefing on them and all the subsequent offences, crimes and so on that they had perpetrated. She was not doing it out of spite or anything like that; she was doing it as part of her campaign to expose the injustices that went on at that time and all those who were implicated in them. In some instances that annoyed people, and sometimes her persistence rubbed people up the wrong way, but for me, it made me love her even more.

Beth Winter: I thank my right hon. Friend—"persistence" describes Ann in many respects. I have also had the honour of speaking to her longest-standing colleague in Parliament, Lord Campbell-Savours, who referred to Ann as "Clwyd". He said that "Clwyd was the most courageous woman I have ever met in my life. She was fiercely independent, knew her own mind and refused to be labelled. Clwyd was what I call a real radical." He repeated the term "radical"—to him, she was the most radical person he had ever met. They were long-standing friends.

I have also spoken to lots of constituents. A local story about Ann's forthright approach relates to her canvassing in an election. She was using a loudspeaker, which she did very often throughout the Cynon Valley. A local resident came out and started to harangue her, so in very colourful language—not unlike that used recently by the Secretary of State for Education, which I am unable to use here—Ann told him to go away. Unfortunately, she forgot that the loudspeaker was still on, so everybody got to hear Ann's colourful language. Her language could be colourful at times, as I am sure her family would agree. Another story that I was told was of Ann comparing a Tory MP's fur collar to a dead cat around her neck when she criticised Ann for her position on late abortions. Ann did a lot of work on abortion rights, which again is an issue that is still in the political melting pot, as women are still having to fight to decriminalise abortion.

Ann had a very deep and personal interest and involvement in health matters over many years, particularly in a personal capacity in her latter years. At one time, she sat as a member of the South Glamorgan health board alongside a Cynon Valley GP, the late Dr Alistair Wilson, who always felt that Ann wanted services to be the best possible for people. She fully supported the national health service, but with a critical eye—and, oh, did she have a critical eye.

Ann did move on the international stage, but that did not prevent her from paying attention to local issues. Like many other people, one young local person—Richard Jones, who is now a disability rights local champion—asked for help. He recalls that when he asked her for help with a school project as a schoolboy, she sent him so much information that he got top marks for it. Later, he was the constituency Labour party chair when she made her retirement speech at the constituency party, so he had known her throughout his life.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on her excellent speech. Does she agree that, in addition to her many political achievements, Ann was a true friend to us all? As my hon. Friend has described, Ann took a genuine interest in all our concerns. She commanded our trust

and she did that challenging task of showing real leadership as chair of the parliamentary Labour party—quite a task to fulfil. It was that genuine interest in people and the trust that we were able to put in her that enabled her to do that. I do agree with my hon. Friend, and I hope she agrees with me.

Beth Winter: I completely agree. Ann did take an interest in people and was very patient when listening to their concerns.

Ann had first-class support from staff in her constituency and in Parliament, and I recognise the importance of that as a Member of Parliament. I have had a conversation with the family today, and I am sure nobody will mind if I make specific reference to one person in particular: her friend, confidant and mainstay in Cynon Valley, Jean Fitzgerald, who was also a great support to myself. Sadly, Jean died shortly after Ann retired, but the closeness between them was so evident, particularly when Ann paid tribute to Jean at her funeral.

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. I did not know Ann at all, but my parliamentary assistant worked for her and has relayed very fond memories of her. One in particular was about Ann's kindness to her late friend and colleague, John Stevenson. Members will know that John was a political correspondent for BBC Wales, but for several years before that he had been homeless and had struggled with alcohol addiction. Ann had known John when they were young journalists in Wales, and she sought him out when she became an MP. She knew he had fallen on hard times, so she gave him a job working for her. It was his second chance and a chance to rebuild his life, and it was something he never forgot. I am sure the whole House will agree when I say that that just shows the depth of Ann's compassion towards people, the breadth of her humanity and kindness, and the essence of her remarkable character.

Beth Winter: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I think that kindness, compassion and humanity are words that really do sum up Ann in so many ways.

I am almost at my conclusion, but I need to say that the fight does continue. Just as Ann fought so fearlessly for what she believed in, we in this place must continue those fights. I know that she would want us to do that so that the people we represent can benefit from a just and more equal society with international peace and justice.

Before I conclude, I want to say that many other Members wished to contribute today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who worked with Ann on social work to a large extent, my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who unfortunately cannot be here this evening, and also the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), from the Government Benches. Many, many more MPs have paid tribute to Ann and would have been here if they could.

Felly, Ann, diolch i chi am helpu i gadw ein hiaith yn fyw, a diolch am frwydro dros hawliau dynol, yn erbyn anghyfiawnder, dros y tlawd, i gael gwasanaethau da i bobl, a dros hawliau menywod. A diolch am fod yn fenyw oedd yn barod i sefyll i fyny a siarad ei meddwl—heb os nac oni bai, menyw gadarn gydag egwyddorion cryf.

I orffen, gair i'r teulu a ffrindiau agos: mae mor bwysig ein bod ni'n cofio Ann, yn siarad amdani ac yn dathlu ei bywyd fel hyn. Diolch i chi am gytuno i ni, fel Aelodau Seneddol, i gael y cyfle yma heddiw. Pob cydymdeimlad gyda chi, ac atgofion da.

I have been told that I have to repeat that in English, but then I am finished. Ann, thank you for helping to keep our language alive. Thank you for fighting for human rights and the poor, fighting against injustice, fighting to get good services for people and fighting for women's rights. Thank you for being a woman who was ready to stand up and speak her mind. Without a doubt, you were a strong woman with strong principles. To finish, a word to Ann's family and close friends: it is so important that we remember Ann, talk about her and celebrate her life in this way. We all wish to offer thanks for us as Members of Parliament having been allowed this opportunity today. My condolences, and our condolences, to you, and fond memories.

6.31 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It is a great pleasure to be able to speak about my friend Ann Clwyd, whom I knew extremely well. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) for the wonderful way she has put her memories on the record today.

I first knew Ann when she was elected to Parliament along with me in the early '80s. We shared an office in the Cloisters downstairs, along with about 25 other MPs. It was an extremely noisy place, because Ann had a great deal to say. Lord Campbell-Savours often came along to have an argument with Ann about something, or to tell her what to do, and she told him what to do and so it went on. Tony Benn was next door, and there were a number of others there, so it was not a quiet place.

The office was also home to my dog called Mango, who came in as well. Ann was deeply concerned about Mango's health and often looked after Mango for me. One day there was a leak in the roof. It was literally a leak—there was a lot of talk about Government leaks, but this was a real leak with water coming in from the roof. The rest of us just moaned and groaned and phoned up services and said, "Please fix this leak," but Ann? No, no, no. I opened the *Evening Standard* at lunchtime that day. There was a picture of Ann Clwyd with an umbrella over her head, raincoat, wellington boots—the whole bit—explaining how Parliament had so deteriorated that she was forced to come in with protective gear to get through the day. She had this wonderful panache for publicising events and issues, but that hid a deep steel in what she did.

She represented Cynon Valley, where Tower colliery was. I was at the next desk to her. The miners' strike came, and they wanted support, so she asked me to get a load of people from my constituency to go to Cynon Valley. We hired a coach and a van, we took food and we went in large numbers. Ann met us there. We built up a great relationship with Tyrone O'Sullivan, and it was an honour to be invited to speak at his funeral recently with my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley.

Ann was somebody who stood up for what she believed in. She and I were two of a very small group of MPs who opposed arms sales to Iraq and spoke up for the

[Jeremy Corbyn]

Kurdish people during the chemical attack on Halabja. We did a lot of activities around the place and worked closely together with all the Kurdish groups. Ann was rightly seen as a great friend of the Kurdish community. While she and I did not agree on the Iraq war, we were both on the record as opposing arms sales to Iraq. There were not many of us who were opposed to arms sales to Iraq before the war began. I saw Ann as a friend and colleague, and I worked closely with her as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group.

During the Yeltsin period, we went on a delegation to Russia to try to defend the Chechen people, with the horrors they were going through. Ann was extremely assertive on behalf of the human rights group on that. I distinctly remember sitting in front of somebody who was presumably very senior in something because he had an unbelievable number of phones set out all round his desk, and Ann and I were speculating about which phone led to which person. It was her wit and humour that helped to get things through. I want to put on the record my thanks to her for so much of what she did.

As chair of the human rights group, Ann also led us in a delegation to East Timor in 2000 to witness its referendum. It was difficult, because the Indonesian army was supposedly protecting the integrity of the referendum, which was a strange thing to do. Ann, I and the late Alice Mahon were on a delegation, and we visited all the polling stations on behalf of the UN and met many people there. For some reason that I never really understood, Ann brought an amazing amount of luggage, which filled up the very small plane we went in to get there. The rest of us all became porters for Ann Clwyd's luggage—there was a lot of it, and it was very heavy. When we asked her to explain this, she said, “I don't think it's any of your business how many cases I choose to bring, but it's very much your business that you've got to carry them.” So I said, “Thanks, Ann—that's great.” But we played our part in ensuring that the people of East Timor, who had been through hell for decades, actually saw their independence and some hope for the future.

I want to say a huge thank you to Ann for the friendship, for the humour, and for the steel and determination on the human rights cause and all the other causes that colleagues have mentioned. She was always a good friend to me. We often did not totally agree on everything, but we totally agreed to respect each other in our disagreement, so we always got along very well indeed. That is a good example of how politics can work. I say to all her family: my condolences, and thank you for the life of Ann.

6.36 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to follow the many tributes to Ann, and particularly those from my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), who succeeded her in her seat. It is also a real pleasure to have Ann's family with us in the Gallery.

I want to give a few personal thoughts about Ann. I was lucky enough to know her for decades. I first met her when I was 15 years old as an intern in the Welsh Labour party headquarters, and I remember being bowled

over by her speaking at an event with great power, great passion and that strong sense of radicalism exemplified in so many of the comments we have heard. As often happens in politics, we can meet people when we are younger and think, “Wow—what an incredible figure,” but do they turn out to be that way when years later we meet them in Parliament or have the privilege of working alongside them in Parliament, as I did with Ann? When I was able to join Ann in this place, she lived up to every aspect of what I had seen in her when I was a young teenager.

I was Ann's Whip for a while. She had obviously had a tumultuous relationship with Whips, and indeed with party leadership over many years, but all I can say is that she was always utterly courteous and pleasant, even when there were difficult issues to be discussed. It was a real pleasure to work with her.

We have heard about so many different campaigns that Ann was involved in, including Tower, the NHS, Iraq and miners' compensation, and she really did apply that campaigning zeal, expertise, tenacity, complete dedication and commitment to everything she turned her hand to. I had the particular pleasure of working with her on the Committees on Arms Export Controls. Arms exports were obviously a significant issue that she reflected on in many different capacities in her career. I remember working with her on the Committees—I will not go into too many details, because we are not supposed to reveal certain proceedings—and dealing with a lot of shenanigans, with things making it out into the media and so on. Ann's expertise and length of time in this place, having seen so much of it in the past, was a great instructor to me on how to handle such situations.

Even amid all that, she never lost track of her clear purpose, which was to stand up for civilians affected by conflict, for children, for human rights, and for basic standards and decency, even in war and conflict. Ann spoke passionately about that issue on the very last day that she spoke in this place in the valedictory debate, which I will quote in a moment. She taught me an incredible amount about sticking to principles, driving forward and fighting through difficult political situations. Ann served as an MEP before coming into this place. I spent a lot of time with her here during the Brexit debates, which as we all know were tumultuous, tiring and trying at times.

Ann never lost sense of her principles and what she stood for. My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) talked about how Ann stuck to her principles and was very tough, but she was truly an internationalist. She was never afraid to tell it as it was in this place when she thought others were getting it right rather than us. In that valedictory debate, she said:

“There are other reasons why I was pleased that I went there first”—

referring to the European Parliament.

“I have to say that it was a cultural shock for me to come here, because I had not realised how delusional people here were. I will tell you why. It was because we gave the impression that we did everything better than everybody else, when in fact there were many examples of other countries doing things better than we did, and I was pleased to have had the opportunity of experiencing that.”—[*Official Report*, 5 November 2019; Vol. 667, c. 699.]

Ann was deeply and passionately Welsh and British. She was proud of our country and what we did in the world when we were at our best, but she was also not

afraid to tell it as it was and to question and criticise, whether on domestic or international issues or on so many of the other causes that she went for. How she spoke in that last debate really sums her up.

Ann was a tireless advocate for, and regularly spoke to me about, human rights in a whole series of countries, from Türkiye to East Timor, as the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) mentioned. She fought for children in the terrible conflict in Syria in recent decades. She proudly spoke up alongside other dear departed colleagues such as Jo Cox and others in those crucial debates about the situation for children in Syria.

Despite all that international work, she never lost sight at all of the centrality of her constituency. I sat down with her a couple of years ago after she had retired, and she talked with encyclopaedic knowledge about the Phurnacite plant and everything that went on with her campaign on that in the constituency. She told me that at one point it was the most polluting plant in western Europe. She was resolute in her desire to fight for better air quality and standards for her constituents. She was not satisfied when the plant had closed, but fought for the clean-up and the return of greenery and wildlife to that site. That sums her up.

Ann helped, stood up for and advocated for so many people, particularly individuals detained abroad or who had their human rights violated. That may have been speaking up for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe or others detained in a whole series of situations, though I would not want to breach any confidence. Ann was always on the phone to me about my own constituents who she worked bravely and tenaciously to support. I am sure that Ann's advocacy and campaigning touched hundreds and possibly thousands of people, and possibly changed their lives. They may not ever know that, but she did.

I want to reflect on what a wonderful woman Ann was to spend time with privately. After she retired from this place I had the pleasure of spending a number of evenings, lunches and chats with Ann at her home. She would invite me over, and we would talk and gossip about politics and what was going on in here. We would get into some serious conversations about different issues and campaigns. She talked from her vast experience, but we also talked about her cats—she had stories about every one of them. I am a big cat lover and, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, Ann had a deep love of animals and had serious compassion for them. She told stories about their personalities and how they acted. She was incredibly proud of them. That showed that human and compassionate side of her character.

I remember stumbling into Ann's house one evening. I do not know what had been going on but I had been running from one event to another. I had not eaten and I was looking a bit pasty. I walked in and Ann, who was not in the best of health at that stage, got up and said, "Stephen, I'll make you a chop, I'll put some vegetables on and make you dinner." She cooked dinner for me and made sure I was fed and watered. That is a testament to the kind of woman she was.

Ann was a remarkable woman. She will be missed by many, not just for her incredible campaigning internationally, nationally and for her constituents, but for her friendship, companionship, mentorship and inspiration to many of us in this place from different

decades, different political persuasions and different parts of our own Labour movement. We have heard today some of the stories that show why she meant so much to so many of us.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) on securing the debate. It is a privilege to celebrate the contributions of her predecessor, the right hon. Ann Clwyd, the former Member of Parliament for Cynon Valley, who sadly passed away in July, aged 86.

Ann was not just a public servant; she was a great ambassador, whose dedication to her constituents and commitment to the values of justice and compassion have left a significant positive impact on many people's lives. She was born in Flintshire on 21 March 1937 to parents Gwilym and Elizabeth. Ann was educated at Halkyn Primary School, Holywell Grammar School, the Queen's School, Chester, and University College Bangor before becoming a student teacher at Hope School in Flintshire. She moved on to become a BBC studio manager, freelance reporter and producer, and then a journalist for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. As we have heard, she was a major advocate for the Welsh language. She campaigned to secure important funding to support it. In fact, I believe she could only speak Welsh until the age of five. She always made sure she took the parliamentary oath yn Gymraeg. In 1963, Ann married Owen Roberts, a television director and producer.

Ann's journey in politics spans several decades, during which she consistently demonstrated her resilience, integrity and genuine concern for the wellbeing of her constituents. Having joined the Labour party in 1968, she first stood for Parliament in 1970 in my part of the world, the old constituency of Denbigh. She then contested Gloucester in 1974 before being elected as a Member of the European Parliament for Mid and West Wales from 1979 to 1984. While putting together these words, I realised that she would have served alongside my relative Beata Brookes, the former MEP for North Wales. Then, in a by-election in May 1984, she became the Member of Parliament for the Cynon Valley, becoming, as we have heard, the first female MP to hold a seat in the south Wales valleys. That was a seat she held until she stood down in 2019. In total, she served 35 years in this place and is therefore Wales's longest-serving female MP to date. She was also, I believe, the oldest woman to have sat in the House of Commons.

Between 1987 and 1995, Ann was Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson for women, education, overseas development and co-operation, Wales, national heritage, employment and foreign affairs. During that period, she was, as we have heard, sacked on two occasions for choosing not to toe the party line, an indication that she was independently minded and not afraid to put her principles above all else. Indeed, her autobiography was entitled "Rebel With a Cause".

One of the most commendable aspects of Ann Clwyd's political career was her relentless pursuit of social justice. She championed human rights, advocating for those who often have no voice. Her work as the shadow Secretary of State for International Development and her role as the chair of the all-party parliamentary

[Dr James Davies]

human rights group demonstrate her dedication to improving the lives of people in both her constituency and around the world.

In 1994, she staged a 27-day sit-in at Tower colliery, near Hirwaun, in protest at British Coal's decision to close the last deep pit in Wales. The miners, of course, pooled their redundancy money to take it over and it went on to produce coal until 2008.

In 2003, the then Government moved to amend the existing law on female circumcision—the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985—after a private Member's Bill was introduced by Ann. The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 increased the maximum penalty from five to 14 years in jail.

Ann consistently campaigned for healthcare reform, and for better resourcing of the NHS. She worked to improve patient care, fighting for better working conditions for NHS professionals and increased transparency in the healthcare system. She was appointed by the then Prime Minister David Cameron to lead a review on complaint procedures in the NHS following the death of her own husband, Owen Roberts. While leading that review, she raised some difficult but honest concerns about healthcare in Wales. Her role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia helped to ensure that those affected by that devastating condition receive the support and care that they deserve.

Ann Clwyd was not just a leader in her own right; she was also a strong supporter of women's rights and gender equality. Her work in that area paved the way for

greater gender representation in politics, and has inspired many young women to pursue careers in public service. Her legacy in this regard is a testament to her desire for creating a more inclusive and equitable society. She was made a Privy Counsellor in 2004.

Throughout her career, Ann Clwyd's ability to connect with people from all walks of life, listen to their concerns and take action on their behalf earned her the respect and admiration of her constituents and colleagues alike—and we have certainly heard plenty of examples of that this evening. I served in the House alongside Ann between 2015 and 2017, and enjoyed my occasional conversations with her about the NHS and our shared connections in north Wales. She was personable, passionate and forthright.

I understand that a public service to remember Ann's life and work will be held at 2 pm on 13 October at St Elvan's Church in Aberdare. I have no doubt that her legacy will continue to inspire many for generations to come.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Ann Clwyd had many friends across the House, and I am proud to have been allowed to call myself one of them.

Question put and agreed to.

6.52 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 19 September 2023

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Freedom of Religion and Belief

9.30 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered freedom of religion and belief.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate. Speaking as a Member of Parliament, I seek to bring to bear my experiences over the last two to three years as the UK Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and from my role as the chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which now comprises 42 countries and growing, even though it is only just over three years old.

The focus of my speech is the need for us to be bolder and braver, to turn more of our words into actions, and to make a positive difference for those who suffer freedom of religion or belief violations. Freedom of religion or belief is a foundational right, but sadly violations of it are increasing across the world, by countries at scale, by terror groups and mobs, and through abuses against individuals imprisoned for their beliefs who so boldly and bravely stand and suffer for their faith. Those people are excluded from education, jobs, healthcare and access to justice; they experience discrimination, harassment and persecution. They are at risk of being incarcerated, tortured or even killed simply on account of what they believe. The men, women and children around the world who suffer, whether under the hard arm of authoritarian regimes or at the ruthless whims of militant mobs, need not just our voices, but our partnership—not just our words, but our good deeds.

That is why, after the London ministerial last July on freedom of religion or belief—a two-day gathering, which I had the privilege of co-chairing with Lord Ahmad, that was attended by more than 1,000 Government representative delegates from more than 80 countries, with more than 130 side events at the FORB fringe—I said, “These two days cannot be just a talking shop. We must turn our words into action that follows.” My special envoy team and I organised a third day after the conference; I pay tribute to David Burrowes, my deputy special envoy, and my private secretary from the Foreign Office, Sue Breeze.

That event was a “next steps” day, when more than 100 people from across the international community concerned about freedom of religion or belief, or FORB, sat down and worked out some action priorities, which the special envoy team has since worked to implement. In some cases they have begun to be implemented and in others we have made some good progress, with the support of the global council of experts of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance—a group of 40 experts from across the world—and in conjunction with representatives of the UK FORB Forum, a forum of 70 concerned organisations chaired by Mervyn Thomas, the founder of CSW, who is in the Gallery today.

I will particularly focus on strengthening collaborative working on freedom of religion or belief between grassroots activists, academics, lawyers, civil society experts, faith leaders, non-governmental organisations and Government representatives such as myself. Not long ago, it was encouraging to hear Mervyn Thomas, a seasoned observer in this field, say that he has never seen the FORB community more connected than it is today. We will make a difference only if we work together. The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance is a growing organisation. Our countries range from the Americas, Canada, Brazil, Costa Rica and across Africa, such as in Sierra Leone, down to Australia and through to many European countries. We are an organisation based on action.

What are the practical next steps that have been taken since the London ministerial last July? IRFBA—a difficult acronym to say—has inspired a 24-hour global virtual youth conference on FORB. This will take place on 19 and 20 October, and we hope to engage 1,000 young people from across the world, including in countries where they experience persecution, to enable them to directly recount their experiences through the “open space” format. We hope to inspire a new generation of FORB ambassadors. Much as young people have inspired the world on climate change, can I encourage anyone listening to this debate to log on to forbsfuture.org, and find out more about this conference? Particularly if you are a young person, please join it.

Other work has been done for young people. For instance, throughout the last academic year since the London ministerial, curriculum materials have been developed for the very youngest children—five and upwards—to understand the importance of not discriminating against others on account of their religion or belief, with a pilot being undertaken in four schools in the UK, including one in my constituency. Preliminary feedback is encouraging—children as young as five can quickly grasp the concept of FORB—and I have been encouraged by the interest in this work shown by our Schools Minister. I hope we can roll it out to more schools nationwide, and internationally across to our IRFBA countries in due course. I call this the ultimate upstream prevention work.

The special envoy team, together with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, is driving forward work in a number of other areas. Time prohibits me from going into detail, but let me list them. We are championing individual prisoners of conscience—at least one a month over the last year—and we have already seen two people imprisoned for their beliefs released. The most recent is young Hanna Abdimalik from Somaliland, a 24-year-old who converted to Christianity, was reported to the authorities by her own mother and was imprisoned for five years. I am very pleased to say that she was released last month.

We are building an international network of FORB roundtables, such as the UK FORB Forum, which has been so successful. We are networking and supporting human rights defenders working on FORB. We are better engaging with the media on FORB. This is a struggle, but we are doing our best to look at how we can better bring this major international concern into the media, both social and mainstream. We are working on atrocity prevention to help to call out abuses earlier. We are working with lawyers on legislative reform.

[Fiona Bruce]

We are looking to protect religious and cultural heritage with a very active working group, and we are beginning to network on international best practice for trauma counselling and rehabilitation, so that people such as young Hanna can get appropriate support when they are released from prison. This is the kind of work I mean when I say that we need to turn words into action.

That is the good news; and why is it so important? Because of the bad news. The bad news is that it has never been more important to champion FORB because it has never been more at risk. What is the evidence? Look across the world at what has happened in the over two and a half years since I was appointed as the UK Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief in December 2020. We have seen a military coup in Myanmar dramatically exacerbating the persecution of religious minorities there. We have seen the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, with every belief group there, other than those willing to succumb to the Taliban's oppressive ways, now living in daily fear. Eritrea and Uganda have grown increasingly authoritarian.

FORB restrictions have increased in Tunisia, as well as in Algeria, to which I led a delegation just a few months ago. In Algeria, dozens—indeed, most—of the evangelical Protestant churches have been required to close in the last few years. Pastors now face court proceedings. The Catholic social action charity Caritas was shut down—actually, while I was there—a few months ago. Ahmadi Muslims face huge fines. Not one synagogue is left open in the capital, Algiers, and Bible Society literature has been blockaded from distribution from ships at port. Also in Africa, in Nigeria, year on year increasing thousands of Christians are massacred by the ISWA—Islamic State West Africa—terrorist network.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member and all the other Members who engage on this important issue on an ongoing basis. She is outlining a whole series of international incidents and issues. Does she agree that there must be an international response to all this, to ensure that there is wider understanding and then action taken, as she has outlined?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Member is absolutely right. I am pleased that the international response through the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance is strengthening, but we need to do more and we need more countries to join it.

In Nicaragua, the Catholic Church has been targeted this year, with religious organisations running schools and medical centres peremptorily expelled. A university was shut down last month. Even Mother Teresa's nuns, who have been working there for 30 years, were thrown out with no notice. Meanwhile, dozens of pastors flee Cuba. We are all too aware of China's incarceration of 1 million or more Uyghurs, but how many of us know that a similar number of children—1 million or so—as young as two years old have recently been removed from their homes and families in Tibet and transported to residential schools, to alienate them from their families, cultures and beliefs? In Hong Kong, the public voice of the Church has been neutered.

In the period since I was privileged to take up the office of envoy, the war against Ukraine has erupted, with places of worship being deliberately destroyed, pastors disappearing and Putin weaponising Orthodox Christianity. In Russia itself, Jehovah's Witnesses, who are pacifists, are now being imprisoned as criminals—even the very elderly.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's amazing work as the United Kingdom's envoy. With regard to Ukraine and Russia and the point made by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell)—who is to my right in this Chamber but not to my right politically—the United Kingdom has imposed the toughest sanctions possible to address Putin's war machine and hold him accountable. The question was raised about the international community coming together to address and to hold to account those who violate religious freedom. Will the envoy say whether the 42 member countries of the alliance—I declare that I was its vice-chair—have come together to ask respective countries to look at sanctioning certain individuals across the globe for their violations of international religious freedom or belief?

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend makes a good point. As chair of the alliance, I have certainly asked our sanctions unit to look at individuals, but it is an excellent point: the alliance collectively could also look at that.

Ukraine is a founder member of IRFBA, but Ukraine and many central European countries around it now face Putin crouching at their door. For them, defending FORB is more than a principle; it is a lived reality. They faced communism, they faced the Nazis. Working with my counterparts from those countries humbles me. I am referring to counterparts such as Ambassador Robert Řehák from the Czech Republic, the IRFBA vice-chair. When he was at school during the communist era in what became the Czech Republic, the state police came to see him and said, "If you keep speaking out like this, we'll take you away." He says, "I knew they meant it, because I had seen the bodies taken away through the streets of Prague in black bags."

All the FORB violations that I have referred to and more, in all the countries where FORB violations have increased, are impacting on millions of people across the world. It is a tragedy that so many violations are happening in our time and that the numbers of people affected are so huge. Individual men, women and children are affected. They are suffering simply because of what they believe and simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But there are too many wrong places and this is in our time, the 21st century.

It is a tragic paradox that globalisation, which not long ago, in the 20th century, was heralded as the route to a more connected, confident and civilised future for the world, seems to have spawned, in the 21st century, a far more insecure, fractious and fragmented international landscape. The current global trajectory is away from a rights-based order or consensus, prioritising democracy, civil liberties and the rule of law, to what could increasingly be described as a values-based order—and those values are not always positive, focusing on national, religious, ethnic or political priorities.

Since the turn of the century, an increasing number of countries have seen the creeping eclipse of liberal democracy and its replacement by an authoritarianism

led by so-called democracies such as Russia and inspired by the model of the People's Republic of China. A new authoritarian influence that openly seeks to reinterpret and redefine human rights is on the increase, aided and abetted by technological developments, facilitating persecution on a scale unimaginable a generation ago. That technology, which is sold around the world to dozens of countries, also feeds another recent trend: transnational repression. Consequently, it often appears, as the writer Anne Applebaum so powerfully noted in *The Atlantic*, that "The Bad Guys Are Winning"—a piece she otherwise titled, "The Autocrats Are Winning".

For authoritarians, FORB represents an existential threat. For states and rulers who seek to impose their worldview or ideology and who wish to control the national narrative, the public presence of diverse and vocal religious and belief groups is intolerable. For them, ultimate loyalty must be to an authoritarian leader and no other. That, of course, is no more tragically seen than in the outworking of the egregiously cruel regime of Kim Jong-un in North Korea, where three generations of a family can be punished for the so-called crime of one, and where a two-year-old child has been sentenced to life in prison simply because his parents owned a Bible.

As well as the autocrats—the so-called bad guys—regrettably, too many Governments, which may be called "the good guys", view FORB merely as a niche interest, to be engaged by a few of us with a particularly religious perspective on life. Yet FORB is not a niche topic or a sidebar issue. That perception has to change. Here in the UK, we cannot just tick the FORB box by saying, "Well, there's a special envoy." The so-called good guys have to be bolder and braver to call out FORB abusers, and those of us involved in this work need to work harder to communicate that.

FORB is a foundational human right. FORB concerns should therefore be core concerns at every international summit, because they are at the core of so many human rights violations today. I will give just one of the many examples of continuing blind spots in identifying FORB abusers for what they are—and this one is by the good guys. While women in Iran have bravely led the charge against the brutal theocratic regime, journalists and politicians alike have not fully grasped the fact that, at heart, the protests are about FORB violations. The imposition of religious dress codes is a FORB issue. It is FORB that the Iranian regime fears most because, as with all authoritarian regimes, FORB represents an existential threat. With angry crowds shouting, "Women, life, freedom," it is the realisation of FORB in full that will ensure respect for women, for life and for freedom for everyone in Iran. This is the issue on which the future of Iran hangs.

If global trends continue, the stage is set for an era of diminishing human rights. FORB will continue to be a prime casualty of that decline, which will be exacerbated by inadequate understanding—even by the good guy countries—of FORB as a foundational human right and of its importance in the human rights realm. We have been too accustomed to countries merely paying lip service to FORB rights and obligations, having signed up to international agreements including article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights and the international covenant on civil and political rights, but without honouring the obligations in them. In a country

that has signed up to both those agreements, it is simply not acceptable for a young girl to be kidnapped from her home, forcibly "married" by being raped multiple times, and then turned away when she goes to a police station or tries to get justice through the courts. We should call this out more.

If the era that I have described continues, we can expect even the pretence of assent to begin to fade. That is why the good guys must be bolder and braver. Although human rights are independently valuable and interdependent, the right to FORB is a foundational value. Without the freedom to believe or not to believe, it is hard to see how other human rights make sense. Freedom of speech, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, the right to equality before the law, the right to education, privacy, family life and marriage—all those rights are predicated and contingent on the right to thought, conscience and religion.

Citizens cannot be truly free if they cannot live according to their beliefs. Without the expression of what has long been considered a sacred inner liberty, external rights lack grounding and legitimacy. Political, social and economic freedoms cannot co-exist alongside major limitations on FORB. FORB can exist without democracy, but it is hard to see how democracy can exist without FORB. FORB can also be considered a foundational value, because violations of it provide an early warning system for other human rights troubles and their trajectory. That is why we need to call out abuses at an early stage.

Much good work is being done, as I mentioned at the outset, but we need to do still more to be bolder and braver and to turn more of our words into action. We need a dedicated Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister in the House of Commons working on the issue of religion or belief. I am grateful to the Minister for being here today, and I know she takes great interest in the subject, but last week it was the Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who responded to our debate on the Ahmadiis. During Question Time in the main Chamber, it is the Minister responsible for international development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who answers questions on FORB. This is too important an issue for us not to have a dedicated Minister in the House of Commons, much as we have one for women and girls. On every foreign trip, a Minister should be accompanied by a FORB briefing, which my special envoy team is more than willing to provide. We also need to ensure that recommendation 6 of the Truro review—that the special envoy role be embedded in legislation—is put into effect.

On 18 October, I shall present a private Member's Bill on the issue. I thank hon. Members who are supporting the Bill, and I pay tribute to parliamentary colleagues across the parties for their commitment to and interest in FORB. We in the UK are a beacon in that respect, but we need to ensure that the energy and momentum of the current special envoy team endure beyond the next general election and that they are given better and more adequate and substantive departmental support in the FCDO. This is an area in which the UK is now seen as a global leader. Let us keep it that way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 11 o'clock. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespersons at no later than 10.27 am, and the guideline limits are 10 minutes each for the Scottish National party, for His Majesty's Opposition and for the Minister. We should then have a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to sum up the debate. There will be a five-minute limit so that everybody can get in, and Jim Shannon will lead by example.

9.54 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): That will be difficult, Mr Hollobone, but I will try my best. I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for setting the scene so very well. I commend her sterling work in this House for freedom of religion or belief, and for Our Lord and Saviour. It is important work, and I thank her for it.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I want to raise two issues: India and Pakistan. This debate is not to attack friends, but to share a lesson from our history. The UK has learned enough through its long history to know that when religious minorities are denied rights, it harms the rest of society. When they have been granted equal rights, the UK has thrived.

I am concerned about the ongoing violations of religious liberty that have been allowed to continue in the Manipur region of north-east India. Between 3 and 6 May this year, a short, sharp episode of extreme violence occurred. Eye-watering numbers of people were displaced from their homes; some reports state that 26,000 people were displaced and 50,000 were forced to relocate. A shocking video of two Kuki women who were graphically assaulted went viral a few weeks ago, opening up the world to the plight of the thousands of people who have been suffering.

The events in Manipur might be classed as originating in tribal or ethnic tensions, but the Manipur violence has silently been an attack on Christians in India. It is striking that local police and state government sat by as arson destroyed the properties, homes and lives of minority and religious groups. The religious aspect of the violence has not been widely reported. The perpetrators of the violence are understood to be from Hindu extremist backgrounds, whereas the victims are predominantly Christians. Some 230 churches were destroyed over a four-day period. Many perpetrators of the violence did not act in a random manner; their violence was deliberately targeted at Christians, and they wanted them to flee their lands.

International reports have made an explicit link to the violations of freedom of religion or belief in Manipur. The European Parliament has urged the Indian Government to

“take urgent steps to restore calm”

and

“to tackle the impunity enjoyed by mobs perpetrating the violence and respond to stem the violence in line with their international human rights obligations”.

The United Nations Human Rights Council declared that the violence had “reached a breaking point” and appealed to the Government of India to address the ethnic, tribal and religious crisis.

I am incredibly saddened to say that the situation in Manipur has escalated even further, with 60,000 people now displaced and 360 churches damaged. In the five minutes that I have, I have many questions for the Minister, but one of the most urgent is whether the violence in Manipur was mentioned in any formal discussion when our Prime Minister was in India. I know that the Minister is not responsible for what the PM says, but I am sure that discussions have taken place, so let us find out whether the Prime Minister brought these things to the attention of the Indian Government and whether those issues were raised. Journalists are still being prevented from doing fact-finding investigations. Will the Minister make representations to her Indian counterparts to find a way for journalists and human rights reporters to access the region?

I have been twice to Pakistan; we were there in February. The abuse of women and children in Pakistan concerns me. Members of Christian, Hindu, Sikh and other communities have suffered for decades under the weight of an oppressive system under which FORB is guaranteed by law but often disregarded in reality. Some 150 Christian families were evacuated due to persecution in the last month alone.

There is some positive news: caretaker Prime Minister Kakar has declared the state's dedication to protecting religious minorities. However, 1,000 young Hindu girls and women are abducted each year, as are Christians. One young girl, Chanda Maharaj, was 15 when she was kidnapped. What happened to Chanda is unimaginable. Will the Minister join me in condemning such brutal and unjust governance?

Some 57 blasphemy cases have been registered—more than in the previous year—and some 79 people have been murdered in the name of blasphemy laws. The attacks on Ahmadiyya Muslims have been well publicised in a previous debate, but there is something wrong when 4 million Ahmadiyya who live in Pakistan do not have the freedom that they should have.

This year, foreign aid to Pakistan totalled £41.54 million. As I and others have long said, let us have that aid tied to freedom of religion or belief, human rights and equality issues, and ensure that the freedom that we all wish to see actually happens. At the moment, it does not.

I have three final questions for the Minister. Was the issue of Manipur raised at the G20 meeting? Has the Minister raised the issue of access to Manipur for journalists and human rights monitors and their counterparts? And—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Theresa Villiers.

9.59 am

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): “You may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say you did not know.” Those were the words of William Wilberforce in a 1791 debate in this House on the slave trade, quoted by the Bishop of Truro in his groundbreaking 2019 report on the persecution of Christians. It is an apt quotation for today, after everything that we have heard in this debate about the plight of Christians and other religious minorities around the world.

I urge the Minister to ensure—as the special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), urged—that the Government take action on the recommendations of both the Truro report and the influential ministerial conference last year. Research by organisations such as Aid to the Church in Need and Christian Solidarity Worldwide tells us that thousands are suffering simply because they want to follow their faith in freedom.

In China, we are seeing the tragedy of the Uyghurs. We have also seen a dramatic exodus of Christians from the middle east. Nigeria is a hugely dangerous place to be Christian, for many people; the abduction of 276 mainly Christian schoolgirls made headlines in 2014, but that is just one of many kidnappings that have been followed by rape, forced conversion and forced marriage. Nine years on, many of those Chibok girls are still missing.

In Pakistan, there are frequent examples of Christian and Hindu girls suffering forced conversion, as Aid to the Church in Need documented in its 2021 report “Hear Her Cries”. Blasphemy can be punished by death in Pakistan. Allegations that are malicious, vindictive and without substance are often made. Insight UK reports that Hindu temples have been attacked and vandalised. At the time of partition in 1947, there were approximately 400 Hindu temples in the Sindh region of Pakistan; there are now barely 20. Amnesty International has highlighted attacks on Hindu and Christian women in Pakistan and has called on the Pakistan Government to keep the promise made in August 1947 by one of the country’s founders, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, that religious freedom would be protected.

I also want to talk about Cyprus, which has an ancient civilisation dating back to 9,000 BC. It is close to the holy land and was one of the first countries to embrace Christianity. It is believed that in 45 AD the apostles Paul, Barnabas and Mark visited Cyprus. The island is home to a huge number of churches, monasteries, mosaics, murals and icons that stretch back to the earliest days of Christianity.

In July 1974, Turkey invaded Cyprus, and it continues to occupy 37% of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus. Since the invasion, about 500 churches have been desecrated or badly neglected, 77 have been converted into mosques, 28 have been used as barracks by the Turkish military and 13 are believed to have been used as storage rooms or hay barns. Thousands of priceless icons have been looted. There is a thriving illicit trade in cultural artefacts, which is fuelled by illegal excavations and smuggling. That not only perpetuates the destruction of religious sites, but finances criminal activities. Many religious sites are impossible to access because they are located in Turkish military zones. There are worrying instances of Orthodox and Maronite Christians who live in enclaved communities in the Turkish-controlled area of Cyprus being unjustly prevented from conducting religious services and practising their faith.

I appeal to the Government to work with international partners to protect the cultural heritage of Cyprus, bear down on the illegal trade in artefacts and, above all, put pressure on the Turkish authorities to restore full freedom of religion in the north of Cyprus, as well as giving Cypriots the freedom to determine their own future as Cypriots, free from Turkish military control.

Matthew 5:10 says:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

That may be a comfort to those who are suffering for their faith, but it does not absolve us in this House of our obligation to speak out for those facing discrimination, violence and hatred because of their religion. That is what we must all continue to do, to play our part in changing life for the better for Christians and other religious minorities around the world.

10.4 am

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the special envoy, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for securing this important debate, and I thank all my colleagues in the all-party parliamentary group, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for their work on the issue.

I will focus on the effects of social media on promoting misinformation, intolerance and inflammatory speech that challenges people’s right to freedom of religion or belief, especially in crisis areas. The danger of social media companies in that respect has been noted by the companies themselves. A Meta company worker said in 2019:

“We have evidence from a variety of sources that hate speech, divisive political speech, and misinformation on Facebook...are affecting societies around the world. We also have compelling evidence that our core product mechanics, such as virality, recommendations, and optimizing for engagement, are a significant part of why these types of speech flourish on the platform.”

That is partly why Labour has repeatedly warned that the Government’s Online Safety Bill may not go far enough in its focus on content rather than on social media platforms’ business models.

In 2021, many fake social media accounts pretended to be “#RealSikh” members of the community in India. A groundbreaking report by Benjamin Strick of the Centre for Information Resilience, reported on by the BBC, found at least 80 fake accounts, many using profile pictures of celebrities, posting divisive posts seeking to discredit Sikh political interests such as the farmers’ protests, often labelling them as extremist or claiming their infiltration by extremist groups. Benjamin Strick said that the aim of the network appears to have been to

“alter perceptions on important issues around Sikh independence, human rights and values”

Those accounts have now been suspended because they were fake. The danger of such information has led to religious and ethnic violence and tensions.

I took a close interest in the report at the time because many of those fake accounts also targeted me and other politicians. I could see how effective they seemed to be in generating a narrative and abuse that seemed to take on a life of their own. I have no problem with individual voters challenging me on x—it comes with the job—but I am concerned about politically motivated misinformation campaigns that appear to have money behind them and to be co-ordinating across platforms on a large scale. Areas of the media in which it is possible to buy political influence and distort debate are generally carefully regulated, but that is not the case with social media, which it is why it has become such a target for manipulation.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

The network used so-called sock puppets—fake accounts controlled by real users, as opposed to automated bots—posing as independent people. Nikhil Pahwa, a digital rights activist, has noted:

“These 80-odd accounts will not necessarily make something trend, but with consistent posting, they try to discredit a point of view... This seems to be a sophisticated approach, and seems to be a part of a larger operation.”

The farmers’ protests and the decades-old Sikh independence movement were two discussion topics targeted by the network, with attempts to delegitimise both.

The same phenomenon has had incredibly grave consequences elsewhere in the world. As the United Nations found in Myanmar, hate speech and calls for violence on Facebook played a major role in fomenting the Rohingya genocide and later religious and ethnic violence in the country. The continued exile of nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is surely a testament to the seriousness with which we should be taking the issue.

Similar speech is reported to have greatly contributed to the violence and potential genocide in Tigray. Meta is currently facing a \$2 billion lawsuit, backed by Amnesty International and filed in Kenya, for allegedly contributing to the violence against the Tigray community. Facebook has allowed the incitement of violence in the region for years, and although there are efforts to stop it, they have not been entirely successful.

As Internews Europe told the International Development Committee in evidence submitted to its inquiry on atrocity prevention,

“media, online and social media platforms with significant reach have been deployed as part of deliberate efforts to dehumanise particular ethnic or religious groups, disseminate grievance-based narratives and incite violence”.

His Majesty’s Government must do more. More must be done to enforce respect for FORB throughout the world, particularly in the United Kingdom and its partner nations. When we see persecution and hate still rife across the world, it is incumbent on all parliamentarians across the House to reaffirm our commitment to the values and principles set out in the 2021 G7 summit communiqué, which for the first time referred specifically to freedom of religion or belief. As the Prime Minister absconds from the role of international statesman that British Prime Ministers used to hold, failing even to show up at many of the international fora at which issues such as FORB will be raised, I hold out hope that his Ministers will take a stand for human rights in his stead.

10.9 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As always, Mr Hollobone, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this debate from the Backbench Business Committee. She has devoted much of her time in Parliament to speaking out on behalf of those who dare not whisper their faith even to their closest family for fear of losing their home, their job or even their life.

On Sunday, I was invited to St John’s church in Shiphay for its harvest celebration. It was great to be part of the congregation as the community came together

to thank God and those who produce our food for the harvest. We had a little too much soft refreshing rain—in the words of the famous hymn—falling outside, but the warmth of welcome in the church was clear. I thank Rev. Paul Ireton and the whole team at the church for the invitation to join them and for all their work to support the wider community.

Attending a church event or fun day is an experience that many colleagues will be familiar with; it is routine. Yet for too many across the world, the simple act of attending church on Sunday can mean putting their life on the line. This debate is about standing up for people’s right—not to have the same faith as me, but to express their own beliefs. The 1948 UN universal declaration of human rights states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the freedom to choose, change and practise their own belief or faith, or not to profess one. The declaration is complemented by the 1981 declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief.

While the two declarations are non-binding on states, they set out expectations that those with religious faith, and those without, have the right to choose and practise their beliefs. The protection for FORB in the 1966 international covenant on civil and political rights is binding on states that have signed it. To date, there are 173 parties to the covenant; perhaps unsurprisingly, those that have not yet ratified it include China and Cuba—a reminder that religious and political persecution go hand in hand, as denying the right to believe in God is so often linked to leaders who wish to put themselves in His place.

As touched on already, religious persecution is still too common across the world. In 2020, US-based Pew Research Centre found that Government or societal harassment was reported in 155 countries against Christians, in 145 against Muslims and in 94 against Jews, out of the 198 countries surveyed. Globally, apostasy—renouncing a faith or belief—is potentially punishable by death in at least 10 countries as is the case in seven for blasphemy.

As hon. and right hon. Members will know, the organisation Open Doors does fantastic work to support the persecuted, with much of it going unheralded due to the circumstances in which its teams operate. Its annual world watch list is a comprehensive assessment of the levels of persecution faced by Christians around the world. To give some perspective, 312 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of persecution in the top 50 countries alone of Open Door’s world watch list. As has been touched on, few will be surprised to hear that North Korea tops the list, given the way that all freedoms are suppressed by its despotic regime, but other names, such as Mexico at No. 38, might be more of a surprise, as the list looks at not just the position of Governments, but the experiences of Christians in daily life.

In its May 2023 summary of trends, Open Doors identified six key points. The first is that violence in sub-Saharan Africa has reached new heights. Secondly, the China model has a growing number of emulators, with authoritarian regimes effectively taking inspiration from how China oppresses its citizens. The third is that China’s digital control is threatening the Church, as has been touched on in other contexts, and its ability to manipulate social media. The fourth is that conditions for the Church in Latin America have worsened. Fifthly,

the Church in the middle east is reduced and still under pressure. But there is some good news: greater tolerance in the Gulf was the sixth trend. Each trend is either a challenge for the future or, in one case, a sign of how a growing sense of economic freedom can bring with it a demand for the right to choose our own religious faith.

I look forward to the Minister's response. I would be interested to know what role the analysis provided by groups like Open Doors plays in the Government's work, and how she would describe the difference the UK makes in this area, particularly on its engagement with China. I welcome the chance to have shared my thoughts in the debate and to once again be in this Chamber standing up for the freedom of religious belief. It is natural to question why and to explore what we believe, yet too many still cannot do that without putting their life, home or job on the line, and that is what the debate is about.

10.14 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing the debate and for her cross-party work on these important issues.

Earlier this month, I was pleased to represent the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief at the International Religious Freedom Summit 2023 in Taiwan, where we heard some harrowing tales of the persecution, torture and even killing of people for their religious beliefs in a variety of countries. It was truly shocking. Our cross-party all-party parliamentary group seeks to advocate for those without a voice so that they are heard loud and clear. We help those without the freedoms that we enjoy to be heard and seen, and we will fight on their behalf until those freedoms, which many of us take for granted, are available to one and all across the globe. As we look around our world, the scourge of persecution against religious minorities remains a challenge for all of us to tackle head-on, now and in the future.

The APPG recently published a report on the state of freedom of religion or belief in Nepal. The report, which I recommend that colleagues read, details the need for support from the UK, in terms of both policy assistance and training, to help Nepal to execute the vision in its constitution. Sitting between China to the north and India to the south, Nepal is uniquely situated at a strategically vital point in the region for the expression of freedom of religious belief. Nepal boasts a liberal constitution that ensures that all citizens have the right to freedom of religious belief, but minority religious communities still face persecution. I look forward to the APPG and the FCDO taking steps to support Nepal through this ongoing process, and I call on the Minister to designate funding to support a training delegation to Nepal to help local administrators with FORB best practices.

Nepal has a large population of Tibetan refugees; indeed, according to the lowest estimate from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, about 12,000 Tibetan refugees now live in Nepal. A 2015 UNHCR report states that as many as three out of four Tibetans may not possess up-to-date refugee cards. Without identification, they cannot access basic Government services or move

from Nepal, which means they are left in a state of limbo as a minority religious community. They are denied documentation and the basic rights of citizens. That is not to mention the group of over 23,000 Bhutanese refugees who are mostly living in camps in eastern Nepal, and who need documentation to continue their lives. In any future delegations to or discussions with the Nepal Government, the future of those tens of thousands of displaced people must be discussed.

International human rights law is underpinned by the universal declaration of human rights. When a human right is abused anywhere, that contributes to the breakdown of the rule of law everywhere. Of course, such a breakdown will have a huge impact on the democracy and health of communities the world over, which is why it is vital for parliamentarians and elected representatives of the people at all levels of government to uphold the universal declaration of human rights. We should be able to worship our gods and have our beliefs according to our consciences, and we should allow all other men, women and children to have the same privileges and let them also worship how, where and who they want.

For all the calls for respect, understanding and decency, it is important also to remind ourselves that around the world many groups of different faiths celebrate, learn and come together. We must never forget that although we may come from different religious faiths, we strengthen each other when we embrace each other. We need to work in solidarity and never walk by on the other side. By working side by side with, honouring, standing up for and protecting each other, we can build a better, more inclusive and safer world for all of us. To build that better world, we must never forget the threats that remain alive today. Regimes that oppress freedom of religion are likely to violate other human rights too. Of course, the protection of our freedoms is vital not only for the welfare of individuals but in preventing unrest and instability and delivering that better world for all of us.

10.18 am

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start with a declaration of interest: I am a former UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and was also the co-vice chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance when it was first set up in 2020, working alongside the United States. I also refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for other interests related to religious freedom.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who has done an outstanding job as the United Kingdom special envoy. I echo her request to the Foreign Office and the Government for a dedicated Minister. I was an envoy and a Minister in the Foreign Office, so I know that we have brilliant duty Ministers, but to do fairness and justice to this issue, we must have the consistency of a Minister turning up to the Dispatch Box, having heard what Members of Parliament have said before; that would bring credibility to the issue. I also support the call for dedicated support, structure and resources for the envoy's role.

That having been covered, the question is this: how do the United Kingdom Government advance international religious freedom as a top priority? Page 3 of the report produced by the House of Commons Library on 8 September 2023 reads:

[*Rehman Chishti*]

“In her submission to the Backbench Business Committee, Fiona Bruce MP, who acts as the UK Government’s Special Envoy on FoRB, raised 13 countries of particular concern: Algeria, Afghanistan, China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, Nigeria, Nicaragua, Russia, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, and Uganda.”

They were also on my desk when I was the envoy. How do we make those countries accountable?

We have the tools. Our key tool is sanctions. I am a former Minister for sanctions; we have seen the key role that sanctions have played in addressing Putin’s illegal war in Ukraine. In how many of those 13 countries have we applied sanctions to individuals who are FORB violators? We have sanctions with regard to Ukraine and Belarus and we have Magnitsky sanctions, but how many have been applied in these countries? I ask the same question of the 42-member alliance. It was 26 when we started it, so I pay huge tribute to the envoy for taking it to 42. The alliance has a responsibility. Has the alliance come together to say, “These are the individuals across the world who violate human rights and, to protect freedom of religion or belief, we need decisive action in a co-ordinated manner and to share that with our respective countries back at home with a sanctions department”? I think that is absolutely crucial.

In the United States, Knox Thames, who was a State Department adviser for over 20 years, has written a brilliant report. In May 2023, he said that the United States has only once ever refused a visa to an individual for FORB violations. If it is once in the United States, how many times have we in the United Kingdom refused visas for individuals who breach religious freedom or belief? Can the Minister take that away? Time is running out.

The other point I want to raise is with regard to a closed petition condemning the burning of the Holy Koran in Sweden. A petition was put to the House of Commons, and 64,000 people signed it. It made the point that where individuals burn holy books with regard to the incitement of hatred, whether it is the Koran, the Torah, the Guru Granth, the Gita or the Injil—across the board—that kind of behaviour incites intolerance and hatred. Therefore, countries such as Sweden and Denmark that allow it under freedom of expression need to reconsider what that leads to. The point was made earlier that freedom of religion or belief is not just doing the right thing; it is absolutely about doing that, but it is also a national security imperative. If we do not have strong cohesive societies, it leads first to non-violent extremism and then violent extremism, and that creates havoc in our societies.

I finish with words from His Holiness Pope Francis. On the burning of the Holy Koran, he said he was “angry and disgusted” and that he “rejected and condemned” permitting the act as a form of freedom of speech. I ask the Minister to make very clear the United Kingdom Government’s commitment to ensure respect for all scriptures and that, whenever that is violated, we call it out, and to ensure that we do everything to make representations to Denmark and Sweden so that this kind of behaviour does not go unchallenged.

10.23 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As everyone else has done, I want to congratulate the

hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) both on securing the debate and on all the work she does in this area. She made a very powerful and considered opening contribution and that was followed by six equally well-informed and impassioned contributions from Back-Bench Members of different parties.

Looking back, we seem to have a debate like this about this time of year. I do not know if that is deliberate or not, but it seems to be becoming a bit of an annual tradition. That is quite appropriate because on 22 August, during the summer recess, we marked the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief and, in about a month, on 27 October we will mark International Religious Freedom Day. Those days have been designated by international bodies to reflect the fact that freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right. As the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) said, that is enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights, which will be 75 years old on 10 December. It is also recognised, as the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said, in many other global treaties and conventions.

Sadly, as we have heard throughout this debate, the denial of those rights is on the rise around the world. Perhaps one of the most frustrating and disappointing aspects of this is that the persecution of people for their religion or belief is most often carried out by people who hold or practise a religion or belief of their own. Yet a core teaching of almost every major world religion is the golden rule of the ethic of reciprocity, which is that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated. Peace and justice are preached, but too often violence and oppression are practised.

We have heard a number of references to various reports about the rise of threats to freedom of religion or belief, including that of the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea. Her report earlier this year stated that challenges to FORB were “alarming”, and were undermining efforts on conflict prevention, other human rights such as freedom of speech, and the ability of minorities to participate in public life. I think all Members have drawn out this link between the fundamental principles of freedom of religion or belief and all the other human rights on which the world order is supposed to be based.

We have heard about various countries where apostasy or blasphemy are still criminal offences—in some places punishable by death—including a number of Commonwealth countries, despite the Commonwealth’s proclaimed shared goals of prosperity, democracy and peace. We have also heard reflections on the Pew Research Centre’s published assessments on these issues. It has assessed that the number of countries with high or very high Government restrictions on religion has increased steadily from 47 in 2014 to 57 countries by 2020. It is clear from contributions that threats to freedom of religion or belief also come from non-state actors that are allowed to act with impunity while the state either turns a blind eye or actively supports or encourages them.

At the same time, we should recognise and pay tribute to the work of the many organisations that advocate for freedom of religion or belief and monitor the situation around the world. I am thinking particularly of Open Doors, which publishes its annual world watch list—that is of interest to many constituents in Glasgow North, and I am sure to the constituents of everyone here—as

well as Aid to the Church in Need, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and many others. The staff, researchers and partners of these organisations often put themselves at risk collecting the evidence and testimonies that inform our debates, so we should be very grateful for their work.

I hear regularly from constituents in Glasgow North who raise their concern about the oppression and persecution of faith communities around the world. They are concerned about the increasing oppression of Christians in Pakistan, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about, and have cited a recent example where Christians were forced to flee the Punjab town of Jaranwala after violence broke out following accusations of blasphemy against one of the local cleaners. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan also faces severe persecution by the state, which I think makes the determination of that community to live by their precept of love for all and hatred for none all the more inspiring.

The struggle for peace and justice in the Holy Land, which has been mentioned, is incredibly complex, but respect for freedom of religion has to be at the centre of any just and lasting solution. Yet extreme elements of the Government of Israel are pushing for arrangements and territorial designations that will make access to holy sites for Christians—not just residents, but potentially tourists and pilgrims—much more difficult.

We are marking the first anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini in Iran, and the start of the demonstrations for women, life and freedom that began in the wake of that tragedy. Women should have the right to wear religious dress as they see fit, but they should also have the right to choose not to, and no Government or state body should be punishing them for that decision. That is also true in Afghanistan, where the Taliban's treatment of women is abhorrent, and many people who belong to religious minorities have fled the country. We have also heard case studies about China, where any religion not sanctioned by the state can be subject to severe repercussions, including the appalling treatment of the Uyghur Muslims that many argue is tantamount to genocide.

All of this demands a response from the UK Government. They must consider how seriously they can live up to the principles they say that they support. The hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) made that point powerfully in a fitting closing speech from the Back Benches.

We cannot pretend that cuts to the aid budget have happened in a vacuum. Funding for conflict resolution projects in some of the world's most volatile regions—including Nigeria, mentioned by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and Myanmar, mentioned by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill)—was cut to the tune of around £12 million in April 2021. Those cuts do not help the UK's global influence or its ability to be taken seriously when speaking about these matters on the global stage. The solutions proposed by the hon. Member for Congleton, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham and others for how the Government can take FORB seriously and ensure that it is front and centre when Ministers travel overseas and have the opportunity to raise it with international partners are absolutely

correct. The Government need to step up their work on atrocity prevention and introduce a whole-of-Government approach.

Constituents in Glasgow North and people across Scotland want to do their part to promote and respect harmony between people of all religions and none. I have spoken before about the excellent work of the interfaith movement in both Glasgow and Scotland more widely, and the practical work it does to bring together people of different communities. The Scottish Government continue to lay out their vision for independence, including a written constitution that will enshrine respect for human rights in the foundation of a new Scotland. That way, hopefully, we can all play our part together to continue to promote freedom of religion and belief, and respect for human rights, around the world.

10.31 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the special envoy, for securing the debate. I thank all colleagues for their contributions and all the organisations that many of us have drawn on. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, they do such important work, often in very dangerous circumstances, bringing the truth to light about some truly horrific situations around the world.

I thank the special envoy in particular for her powerful opening speech and for highlighting the growing trend of clampdowns on freedom of religion or belief across the world in many different contexts, including by states. She was right to highlight not only the situation of the Uyghur Muslims in China, which we often hear about, but the persecution that has gone on in Tibet, not least of Tibetan Buddhists. The horrific circumstances there include the state monitoring of monasteries and the use of facial recognition cameras, restricting people's practice of their beliefs. She was also right to highlight the Bishop of Truro's important report, which we have debated many times in this place.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is always a powerful advocate on these issues, was absolutely right to draw attention to the situation in Pakistan. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) raised important concerns about Cyprus, which have also been raised with me; I saw some of that with my own eyes on my visit there. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) is always a powerful advocate on these issues as well, and she rightly highlighted the dangers of social media and disinformation in spreading intolerance and hatred. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) raised the situation in Nepal, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North rightly raised the situation in Iran, particularly for women.

All those examples and the others that we have heard about show the real concerns about the clampdown and the trends that we see globally. There is huge concern across the House about these issues and a desire for the Government and the United Kingdom to play a role in promoting freedom of religion or belief not only domestically, but globally through our diplomatic networks and other engagements, including sometimes difficult

[Stephen Doughty]

conversations with allies and friends about issues in their own countries. We have a crucial role in that as a leading member of the United Nations Security Council and many other bodies, including the Human Rights Council.

We all know that the 1948 declaration of human rights states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom to choose, change and practise their own belief or faith—or, indeed, not to profess one. In their most recent survey, in 2020, the special rapporteur found that legal restrictions on freedom of religion or belief have increased in recent years, including restrictions on the freedom to worship publicly, the operation of humanitarian agencies and associations, the appointment of faith leaders and access to education.

We know that in many cases the greatest persecutors and inhibitors of such freedom can be states themselves. The special rapporteur said that

“states employ a range of extra-legal measures that violate freedom of religion or belief, which also serve to delegitimise and stigmatise certain religious or belief groups.”

As we have heard on a number of occasions, the rising intolerance of authoritarian regimes throughout the world is supplemented by the increasing use of technology as a means of state-sponsored repression and the increased adoption and implementation of anti-blasphemy laws and the criminalisation of apostasy.

Rehman Chishti: The hon. Gentleman mentions the role of authoritarian states, but what about democratic states? The House of Commons Library briefing dated 8 September contains a question by the special envoy to the Second Church Estates Commissioner, in which she referenced the killing of about 100 people, and the displacement of 50,000, in Manipur in India. We have a strategic foreign policy objective of prosperity, security and values, and we have engagement with the Indo-Pacific region on security, but then we have issues in a democratic state with regard to religious minorities. How would the hon. Gentleman go about addressing those challenges and engaging with a country as important for the United Kingdom as India? What levers would he use?

Stephen Doughty: We have to have a robust, honest and candid dialogue with our closest friends and allies. Indeed, a number of those have already been mentioned, and I will go on to mention a number of them myself. It is incumbent on us to have those conversations when there are clear concerns. The hon. Gentleman mentioned several countries, but there are a number of democracies around the world where we see these issues.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is right. Further to the intervention by the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), there are ways of doing this; I indicated that in my speech, as did others. We can tie human rights and freedom of religious belief in with aid. We give India and Pakistan substantial aid, as we do other parts of the world. If we make that conditional, we can effect some change.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed, there have always been, as far as I understand it, partnership principles in giving UK official development assistance. It is important that all those are considered when we engage with countries, even those that are friends and allies or might be rightly

receiving assistance for other reasons. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom identified 16 countries of particular concern in 2023 and recommended 11 countries for a special watchlist. In 10 countries, the crime of apostasy is potentially punishable by death in all or part of the state, and there are seven countries where blasphemy potentially carries the same sentence.

We have heard about persecution of lots of different faiths. It will be too difficult to do justice to all of them, but let me highlight a few instances. On persecution against Christians, according to Open Doors, more than 360 million Christians worldwide suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. That is a staggering one in seven believers. In Sudan, the ongoing political unrest has led to an intensification of anti-Christian sentiment. We have seen a horrific situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban, with the Christians who remain in the country pushed into hiding; those who are discovered could face the penalty of death. We have seen the expulsion from Nicaragua of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by St Teresa of Calcutta, and the religious of the Cross of the Sacred Heart of Jesus without due process.

In Egypt, there are reports that authorities have continued to prosecute and imprison Christians and other religious minorities. Jihadist violence continues to wreak havoc and horror in northern Nigeria, where a horrific attack in June last year saw 41 people killed at the St Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo. In Myanmar, pastor Hkalam Samson remains in prison for his religious beliefs. The sad fact is that I could go on and on, but there is simply not enough time to speak to the number of situations where Christians face persecution.

On the persecution of Jews, antisemitism is utterly abhorrent and I know that all hon. Members will condemn it in all its manifestations. The most recent report from the special rapporteur, in 2019, stated clearly that

“in many States antisemitic harassment is significantly underreported. Nevertheless, reports of hostility, discrimination and violence motivated by antisemitism have increased in many parts of the world.”

Eighty-five per cent of respondents

“felt that antisemitism was a serious problem in their respective countries, 34 per cent reported that they avoided visiting Jewish events or sites because of safety concerns, and 38 per cent had considered emigrating because they did not feel safe as Jews.”

The UK has a critical role to play both at home and abroad, whether on the desecration of cemeteries, on attacks and killings at synagogues or on the daily persecution and discrimination that so many Jewish people face around the world.

On the persecution of Muslims, the appalling treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and of the Rohingya in Myanmar are high-profile cases, but we have seen that in many other places. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are all rich and diverse societies, but we must all continue to raise concerns about religious freedom wherever necessary and urge the leadership of those countries to ensure that the right to freedom of religion is fully respected, whoever happens to be in the minority. We unequivocally condemn recent incidents of Koran burning and other attacks on Muslim communities. Indeed, I have stood alongside Muslim communities in my own constituency when they have faced violence and intimidation from the far right and neo-Nazis, with swastikas sprayed in their communities and acts of violence towards mosques and Muslims in my local area.

We also see violence against Hindus. In 2020, Dipti Rani Das, a teenager from the Hindu minority in Bangladesh, was arrested for a Facebook post, taken to a detention facility and held for 16 months. She faced up to seven years in jail for “hurting religious sentiment”. Whatever the rights and wrongs of her post, that is an extraordinarily draconian approach to take to an under-age individual. Amnesty and others successfully campaigned for her eventual release, but huge concerns remain.

Of course, there is also persecution of Sikhs. We saw a horrific assault on two Sikh businessmen in Peshawar, Pakistan, in May 2022. Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, has seen the near extinction of the Sikh community, which goes back to the 15th century. Until the 1980s, there was a vibrant community of 300,000 Sikhs, who played a critical role in the economy. It is now believed that their number is down to 200 people in hiding, as many have fled the brutality of the Taliban. Sadly, we know that humanists, atheists and those with no religious beliefs also face continued persecution, and we have discussed many such cases in the House.

I want to ask the Minister a few specific questions, given the horrific record that we have heard about today. First, it was good to see that the G20 communiqué specifically highlighted UN General Assembly resolution 318, particularly its

“commitment to promote respect for religious and cultural diversity, dialogue and tolerance”,

but can the Minister outline why this issue did not feature in the G7’s communiqué and whether the UK, as a leading member of the G7, the Security Council and other bodies, will ensure that we use all forums to highlight these issues?

Secondly, what steps are being taken more broadly to ensure that freedom of religion is prioritised internally? We have heard different suggestions about how that might be done, particularly in our bilateral conversations with friends and allies. We need to ensure that freedom of religion is central to our diplomatic and economic engagement.

Finally, could the Minister explain how the Government continue to engage with diaspora, civil society and religious communities here in the UK on setting priorities? They often have critical insight and intelligence about what is happening and the experiences of those within their faith communities, and it is critical that the Government engage with them.

I am privileged to represent a constituency with huge religious diversity. At the last count, I think I had eight mosques, three Hindu temples, a Sikh gurdwara and a Jewish synagogue. There is every type of Christianity, from Greek Orthodox through to Nigerian Pentecostal, Catholic, protestant—you name it. One of my predecessors, who is a Member of the Senedd, is a humanist celebrant. Cardiff South and Penarth is a place of huge religious diversity and tolerance, going back to our history as a port city, and I am really proud of some of the interfaith work that goes on. When we have had difficulties and there have been threats to people, the community has responded. Sadly, however, we do not see that in so many situations and countries around the world. The UK has a critical role to play, and I hope to hear from the Minister what steps we are taking to ensure that we uphold the UN declaration and the fundamental principles that we have all espoused today.

10.42 am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I congratulate the Prime Minister’s special envoy for FORB, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), both on securing the debate and on her long-standing and vociferous commitment to doing the incredibly difficult job of being all our voices and making sure that the UK’s position is heard. I thank her for pushing us on at every stage.

I also thank all Members present for their ongoing engagement through the APPG for FORB, which continues to champion this essential human right to colleagues in the House, policymakers and, indeed, the general public more widely, and for highlighting some of the organisations that help us to do that, such as Open Doors. Such organisations bring vital analysis to public awareness and help parliamentarians and the Government to focus on our work and the advocacy that we want to continue to do.

The shared passion in the House for protecting freedom of religion or belief alongside other human rights is clear and warranted, and I hope to be able to respond to the points raised in the debate. If I cannot respond to them all, I will make sure that we do so in writing in order to highlight the UK’s action in this incredibly important arena.

Let me restate that violence against any person because of their faith or belief is completely unacceptable, and the Government have long been committed to promoting and protecting FORB for all. Although this right is clearly enshrined in international human rights law, the situation globally remains of grave concern. As my hon. Friend the special envoy set out, there is a sense that it is going in the wrong direction in too many areas. Every day, people are persecuted, harassed and, indeed, killed for their beliefs.

Religious intolerance and persecution are often at the heart of foreign and development policy challenges. Where religious freedom or belief is under attack, human rights across the piece are often threatened too. My hon. Friend raised the challenges that we see in Iran, where the root of what we are talking about here is visible, and we need to ensure that we always highlight that. She set that out incredibly well.

In July last year, the Minister responsible for human rights, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, and our special envoy hosted the international ministerial conference on FORB, where more than 100 Government delegations, 800 faith and belief leaders, human rights experts and non-governmental organisations came together to agree actions to protect these freedoms. During the conference, we announced new UK funding to support those who defend religious freedom or belief, and 47 Governments, international organisations and other entities pledged to take action in support of this fundamental right.

Since last year we have built on the momentum of the conference in a number of ways—first, by working through international bodies, within the multilateral framework, to strengthen coalitions of support and protect FORB for all. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), raised some of the places where that has been easier or, sometimes, harder to achieve in the multilateral environment.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

Secondly, we have been using the strength of our own global diplomatic network to encourage states to uphold their human rights obligations. To answer a number of colleagues' questions and, indeed, the envoy's message, I can say that I travel to no country without a very clear brief on the issues around any human rights challenges, specific or more broad. Every Minister, whenever they are travelling, has that in their portfolio of information and, where the opportunity arises, we will raise those issues with the people we meet.

Jim Shannon: I know that the right hon. Lady always tries to give answers on the issues that we bring to her attention. I referred specifically to the violence against Christians in Manipur, which was reported recently in *The Times*, and I asked her to find out whether the Prime Minister, when he was in India, made any representations on that issue. The right hon. Lady has said that she raises issues all the time. It would be unwise and inappropriate if our Prime Minister had not done the same, so we would like to make sure that he has. I also asked for some information on the role of journalists and media in Manipur province, where they have been prevented from entering. There are big issues in India, and if our Prime Minister does not ask those questions when he is in India, there is something seriously wrong.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I obviously was not privy to the conversations that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had, but I can say that, as the Minister who oversees India, with my Indo-Pacific portfolio, I always raise issues of concern. We have very clear and direct private conversations at every level where we feel that is appropriate, and India is no different from any other country, but I am happy to ask the Prime Minister's office to get back to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) if that would be useful.

On the multilateral point first, we work across the UN, Council of Europe, G7 and International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to try to protect and promote this incredibly important human right. Our envoy acts as the UK representative and is the current chair of the alliance. The alliance has grown incredibly strongly under her leadership and now has 45 members, friends and observers. The joint statements recently issued by the alliance covering restrictions and concerns for different faith or belief communities around the world are most welcome and important. I also commend the alliance's recent programme of targeted advocacy on cases of individual prisoners of conscience.

We of course regularly raise situations of concern at the UN Human Rights Council. That work is led by Lord Ahmad; it is in his portfolio. In July, during the adoption of Pakistan's universal periodic review, the UK urged the Government of Pakistan to ensure the safety of persecuted religious communities, including, of course, Ahmadi Muslims and Christians. At the most recent session of the council, which began last week, we called on Sri Lanka to respect its citizens' rights to freely practise their faiths or beliefs. At the UN Security Council in June, we led with the United Arab Emirates on a resolution about tolerance, peace and security. The resolution directly addresses, for the first time, the persecution of religious minorities and other minority groups in conflict settings.

In recent months, we have actively engaged in UN discussions on the balance between freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression, following incidents of Koran burnings in Europe. In our bilateral work, we regularly raise specific issues with other Governments both in public and private: for example, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), met Nicaraguan human rights activist Bianca Jagger in May, and discussed the situation in Nicaragua and the plight of imprisoned Bishop Álvarez. On Afghanistan, UK Ministers and officials engage regularly with a range of Afghans, including Hazaras, to ensure our policy and programming reflect the diversity of needs there. Providing a platform to Hazaras at the ministerial conference last year raised awareness of their situation and enabled an ongoing dialogue with Ministers and policymakers across the world.

We remain concerned that religious and ethnic minority populations continue to decline in Iraq, and we raise these concerns with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government. When my noble Friend Lord Ahmad visited Iraq earlier this year, he held an informative and very helpful roundtable with religious leaders. We are also implementing a £15,000 programme to improve religious tolerance and social cohesion in Nineveh. We need to continue to do that in those most challenging areas.

A number of colleagues raised the subject of Nigeria, where we see civilians of all faiths, including many Muslims, suffer devastating harm at the hands of violent extremist groups and as a result of intercommunal violence and criminality. We remain committed to supporting Nigeria to address those root causes of violence, protect human rights and promote dialogue and respect between different ethnic and religious communities. We have continued to raise that with the Nigerian Government, including in the earliest meetings with the new Administration.

On Pakistan, many here will have heard the speech the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), recently gave on our support to Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan. As well as the recent discussions, Lord Ahmad also raised the treatment of marginalised communities with Pakistan's Minister for Human Rights in January and June. He also wrote to Pakistan's acting Foreign Minister, Jalil Abbas Jilani, urging the Government of Pakistan to ensure the safety of the Christian community following recent attacks in Jaranwala.

A number of colleagues cited violations happening much closer to home, even in Ukraine, as Putin with his brutal illegal war of aggression has weaponised orthodox Christianity. My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) raised an important issue around co-ordinated sanctions work among those in the alliance. I will take that away to look at how we might consider working on that internationally, as we have done with the Russia sanctions regime, which has been very effective in having that multilateral impact. The hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) raised some important issues concerning refugees in Nepal and I will come back to her on that matter, as Nepal is a country in my portfolio where we do a lot of work. I will also provide more specific information on

how we have used and are using our human rights sanctions with the countries raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham, which I hope will be useful.

Finally, I want to talk about embedding freedom of religion or belief in the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We welcome the findings of the independent review of the Bishop of Truro's report. The assessment concluded that the majority of the recommendations are now in an advanced stage of delivery, or actively being delivered. I hope we demonstrate through our multilateral and bilateral work that we are continuing to seek opportunities to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is central to wider human rights work, including through our global human rights sanctions regime.

Our efforts are supported by central programming via project funding, including our John Bunyan Fund and ROLE UK partnership that aims to support legislative reform to increase religious or belief protections. Religion for international engagement training is available to all civil servants, to enhance their understanding of the role of religion and belief in a wide variety of contexts, in order to deliver the UK's international objectives more effectively. We continue to promote this and earlier this year we were pleased to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton to a seminar for all Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff. I commend my hon. Friend for convening country-focused roundtables on this topic, bringing together academic experts, civil society and British diplomats. I welcome the opportunity those forums provide to dig deep into some of the challenges we see around the world, and ponder the action we might take together to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief.

As envoy, my hon. Friend has a dedicated formal role. She has asked whether a specific Minister in the House of Commons might take responsibility for freedom of religion or belief. In a bicameral Parliament, of course, we have specific ministerial responsibilities that are split across both Houses. My noble friend Lord Ahmad established the FORB role prior to the Truro report, and I know that colleagues present agree that he does an incredibly good and passionate job as a proactive advocate for and a passionate believer in these principles; his work is now recognised and respected around the world. I also note my hon. Friend's intention to seek a private Member's Bill to make the special envoy role permanent. I know that she has spoken with the Foreign Secretary on the matter already, and I look forward to seeing how that progresses in the months ahead.

As a long-standing champion of human rights, the United Kingdom has a duty to promote and defend our values of equality, respect and democratic freedom at home and abroad, and I assure Members that this Government are doing just that. Through the channels

available to us, we will continue to call out persecution and defend the right of freedom of religion or belief for all. Difficult and robust conversations happen at the highest levels every time Ministers travel, to ensure that the UK's commitments to FORB and tolerance are clearly understood.

10.56 am

Fiona Bruce: I thank all colleagues for contributing so excellently and informedly today, and I thank the Minister for her thoughtful response. Forgive me if I do not refer to all colleagues individually, but I want to mention the reference made by the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) to the need for a "better world" and the potential of religions to play a role in achieving that. Would it not be wonderful if we could move from a narrative of attitudes to religion being the cause of so many problems in the world to one of freedom of religion or belief being one of the answers to the world's problems, as I believe it is?

To illustrate that, I close by presenting colleagues with two alternative futures for our consideration. The first is a world in which freedom of religion or belief is weak. Here there is an unbridled appetite for power. Domination is the goal. The strong succeed. The vulnerable are violated—physically, mentally, emotionally. Fear prevails. Minorities are despised, diversity deterred, assimilation enforced. Lives are wasted, as people are seen as a disposable means to an ideological end.

The second possible future is a world in which freedom of religion or belief is strong and respected. Here, people find ways to live together with their deepest differences. Choices for FORB can be freely made, and so many other freedoms flow from that foundational right: individual potential can flourish, safety and security are enhanced in local communities and internationally, the weak are strengthened and supported, poverty and inequality are reduced, minorities are respected, diversity is honoured, voices are given an opportunity to speak, and lives are fulfilled. Every person is afforded the inherent human dignity that is their due.

The choice between those two possible futures lies before us. Much depends on those of us in this room today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Before I put the Question, I ask Members leaving the debate to do so quickly and quietly, because we have an important debate coming up on South West Water, which we will go straight into.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered freedom of religion and belief.

South West Water: Environmental Performance

11 am

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the environmental performance of South West Water.

I am delighted to have secured this debate on South West Water, Mr Hollobone. South West Water looks after Devon and Cornwall, yet it has been dumping raw sewage in the lovely rivers of Devon and Cornwall for years. For 10 disgraceful years, South West Water has dished out huge dividends to its shareholders instead of investing to clean up its own filthy act. For 10 deplorable years, South West Water has been rated red by the Environment Agency—red for appalling, red for risky, red for downright dangerous. People can buy its shares if they fancy it and are brave enough, but they should look out, because this company has been borrowing its way out of trouble for many years.

Pre-privatisation South West Water was debt free, but two years ago it was in hock to the tune of £2 billion. It has reduced the debt a little bit, but with rising costs and the threat of a big stick from the regulators—rightly so—South West Water looks like, I am afraid to say, a very dodgy stock in which to place money. The company's chief financial officer has left, and who can blame him? South West Water is now under severe and serious investigation for massaging statistics. It has lied about the scale of the ongoing pollution. It has already been fined over £2 million for dumping poo in the recent past. It does not even make the water; it sells it. God makes water! It sells water, and charges the highest price in Britain for every drop used.

South West Water also loses water at a frightening rate through burst pipes and its own broken promises to repair them. Almost 127 million litres a day goes down the drain. I will repeat that: 127 million litres. It would matter less if it had enough water to last, but it does not. There are two reservoirs in the area; one is in Roadford in Devon, and the other is Wimbleball, the big lake on Exmoor. Needless to say, South West Water did not build either of them. They were constructed in the days before privatisation.

The only addition that South West Water seems to have made is a highly unpopular timeshare village, believe it or not, on the banks of Roadwater lake, and guess what? It did it for money, of course. South West Water leaks like a sieve, it makes its customers pay through the nose and it is rapidly running out of storage space for what is left. None of us should be surprised that South West Water still has a hosepipe ban in place—the only one in Britain. It is a complete joke.

The Government have been passing laws to trample on obscene bonuses, often awarded in the name of protecting the environment. The Lord-Lieutenant of Devon is one such recipient. In principle, I am all in favour of hitting the culprits hard where it hurts—in their wallets. It is a good idea, but the Minister and her team probably did not reckon on the ingenious methods used by some of the water companies. South West Water is not the only one, but it is the one that I am concentrating on.

When it became clear that it could not get away with pumping poo into the rivers willy-nilly and then paying each other fat bungs for saving the planet, South West Water had a little rethink. Surprise, surprise—guess what? It decided to award handsome bonuses for meeting its financial targets instead. Funnily enough, it was an idea borrowed from Wessex Water. You do not really invent the wheel; it goes round. When that ruse fails, South West Water will probably move the goalposts again. Who knows? They might start awarding each other big bungs for helping old ladies to cross the road.

In the water industry, more or less anything is acceptable these days, which is bizarre. For example, last week the BBC—yes, the BBC—did something very unusual. It did some good old-fashioned journalism. That is amazing—not dance-offs, but journalism. It produced a story that I think would have chilled the Minister to her core, along with many others. Water companies are allowed to dump raw or partly treated sewage on a strictly limited basis, when the weather is really wet and the pipes would get overloaded, and they need a permit to do so. Some bright spark at the Beeb—and that is going some—wondered whether it could be discovered exactly when the discharges happened and what the weather was like at the time, and to look at all water companies. The results of these inquiries were shocking.

The BBC found out that 388 dumps—if you will pardon my expression, Mr Hollobone—took place in bone-dry conditions, which is illegal, yet this is probably only the tip of a very smelly scandal, because so few water companies provided any information whatsoever. All nine water companies were sent requests about when their spills started and when they stopped, but only Thames, Southern and Wessex provided details. The BBC cross-referenced those with the Met Office's rainfall data and found that most of the spills took place during the drought last year. As an example, take Wessex, which covers my and the Minister's constituencies. It admitted 215 individual spills at 68 different sites that lasted more than 60 hot, rainless days. That is one hell of a lot of illegal poo. My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) looks quizzical, but he can ask the BBC if he wishes.

The Beeb had to rely on water companies' own monitoring equipment, but—surprise, surprise—South West Water claimed it could not help because it has very old equipment; more likely is that it just could not be bothered to reply. I am afraid it is a bit like Russell Brand: not to be trusted. South West Water has a broken moral compass and a cavalier attitude to its own filth. In my view, it is a working certainty that South West Water was and still is quietly pumping pollution into our rivers, but we do not know how much or when.

The people who ought to be finding out are equally powerless to do so. The Environment Agency does not have the manpower or the time to investigate every single infringement. It has to rely on information from the companies themselves. In 2010, its budget was halved, and austerity came at a price. The Environment Agency no longer audits water companies every year, which it is meant to do by law. Only a third of all audits, to check if companies are telling the truth about pollution and illegal sewage, take place. Audits for South West Water, with its dismal record of pollution, are missing for eight of the last 13 years. I repeat: missing for eight of the last 13 years.

This company of ruthless, money-grabbing cowboys makes Al Capone look like an angel. South West Water is by far and away the worst water company in this country. The chief executive was paid £456,000 last year, which is four times more than the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and you should see the size of the bonuses these people get, Mr Hollobone. The same chief executive could have cleaned up an extra £450,000 this year, but she reckoned it would be good PR to turn it down—it makes her look like a caring type of chief exec, doesn't it—so I will be coming round with a begging bowl a bit later if you could give generously to help her.

Let us not forget the company's chair, the squeaky clean figurehead of Pennon Group, who was appointed deliberately to add gravitas to the grubby business of getting rid of what goes down the toilet. Her name is Gill Rider—actually, Dr Gill Rider, but if she wants to give you the botty probe, say no. She did five years at the top of the Cabinet Office, so she should jolly well understand what it takes for leaks and dirty deeds. She is also president of the Marine Biological Association, which was set up to help protect the environment of our coasts. What a wonderful irony that is, given that South West Water sewage ends up in the sea.

Miss Rider is of course the non-executive chairperson of Pennon Group, which is why I am afraid the poor lady has to scrape by on £113,000 a year. Perhaps it was her who suggested hiring a firm of top City lawyers to scare off local news organisations, and the Minister is aware of this. The editors were bullied by a City law firm into censoring my press releases about this company for fear of writs for defamation. Those are the tactics of mobsters, but I am afraid that Dr Gill Rider is used to getting her own way. One foot out of line, and you risk ending up with a severed horse's head on your pillow—or perhaps, unfortunately, dead fish in the river.

That reminds me that there is in Tiverton an almost dead building firm called 3 Rivers Developments. It was conceived by senior officers in Mid Devon District Council, next to the Exe. They thought it would solve their financial problems. They have never built a Lego house, never mind a real one. They do not have a clue. Six years and £21 million later, the company is stony broke. There is an irony in all that. The kindest thing would be to cut their losses and shut it down—full administration, which is the only way to get to the bottom of what has gone on. We understand that as MPs—we have seen it in our seats—but the Liberal loonies decided to let it limp on, haemorrhaging public money. By the way, this is a political party that promised big change in Mid Devon. They cannot even change themselves. I noticed with some alarm that one of the members elected to Tiverton Town Council in May has not turned up for a single meeting—my hon. Friend the Minister looks shocked—so it is no wonder that people are calling for a by-election to unseat him.

The Liberal MP for the area, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who is in his place, ought to be—dare I say it—kicking the backsides of South West Water on a painful and regular basis. I gather that he would like the company to be reformed. I am sure that South West Water will take his views with the seriousness they deserve—and take no notice at all. I will do the kicking, because that is the job of an MP. I have attacked South West Water once, twice, three

times, four times. I will not rest until this is sorted, and I have sharp toecaps. I have already highlighted the shortcomings of the Environment Agency and Ofwat—the regulators are far from rapid in their response to water company excesses—but I must say to my hon. Friend the Minister that her Department, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, is responsible. I gently say that the Department cannot plead complete innocence. I recognise that the Minister has worked hard—she is my neighbour in Taunton—to steer tough new water legislation through Westminster. It is good news to be able to offer limitless fines as a punishment for polluting our rivers—fantastic. But the whole exercise is pointless if the agencies cannot enforce the law. That is what is happening, and it should not be.

I am sure that the Minister will recall the Environment Act 2021. It created the brand-new Office for Environmental Protection, which is charged with holding everybody who is responsible to account. Ministers, Departments and agencies all come under the new OEP, and the new OEP has already spoken. The OEP opened an investigation into the Environment Agency, Ofwat and DEFRA last June, amid concerns that they had not properly been enforcing the law. At the heart of the case, the OEP said, was whether those bodies were correctly interpreting what count as “extraordinary circumstances”. Now, that is open to interpretation. Water companies have been granted permits to discharge sewage into rivers and seas hundreds of thousands of times a year when their network has been overwhelmed by rainwater—we have had serious flooding in Somerset, as the Minister knows, over the last 48 hours—on the basis that such rainfalls were considered “extraordinary circumstances”. The OEP, however, believes that DEFRA, the EA and Ofwat may be being too lenient in interpreting the law. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister and her Department to defend themselves against the public body that they created. This is a monumental mess.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I give way to the Member for the women's auxiliary ballerina corps.

Richard Foord: The hon. Member is giving a bombastic speech of which the late Lord Flashheart would have been very proud. What does he think of the actions of the Government in this space? Although he seeks to shift the blame on to water companies or regulators, the Government ultimately have the responsibility for the regulation of South West Water and for holding it to account.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: More to be pitied than scolded, Mr Hollobone. I would say to the hon. Member that he must listen to what Members in this House say. We are not complete morons. I have laid out why I was saying what I was doing. I have made the point.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister, whom I have worked with for over a decade, understands that there is much to do, and the OEP has made it clear that DEFRA, the EA and Ofwat have a lot to answer for. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton may not know this as a new MP—I understand the limitations—but DEFRA is a Government Department. It is the Department

[Mr Liddell-Grainger]

for Environment, Food And Rural Affairs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland mouthed with me—I am grateful to him for that.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton needs to sit up and listen. He really does. Quite honestly, I wish he was a little more proactive on South West Water, because all we get from him is resounding silence. I know he was a major in the education corps, but that is not an excuse.

My hon. Friend the Minister's constituency includes Taunton, which is on a flood plain—we are the levels—so she knows how important water is. Will she say in response what action the OEP needs to take? How are we going to get South West Water to actually do the job, because its staff and team are not doing it and it is going to go bankrupt at some point because it is haemorrhaging money? How we are going to stop this before we all end up back in Westminster Hall or the main Chamber saying, "What did we miss?" I am glad that the Minister is in her place, and I look forward, as always, to hearing her words of wisdom.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Mr Hollobone, it is a pleasure to have you in the Chair today to preside over this important debate about one of our water companies, South West Water.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), I am disappointed at the overall environmental performance of South West Water and the impacts that that is having on the local environment. I have been regularly meeting the chief executive officers of companies identified as lagging in their performance commitments, including the CEO of South West Water. I expect to hear of the progress it has made this year and its plans on how it will continue to improve.

There are some promising signs of improvement since the previous debate on this topic in this Chamber, back in February, although I do not believe that my hon. Friend attended that. South West Water has been upgraded from one star in 2021 to two stars in 2022, according to the Environment Agency's environmental performance assessment. Of course, this is a very long way to go to get the outcomes that customers, regulators and the Government expect.

South West Water has consistently been one of the worst-performing companies for high levels of total pollution incidents and, despite recent improvement, it was still significantly above the industry average for total pollution incidents in 2022. It must take urgent steps to further reduce these pollution incidents, and I expect to see sustained and continued improvement. I have spoken to it about this many times.

I am also aware of the concerns raised about South West Water's use of combined sewer overflows and the impact that has on coastal communities. South West Water has made good progress on monitoring storm overflows, has met its deadline for 100% coverage by the end of the year, and has achieved a 30% decrease in the number of spills from storm overflows. I am pleased to say that I received an update just this week, from right

across the water industry, to say that 96% of overflows are now monitored, with the remainder on track to hit our target of 100% by our deadline at the end of this year.

I welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), to his place. I do not think that this is our first meeting together. I have to point out, though, that under Labour, only 7% of overflows were monitored. It was this Government who introduced the monitoring, and that is why we have a picture of what is happening. It was actually the Labour party that allowed water companies to self-monitor. That was alluded to, I think, by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset, and we must not forget that.

On 29 August, I called the CEO of South West Water regarding Harlyn bay, the most beautiful bay in Cornwall, following reports of discharges from storm sewage overflows and reports of increases in sickness among bathers and surfers. The Environment Agency is investigating that. Clearly, action can be taken only if we have the evidence and if there is an issue. There is a permit system and there are exemptions for extreme weather—we know why that is in place—but I have asked the CEO to ensure that, should pollution be identified, signage is put on the beach so that it is made very clear to bathers and surfers alike. They have taken up my point.

Richard Foord: Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I will carry on for a moment.

On storm overflows and discharges in the south-west, Ofwat announced, as part of a £2.2 billion accelerated infrastructure package that this Government triggered, that South West Water will accelerate £70 million of investment to deliver 15 storm overflow improvement schemes in the Falmouth and Sidmouth catchments. That will ensure that they meet the new bathing water and shellfish requirements and will significantly improve standards to protect public health at some of the south-west's most important sites. Further investment to meet our strict targets will be required as part of the draft water company business plans for the next price control period. Those are being looked at right now. They will be published shortly and scrutinised by the regulator to ensure that we get the infrastructure and efficiency we need, balancing the need for improvement with managing people's bills.

No Government have ever done as much as this Government are doing to tackle storm overflows. In 2013, the Government set out expectations that water companies must monitor the vast majority of those combined sewer overflows, as I referenced earlier. It is that monitoring that has meant that regulators understand the scale of combined sewer overflow discharges and can take stronger action within the existing legal framework.

In 2022, the Government launched the storm overflows discharge reduction plan. Our strict targets will see the toughest ever crackdown on sewage spills and will require water companies to deliver the largest infrastructure project in water company history—that is, £56 billion by 2050. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset may be aware, there has been a court case and I am pleased to say that last week the High Court found that our plan went beyond legal requirements. We have been consulting on expanding

our sewage overflows plan further to cover coasts, estuaries and marine protected sites—something I have particularly pushed for. We have announced our intention to make the plan's target a legal requirement under that all-important Environment Act 2021, which I was so proud to take through Parliament. It is a game-changing piece of legislation; there is no doubt about that.

We also required water companies to produce action plans explaining how they will improve every storm overflow in England. South West Water will not be able to escape this; they have to do that, too. Those are on officials' desks being worked through, and they will be published shortly. I hope that my hon. Friend realises that a great amount is under way by this Government.

Richard Foord: Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I will do my final paragraph on this subject and then I will give way. In April 2023, the Government published their “Plan for Water”, which is a comprehensive strategy to transform our water environment, dealing with supply, demand and pollution, and pulling everything together to deal with the needs of society for water in future.

Richard Foord: I heard the Minister say a moment ago that enforcement action can only take place where there is evidence. Is it the case that the Minister does not have sufficient evidence for enforcement action to take place against South West Water?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. One cannot take a court case without sufficient evidence; that is absolutely critical to any court case. I will come on to that, the actions that the Environment Agency is taking and its enforcement powers in a minute, but first I must refer to what some of the other parties think would be the right thing to do.

The Labour party has been calling for mandatory monitoring when we have already delivered it, as well as automatic fines that would make sanctions weaker and a plan to tackle sewage that simply is not credible. When it comes to talking about water, the Liberal Democrats do not have a plan. They seem to think that we can flip a switch and fix it overnight. Even if we could flip a switch, it would mean sewage backing up into people's homes and businesses and widespread mains waterpipe bursts across the country. We are the only party that has a credible plan to tackle this problem, backed by more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement. That will all be applied to South West Water as appropriate.

I will touch on water security, because that has been a significant issue in the south-west. I am well aware that South West Water customers in Cornwall and Devon have been under hosepipe bans for extended periods of time—since last year, in some cases. I am pleased that South West Water will lift the hosepipe bans next week. I have personally visited South West Water to look at the issues: I have been to the reservoirs referenced,

looked at how their size is being increased and how the issue is being tackled to address the whole water-resilient supply. We are working with South West Water, and it is working on emergency plans for situations of drought.

Where performance does not improve, the Government and regulators will not hesitate to hold water companies, including South West Water, to account. Back in 2015, the Environment Agency brought 59 prosecutions against water companies, securing fines of £150 million. As the House will be aware, South West Water has recently been fined £2.1 million in criminal charges relating to offences between 15 July 2016 and 20 August 2020. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), of course the EA had the evidence and data. That is how it could take that strong action.

The subject of enforcement was raised. The EA had its budget for enforcement expanded by £2.2 million a year to tackle enforcement, and Ofwat received a further £11.3 million uplift for enforcement. This is an absolute priority. Furthermore, following its categorisation as a lagging company in 2022, South West Water was required by Ofwat to publish an action plan setting out how it will improve its performance. It was published in 2023 and updated earlier this month, and I will be tracking its progress. Enforcement is being taken really seriously, and I am sure the House is aware that this is actually the largest criminal and civil investigation, investigating 2,200 sewage treatment works. It is being undertaken right now by the Environment Agency and Ofwat into water company permit compliance.

I must quickly allude to that BBC report. I was a news reporter, and I prided myself on my data and sources. They obviously did their report, but it would need to stand up in court if the EA chose to prosecute any of the cases raised by the BBC. If it stands up in court and the information is there, of course the EA will take action if it finds non-compliance. Huge amounts of data were analysed, and it must be thoroughly analysed by the EA in order to go to court, but more openness and transparency are very much needed in the water industry. That is being worked on.

We continue to take action to strengthen the regulator's powers to better hold water companies to account, and we are in the process of removing the cap on civil penalties for environmental regulators to drive compliance. I share concerns about dividends and executive pay—they must reflect performance. Ofwat has recently strengthened its ability to take enforcement action against water companies that do not link dividend payments with their performance, using its powers under the Environment Act 2021. In June, Ofwat made it clear that customers will no longer fund executive bonus payments that have not been sufficiently justified. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset will be interested in that.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Proposed Merger of Three UK and Vodafone

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposed merger of Three UK and Vodafone.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir George, and I am grateful for having been granted the debate. I refer the House to my entry to the Register of Members' Interests. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) to his new role as shadow Minister.

In July, it was announced that Vodafone and Three UK had agreed to combine their businesses, in an effort, they claim, to create one of Europe's leading 5G networks. Although I welcome the aspiration, such a deal will have terrible consequences, with higher prices for consumers, job losses alongside inflated corporate profits, and a threat to the UK's national security. The newly combined company would have 27 million customers, which would make it the largest mobile network operator in the UK, surpassing O2 and EE. That makes today's debate important, as both carriers already have customers in every one of the 650 seats represented here in the House of Commons.

The announcement of the merger came only months after Vodafone had already announced 11,000 job cuts worldwide, including here in the UK. When Vodafone UK's chief executive was subsequently asked what impact the merger would have on future job losses, he stubbornly said,

"it's very early...to talk about job losses"

and that "some roles" might be impacted. External studies suggest that "some" could be as many as 1,600 roles. When Vodafone and Three merged with TPG in Australia in 2020, they claimed that it would accelerate the benefits of substantial network investments made by both companies, when in reality investment levels across the sector are down by 45%.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Is this not part of what we are seeing across the IT sector, which is what we previously saw in other industrial sectors, for example, in companies such as John Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company? Basically, these companies drive out competition and then set their own terms and the terms of those who work in the industry. Is this not of real concern not just to consumers, but to all those concerned with the creation of those monopolies?

Navendu Mishra: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. This merger is bad news not just for UK customers, but for the people who work for both these businesses and, of course, it poses threats to national security as well.

Investment levels in the sector after the merger of Vodafone and Three in Australia went down by 45%. I ask the Minister: does the evidence therefore suggests that this will be a sensible merger here in the UK?

I want to place on the record my thanks to my union, Unite, for campaigning on this issue. It shares the concerns that so many of us have about jobs and national security, and it has consistently kept members aware of the

implications since the merger was announced. According to Ofcom, 2.2 million households are struggling with the cost of mobile services. As a report by the House of Commons Library stated:

"Bills for some customers rose by over 11% in 2022. Communications consultancy Farrpoint has estimated that, based on inflation projections, bills will rise by a third over the next five years."

Will the merger make bills cheaper for British customers? Research suggests not. The former chief competition economist at the European Commission has undertaken work showing that prices after a Three-Vodafone merger could be 50% higher. Based on average spending patterns, that means UK customers would pay up to £300 more per year on their mobile bills.

Only a few months ago, we heard that water companies were pushing for bills to rise by up to 40%. We know that electricity and gas payments almost doubled between May 2020 and June 2023, and the Bank of England chief economist recently warned that food inflation is unlikely to come down soon. Why will British customers who use Vodafone and Three have to find even more money for an unnecessary choice that has been foisted on them?

The merger is bad news not only for households' financial security, but for the UK's national security.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I apologise to all concerned, but I have a meeting in the Treasury very shortly that I will have to go to. However, I want to ask this question to ensure that it is raised with the Minister, who will no doubt be responding to this debate.

On the security issue—as the hon. Gentleman knows, I have been sanctioned by the Chinese Government, like others—I am concerned that there should be full and due diligence on such a merger, particularly given the Cheung Kong Group and the Li family being so knowingly involved with Chinese Government committees, their contacts in the Chinese Government and having to pass data over under the national security law. Will the hon. Gentleman ensure that the key question for the Minister is that the Government are able to assure everybody publicly that this will not take place unless these security issues are clarified and are not still security issues at the end of this process?

Navendu Mishra: The right hon. Gentleman makes important points, and national security is vital. I pay tribute to him for his work on this issue, and to all the members of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China in the House of Commons and the House of Lords who are active in that campaign group.

John Spellar: When there was the issue about Huawei installing its equipment, one of the arguments made was that this was the hardware, and that the telephone companies and indeed the National Security Agency would be able to keep track of the software, but these companies are now deeply involved in the software. Does that not make these systems even more vulnerable to possible influence by the Chinese authorities?

Navendu Mishra: That is an important intervention. I accept the point that the hardware and the software are both quite open to interference, and I hope the Minister will be able to address these concerns from Members.

Following a merger, Three's ultimate parent company, CK Group, will gain significant control over a business that will serve 40% of the UK's population. Evidence suggests that there is extensive collaboration between the CK Group, the Li family that controls it and the Chinese state. It is well documented that the Li family has strongly backed pro-Beijing hardliner John Lee as the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, and supported a draconian new security law that would suppress dissent. On top of this, top CK Group executives sit on Chinese Government committees and have access to the inner circle of the Chinese elite. Does the Minister feel comfortable with a hostile foreign actor potentially having access to millions of UK citizens' data?

Last month, I wrote to Greater Manchester police, my local force, sharing my concerns about the impact that such a merger would have, and Greater Manchester police is just one of the many police forces that have contracts with Vodafone at present. I am aware that Unite the union is happy to provide a list of police forces that have contracts with Vodafone, so I urge Members across the House to contact their local force to seek assurances about security and privacy measures. I implore the Minister to meet Unite to discuss these concerns as a matter of priority.

I have grave concerns that China's domestic and counter-intelligence laws and Hong Kong's national security law may pave the way for China's security services to obtain confidential data from companies such as CK Hutchison. While in theory UK law prohibits the collection or transfer of individual user data, in practice there have been numerous examples in the UK and elsewhere where data has been accessed and transferred to China. Can the Minister give his assurances that he will do all in his power to prevent this from happening?

Although Ministers may assure us that they will do all in their power, I remain worried that that is not enough to stop sensitive UK Government communications being exposed. It goes beyond the police, as Vodafone has contracts with the Ministry of Justice and the national health service, too. The recent report by the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament found that the UK is of "significant interest" to China

"when it comes to espionage and interference",

and notes that China uses

"all possible legitimate routes to acquire UK technology, Intellectual Property and data",

but that such overt

"acquisition routes have been welcomed by HMG for economic reasons".

Now would be a good time for the Government to acquit themselves of that allegation, and to put British consumers and our national security first.

In the past, the Prime Minister met the Intelligence and Security Committee yearly. I hope the Minister will give the House his assurance that the Prime Minister will reinstate those meetings. Now, faced with this significant merger and a litany of other national security threats, would be a good time to do so.

Unite the union has commissioned analysis from digital security expert Dr Alexi Drew, an academic and the director of tech security at consultancy Penumbra Analysis. Dr Drew found that the potential merger created substantial security risks, noting:

"Domestic laws and internal company policies will do little to hinder the exercise of nation-state intelligence gathering apparatus from leveraging any means of access to data that company mergers and acquisitions might enable. If a merger creates the technical or human means to collect valuable data, then the security services of any nation-state, Chinese or otherwise, are likely to make use of it."

The Government have said that they will assess this risky merger through their investment security unit, so what stage has the ISU assessment reached, and will the acquisition be called in for a further national security assessment? Knowing what we know about the proposals, they seem wrong on so many levels. They are bad news for British customers, will result in significant job losses, and plainly pose a national security threat to the UK. Perhaps things would be very different if the Government actually had an industrial strategy for the UK and were not asleep at the wheel while our national infrastructure got sold off to hostile actors.

In the light of all this, I will be interested to hear the Minister's contribution and whether he supports the merger. If he supports it, why? If he does not, what will he do to stop the merger?

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

2.40 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing this important and timely debate.

The merger of Three UK and Vodafone will create, in the words of Unite the union,

"a telecoms cartel with devastating effects on mobile phone users."

It is a bad deal for workers, a bad deal for consumers and a bad deal all round. The jobs of 1,600 people hang in the balance, and that is in addition to the brutal 11,000 job cuts globally that Vodafone has recently announced.

Previous telecoms mergers have resulted in workforce reductions of between 7.5% and 12%. While corporations line their pockets, UK workers will be left without the means to support themselves. But don't take it from me—the former chief executive officer of Vodafone UK, Nick Read, has stated explicitly:

"We feel the UK needs to consolidate to give [us] industrial scale so we can improve returns."

This dangerous deal will not provide a better service, cheaper costs, more jobs or better terms and conditions for workers. The move is being made solely to line the pockets of these major corporations and their shareholders, and is just another example of the corporate greed we have seen over the last couple of years.

Over 2.2 million UK households are struggling with the cost of mobile services. Three and Vodafone have already rolled out above-inflation price hikes of up to 14% on monthly plans, and research by the chief competition economist at the European Commission shows that prices could increase by an eye-watering 50% following the Three-Vodafone merger. That could mean a £300 hike to UK customers' phone and broadband

[Kim Johnson]

bills. Given the looming recession, financial pressures from the cost of living crisis and spiralling inflation in the Tories' mismanaged economy, this could not come at a worse time.

Vodafone already has a history of hiding profitability to evade taxation, and several countries have condemned it for using tax havens to avoid local fees. Instead of consolidating super-conglomerates, we should be tightening tax loopholes and strengthening the power of regulators to prevent profiteering and protect consumers. Allowing this merger to go ahead would clearly prioritise corporate interests over those of the working class. The Government must act now to end the cycle of greedflation. There are some legitimate security concerns, and I hope the Minister can reassure us that they will be thoroughly explored before any further action is taken. I hope he will agree today to take up the calls to stop this reckless merger.

2.44 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Sir George, to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on securing this important debate. I also draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests regarding my membership of Unite the union.

Speaking more than a century ago, Theodore Roosevelt called for congressional action to curb the power and influence of trusts, remarking that

"the state not only has the right to control the great corporations, but is duty bound to control them whenever the need of such control is shown".

The world has changed beyond recognition since Roosevelt launched his crusade to bust the trusts, but his message—that Governments have a democratic duty to protect their citizens from the aspirations of big businesses to become all-powerful monopolies—is as true now as it was then.

Around the globe, we are witnessing huge corporations' increasingly aggressive merger and acquisition strategies. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that the interests of our constituents are not trampled over by corporate greed. Should the Three-Vodafone merger succeed, it would create the largest operator in the telecommunications market, with 27 million customers and a 35% market share. It would also reduce the number of mobile network operators in the UK market from four to three.

According to one study, which drew on data from 33 countries over 13 years, 43 telecoms mergers of this kind increased prices by an average of 16.3% per customer. For the average UK customer, that could mean a price hike of between £180 and £300 a year, which is an unaffordable sum for many of the 2.2 million households across the UK that already struggle to meet the costs of mobile services. With more than one in five people in the UK able to access the internet only through their smartphone, this merger also threatens to plunge even more people in Britain into digital poverty, at a time when we need to do more to narrow the digital divide.

As we have heard, this merger raises a number of issues for our national security, for our consumer rights and for the futures of thousands of workers who are currently employed by Three and Vodafone. As elected

representatives, it is our responsibility to ensure that the proposed deal is subject to robust democratic scrutiny. However, that has become a near-impossible task, because Parliament has been almost totally excised from the scrutiny process. In fact, today's debate is one of the few opportunities for Members to have a meaningful discussion about the proposed merger. Instead, the responsibility for ruling on whether the merger should proceed has been delegated to the investment security unit, under the direct oversight of the Cabinet Office, and ultimately the Prime Minister himself.

The Intelligence Security Committee has been scathing in its assessment of the process, stating that

"the Government does not want there to be any meaningful scrutiny of sensitive investment deals. Effective Parliamentary oversight is not some kind of 'optional extra'—it is a vital safeguard in any functioning Parliamentary democracy."

I hope the Minister will be able to say on what grounds the Government can justify excluding Members from being involved in scrutinising a proposal that has such enormous ramifications for the telecommunications sector.

This merger is a naked attempt to monopolise the telecommunications sector and strangle the opposition, leaving customers with no recourse when prices are inevitably hiked. There is only one right response. The Government should take the lead of the Competition and Markets Authority—which in August confirmed its original decision to block Microsoft's acquisition of Activision—and kill this deal.

2.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called in this debate, Sir George. I thank the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for introducing the debate and setting the scene, and for his passion for this subject. I also thank the hon. Members who have spoken before me. I will add my support for what they said and also make some other comments.

There is no doubt that this merger could be a major shake-up for many of our constituents who use these services daily and have done so for many years. There has been much discussion about the need for smaller mobile providers and about their place in the mobile network market. There is hope that the merger will allow both Three UK and Vodafone to be a competitor within the market, so it is good to have these opinions on the record, and I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. May I also say that it is nice to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), in his place? I only found out today that he has been promoted. I wish him well in his new role, which I know will focus his attention on the subject of this debate. We look forward to hearing his contributions.

I have done some research into this matter—as of course others will have done before coming here. I must say a special thanks to Unite the union, which sent me information that I felt was relevant to put on the record. The hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) have already spoken about that; I will speak about it myself in just a few moments.

According to my research, promises have been made that the combined merger will lead to investment of £6 billion across the UK in its first five years. It has also

been said that there will be a best-in-class 5G network. The creation of jobs to support the complete digital transformation of the UK's businesses has also been mentioned. One big selling point is that under the proposal, the merged company is expected to deliver 5G coverage to nearly 99% of the UK population, which is huge and important.

Constituents contact me regularly about rural network coverage—broadband signals or on the phone network. My constituency of Strangford is rural. I live in the country, so I am fully aware of the issues that some families still have with 5G connection. It can go from working in certain areas of the house to not working at all—people tell me about it every week in my constituency. That leads to consumers paying extortionate amounts for wi-fi and not getting the service that they deserve.

We have covered the good news, but let us look at the other side, which the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside and for Birkenhead referred to; I think others will refer to it as well, and I want to reiterate that point of view. Unite the union was in touch ahead of this debate to offer insight into the dangers of the merger, and the issues that it could cause. We must look at things from all perspectives and be critical. It is always good to look at an issue holistically—to get all the information in front of us and then make a decision, whether it is right or wrong. I will pose questions to the Minister about our concerns.

It is important that the issues are known and talked about. One that has become increasingly apparent is that the merger raised profound national security concerns. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) referred to that, and that is an issue for many of us here. There have been claims of groups connected with Three UK associating with the Chinese state, and aligning themselves with some of the most repressive Chinese policies. That could ultimately mean that the privacy and security of 27 million UK customers is at stake. I have no doubt whatever that the Labour party's new shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rhondda, and the shadow Minister from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), will also highlight these issues; that is why the Minister's response is so important.

We hear of new data breaches and complications, and the misuse of people's information, almost every day. It never seems to end. We wonder sometimes exactly what is going on. It is of the utmost priority that in a merger, Vodafone and Three UK ensure that their customers' data is not at risk from anyone or any state—and from China specifically.

The comment has been made that the merger will make mobile bills less affordable. That cannot be ignored. We have already had a couple of years in which price increases have been quite significant, and have hit us all. If the merger closes the market to a number of companies, prices may go up. We make this plea on behalf of customers and our constituents. More than 2.2 million UK households are struggling with the costs of mobile services, due to extreme price increases last year and the year before. We understand fluctuating prices, but we do our best for our constituents to ensure they get the right deals.

That leads me finally to the importance of parliamentary scrutiny—it is why this debate is important, and why the hon. Member for Stockport was right to secure it. This

is the place to discuss and highlight issues, and bring them to the attention of the Minister and the Government. We thank the hon. Member for Stockport for doing just that. For all our constituents, whether the merger will impact them or not, the issues, including price hikes, security and convenience, must be spoken about.

To conclude, the merger could have an impact on many aspects of people's daily lives. It is said that millions of customers could benefit from better 5G coverage. That is the good part, but there is more to it than that. That is what this debate is about. We must ask ourselves what this will cost us and our constituents. There is a cost to security, as well as to our pockets and those of our constituents. I encourage the Minister to think of all those issues, and to do as much as possible to ensure that the merger does not penalise, disadvantage or in any way affect the security of our constituents. Again, I thank the hon. Member for Stockport and say, "Well done."

2.54 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing this important debate. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and a couple of other Members did, I would like to thank Unite the union for the incredibly helpful briefings that it produced for this debate. I also welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), to his post.

We have been here before. It is only three years since we engaged in a whole pile of debates about Huawei and the threats posed to national security by the involvement of the Chinese state actor with our 5G network. Despite repeated warnings from allies and security experts, the Tories went ahead and awarded Huawei a huge contract to deliver the UK's 5G network. Only after months of debates, questions and condemnation did they do a final U-turn to revoke the contract, but not before Huawei had begun its work. That meant that not only was a security risk introduced, but the removal of Huawei from the 5G system cost somewhere between £2 and £3.5 billion. The UK Government's intransigence in the face of those warnings cost taxpayers a huge amount of money.

We should have learned the lesson. However, it now appears that we are getting ready to hand over control of key infrastructure to the CK Group—the parent company of Three. Following the merger, as the hon. Member for Stockport pointed out, the CK Group will become a person of significant control over a business that will serve 40% of the UK's population. Unite the union has uncovered extensive collaboration between the CK Group, the Li family that controls it and the Chinese state. A number of CK Group executives sit on Chinese Government committees, with access to the inner circle of the Chinese political elite. That has to raise serious questions about privacy and security for UK consumers, which the CK Group has done nothing to address.

Under the Chinese Government's state security laws, it would be possible for the personal data of all users of the new merged company to end up in the hands of the Chinese Government. That is bad enough, but Vodafone

[Carol Monaghan]

holds UK Government contracts for the NHS 111 helpline, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Defence.

Navendu Mishra: And police forces.

Carol Monaghan: And police forces; I thank the hon. Member. Added to that, strategic national assets in the form of Vodafone subsea telecommunications cables between the UK and US would pass to the CK Group. It is quite simply madness.

Security is one thing, but there are other concerns, as a number of Members have pointed out. What would the merger, and any further monopoly of the telecoms market, mean for consumer costs, consumer choice and job security in the UK? The merger would result in nearly half of all UK consumers falling into the company's market share. As the EU has previously warned when blocking similar mergers, that could harm consumers and give free range for price hikes.

Navendu Mishra: The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the root cause of the problem—the core of the issue—is that the Government do not have an industrial strategy? The merger seems to be bad news for customers, bad news for national security and bad news for people who work for telecoms businesses. The bottom line is that if we had a good, forward-thinking industrial strategy that looked at growing good, well-paid jobs in this country and treating customers well, perhaps we would not be in this place.

Carol Monaghan: Of course, we have to look at who the merger is good for. It is good for the shareholders, good for the corporation and good for those who seek to profit off the back of it, but it is not good for the ordinary consumer or, as the hon. Member says, national security.

Given the potential for price hikes, the merger should be thrown out straight away, especially given the cost of living crisis, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) pointed out. We should not even be here having this debate. The hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) gave an indication of the potential magnitude of such a price hike; I think he mentioned a figure of up to £300 per year. That is astronomical for people who are struggling to make ends meet from week to week. This merger has been portrayed as something that will increase investment, and lead to a better consumer experience and lower prices, but we know what normally happens during a merger: investment falls, profits increase and the customer suffers. I cannot see this being any different.

The difficulty is in who is profiting. We have to look at the Government Benches. Two Tory MPs are on CK's payroll; that is in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, so it has been declared. The UK Government must do full diligence, and protect customers from Chinese state surveillance, not override these security concerns.

We need assurances from the Minister that this merger does not compromise national security in any way, shape or form. The two profitable companies concerned, which hold the data of 27 million UK consumers, have

critical Government contracts. Will the Government take a “consumer first” and “national security first” approach to any regulatory checks? What steps will the Minister take to ensure that large job losses do not result from any merger? This cannot be allowed to become a repeat of the Huawei scandal, in which ignorance and intransigence not only put consumers at risk but cost billions and led to an eventual U-turn. Security of the telecoms network and of users' data must come first.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): I call Sir Chris Bryant.

3.1 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank you, Sir George. I see we have three Knights Bachelor here today. I do not know what the collective noun is for Knights Bachelor; the obvious answer would be a round table. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on introducing this debate on an important issue that will affect not just 27 million consumers, but the whole country. There is an important debate to be had. I was glad he paid tribute to Unite the union. It is not my trade union, but it has done a great deal of work in this field.

Navendu Mishra: You can join!

Sir Chris Bryant: No, I am in the GMB, if we are doing announcements. It was also good to hear from my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), and for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley). The latter made an interesting point about Teddy Roosevelt, who largely got elected on the back of resurrecting the old Sherman Anti-Trust Act, to break up the powerful railroad conglomerates in the United States of America. I have always thought that anti-trust legislation could be used to protect consumers; it is vital part of our artillery in Government.

It is always good to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It amazes me what he knows about; he knows about everything. He is a one-man Opposition, entirely on his own. He made a really important point about rural access to telephony. My constituency in the Rhondda is semi-rural. It feels quite congested, with lots of people living closely on top of each other, largely in terraced housing in the valleys, but everybody lives within a mile of a farm or a field, normally with sheep or cows in it. Some of our mobile telephone connection rates are shocking. Ofcom's declared figures for all mobile operators show 100% connection. It certainly does not feel like that when I am walking up or down Hannah Street; it is impossible to ring anybody. I am painfully aware of the issues he raised. Today, mobile phone connection can be the difference between life and death. For many poorer families, it is their only means of telecommunication. It is how they apply for a job or register for a bank account. It is how most people run so many parts of their lives. That makes this an important debate.

In essence, there are two, slightly separate questions. The first is: what is good for consumers, the industry and the market? That is a matter primarily for the Competition and Markets Authority, although I shall mention a few things that I hope it will bear in mind

when it comes to make its decision. Then there is the separate matter of the security of the UK's mobile infrastructure from potentially hostile actors. That is a matter for the UK Government through the investment security unit in the Cabinet Office.

I turn to the competition issues first. As others have said, it will always be a matter of concern when two operators merge, taking the number from four to three, and especially so when that creates an operator with 27 million customers; it would be the largest in the field. That intrinsically implies that there will be less competition in the market, and that consumers might face higher charges. Indeed, Which? has made the obvious point:

"Reducing the number of network providers from four to three risks reducing the choices available to consumers, raising prices and lowering the quality of services available."

To make a point in line with that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside, prices really do matter to every family in our constituencies these days. I note that this year, tariff rates rose in EE's case by 14.4%, in O2's by 17.3%, in Vodafone and Three's by 14.4%, and in BT Mobile's by 14.4%. That is an awful lot of instances of 14.4%. That does not feel like a very competitive market to me.

Prices for lower-use mobile customers are even worse and much more worrying. Ofcom found a 13% year-on-year real-terms increase in the price of pay-monthly, SIM-only mobile services in 2022. The Labour party and I worry that those increases have contributed to inflation and the cost of living crisis. Yet a smartphone is no longer a luxury; many children do their homework on smartphones, and people fill in job applications on them, or run their companies from them. Both Three and Vodafone have increased prices above inflation recently, which might be an indication of their plans for the future. However, the price rises happened while the companies remain separate. I therefore urge the CMA to carefully consider the likely effect on both companies' 27 million existing customers.

Vodafone and Three argue completely the opposite of what has been said in this debate, and I will deal with that. They claim that since the other two mobile network operators are much larger, the merger might, counterintuitively, help competition by introducing a genuine third mobile network operator of similar size. They also argue that the concern about competition in the mobile phone market is exaggerated, as the separate mobile virtual network operators market, made up of end providers such as Tesco Mobile, which do not own infrastructure but buy access from the mobile network operators, is very competitive, and has low barriers to entry. Again, Vodafone and Three claim that having a third player in addition to EE and O2, which can offer mobile virtual network operator carriage, is good for competition. They also argue that they need to merge in order to invest sufficiently in 5G, and have the stated aim of making £11 billion in investment over a decade.

Navendu Mishra: The information my hon. Friend is sharing is important. On the point that Vodafone and Three make about the merger creating a new outlet for virtual carriers—I think they are called MVNOs—Vodafone already supplies a number of MVNOs, including Asda Mobile, VOXI, which I think is its own brand, Lebara and several others. That does not make any sense at all.

Surely consolidating the number of suppliers in the market will result in even higher price rises than the 14.4% he quoted.

Sir Chris Bryant: I am not sure whether my hon. Friend has been reading my notes, but that was one of the points I was going to make. Those are issues that the CMA will have to look at very closely with an eye to making sure that consumers are protected.

As has already been pointed out, the idea of an £11 billion investment in 5G would be great if it were a bankable commitment, because I want to see the roll-out of high-quality 5G services across the whole country. As I have already said, that is essential if we are to have levelling up across the country, including in places such as the Rhondda.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), pointed out that mergers in other markets have not always led to increased investment; if anything, there has been a tendency in the other direction. I hope that the CMA will look at that. It is worth bearing in mind that the EU's competition directorate blocked CK Hutchison's plan to acquire O2 from Telefónica in 2016. The CMA may well want to look at the reasoning behind that decision, as some of the issues may still pertain today.

In any case, competition is not just about having three players competing for business. In practice, many consumers have little or no choice of operator because of local coverage issues. If the main player has only two other companies looking over its shoulder, it may too readily come to pricing decisions that extract maximum income for the company rather than provide enhanced value for the consumer. Again, I hope that the CMA will consider all those matters carefully.

There is one other market-related issue that I hope the CMA will consider: the trained workforce. Vodafone states that the merger is expected to result in "£700 million of annual cost and capex synergies by the fifth...year post-completion".

I want to know what that means for jobs. The market has regularly complained about shortages in its workforce. It is difficult to see how the merged company could make those significant savings without significant job losses, but until now it has been rather coy about that. Understandably, staff at the two companies and their union, Unite, are concerned about job losses, and we stand four-square behind those concerns. It would be an own goal for the UK telecoms industry to lose significant numbers of workers from its skilled workforce at this time. Far from helping to develop infrastructure in the UK, that could hinder it.

Let me turn to security issues. The merger will require the approval of the investment security unit, which was moved from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Cabinet Office. In effect, that means that, in relation to security issues, approval will be a decision for the Prime Minister. I do not want to exaggerate the security issues, but it is worth bearing in mind that the new company would have to handle extremely sensitive material regarding 27 million customers, as well as contracts for the NHS, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Defence, as has already been said.

Those contracts are currently with Vodafone, not with Three. In the case of the Ministry of Defence, for instance, Vodafone was recently awarded a contract to

[Sir Chris Bryant]

provide video conferencing and recording services to UK military courts in cases relating to sexual offences. That is an important matter that we should consider carefully. Does it make sense to give such a role to a company, CK Hutchison Holdings—the owner of Three—that is a Hong Kong-based and Cayman Islands-registered conglomerate that was formed only in 2015?

My questions for the Minister are as follows. What assessment have the Government made of the relationship between CK Hutchison and the Chinese state? If the merger were to go ahead, how would the Government seek to guarantee the security of national and personal data? Would they, for instance, consider carving out Government contracts from the deal? Under the provisions of the Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021 and the Government's designated vendor direction, all telecoms operators are meant to strip Huawei from 5G by the end of 2027. What progress has been made on that, and what in particular has been done at Three and Vodafone? What impact do the Government feel that the Chinese security law in relation to Hong Kong has on Three and CK Hutchison Holdings?

On the security issues, can the Minister tell us what stage the decision is at? Will any Government decision, and the reasoning behind it, be published? Will Parliament be engaged in the process in any way? The Minister will know that the Intelligence and Security Committee has expressed its concerns about the process. The Committee said:

"The fact that the Government does not want there to be any meaningful scrutiny of sensitive investment deals...is of serious concern."

It went on:

"Effective Parliamentary oversight is not some kind of 'optional extra' – it is a vital safeguard in any functioning Parliamentary democracy".

That is particularly important for us to consider given that the Chinese state has sanctioned several Members of Parliament, including, incidentally, the Security Minister.

Given the recent stories about the Chinese state's attempts to infiltrate Westminster and serious concerns regarding Chinese involvement in other parts of our national infrastructure, how will the Government ensure that the merger, if it goes ahead, does not undermine national and personal security? How will the Government ensure that all ministerial meetings with CK Hutchison Holdings and its subsidiaries are published in full and in good time, in case there is any inappropriate lobbying?

I want to say one final thing, because we are partly talking about China. Next week will see the 1,000th day of the incarceration of Jimmy Lai, who is a British national. The House will not be sitting, but I think all Members would want to put on the record that we believe he has been incorrectly and inappropriately held in custody. We would like to see him free.

3.16 pm

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on securing the debate. It has been an interesting discussion. At times, I felt like I was listening to a display of

Marxist economic analysis, but some important points have been raised. Unfortunately, I will not be able to address a lot of them in detail, because they relate to either the Competition and Markets Authority or national security. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) was correct to direct a lot of his concerns, particularly with respect to the impact on competition, to the CMA, which will obviously have to examine the potential merger. There is also a national security mechanism in place, as he will be aware.

I will make a few more remarks about that, but it gives me an opportunity to say something about the importance of mobile connectivity and 5G technology, which has enormous potential to transform public services and make our workplaces more effective, connecting healthcare workers, vehicles, traffic flows and so forth. We reckon that widespread adoption of 5G could bring £159 billion in productivity benefits across sectors by 2035. The Prime Minister has set out the UK's ambition to be the leading science and technology superpower by 2030. If we are to achieve that aim, connectivity will play a critical role. To reach that point, we will rely heavily on investment by the mobile companies, and we are in regular dialogue with them.

As the hon. Member for Stockport knows, the deal that is on the table between Vodafone UK and Three UK will be subject to regulatory approvals. The debate has concentrated a lot on the potential national security implications, which I will talk about, and the impacts on competition. In general, the Government welcome investments into the UK that will support growth and jobs, meet our legal and regulatory requirements, and not compromise our national security, but as everybody who has participated in the debate has stressed, the security of critical national infrastructure is of prime importance.

The Government have a strong record on putting in place much tougher measures through such things as the National Security and Investment Act 2021 and the telecoms security legislation. Hon. Members will be aware of the actions that have been taken around Huawei and of the removal of its technology from the core network. The hon. Member for Rhondda referred to the target of achieving that by the end of 2027. I can tell him that we are on track, and only this week I announced further incentives to establish the open radio access network, which will increase the diversification of our telecoms supply market.

On competition, it is obviously a matter for the Competition and Markets Authority to assess the impact on both the market and consumers. The Government do not have a role in the decision, which will be taken by the Competition and Markets Authority. It is long established in competition policy that these matters are determined by an independent regulator.

The hon. Member for Stockport and others expressed concern about the potential impact on jobs. That is essentially a commercial matter for the company. Yes, Vodafone has announced the loss of 11,000 jobs globally over the next three years, and obviously that is a matter of regret. Those are difficult decisions, but they are commercial decisions for the company. There is no reason to believe that the merger will add to that number. Again, that will be taken into account in the examination of the case for the merger.

The hon. Gentleman referred to analysis by Unite the union on what happened when a similar merger took place in Australia. However, every market is different. We cannot extrapolate from what happened in Australia, where there were different timings, a different state of the market and different network providers, to reach conclusions about the impact here.

There are now 27 providers of social tariffs, with millions of households eligible. I would like to see greater take-up, and we are pursuing that by publicising eligibility for social tariffs to potential claimants. Strong competition in the mobile market has managed to keep prices in this country relatively low compared with many others, such as Italy, Germany, Spain, France and the USA. Consumers are beginning to see the benefits that 5G can offer.

The one contributor to the debate who understandably and correctly raised his concern about the lack of coverage was the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We missed him the other day in a debate on broadband, but it is certainly the case that his constituency has a long way to go. The shared rural network programme we are undertaking will particularly benefit Northern Ireland, because the challenges there are especially great. I am happy to talk to him about what more we can do to roll out both broadband and mobile coverage in his constituency, but that means that we are beginning to see the benefits that 5G can offer, in particular given our ambition to achieve stand-alone 5G, which represents a big leap forward from non-stand-alone 5G. That will require considerable investment, which must be paid for.

working with it to update the net neutrality guidelines. Recently, I was able to announce the launch of our 5G innovation regions programme, which will invest up to £40 million to help local and regional authorities to realise the benefits of 5G and advanced wireless connectivity.

As I said, there is now an established procedure with respect to national security implications. The hon. Member for Rhondda was right to point to the role of the investment security unit, which now falls under the Cabinet Office, but several hon. Members—in particular the hon. Members for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) and for Strangford—raised concerns about the lack of parliamentary involvement in the decision. National security issues have always been kept confidential, out of necessity, but we recognise that there needs to be some parliamentary oversight of economic security measures.

I am sorry that I am unable to go into detail on a number of the issues raised by hon. Members, but I will at least recognise that the debate has provided an opportunity for them to be put on the record. I am sure that the questions raised, which are legitimate ones, will be properly taken into account when the merger is examined by the CMA, if it triggers the process under the National Security and Investment Act. I thank Members for their participation.

Navendu Mishra: This merger will impact all 650 constituencies that are represented in the House of Commons, so it is right that we discuss it. I hope that the Government will keep Members informed of any developments. I note that my good friend the shadow Minister is a member of the GMB union, and I know that he is a scholar of parliamentary history and procedure, but I invite him to join Unite—it is possible to be a member of two trade unions.

[Navendu Mishra]

are facing a hard time—I think the figure from Ofcom is that 2.2 million households are already in a very difficult position—so I hope the Government will pay attention to the cost of the merger for consumers.

I also did not hear much from the Minister about job losses—well, actually we did, but 1,600 jobs in the UK and 11,000 across the world could go because of this merger. I and other Members will be most concerned by job losses in the UK. This goes back to the points I made about the country's lack of an industrial strategy and weak governance.

I encourage the Minister and his team to meet Unite to discuss the merger, because Unite is the trade union for workers in this sector and the Government should have engagement with it. I appreciate his comments about the CMA and about the workings of the investment security unit, but meeting the legitimate trade union for the sector should be encouraged, so I encourage him to meet Unite.

I am pleased that there were contributions to the debate from Conservative, Democratic Unionist party, SNP and Labour MPs. I am not quite sure what “Marxist” analysis the Minister was expecting, but I am sorry to disappoint him.

I will end on that note. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will continue to press the Government on this merger.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the proposed merger of Three UK and Vodafone.

3.31 pm

Sitting suspended.

Youth Programmes and Girlguiding

4 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role and future of youth programmes and Girlguiding.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. We are so lucky to live in a country that gives our young residents so many opportunities to learn new skills, have adventures and make lifelong friends. From the guides to the scouts and from the Duke of Edinburgh awards to the cadets, volunteers across our country devote so much of their time and energy to the youth programmes that add so much to the formative experiences of our young people. It has been an incredibly difficult few years for children and young adults. The damage caused by the covid pandemic is impossible to fully ascertain, but NHS figures show that the number of children seeking help for their mental health has risen by almost 50% since the start of the pandemic. Schools were closed and socialising banned, and all of this means a lasting and painful legacy for our young people.

We all know that outdoor activities and spending time with friends in nature are good for people's mental wellbeing. There are myriad different studies to that effect. Even NHS England has started offering nature prescriptions. So now is the time we need more opportunities for young people to have fun and spend time outdoors, and to socialise and be children. As more and more young people spend longer and longer on the internet or their phones, cooped up indoors, now is the time to provide more opportunities for them to get out and do something fun and adventurous—to build a raft and see if it sinks, go abseiling or learn life skills such as cooking. Now is not the time to be pulling away from providing these opportunities, so I ask the Minister what his Department is doing to provide more opportunities for young people that get them out and about, help them learn new skills and help them build friendships.

The girl guides have a very proud tradition of having this kind of positive impact on the lives of girls not just in the United Kingdom, but across the world. The board of Girlguiding has recently taken two incredibly concerning decisions regarding the future of the organisation: the proposed closure of all five of its outdoor activity centres across the country; and the full shutdown of British Girlguiding Overseas. It goes without saying that Girlguiding has touched the lives of so many thousands of girls across the globe. First and foremost, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the thousands of people across the country and across the world who have given countless hours, evenings and weekends, and much more to the betterment of opportunities for young girls everywhere.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this forward. It is a subject that is very important to us all, which is why we are all here. Does the hon. Lady agree that the positive mental health influence for children of organisations such as the girl guides, as well as the scouts, the Campaigners, the Boys' Brigade and the Girls' Brigade—I have them in my constituency in some numbers—cannot be overstated?

Does she agree that our thanks should go to those in the voluntary sector and the churches, which are deeply involved in this, who give of their time to teach children skills and practical topics, but also to build self-confidence and self-worth? Their value to society should be highlighted and recognised, and the hon. Lady has done that well today.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I thank the hon. Gentleman so much for making such an excellent point. I did not mention the Girls' Brigade and the Boys' Brigade, which, as he says, make such a wonderful contribution. They build the formative skills that young people need to face the challenges of life ahead, and make such a huge difference to individuals' lives.

That is why this decision to close down every single one of the five Girlguiding activity centres across the United Kingdom is so bizarre. Girlguiding is closing down opportunities for young women and girls who would otherwise struggle to afford them. This decision comes after the body blow to Girlguiding that is the move to end their overseas operation, which serves thousands of girls across the world and has been doing so for decades. Both of these utterly bizarre decisions came after no real warning and no consultation with members.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have been watching this developing disaster with increasing horror. The reason that may lie behind some of it appears to be a disastrous venture into property investment. Does my hon. Friend know about the headquarters of the girl guides, which spent millions on itself, and millions more on a hotel venture that went bust, owing unpaid rent to the girl guides of nearly £2.8 million? All that is alleged to be completely unconnected to the decision to close the overseas activities and the training and activity centres, one of which, Foxlease, is in my constituency. This reminds me of the Black Knight in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail", with the exception that it is cutting its own limbs off and not waiting for other people to do it.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I was not aware of that. My right hon. Friend has been a great friend to Girlguiding in Foxlease in his constituency and a great champion of Girlguiding across the country. What he says is incredibly worrying; there has been very little information at all about the thinking behind these decisions, so his comments about the potential reasons are interesting.

As my right hon. Friend says, one of the centres to be sold is Foxlease in Clay Hill in Hampshire, which is the closest one to my constituency. There is also Waddow Hall in the Ribble Valley, which is very close to the heart of our much-loved Mr Deputy Speaker; Blackland Farm in Mid Sussex; Glenbrook in High Peak, Derbyshire; and Ynysgain in Montgomeryshire on the edge of the Snowdonia national park.

These decisions do not merely affect Girlguiding members, but many others across the country. The closing activity centres do not just serve young girls in Girlguiding; they run courses and activities and provide opportunities for all sorts of groups of young people, including scouts, schools and many others. If the activity centres are sold off, there is no bringing them back—that's it. They will be gone and will not be providing opportunities

for young women and countless other young people. They will simply be turned into another relic of a wonderful past where children could be children.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a very important argument about the centres being lost forever. When I visited the fifth Romsey girl guides over the summer, the girls there made the point that they had all enjoyed Foxlease in the constituency of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), but they were concerned that future generations of brownies, rainbows and guides would not have the same opportunities that they had had, so it is the girls themselves who are concerned about future generations. They feel that they have missed out on an opportunity to be consulted and listened to, and to perhaps change the decision.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend puts it perfectly. I could not have put it better myself. The girls are concerned about the future—for their peers and those who come up behind them, who deserve the same opportunities and life chances they have had. We only have to look as far as Scotland to see what is likely to happen here in England.

Back in summer 2020, Girlguiding Scotland sold off its wonderful training centre at Netherurd under the guise of covid, and the site has now already been rubber-stamped into holiday lets. It looks as though we might even now be too late to get Girlguiding to change its mind. It confirmed its plan to go ahead with the sale on 14 August. Local communities have been valiant in their fight to save the activity centres. Foxlease has already been declared an asset of community value by New Forest District Council, in the area where my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East resides, in a move that will hopefully enable the new charity, Foxie's Future, to take up the mantle and save the site; and the Waddow Hall Trust in the Ribble Valley is following suit with similar plans, as are others.

I wish all these groups the very best in acquiring and maintaining their sites should they be sold off by Girlguiding but, importantly, I want to know from the Minister what the Government are going to do to prevent the sites from falling into the hands of property developers to become more holiday lets? What are the Government going to do to ensure that the important capacity for outdoor activities is maintained across the UK and kept available at a low cost for those who could not otherwise afford them?

We live in a digital world. Going out and playing with friends is becoming a rarity for some children, which is why it is so important that we expand organised outdoor activity and so alarming to see plans to take that away from children. It is not just young people in the UK who are being impacted by Girlguiding's short-sighted decision. The decision to end Girlguiding Overseas will bring a close to well over 100 years of Girlguiding across the world. Up until this month, British Girlguiding Overseas operated in 36 separate countries and territories. Those operations are all now either shut or shutting. That momentous decision has seemingly been taken without any proper consultation. British Girlguiding Overseas has said in a statement that it still does not

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

understand why Girlguiding took the decision and that, despite many requests for further information, no information has been delivered.

It is important to note that the end of British Girlguiding Overseas will not only shut down opportunities for thousands of girls across the world, but take away the important English-speaking girl-only spaces that have for so long provided a lifeline to so many members. British Girlguiding Overseas consists of two main elements: units that run in the middle east, Africa, Asia, Benelux and France, Europe and lone guiding, and the units in British Overseas Territories. Although Girlguiding continues to support the Crown dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, the many other territories served by the organisations are set to lose all their support. That will be felt particularly acutely by our overseas territories, which have very special links with the UK. They are often taken for granted, yet in many cases those often remote parts of the world, such as Bermuda or the Falkland Islands, see this country as their big sister—someone who looks out for them. At a time when the world feels particularly unstable, and when the UK needs to be looking out, not in, taking away support and casting branches away to fend for themselves is an incredible retrograde step that will undoubtedly lead to branches collapsing and opportunities for young girls simply melting away. It is also a retrograde step for our global soft power. We hear so much about that, and focus so much energy and attention on it, and yet here we are, taking it away.

British Girlguiding Overseas has not simply rolled over and allowed this step to take place without action, and it should be commended for its efforts in trying to secure alternative solutions, but the shock announcement and rapid deadline set by Girlguiding has left it few options.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; she is being generous with her time. Does she agree that it is almost as if the people at the top of the organisation, who do not seem to be answerable even to their own council, still less their own mass membership, are determined to take steps that are bound to lead to the closure of the organisation? Given that the organisation seems to have a very undemocratic structure, does my hon. Friend agree that we ought to look to the Minister for support for the idea of the Charity Commission investigating what has been going on in the organisation, which appears to have strayed far from its founding objectives?

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I thank my right hon. Friend for that sensible suggestion, to which I am sure the excellent Minister will respond. It sounds as if the upper echelons of Girlguiding are standing around with their fingers in their ears, humming loudly; they have rejected applications for an extension to continue discussions, they have rejected the request from British Girlguiding Overseas to become a charity in its own right, and they have rejected British Girlguiding Overseas' request to set up a separate franchise.

I will bring my thoughts to a close so that we can hear from the Minister. The Government are aware of Girlguiding's plans to end British Girlguiding Overseas, and I would be keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on them. I urge him to do whatever it takes to get Girlguiding

around the table to help to stop British Girlguiding Overseas coming to an end. These are two retrograde moves: terrible steps backwards for girl guides, terrible steps backwards for young girls and young people across the UK and across the world, and terrible steps backwards for our global soft power. I am keen to hear how the Government can help to push back against those disastrous moves and safeguard the future of guides in the UK and globally.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing this important debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my right hon. Friends the Members for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who have spoken in the debate and collared me on these issues when they can. Others have not been able to contribute but share their passion, including Mr Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), and the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies).

A thriving youth sector is a critical part of so much that my Department and the whole of Government are hoping to achieve for young people. Approximately 85% of a young person's waking hours are spent outside school, and it is during this time that thousands of youth workers and volunteers make a tremendous difference to young people's lives, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport mentioned. They provide early intervention, help to reduce pressures on other public services and build trusted relationships, enabling young people to achieve their ambitions.

I was recently fortunate enough to visit a National Citizen Service residential in Doncaster and see how transformational youth services can be. The impact that such activities and trusted relationships provide cannot be underestimated. The young people told me at first hand that they felt more confident and had overcome some of their personal fears, developed new skills and made new friends, sometimes with people from backgrounds they had never mixed with before. All this gets amplified around the country, and I thank the volunteers involved.

I know that many right hon. and hon. Members present will have been disappointed to learn that Girlguiding has decided to sell its five activity centres in the UK and cease overseas operations. Having seen at first hand the benefits that young people can gain by participating in programmes hosted by organisations such as Girlguiding, I share that disappointment. However, as Members will know, Girlguiding is an independent organisation and its board of trustees has a fiscal responsibility to take decisions in the organisation's best interests in order to secure its future and the safety of its members. The board tells us that it has not taken the decision lightly. That said, I understand the disappointment about the lack of consultation, which would enable people to make their views known.

Sir Julian Lewis: I fully recognise that this matter falls outside the Minister's responsibilities, but does he agree that where millions of pounds appear to have been

fire-hosed away from the objectives of the organisation, and where there is clearly a lack of internal democratic accountability, we have to look to the Charity Commission as a last resort to see whether the mismanagement can, even now, be limited in its terrible effects?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point. Of course, as a registered charity, Girlguiding is obliged to do the usual reporting. Anybody can raise any case with the Charity Commission, and colleagues may feel that they want to take that step.

I will outline a bit more what we have heard from Girlguiding. I understand that its decision to close the five activity centres is due to the significant capital investment required to ensure that they are fit for purpose, but it also reflects the ongoing running costs in the light of low levels of demand from Girlguiding groups. It is anticipated that funds from the sale of the activity centres, valued collectively at around £10 million, will be invested in a range of activities to support the future of Girlguiding and its members, including adventures away from home.

Dame Caroline Dinanage: I am sorry for interrupting the Minister, but does he agree that looking at the use of the sites as we come out of a period of a pandemic, when everything has been locked down, is incredibly short-sighted? Anyone with any modicum of business sense would be looking at how the organisation can attract a new audience. In my constituency, the number of youngsters joining scouting organisations is at a higher level than ever before. There is huge appetite among young people to get out there and join these sorts of activities. Should Girlguiding not be looking forward more broadly and more optimistically, rather than judging things based on what has happened over the last couple of years, which has obviously involved a completely unusual series of events?

Stuart Andrew: I will come shortly to what I propose to do after this debate. First, I want to address Girlguiding's decision to cease overseas operations. Girlguiding says that is due to the complexity of providing Girlguiding's board of trustees with appropriate reassurances on both the safety of members and the integrity of operations, in line with its legal responsibilities, across 36 countries and territories. Operations in the middle east, Africa, Asia and Europe ended on 1 September, and operations in the British overseas territories will cease at the end of the year.

My officials are in regular contact with Girlguiding, alongside colleagues from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence. They have been exploring Girlguiding's options for units in the British overseas territories and military bases to continue operating. We remain hopeful that a solution can be found to support this work and to ensure that the guiding experience in these locations continues in a way that is consistent with Girlguiding's decisions about what is appropriate for the organisation.

My Department and I absolutely recognise the benefit that Girlguiding brings to girls and young women. That is why, as part of the national youth guarantee's uniformed youth fund, we have provided Girlguiding with over £2 million to create more opportunities to take part in Girlguiding. Girlguiding has already created over 1,000 new places, recruited hundreds of new volunteers and opened 40 new units, with more to come.

I know that many hon. Members here today will join me in thanking Girlguiding for what it is doing. My Department and I have been in regular contact with Girlguiding, but I will ensure that I write to Girlguiding to highlight this debate today and the contributions of hon. Members. I will then happily send them a copy of the response that we receive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport also asked me to highlight what we as a Government are doing. It is important to do that, because ensuring that all young people have access to youth services is a top priority for both me and the Secretary of State. In 2021, we undertook the youth review to ensure that our spending and programmes were aligned with the needs of young people. In response, we are investing over £500 million in delivering the national youth guarantee, and our commitment is that by 2025 every young person in England will have access to regular out-of-school activities, adventures away from home—we recognise how important they are—and opportunities to volunteer.

To realise the ambitious aims of the national youth guarantee, we are investing in a few key programmes. We are creating or redeveloping up to 300 youth facilities through the youth investment fund. Over £160 million has already gone out of the door, supporting 87 organisations to give thousands more young people access to opportunities in their community.

We have also reformed the National Citizen Service programme into a year-round offer, so that thousands of young people who have signed up to the new programme will be ready for work and ready for the world. We recognise the benefits of greater join-up between formal education and the youth sector, for example. With the Department for Education, we are expanding the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport mentioned, in schools and communities. Over 400 new organisations have already started delivering the programme, giving more than 70,000 young people the opportunity to challenge themselves, support their communities and learn vital new skills.

We are also supporting uniformed youth organisations to recruit more volunteers, so that they can sustainably increase their capacity. Almost 3,000 young people already have a new place in an existing group or in one of the 144 new groups that have been established. Alongside that, the National Lottery Community Fund is continuing to invest in the #iwill fund, to help thousands of young people to make a difference in their communities through social action.

We recognise that there is a lot of work to do and that there is a tremendous amount—

Caroline Nokes: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for giving way. The subject of my intervention is perhaps not entirely relevant to what he has just been saying, but I feared that he was coming to the end of his remarks.

My right hon. Friend the Minister has spoken about his work with the Department for Education. May I ask what connection there has been between his Department and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities? There is a real concern in the New Forest about holiday lets, which my right hon. Friend the

[*Caroline Nokes*]

Member for New Forest East mentioned. With these sites that we have been discussing, I note that at least three of them—Snowdonia, the Peak District and the New Forest—are national parks. There is a real fear that properties in those sites will end up as luxury holiday lodges, thus restricting the ability of young people from disadvantaged communities to get out into our national parks. Has there been any discussion or consultation on issues such as the Caravan Sites Act 1968, which is of particular concern to the New Forest National Park Authority? Is the Minister prepared to discuss with colleagues across Government what can be done specifically to protect those sites from that sort of unwanted development in our national parks?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot make a commitment to stray into those areas of work, but I will absolutely and happily raise with my colleagues in DLUHC the issue that she brought up. I know that it was a big issue when I held that post for a short time, but I recognise that there will be concerns locally about what will happen to those sites. I will happily address those concerns to my hon. Friends in that Department.

Sir Julian Lewis: I will take the opportunity to stress that when Girlguiding UK says that only 10% of the movement uses the five centres, we are still talking about tens of thousands of young people. The response to the situation has been not, “We have to close one centre in order to subsidise the others”, but, “We have to close the whole lot while simultaneously losing millions upon millions of pounds on inappropriate investment

in property hotel ventures.” That has to be questioned. The reason for donating Foxlease to Girlguiding 101 years ago was not so that it could be used for commercial development; it was donated to be used by young people.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I need to bring the Minister back in now. We are very short of time.

Stuart Andrew: Thank you, Sir George. One of the challenges of trying to answer a debate about a decision made by an independent organisation is that there are limits to what I am able to say. That is why I made a commitment at the beginning to highlight the concerns of hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East raises another valid point, and I will ensure that his question is in the letter that I send. As I promised, he will receive a reply.

Youth services and organisations such as Girlguiding provide an essential service for young people and communities. As a Department, we are committed to ensuring that all young people in England have access to regular clubs and activities, to those important adventures away from home and to opportunities to volunteer. To deliver the services that young people want and deserve, a partnership must happen between central and local government, the private sector, young people themselves—crucially—and the great organisations that have provided so much. I recognise the strength of feeling raised in this debate. I have made the commitment to write to the organisation and highlight those issues, because I recognise that this concerns all the Members I mentioned at the beginning of the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Further and Higher Education Students: Cost of Living

4.30 pm

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of increases in the cost of living on further and higher education students.

I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Sir George. This is a timely debate coming as the new academic year starts. It is based on the two-stage inquiry undertaken during the first half of the year by the all-party parliamentary group for students, which I chair and officers of which are also present. We looked at the impact of the cost of living crisis on higher education students, on which we reported in March, and, in partnership with the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning—whose chair, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), I welcome—on FE students, on which we reported in July.

Although many others have been impacted hard by the cost of living crisis, we were concerned that students should not be overlooked. We were not alone in that concern. Petitions Committee staff wrote to me last week to tell me that there have been six petitions to Parliament seeking support for students. It is important that students are not seen as a homogeneous group. In FE and HE, there is enormous diversity of students, including part-time and full-time; distance learners and commuter students; many with families and caring responsibilities, juggling work with study; classroom-based and apprentices; undergraduates and postgraduates; and home and international. Of course, there is the difference in the arrangements and responses across the four nations of the UK.

The current student cohort, though, have one thing in common: the double misfortune of educational disruption from covid and now the cost of living crisis. Our inquiry collated evidence from universities and student unions, and directly from hundreds of students who engaged with us. We drew on the work of others, including the Office for National Statistics, the Sutton Trust, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Save the Student. I would like to thank Parliament's Chamber Engagement Team for its work in gathering feedback since the debate was announced. Just over the past couple of days, we have had upwards of 160 students, parents and others contact us.

So what did we hear? First, we heard that the student support system has failed to keep up with rising costs and that it was already unfit for purpose when the cost of living crisis hit, particularly given the decreasing value of student loans. According to the Save the Student survey, the loan fell short of average costs that students face by £439 per month in 2021-22, and that had increased to a shortfall of £582 per month last year. Other factors include the freezing of the lower parental earnings threshold, which means that the proportion studying outside London who receive the maximum student loan fell from 57% in 2012-13 to 38% in 2021-22.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My constituent Elliot is starting his final year at university, and his biggest worry is securing affordable housing. The maximum loan he gets is not keeping up with the prices, and he spends at least two thirds of his loan on rent alone. His family cannot afford to top up his rent. Does my hon. Friend agree that dealing with such financial hardships can be a barrier to excelling at university and that much more financial support is needed to give students the freedom to focus on their education?

Paul Blomfield: I echo the point my hon. Friend makes. Many of the comments that we received reflect the sorts of problems that his constituent faces, and I will come on to some of the wider points that he made.

Another contributory factor, according to the IFS, was the inflation forecast errors used to calculate loan increases, which mean that their real value is lower now than at any time in the past seven years. On top of that, we have had the scrapping of maintenance grants. The cumulative effect has pushed many students to a tipping point. More than a quarter of students were left with less than £50 a month, after paying rent and bills last year. As my hon. Friend points out, rent is accelerating at a significant rate. Our inquiry found 96% facing financial difficulty, with food, rent and energy the biggest pressures, but transport costs were also a key issue and particularly difficult for commuter students, many of whom chose to be home-based precisely to save money. Students have been struggling to get to their classes, access libraries and travel to placements.

The inquiry was a genuine learning exercise for us and we were particularly concerned to hear about the sharp increase in hours of paid employment taken by students. Of our respondents, 61% worked alongside their studies and 37% said that they are working more hours because of cost of living pressures. The Sutton Trust reported that about half of undergraduates missed classes last year due to paid employment. Around a quarter missed a deadline or asked for an extension on a piece of work.

They are often in precarious and insecure jobs. Johanna, one of the respondents to the Chamber Engagement Team survey, said,

"I have had to take several jobs, as the part time job sector is full of zero hours contracts with little stability and no promise of actual work. I am working more than I should have to and my grades are suffering."

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. Some of the figures he has given are truly shocking. Does he share my shock that a quarter of universities are now running food banks? The fact that universities are themselves having to provide food banks for students is an indictment of the fact that clearly our young people cannot afford to make ends meet at university. Does he agree we should consider bringing back things such as the maintenance grant so that our young people can focus on learning rather than spend all this time trying to make ends meet?

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention and her support as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group. She is right about the shocking

[Paul Blomfield]

fact she shared about food banks. I will come to that and reflect on some of the recommendations she talks about.

As well as affecting academic work, paid employment also affects involvement in extracurricular activities. People might ask why that matters so much, but it matters enormously because volunteering roles involve networking, team working, leadership skills and wider opportunities. Those experiences give graduates that extra edge in the job market.

Hitting grades, weakening skills development and limiting CVs—this all means that those from poorer backgrounds, who are the ones relying on ever increasing paid employment, are particularly disadvantaged, reversing the efforts of successive Governments to widen opportunities and ensure that those who take advantage of higher education go on to succeed. Since our inquiry, we are beginning to see the impact on retention, with rising drop-out rates. The sector group, MillionPlus, has estimated that as many as 90,000 to 108,000 students might find it too difficult financially to continue to study.

Responding to all of those challenges, most universities have put more money into hardship funds. Others have developed initiatives to offset the pressures faced by students, though not uniformly. The sector probably could do more. Just last week, the Higher Education Policy Institute published a report saying that those initiatives included supporting students with food costs, providing both means-tested and unconditional hardship funding, and subsidising student activities. And, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) pointed out, a quarter now have food banks on campus.

University support services have substantially increased their workload, extending the criteria for hardship funds, drawing in more eligibility, and working with their student unions. Our survey found that many students have not always accessed the funds available, either because they were not aware of them, which is a challenge for the sector, or because they did not think they qualified for additional help.

Recently, we have seen some universities moving to a three-day week in their timetabling on some academic programmes, to allow students to fit in their part-time jobs alongside study and to limit the impact of commuting costs. That may offer immediate relief, but it is not a solution.

There are other ways in which financial pressures are affecting life chances. Many students aiming for master's programmes, which have become important as an additional benefit in the job market, said they were reconsidering. For example, Alex, who also responded through the Chamber Engagement Team, said:

"as a working-class student in my penultimate year, I see my peers consider postgraduate study and I wonder how they can afford it. I'll never be able to save enough".

Postgraduate research students told us that they, too, were struggling—that stipend payments are insufficient to meet living costs and that PGRs are ineligible for childcare grants as they are in education: they often cannot access hardship funds because they fall into the gap between the definition of being a member of staff and that of being a student.

There are issues to address across the board. Our evidence confirmed a disproportionate impact on already marginalised and underrepresented groups, disabled students, black and minority ethnic students, care leavers and students who are estranged from their families. The Sutton Trust found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more affected, with a third skipping meals to save costs. It also found that a fifth, mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds, plan to live at home as commuter students during term time to reduce costs. That might be okay for some. It might work in London, where there is a wide range of higher educational choices. However, it limits university choice and limits course choice for many students across the rest of the country.

Our inquiry made four key recommendations to Government for higher education. First, to provide further hardship funding to universities to enable them to support those most in need. Secondly, to increase student maintenance loans to restore their real value and to maintain that value by taking a similar approach to uprating benefits. Thirdly, to consider reintroducing maintenance grants, as was recommended by the review the Government commissioned from Sir Philip Augar. Fourthly, to increase the household income threshold for the maximum student loan, which has been frozen since 2008. At that point, the threshold was in line with average earnings of £25,000, but those average earnings are now £33,000.

I move on to our further education inquiry. I am sure the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning, the hon. Member for Waveney, who is present, will cover many of the specific points, so I will skim over them a little more lightly. Our evidence found that, although FE students face similar financial pressures, many face additional ones, supporting not just themselves but in many cases having to support their families. FE students who responded to our survey reported difficulties with transport in particular and 72% said they face costs that put them in financial difficulty. Like HE students, they were working more paid hours to make ends meet, struggling to prioritise their coursework and classes and facing negative impacts on mental health.

Retention was also a key issue for colleges, with a decline in student attendance taking up resources to ensure students do not drop out of their studies. That is not just a problem for the colleges. Many students in FE are on technical and vocational courses—I know that is an issue close to the Minister's heart—providing essential skills for the UK workforce. The Association of Colleges reported to us that bursaries and hardship funds are becoming an essential item for family budgets. It is a bit like the point about food banks. Some reported students walking several miles a day to college so they could use their transport bursary to support their family with food and energy costs.

FE does not have the funding of HE and colleges cannot provide the same support. Of serious concern to us were emerging reports that colleges have been dealing with a significant rise in family tensions and domestic abuse because of cost of living pressures and have been referring more students to supported housing. Shockingly, some colleges told us about increased safeguarding issues, with cash-strapped students vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation.

Concerns were also raised about apprentices, with an average wage of £5.28 an hour, not being eligible for the 16-to-19 bursary because of Government rules—apprentices often travel furthest to placements, attend more regularly and are left more exposed to travel costs. We subsequently heard about the particular issue facing young carers doing T-levels, who will lose their carer's allowance if they study for more than 21 hours a week. So the cost of living crisis is affecting decisions not only about whether to remain in further education, but about the type of course, with many leaning towards shorter courses or those that lead more quickly to securing work, sacrificing ambition and limiting their potential.

Our key inquiry recommendations to the Government for FE included providing additional funding support so that providers can increase bursaries targeted at those most in need; reviewing the mandated eligibility criteria for bursary funds—this is an easy one as it does not cost anything—to provide colleges with more flexibility to determine eligibility; considering the case for extending free school meal eligibility so that colleges can provide more subsistence support; considering the introduction of free or subsidised travel for all 16 to 19-year-olds in FE or training; and increasing the apprenticeship minimum wage, including enabling providers to use bursary funds to support apprentices as well as other FE students.

My final point is that, in FE and in HE, the key takeaway from our inquiry has been the particular impact on students from poorer backgrounds. We are seeing the cost of living crisis damaging access and participation, limiting opportunities, affecting lives, levelling down not up, widening the skills gap and weakening our research capacity as a country. I hope that the Minister, and indeed the shadow Minister, will give full consideration to our recommendations.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. In view of the number of people hoping to speak in the debate, I am afraid I must impose a time limit of three minutes on Back-Bench speeches. I am sorry, but otherwise the number of people able to take part would be even more limited.

4.47 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate and opening it in such a comprehensive and diligent way. As he said, I chair the APPG for further education and lifelong learning, and I would like to thank the Association of Colleges, which provides our secretariat, for all the work it did in supporting the second stage of the inquiry, focusing on the challenges faced by further education students.

An online evidence session was held, during which we heard harrowing feedback from FE students about the experiences they are facing. Many of those in further education come from less well-off backgrounds and are already making enormous sacrifices to go to college. They are working long hours in part-time jobs, and many are supporting members of their wider family. The cost of living crisis has piled further pressure on them; for some, the burden has become intolerable and they have had no choice but to give up their studies.

Colleges are provided with funding to support students, but this is inadequate, and in many respects the crisis is deepening. East Coast College, with campuses in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth, has been providing bursaries and free school meals. Two years ago, it was supporting 1,400 16 to 18-year-olds. Last year the number rose to 1,842, and this year the college has already received 2,200 applications, which represents two thirds of its student cohort. The situation is intolerable, and the negative knock-on effects are far-reaching. Many people are being placed under intolerable pressure and are making enormous sacrifices. Colleges themselves find their budgets stretched to breaking point, and that in turn leads to the ever-widening skills gap that affects our economic performance so dramatically.

As we have heard, the July report put forward six recommendations. I would like to highlight one that we speak about a great deal in FE debates: the need for additional core revenue funding for the sector. I acknowledge that in recent years, particularly with regard to capital funding, the situation has improved, but FE gets a raw deal. I urge the Chancellor to address that at the forthcoming autumn statement by providing £400 million additional revenue funding that can address the problems that the sector faces and also alleviate the particular challenge that FE students face.

4.50 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous); I profoundly agree with the last point that he made. It is an even greater pleasure, Sir George, to serve under your chairmanship and to be able to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate and also on the work done by the all-party parliamentary group for students, which provides material to underpin the debate today.

My own constituency in Newcastle upon Tyne East has a very large student population. Perhaps we are more famous for shipbuilding, heavy engineering and manufacturing cigarettes—all industries that have gone—but we are still famous for having a large student population.

Inflation is an evil that must be exterminated. Mrs Thatcher told us that in 1987 and it made its way into the Conservative manifesto. She might have added that once exterminated, it ought to stay exterminated. For reasons we all understand, it has broken out again and makes us face a series of challenges—some much more easily borne by the rich than by the poor. That is the core point that I want to make in my short address to this debate.

A number of funding authorities have had to address this question. In Northern Ireland, the maximum maintenance awards have been increased by 40%. In Wales the increase is 9.4% and in Scotland, although the support is provided in a different formula, it is a rise of £900 a year, which, depending on circumstances, is an increase between 11.1% and 17.6%. That is the devolved Administrations.

Maintenance loans in England are due to rise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central told us, by just 2.8%. That cannot possibly meet the general challenges of inflation. When we look at the factors

[Mr Nicholas Brown]

that make up the specific pressures on students, such as rent increases, the cost of food, which has been particularly affected by the arable sector price increases, and transport costs as well, we see that students are disproportionately affected. Yet their interests have not been addressed, so they find themselves working longer hours to earn more money to keep themselves and become subject to an enormous amount of stress and anxiety. That could be a separate debate in itself.

4.53 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Sir George; I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing it. He and I have worked together over many years. His careful stewardship of the APPG inquiries is typical of his attention to detail and his passion—shared, I know, by the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon)—for education as an engine for social mobility.

I was very pleased, both as Chair of the Education Committee and as a local MP with a large university and many excellent colleges in my patch, to be able to serve on the inquiry and contribute to it. There are a number of strong recommendations, which I want to endorse, including more targeted bursary funding and an increase in the earnings threshold for the first time since 2018. I hope my right hon. Friend on the Front Bench will be able take some of those up.

The two reports from the all-party group highlight several concerning trends for students, which look set to fundamentally alter how young people see the comparative value of different further and higher education routes. Where that increases the attractiveness of earn-while-you-learn approaches such as apprenticeships, it might in some senses be welcome, but where it reduces students' ability to complete their courses or participate in the wider life of universities, including clubs, volunteering and community engagement, and where it risks increasing drop-out rates or requires students to spend so much time working that their studies and mental health suffer, it is a concern.

Local students at the University of Worcester wrote to me with a number of concerns that they wanted to be raised in this debate. They point out that the cost of living is acutely affecting those who live on their maintenance loans and feel that a number of the existing schemes to support people with the cost of living specifically exclude students. They say that student accommodation costs have risen 60% in our area in the last decade, and 68% of students who responded to their survey say that they can no longer afford course materials. One third of students have considered dropping out because of finances, and one third—compared with the quarter highlighted in the all-party group's report—have been left at the end of the month with less than £50 after rent and bills. They call for an increased student finance package and tailored cost of living support for students. In that respect, the recommendations of the all-party group are very welcome.

The Education Committee has also heard concerns that students taking T-levels find that they cannot complete their courses because of cost of living pressures on their

families; in many cases, they are transferring to apprenticeships to earn while they learn. I highlight the recommendation, which echoes the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), about FE funding in our report "The future of post-16 qualifications"; I gently say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that the figure cited in the Government's response—that there is an increase of 2.2% for the FE sector—is clearly not enough. I know that he will want to make the case to the Treasury for more, and I hope that he will use the reports from the all-party group to strengthen that case.

I also highlight very briefly the Select Committee's recommendation on allowing students and people in study to access the 30 hours of childcare. We think that that is an important part of the offer; it would ensure that people with parenting and caring responsibilities do not drop out of education and out of the opportunity to increase their earnings potential through upskilling.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have spoken.

4.57 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing this important debate.

Further and higher education students in my constituency of Liverpool, West Derby and across the country are facing immense pressure from the cost of living crisis, with rising bills, inflation and the Government's real-term cuts to students' maintenance loans. The maintenance loan simply does not allow students to cover basic costs or to live and study in dignity. The National Union of Students reports that more than a quarter of higher education students are left with less than £50 a month after covering rent and bills, and that 42% are surviving on less than £100. The impact on students' health, wellbeing and education is devastating. Some 22% of surveyed students say that they often skip meals to save money, and, shamefully, a quarter of universities now have food banks.

A staggering 90% of students say that the rising cost of living is negatively impacting their mental health. Students are the very future of our country, and they are being driven into poverty simply for wanting to go to college and university to study. Surely higher education should be seen as a right accessible to all who want to go—an investment in a public good that is essential to the future success of this nation.

At a recent talk in Parliament with a superb class of sixth-form students from St John Bosco, in West Derby, about their plans for the future, it absolutely broke my heart to hear that many of the students felt that higher education was simply not an option for them because of the cost involved. I often hear talk about glass ceilings in politics; listening to the class that day reinforced my view that the cost of higher education for the working class was now becoming one of the biggest glass ceilings of all.

For over a decade in power, the Government have completely failed to support students in Liverpool, West Derby and right across the country. The coalition Government scrapped the education maintenance allowance, and the bursary fund that replaced it has less than a third of the EMA's budget and stricter eligibility criteria that have

excluded many who desperately need that support. That simply cannot go on. We need systemic change. We need an end to the underfunding of our entire education system, an end to under-investment in students and an end to the failed free market experiment in higher education.

The Minister has an opportunity in the upcoming King's Speech to introduce legislation to support students and transform our education system. I call on him to listen to the NUS and

"urgently and dramatically increase the level of maintenance support".

I also call on him to listen to the APPG's recommendations, which were outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central. Finally, I ask him to listen to students in West Derby who are calling for tuition fees to be abolished and for a system of non-repayable financial support to be put in place so that they are not excluded from accessing higher education. Students and their families in West Derby deserve nothing less.

5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on setting the scene. A term used often in this Chamber applies to him: he is truly a champion of education, particularly further education, and he has shown us his knowledge today.

I have spoken countless times in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber about how the cost of living is impacting people from all walks of life, and we must have sympathy for students in further and higher education. None of us is a stranger to how extortionately expensive it is to attend universities and colleges nowadays, and I have no doubt whatever that the cost of living crisis has added to that significantly. Back in March, when the impact of the crisis was still at its peak, we took many steps to ensure that students across the UK were supported. In some areas, rents were frozen and public transport for students was altered. Inflation in the UK had been running at more than 10% since the start of the last term, and students are still feeling the impact.

Some constituents have contacted me to ask, "What is the point in going to university?" When students and young people say that, we have to realise just how important it is to address this issue. Fees and the costs of books, accommodation and transport are not doable for some families. One of my staff members used to travel to university on a return train ticket, which cost £10.50 when she attended between 2018 and 2021. The same ticket today is £16.50. Students must travel at least three or four times a week, so that is £50 a week, or £200 a month, for a student to attend their place of education. Some students are attending university three or four days a week and working full time as well, and they are just about making ends meet. As the darker and colder weather approaches, many fear that circumstances will arise whereby they simply cannot afford to continue. That means dropping out, which is even worse. Many are already having to resort to asking their parents for help or seeking emergency loans.

I ask the Minister, who is a good Minister—as he knows, everyone in the House respects him, which is important to put on the record—to speak to Student Finance Northern Ireland about maintenance grants in Northern Ireland. The price of fuel, electricity, rent and

food has gone up, but Student Finance NI does not deem it necessary to increase maintenance grants accordingly. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central referred to some of the costs that have risen.

We often talk about how young people are the future and how we build the environment we live in today to encourage them. The fact is that they feel beaten before they have started, with excessive, debilitating bills coming from every direction and hitting them head on from all sides. More needs to be done. We are all making the same request as we approach this winter, to ensure that our further and higher education system across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is sustainable and workable for all. Let us do something for our students, and let us do it today.

5.3 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir George, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). He said almost exactly what I would have said, but I would not have put it so well. Colleagues of different parties have made similar points, so I will try not to repeat them.

I find myself returning to the point made by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the value of maintenance loans for students from the poorest families is at its lowest in real terms since 2016-17, and the poorest students in England are more than £1,000 worse off than in 2021-22. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I respect the Minister, but he has to explain how the Government have allowed this situation to develop, because there has been a paltry rise in the maintenance loan. I am sure he is embarrassed about it. He ought to be embarrassed about it on behalf of the Government, and they need to do something about it.

I will make a few quick points about the city of Cambridge, which I represent. Cambridge is a genuine education city, with fine universities, an excellent further education college and brilliant sixth-form colleges. But as the Cambridge University Students Union points out, although the University of Cambridge is a very wealthy university—perhaps the wealthiest in Europe—sadly Cambridge is also the UK's most unequal city on some measures. In CUSU's words:

"Students must pay extortionate rents, College bills and other hidden costs, while maintenance loans and University and College bursaries have been largely stagnant. Disparity across the collegiate University means that students' experiences of both applying for and receiving necessary funding differ vastly."

There are many different experiences, but the fact that one of the Cambridge colleges has had to set up a food hub speaks volumes about the situation in which we find ourselves.

I am grateful to Harvey Brown, the CUSU welfare and community officer, for pointing out the pressure on postgraduate students in particular. He said that some had been in touch to say that there is simply nowhere they can afford to live in Cambridge, with some suggesting that living in a tent was the only means of staying in the city to finish their studies. He also talked about postgrad and international students, who are reliant on scholarships and often depend on extortionate visas, and the visa criteria for international students being harsh, with some having to prove progression to maintain their visa.

[Daniel Zeichner]

There is a range of complicated issues here, but clearly something needs to be done to improve the situation. I also echo the points about further education students. I was told this morning that some are paying £2,000 a year in rail fares just to come to and from Ely for their education.

I will conclude by observing that there is quite a furore in the papers about the triple lock. Is it not extraordinary that there is not a furore about this generation, which is actually suffering here and now? Would it not be wonderful to see that on the front pages of the newspapers tomorrow?

5.6 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who chairs the APPG for students, on securing this debate. As a vice-chair of the APPG, I am pleased to be able to speak.

I am lucky enough to represent the Leeds North West constituency, which has one of the biggest student populations in the country. Our universities and their students boost Leeds's culture and economy, and provide lifelong homes for people like me who never quite manage to leave. I have heard from students in my constituency that they are taking more and more hours of work in attempts to cover their basic costs. It is not surprising that research shows that 49% of students have missed lectures or seminars, which they themselves are paying for, to undertake paid work. A quarter of students report that they are less likely to finish their degree as a direct result of the cost of living crisis. Even after receiving maintenance loans and bursaries, students in Leeds North West, and up and down the country, are unable to pay their rent and are at risk of homelessness.

The main universities and their student union executives in Leeds, and I am sure across the country, are doing outstanding work to support students. Leeds Beckett University has gone above and beyond with measures such as absorbing 80% of the increase in rental costs for those living in student halls, providing a hot meal for £2 every lunchtime for every student, and doubling the allocation of its student hardship fund to £3 million. Similarly, great work is being done by the executive officers at Leeds University Union, such as paying for additional course materials, tackling period poverty on campus and developing a basic needs hub for students. Last year, LUU offered 200 free breakfasts all the way through December, as well as a free night bus service. It is also campaigning for a real living wage for student staff.

According to the NUS, 92% of students state that the cost of living crisis has had an impact on their mental health, with 31% categorising that impact as major. We have a situation on our hands that has been worsening for a decade and is now impossible for the Government to ignore. We already know that black students, students with disabilities and students from areas with high levels of deprivation are more likely to drop out of university and less likely to obtain a first-class degree. Trans and non-binary students, as well as students of colour, are more likely to have an income of less than

£500 a month. By failing to protect them, this Government are devaluing the education of all students who do not have the luxury of generational wealth.

The Tories have consistently degraded the worth of higher education. We saw it when they tripled university tuition fees, we saw it when they introduced cuts to education and anti-strike laws, and we are seeing it now as they leave students at the mercy of food banks and help from their university, student union or even other students. The fact is that students should not be setting up food banks on campus, or missing out on their education in order to prioritise a part-time job. PhD students should not be left without protections or adequate pay. The APPG recommendations on the cost of living crisis take up some of those points. I hope that the Minister will listen to them and act on this crisis in our universities for our students, which will have a real-life and real-world impact on our economy.

5.8 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship once again this afternoon, Sir George. I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing this important debate as we embark on a new academic term.

The current cost of living crisis has been felt acutely by the student population, who are particularly vulnerable to price rises. Monthly living costs for students have risen by 17%. A recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute showed that 64% of students were skipping meals to save money and that a quarter of universities have set up food banks for their students, as the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned. Ultimately, such pressures can force students out of university and eventually out of the workforce. We cannot afford for that to happen.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) mentioned international students and the difficulty they have with visa fees. International students who are in the UK with a stipend or have some funding sometimes have restrictions put on them that prevent them from working, so they are incredibly vulnerable and they really have no way out of that situation. Working could affect their visa or their stipend, so they are in a very difficult situation.

I note with concern the recent calls from some hard-right Tory MPs—I hope that the Minister is ignoring them—to block particular low-achieving school pupils from taking out loans that would allow them to continue their studies. It would be useful if the Minister would confirm that he will disregard such calls from that group of MPs.

There has been a big impact on further education as well, and those in further education often come from a more disadvantaged background to start with. The issues around further education have been mentioned by a number of Members, notably the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Sheffield Central.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central mentioned the cost of travel, saying that it was more difficult for many students to get to courses, so I hope that he welcomes the recent policy of the Scottish Government that gives every young person up to the age of 22 free bus travel. That has removed so many burdens from

that group of youngsters. That is a policy that the UK Government could implement across England and Wales. It would make such a difference to young people, and would not be particularly costly.

The hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) mentioned childcare costs and it is important that we consider that many students have such costs. Being able to access the 30-hour offer would make a big difference to them and enable them to access their university.

Ultimately, everything that we are talking about means that students increasingly find themselves unable to stay on top of their studies. Grades can suffer and in some cases students will drop out altogether. It is notable that new data from the Office for Students affirms that students who were eligible for free school meals are the most likely to drop out of university; in fact, they are almost 10% less likely to complete their courses than students from more affluent backgrounds.

We have heard a lot—from the hon. Member for Cambridge, the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) and the hon. Member for Strangford, among others—about increasing maintenance loans to keep up with inflation. The maintenance loan is significantly higher in Scotland than it is in England. That does not mean that it will always be enough, but it is certainly a step in the right direction, and increasing it would be an easy way for the UK Government to support students.

Of course, in Scotland we also have free tuition, because educational mobility should be based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay. I have great respect for the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, but he must accept that the Labour party is not in a good position just now on tuition fees, having rolled back its commitment to abolish them. It would be useful to hear where Labour is planning to go with that.

5.14 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, Sir George, to serve under your chairship today and to speak on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western).

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this extremely important debate, on all his campaigning on this issue and on his deep expertise in it, which has been of such value to the House. He has highlighted so many issues, as have other hon and right hon. Members, including the creaking nature of the student support system, the impact of increased hours of paid employment, impacts on life chances and wellbeing, and impacts on international students. I pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary groups for students and on further education and lifelong learning. It is wonderful to see the chair of that APPG, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), here and to recognise the contribution that he has made.

We have had strong contributions, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) and Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also pay tribute

to the work of the Sutton Trust, MillionPlus and other important research organisations. I note the vital role performed by universities and further education colleges in supporting students and their life chances, especially through this difficult time, as well as their key role in our education system and economy, and their support for businesses, our industrial strategy and our regional growth agendas across the country.

I am concerned that students have been an afterthought through the pandemic and then through the cost of living crisis. Inflation has skyrocketed into double digits. The inflation rate for food items stands at 14.9%. We know that the causes of the cost of living crisis, while partly global, can be traced to choices that successive Conservative Governments have made that have reduced our resilience, and this is an important debate for us to continue to have. The situation is even more acute with our need as a nation to look at how we grow the economy and to ensure that we have opportunities at every stage.

A report released just last week by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that universities are being forced to take steps to support their students during the cost of living crisis that were previously unthinkable, whether that is having a food bank or recognising that many need food vouchers. It begs the question: which part of Britain is not broken? It is important to recognise that this impacts the ability of those institutions to support that transformational potential, which is their purpose of supporting students to take advantage of learning and improve their life chances. ONS research found that the cost of living crisis affects students' academic performance, skills development, and health and wellbeing.

I will close with a few questions to the Minister, because he will see that the evidence clearly points to the negative impacts of the crisis on our students. The Conservative party should have solutions that are in line with, and part of, how we grow the economy, which is the first mission that we will have as a Labour Government. Has the Minister looked at which students are most impacted by the cost of living crisis? Will he take this opportunity to commit to an equality impact assessment of the impact of rising prices on students? What assessment has he made of the cost of living crisis on discouraging applications from students for certain courses, as has been raised by MillionPlus? How is he working with the FE and HE sectors on the challenges that they and their students are facing? I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate. He is an expert on higher education in this House and is widely respected. This is my first debate with the new shadow Minister, and she, too, is widely respected across the House. I know that we will have fierce debates, but I wish her well. I thank everybody who has spoken in the debate. I completely accept the pressures that students in further and higher education are facing, just as I accept that most people across the country are facing enormous cost of living challenges. I see that in my own constituency of Harlow. I am

[Robert Halfon]

committed to social justice and I am keen that we do everything we can to support disadvantaged groups to progress up the ladder.

We need to set the context: £400 billion was spent on covid, alongside the war in Ukraine and our significant debt. However, even with that very difficult economic context, we are still doing everything we can to help disadvantaged students. Because of the number of Members who spoke and the short time left, I will write to individuals if I do not answer their points in the debate.

I will start with FE and apprenticeships. Students in vulnerable groups—young people in care, care leavers and those on disability-related benefits—may be entitled to yearly bursaries of up to £1,200. We have allocated £160 million to FE for discretionary bursaries. That is almost a 12% increase. That helps students with travel costs and the cost of books and equipment. That is an issue that has been raised by the APPG.

On apprenticeships, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central talked about the apprentice minimum wage. That increased by 9.7% to £5.28 an hour. I appreciate that that is not a huge amount of money, but the latest data shows that the median gross hourly pay for apprentices in 2021 was £9.98 an hour. A 2021 survey showed that pay increased with level of apprenticeship, from £8.23 an hour among level 2 apprentices to £13.84 among degree apprenticeships and £15.11 an hour among level 6 non-degree apprentices. We are investing £40 million to support degree apprenticeships to encourage more people to take them up. We have had more than 180,000 since we introduced degree apprenticeships in 2014. Those students have no debt; they earn while they learn. I gave the hon. Member for Sheffield Central the figures for what they are likely to earn. We know that they are going to get good, skilled jobs.

We have increased something I was very keen on: the bursary for care leavers. That was something I asked for and pushed for the moment I got this post. The bursary for care leavers who undertake an apprenticeship will increase from £1,000 to £3,000, so I am trying to do everything I can in these difficult economic times to help the most disadvantaged.

Let us move on to higher education. A lot has been said about the problems that students face. We have frozen the maximum level of tuition fees, against significant pressure. We have done everything we can on that. We are trying to minimise the debt burdens for graduates wherever we can. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central mentioned transport. He will know that, for students in South Yorkshire, there is a zoom 16-18 pass. It is 80p a journey on bus and tram.

I want to make a wider point to all hon. Members who spoke. They talk about disadvantaged students being denied the chance to go to university. A lot of that came up today, including from the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne). Actually, the figures show that disadvantaged students are going to university in record numbers. Not only that, but they are about 73% more likely to go to university than they were in 2010. That is something that I am very proud of. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) asked what I am proud of: I am very proud that we are helping more disadvantaged students to attend university, and

that we created 5 million apprentices, increased the number of degree apprenticeships and introduced the apprenticeship bursary.

We previously helped students living in private accommodation with energy bills. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned mental health. We have given £15 million to the OfS to help universities with mental health provision. We are doing a lot of work on that, and I refer him to previous debates in the House on this subject.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Robert Halfon: I will carry on a little bit. I have very little time because the hon. Member for Sheffield Central needs a couple of minutes to sum up, but I will try to bring in the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake).

There is more support for students who have disabilities, who get maintenance grants on top of that, of course. None of that was mentioned. We give £276 million—an increase of £16 million over the past year—to the OfS to help disadvantaged students across our HE system.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Halfon: I want to carry on because of the time.

Caroline Lucas: Will he give way before the end?

Robert Halfon: If I can, I will. I genuinely would love more time to bring people in.

That is a lot of money. I have examples: the university in the hon. Member's own constituency has a £500 cash bursary, and in Liverpool, vulnerable students get bursaries of close to, I think, £2,000. We are trying to target significant help at disadvantaged students with that £276 million. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central will know that postgraduate master's students can apply for loans of £12,000 per annum, and doctoral students can apply for loans of £28,000.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) talked about core funding. He will know that skills funding is increasing by £3.8 billion over the Parliament, with £1.6 billion extra for 16 to 19-year-olds. We have just increased core funding by £185 million this year and £285 million the next year, on top of £125 million, as he knows. Wherever possible, we are trying to put more money into further education. My hon. Friend's college has had a significant amount of capital funding and core funding, so I think he will be pleased with that. I hope that also answers some of the questions that the distinguished Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), asked.

If the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) would like to come in very quickly, I will take his intervention—I think I have two minutes.

Ben Lake: On rental accommodation, I am sure the Minister will agree that too often students find themselves having to go for substandard accommodation due to price constraints. Will he consider that in delivering future support?

Robert Halfon: Of course, accommodation is up to the universities and private tenants—although we also work closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—but I will look at that important point, because we want students to live in quality accommodation.

Caroline Lucas: On the £276 million figure for the hardship fund, calculations from the House of Commons Library suggest that, while the cash value per student has increased in the last two years, in real terms it has actually fallen each year, with the 2023-24 level expected to be around 21% less in real terms than 2019-20. Will he look again at the amount of resource going into those budgets? Against inflation, it really is not enough.

Robert Halfon: If I can answer with a final, quick point about the £276 million, there were lots of universities—I can give figures from up and down the country—with bursaries of between £500 and £2,000 going to the most vulnerable students. We are trying to target help.

To conclude, there is one thing that has not been mentioned at all. Everyone here has looked at this in isolation from all the other help the Government are giving to hard-pressed families up and down the country. It is important to remember that the Government are spending around £94 billion—£3,300 per household on average—helping families, which includes students in FE and elsewhere, along with apprentices, to try and help them in every way we can. As in Sheffield and

throughout the country, many of our universities and colleges are doing a great job in difficult circumstances, and the Government are targeting help at those who need it most while being fair to both students and the taxpayer.

5.28 pm

Paul Blomfield: I have to say that I was not sure whether securing the last debate before recess would do justice to our reports, but the number and quality of contributions from colleagues prove that my doubts were misplaced. I am grateful to everybody for their points, and I think there were a number of common themes from both sides of the House.

I know the Minister knows that his response does not go far enough and that we are in danger of reversing the achievements that have been made in widening participation in post-school education. I hope that our reports will be helpful to him, as the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) pointed out, in making the case to his colleagues in Government, because the issues will not go away until we see real change.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of increases in the cost of living on further and higher education students.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 19 September 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Shipbuilding Credit Guarantee Scheme Update

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am making a statement to correct the record in relation to the supplementary estimate for UK Export Finance.

The final paragraph of the statement I made on 13 September 2023 should have read as follows:

“Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £51,000 for this new service 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.”

[HCWS1055]

TREASURY

Public Service Pension Schemes: Quadrennial Valuations

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): There are currently more than 6 million active members of the public service pensions schemes, which cover the NHS, teachers, the armed forces, the police, firefighters, local government workers, the judiciary and civil servants. Valuations of the public service pension schemes are undertaken every four years. The valuations are important as they ensure that the full costs of each scheme are understood and fully recognised by Government, and that there is a fair balance of risk between members and taxpayers with regard to the cost of providing the schemes.

This valuation is the first time that a reformed cost control mechanism will be used. Following a review by the Government Actuary and a public consultation, the cost control mechanism has been reformed to address concerns around its not meeting its original objectives. The objectives are to protect the Exchequer, and by extension taxpayers, from unforeseen costs; to maintain the value of public service pension schemes to members; and to provide stability and certainty on member benefit and contribution levels. The reforms mean that the mechanism now only assesses costs associated with the post-2015 reformed schemes, increases the margin by which costs need to vary from the target in order for benefit, or member contribution, changes to be required from 2% to 3% of pensionable pay, and includes an “economic check” such that changes will only happen if the costs would still be outside the same margin had the impact of changes in long-term economic assumptions been included. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013, when taken together with regulations made under it and the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Act 2022, provides for the introduction of these reforms.

On 31 August 2023, HM Treasury published a document that sets out how the valuations are to be conducted for this valuation cycle^[1]. The document sets a range of

assumptions that Departments and the Scottish and Welsh Governments must use in finalising their valuations of public service pension schemes. The document allows public service employers, Departments and scheme administrators to complete their valuations and prepare for the implementation of new employer contribution rates and take any necessary steps with respect to cost control mechanism results. The publication of this document follows a statutory consultation with the Government Actuary, which concluded in August 2023. Copies of this document, the 2023 Directions, have been placed in the Houses of Parliament Libraries.

A key factor which influences the valuation results of all unfunded schemes is a reduction in the SCAPE—superannuation contributions adjusted for past experience—discount rate which is used to express schemes’ future pension payments as a present-day cost, based on the Office for Budget Responsibility’s forecast of long-term GDP growth. The updated SCAPE discount rate was announced in March 2023 and is expected to cause increases to employer contribution rates. This is because pension payments paid in the future will be discounted at a lower rate and therefore have a higher value in today’s terms. HM Treasury has committed to provide funding, for all centrally funded employers, for increases in employer contribution rates resulting from the 2020 valuations as a consequence of changes to the SCAPE discount rate.

The outcomes of the valuations are expected to be confirmed later this year via the publication of each scheme’s valuation report. Changes to employer contribution rates will be implemented with effect from 1 April 2024, and any changes to benefits required to bring a scheme back to target cost would apply retrospectively from 1 April 2023. An additional process operates in the local government pension scheme (LGPS) (England and Wales) run by the LGPS England and Wales Scheme Advisory Board.

^[1] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-service-pensions-2020-valuations>

[HCWS1051]

War Widow(er)s Recognition Payment: Tax Treatment

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): The Government announced in May that payments of £87,500 will be made to those who forfeited their entitlement to a pension for a service attributable death prior to 2015 and have not had this pension restored through divorce or subsequent bereavement. This payment is not intended to put a value on the widow(er)’s loss, but instead be an amount that clearly recognises that remarriage or cohabiting with a new partner does not erase the bereavement, as the Government are deeply conscious of the sacrifice these bereaved people have made.

The Government are today announcing that these payments will be exempt from income tax and national insurance contributions. This will ease the administrative burden on recipients who are a specially designated group who benefit from a key principle of the armed forces covenant, which recognises that special consideration

should be made by the nation to those, such as the bereaved, who have given most in the service of our country.

We reiterate our sincere condolences and gratitude to the widows and widowers who lost beloved partners in service.

[HCWS1050]

DEFENCE

New Accommodation Offer

The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): Today I am pleased to announce the Ministry of Defence's new accommodation offer, which from 11 March 2024 will deliver greater access to subsidised accommodation for our service personnel.

As the Defence Command Paper Refresh made clear, our people are our greatest strength, and the provision of service accommodation is essential to their operational effectiveness. To support this, our new accommodation offer recognises the different ways our people and their families live, modernises the way we use our estate, and provides an enhanced offer based on each service person's needs. We recognised the importance of improving fairness and inclusivity for all our people in the 2022 Defence accommodation strategy, and through the new accommodation offer we will deliver this for our people. Defence will also invest a further £400 million over the next two years to ensure that we provide the modern accommodation that our service personnel, their families and partners deserve.

The new accommodation offer widens entitlement to family accommodation subsidised by the MOD. This will be delivered through service family accommodation, or a subsidy provided to service personnel to rent from the private rental sector.

From March, service personnel who want to live with their partner but are not married or in a civil partnership, and parents with children who stay with them for 80 nights or more per year, will be entitled to subsidised family accommodation for the first time.

Widening entitlement to subsidised accommodation is the right thing to do. Inevitably, this will lead to increased demand across the Defence estate for accommodation. To ensure availability of subsidised accommodation for those entitled to it, we will make greater use of the private rental sector. Service personnel allocated to live in the private rental sector will receive a monthly rental subsidy to support them in renting a property that is suitable for their needs, within a daily commute of their assigned location.

Defence will no longer take rank into account when allocating accommodation, as using our estate this way increases cost and is inequitable. Through the new accommodation offer, accommodation entitlements will be simplified. Service personnel of all ranks will receive an entitlement to accommodation based on their need, which for most will be linked to family size. We will,

however, give service personnel more flexibility to choose the size, type and location of their accommodation where availability allows.

Many of those who currently receive an entitlement based on rank will continue to be able to occupy a property with the same number of bedrooms under the new accommodation offer. However, where personnel do experience a reduction in their entitlement, they will be entitled to transitional protection until three years after the launch of the new offer.

As well as widening entitlement to family accommodation, the new accommodation offer will address the current disparity between how single living accommodation is charged to service personnel when it is not their main home. All personnel who cannot commute daily from their home will be supported irrespective of their marital status.

Home ownership will be made more achievable by giving first-time buyers the opportunity to have up to £1,500 of their legal expenses refunded alongside the support of Forces Help to Buy.

As of 11 March 2024, service personnel who are newly entitled will have the opportunity to apply for accommodation under the new accommodation offer.

For those who already have entitlement, they will have the opportunity to move to the new accommodation offer on their next assignment. After three years, any service personnel who have not yet transitioned to the new offer will do so in a programmed manner.

The new accommodation offer demonstrates our commitment to improving the offer for our service personnel, delivering the vision set out in the Defence accommodation strategy, and working towards improving our accommodation, noting the recommendations of the Haythornthwaite review. We will go as far as we can to improve the offer under existing policy by widening entitlement to service family accommodation for service personnel in long-term relationships at eight sites covering approximately 10,000 people. This will apply to service personnel assigned to these sites from 31 October 2023.

Further guidance is being published today, with a final joint service publication expected later this year.

As well as ensuring that our service people have the choice in homes they deserve, they must remain affordable. We are committed to protecting our service personnel from cost of living challenges. We have done this by freezing daily food charges, ensuring the council tax rebate reaches those in military accommodation, increasing the availability of free wrap-around childcare and, this year, delivering a freeze in service family accommodation rents funded principally through the penalties applied to maintenance contractors for their poor performance over the winter months.

Our strategic advantage is derived foremost from our first-class people—our real battle-winning capability. Today's announcement builds on accommodation rent freezes, and an additional £400 million injection over the next two years to ensure that we provide the modern accommodation that our service families deserve.

[HCWS1053]

Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan: Revised Terms of Reference

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): Further to the statement by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace) dated 5 July 2023, I can confirm that the terms of reference of the independent inquiry relating to Afghanistan have been amended by agreement with the chair, the right hon. Lord Justice Haddon-Cave.

I have placed a copy of the revised terms of reference in the Library of the House.

The amendments reflect the written ministerial statement, which avowed the involvement of special forces in alleged unlawful activity in Afghanistan in the period mid-2010 to mid-2013.

In my new capacity as Secretary of State for Defence, I would like to reiterate my strong support for this inquiry commissioned my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-09-19/HCWS1043>

[HCWS1043]

EDUCATION

RAAC in Education Settings

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): This update follows from my oral statement to the House on 4 September.

On 6 September we published the list of 147 education settings known to be affected by RAAC. Thanks to the hard work of school and college leaders, all of these settings are offering face-to-face education, with 126 settings offering full time face-to-face education for all pupils.

An updated list of schools and colleges with confirmed cases of RAAC has been published today. As of 14 September, a further 27 settings have confirmed RAAC in some of their buildings. Of the 174 confirmed cases, 148 settings are providing full time face-to-face education for all pupils.

Last year, we issued a questionnaire to responsible bodies for all 22,000 schools and colleges in England to ask them to identify whether they suspected they had RAAC. Since 4 September we have been working with responsible bodies to confirm the remaining responses to this questionnaire. Responsible bodies have, as of today, submitted responses to the questionnaire for 98.6% of schools with blocks built in the target era. We are now working through all of these responses, and I continue to encourage all responsible bodies with outstanding responses to send these to the Department as soon as possible.

In my 4 September statement I also committed to complete outstanding surveys among schools within a matter of weeks. Due in part to the additional surveying capacity we have procured, I can confirm that every school that was awaiting a survey on 4 September has now been visited or will be visited this week.

Every school or college with confirmed RAAC is assigned dedicated support from our team of 80 caseworkers who work with them to assess what support is needed and implement mitigation plans that are right for them. Mitigation plans could include other spaces on the school site, or in nearby schools or elsewhere in the local area, until structural works are carried out or temporary buildings are installed. A bespoke plan is put in place to ensure that each school and college receives the support that suits their circumstances.

Project delivery teams are on site to support schools and colleges, whether that is finding short-term accommodation options or designing and putting in place structural solutions for affected spaces.

The Government will fund the emergency mitigation work needed to make buildings safe, including installing alternative classroom space where necessary. Where schools and colleges need additional help with revenue costs, like transport to locations or temporarily renting a local hall, this should be discussed with their caseworker and we expect all reasonable requests will be approved.

The Government will fund longer-term refurbishment or rebuilding projects to rectify the RAAC issue. Schools and colleges will either be offered capital grants to fund refurbishment work to permanently remove RAAC, or rebuilding projects where these are needed, including through the school rebuilding programme. We will set out further details in due course. We will work closely with responsible bodies to understand and assess what the right solution is for each case.

I want to reassure pupils, parents and staff that this Government will do whatever it takes to support our schools and colleges in responding to RAAC and minimise disruption to education.

[HCWS1045]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): My noble friend the Under-Secretary of State, Lord Callanan, has today made the following statement:

This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Sunnica Energy Farm for the construction and operation of a solar photovoltaic energy generation farm, situated across west Suffolk and east Cambridgeshire.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the Sunnica Energy Farm application is 28 September 2023.

I have decided to set a new deadline of no later than 7 December 2023 for deciding this application.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS1044]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Hong Kong Six-monthly Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong was published today, and is attached. It covers the period from 1 July to 31 December 2022. The report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. A copy is also available on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/six-monthly-reports-on-hong-kong>

I commend the report to the House.

The attachment can be viewed online at:

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-09-19/hcws1049>

[HCWS1049]

UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly: Membership

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) has been appointed as a full representative and vice-chair of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in place of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) has been appointed as a full representative of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in place of the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones).

[HCWS1047]

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The right hon. Lord Dodds of Duncairn has replaced the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

[HCWS1048]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Minimum Service Levels: Hospital Settings

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 allows the Secretary of State to make regulations to establish minimum service levels for relevant services in the event of strike action. They must consult with such persons as they consider appropriate before making

regulations. Minimum service levels aim to limit the impacts of strike action on the lives and livelihoods of the public and to strike a balance between the right of unions and their members to strike and the need for the wider public to be able to access key services during strikes.

A key priority for this Government is to ensure that our health services can continue to deliver vital services to treat and support patients at their time of need, particularly during challenging times. On Tuesday the Department of Health and Social Care launched a consultation seeking views to inform decisions on the introduction of regulations on minimum service levels in England, Scotland and Wales, to protect patient safety in key hospital-based services during strike action.

Our proposal is that most essential and time-critical hospital services should be covered by minimum service levels regulations. This consultation will help to inform decisions on whether hospital services should be covered and, if so, which services, and the appropriate minimum service levels required. The consultation will also seek views on whether any health services outside ambulance services and hospital services should be included in minimum service levels.

The consultation will run for eight weeks and will close on 14 November 2023.

Copies of the consultation will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1046]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Inquiry into Brook House Immigration Removal Centre: Publication of Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Today the independent inquiry into the mistreatment of individuals who were detained at Brook House immigration removal centre (IRC) between 1 April 2017 and 31 August 2017, as shown in the BBC Panorama programme “Undercover: Britain’s Immigration Secrets”, has published its report.

The report can be found on the Brook House inquiry website from noon today.

The report sets out failings in both oversight and governance to protect the welfare of detained individuals within Brook House IRC during this period.

The Government take the welfare and safety of those we detain very seriously and has made significant improvements to immigration detention since the dates covered by the inquiry.

I would like to thank Kate Eves and the inquiry team for their work to establish the facts of what happened at Brook House IRC, to identify learning and to make recommendations that will help to prevent a recurrence of such events.

We will carefully consider the findings of this inquiry in its detailed report, including the recommendations in relation to the management of the immigration detention estate and the welfare of detained individuals.

I have today laid the inquiry’s report before the House, and it will also be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1052]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

UK Artificial Intelligence Policy

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): I am pleased to provide the House with an update on developments in the UK's Government's artificial intelligence policy in recent months.

AI promises to revolutionise our economy, society and everyday lives, bringing with it enormous opportunities but also significant new risks. Led by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the UK has established itself as a world leader in driving responsible, safe AI innovation and has committed to host the first major international summit of its kind on the safe use of AI, to be held at Bletchley Park on 1 and 2 November 2023.

AI Safety Summit

The AI safety summit will bring together key countries, as well as leading technology organisations, academia and civil society to inform rapid national and international action at the frontier of AI development. The summit will focus on risks created or significantly exacerbated by the most powerful AI systems. For example, the proliferation of access to information that could undermine biosecurity. In turn, the summit will also consider how safe frontier AI can be used for public good and to improve people's lives—from lifesaving medical technology to safer transport. It will build on important initiatives already being taken forward in other international fora, including at the UN, OECD, G7 and G20, by agreeing practical next steps to address risks from frontier AI.

On 4 September, the Government launched the start of formal pre-summit engagement with countries and a number of frontier AI organisations. As part of an iterative and consultative process, the Government published the five objectives that will be progressed. These build upon initial stakeholder consultation and evidence gathering, and will frame the discussion up to and at the summit:

- a shared understanding of the risks posed by frontier AI and the need for action;

- a forward process for international collaboration on frontier AI safety, including how best to support national and international frameworks;

- appropriate measures that individual organisations should take to increase frontier AI safety;

- areas for potential collaboration on AI safety research, including evaluating model capabilities and the development of new standards to support governance; and

- showcase how ensuring the safe development of AI will enable AI to be used for good globally.

I look forward to keeping Parliament updated as plans for the summit progress.

Frontier AI Taskforce

Frontier AI models hold enormous potential to power economic growth, drive scientific progress and wider public benefits, while also posing potential safety risks if not developed responsibly. Earlier this year, the Government announced £100 million to set up an expert taskforce to help the UK adopt the next generation of safe AI—the first of its kind.

On 7 September, we renamed the taskforce—formerly the Foundation Model Taskforce—the Frontier AI Taskforce, explicitly acknowledging its role in evaluating risk at the frontier of AI, and systems which could pose significant risks to public safety and global security.

Since the taskforce's chair, Ian Hogarth, was appointed 12 weeks ago, the taskforce has made rapid progress, recruiting its external advisory board, research teams and developing partnerships with leading frontier AI organisations, to help develop innovative approaches to addressing the risks of AI and harnessing its benefits. I am pleased to be welcoming seven leading advisers to guide and shape the taskforce's work through its external advisory board. This includes: the Turing prize laureate Yoshua Bengio; the GCHQ Director, Anne Keast-Butler; the Deputy National Security Adviser, Matt Collins; the Chief Scientific Adviser for National Security, Alex Van Someren; the former Chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, Dame Helen Stokes-Lampard; the Alignment Research Centre researcher Paul Christiano; and the Prime Minister's representative for the AI safety summit, Matt Clifford, who will join as vice-chair to unite the taskforce's work with preparations for the summit—all of whom will turbo charge the taskforce's work by offering expert insight.

We are also drawing on experts to build a world-leading research team. Oxford researcher Yarin Gal has been confirmed as the first taskforce research director. Cambridge researcher David Kreuger will also be working with the taskforce as it scopes its research programme in the run-up to the summit. The research team will sit alongside a dedicated team of civil servants—overseen by a senior responsible officer in my Department, reporting into the DSIT permanent secretary as accounting officer. Together, these teams will work to develop sophisticated safety research capabilities for the UK, strengthen UK AI capability and deliver public sector use cases in frontier AI models.

Industry collaboration, including internationally, forms the backbone of UK's approach to shared AI safety and the work of the taskforce will be no different. The taskforce is harnessing established industry expertise through partnerships with leading AI companies and non-profits, a number of which were outlined in our recent announcement. These partnerships will unlock advice on the national security implications of frontier AI, as well as broader support in assessing the major societal risks posed by AI systems.

AI Regulation

We are moving quickly to establish the right guardrails for AI to drive responsible, safe innovation. In March, we published the AI regulation White Paper, which set out our first steps towards establishing a regulatory framework for AI. We proposed five principles to govern AI, and committed to establishing mechanisms to monitor AI risk, and co-ordinate, evaluate and adapt the regulatory framework as this technology evolves. We received responses from over 400 individuals and organisations across regulators, industry, academia and civil society. We will be publishing our response to the consultation later this year, to ensure we can take into account the outcomes of the AI safety summit in November.

Since publishing the White Paper, we have taken rapid steps to implement our regulatory approach. I am pleased to confirm that my Department has now established a central AI risk function, which will identify, measure and monitor existing and emerging AI risks using expertise from across Government, industry and academia, including the taskforce. It will allow us to monitor risks holistically as well as to identify any potential gaps in our approach.

We committed to an iterative approach that will evolve as new risks or regulatory gaps emerge. We note the growing concern around the risks to safety posed by our increasing use of AI, particularly the advanced capabilities of frontier AI and foundation models. Our work through the taskforce offers vital insights into the issue and we will be convening nations to examine these particular risks at the international level. We will be providing a wider update on our regulatory approach through our response to the AI regulation White Paper later this year.

Alongside this, we are working closely with regulators. Many have started to proactively and independently take action in line with our proposed AI framework, including the Competition and Markets Authority, which yesterday published a report on its initial review of AI foundation models; the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which has published a road map for software and AI as a medical device; and the Office for Nuclear Regulation, which is piloting an independent sandbox for the use of AI in the nuclear sector, with support from the regulators' pioneer fund. This demonstrates how our expert UK regulators are taking innovative, world-leading approaches to ensuring AI safety and effectiveness.

We are also examining ways to improve co-ordination and clarity across the regulatory landscape. This includes our work with the Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum (DRCF) to pilot a multi-regulator advisory service for AI and digital innovators, which will be known as the DRCF AI and digital hub. This will provide tailored support to innovators to navigate the AI and wider digital regulatory landscape and capture important insights to support the design and delivery of our AI regulatory framework.

[HCWS1054]

TRANSPORT

National Rail Contracts: Avanti and Cross Country

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I am updating the House that the Department for Transport has negotiated a National Rail contract for the West Coast Partnership rail operator.

In March 2023, the Department extended the contract with First Trenitalia to operate passenger rail services on the West Coast Partnership. Under this contract, which ends on 15 October 2023, First Trenitalia—as Avanti West Coast—operates express services on the west coast main line.

Today we have awarded a National Rail contract to First Trenitalia to continue operating the West Coast Partnership, providing West Coast train services as

Avanti West Coast. This contract, starting on 15 October 2023, will have a core term of three years and a maximum possible term of nine years. After three years, the contract can be terminated at any point with three months' notice at my discretion.

Previously, I stated that the decision to award a contract to First Trenitalia was contingent on the operator continuing to win back the confidence of passengers, with a particular focus on more reliable weekend services, continued reductions in cancellations, and improvements in passenger information during planned and unplanned disruption. The Department has worked closely with Avanti to restore reliability and punctuality to levels that passengers expect.

Avanti's performance has improved significantly, with Avanti-caused cancellations consistently below 3% since March 2023, and as low as 1.1% in July 2023, down from 13% in January 2023. Over 90% of trains now arrive within 15 minutes of their scheduled time, improved from 75% in December 2022. Over 100 additional drivers have been trained and brought on since April 2022, and improvements to passenger facilities on trains include better seats, lighting, and charging points.

The NRC will support the introduction of a brand new fleet of electric and bi-mode Hitachi trains later this year to replace its current diesel fleet which forms a key part of Avanti's goal to run more sustainably and will result in a 61% cut in carbon emissions, as well as offering more space and a quieter journey for passengers. The new trains support the DfT's strategic aims of reducing environmental impact and improving transport for the user.

The transformation of Avanti's performance over the past year demonstrates how, through working closely with Government, setting out clear goals and being incentivised to succeed, the private sector can deliver on our railways. My Department will stay in close contact with the operator and local stakeholders to monitor Avanti's performance as it continues its progress to a sustained recovery and increase services over time.

I am also updating the House that the Department for Transport has negotiated a National Rail contract for the Cross Country rail operator.

In October 2020 at the height of the pandemic, the Department entered into a unique operating cost franchise agreement with Arriva UK Trains Ltd to operate passenger rail services on Cross Country. The core term of this contract ends on 15 October 2023.

Today we have awarded a National Rail contract to Arriva UK Trains Ltd to continue operating the Cross Country rail services. This contract, starting on 15 October 2023, will have a core term of four years and a maximum possible term of eight years. After four years, the contract can be terminated at any point with three months' notice at my discretion.

The National Rail contract with Arriva UK Trains Ltd includes the addition of capacity to replace the remaining high-speed Trains which are being retired, the refurbishment of both the existing Cross Country train fleets and the introduction from December 2024 of direct daily services between Cardiff and Yorkshire, the north-east and Edinburgh.

[HCWS1041]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Additional Jobcentre Support Pilot: Phase 2 Rollout

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): I wish to update the House on the written statement tabled on 27 February 2023.

Earlier this month, the Department for Work and Pensions started testing a second phase of the additional jobcentre support pilot. The first phase went live on 27 February 2023, following a proof of concept. It tested how enhanced daily work-focused support, across two weeks, can further help eligible universal credit claimants in the intensive work search regime into employment.

Evidence shows that the longer a person is out of work, the harder it is for them to return. A claimant's likelihood of securing employment declines after 13 weeks, so we are focusing this support on those who remain unemployed or with low earnings after 13 and 26 weeks of claiming universal credit.

The second phase will provide an additional week of daily support after the claimant's first assessment period. This new earlier intervention will test the impact of a week of skills and employability focused support.

This builds on the first phase of the pilot which, in addition to this extra week of support, continues to test how enhanced daily work-focused support, across a two-week period, can further support eligible universal credit claimants into employment.

As with phase 1, phase 2 of the pilot continues to provide additional one-to-one work search conversations with work coaches and work search support sessions to help claimants. The "Claimant Commitment", which sets out each claimant's agreed work-related activities, will be regularly reviewed and activity will be focused on specific steps to support people to move into work.

Claimants will receive prior notice of the requirements they will be expected to fulfil. Eligibility remains unchanged and those with reduced requirements remain out of scope, including those:

Awaiting a work capability assessment;

Required to undertake less than 20 hours a week of work search activity;

Who are gainfully self-employed;

Who have no work-related requirements;

With an easement in place; and

On a full-time provision offer.

The second phase will be tested in the existing 60 pilot sites across central Scotland, Surrey and Sussex, West Yorkshire, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire. Over the coming months, the pilot will expand further into more jobcentres.

DWP remains committed to providing tailored work-focused support to help move claimants into appropriate and sustainable work, where they can then experience the many benefits of employment.

[HCWS1042]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 19 September 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	1213	ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO—continued	
Area-based Home Retrofit Schemes.....	1222	Families in Fuel Poverty.....	1226
Boiler Replacement Guidance.....	1223	Heat Networks.....	1225
Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage.....	1216	Methane Leaks from Oil and Gas Production	1217
Climate Change Committee: 2023 Progress		National Grid Funding: South-west England	1221
Report.....	1218	Onshore Wind Industry	1219
Contracts for Difference Scheme.....	1213	Renewable Energy Sector: High-skilled Jobs	1226
Domestic Nuclear Energy	1227	Topical Questions	1228
Energy-intensive Industries: Decarbonisation	1223	Uyghur Region: Solar Industry Sourcing.....	1220

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 19 September 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	65WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	71WS
Shipbuilding Credit Guarantee Scheme Update.....	65WS	Minimum Service Levels: Hospital Settings	71WS
DEFENCE	67WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	72WS
Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan:		Inquiry into Brook House Immigration Removal	
Revised Terms of Reference	69WS	Centre: Publication of Report.....	72WS
New Accommodation Offer	67WS	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	73WS
EDUCATION	69WS	UK Artificial Intelligence Policy	73WS
RAAC in Education Settings	69WS	TRANSPORT	75WS
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	70WS	National Rail Contracts: Avanti and Cross	
Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects	70WS	Country	75WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND		TREASURY	65WS
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	71WS	Public Service Pension Schemes:	
Hong Kong Six-monthly Report	71WS	Quadrennial Valuations	65WS
NATO Parliamentary Assembly.....	71WS	War Widow(er)s Recognition Payment: Tax	
UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly:		Treatment.....	66WS
Membership.....	71WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	77WS
		Additional Jobcentre Support Pilot: Phase 2	
		Rollout.....	77WS

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 19 September 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1213] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero

School Building Closures [Col. 1235]
Answer to urgent question—(Gillian Keegan)

West Coast Main Line Franchise [Col. 1244]
Answer to urgent question—(Jesse Norman)

Resettlement of Afghans [Col. 1253]
Statement—(Johnny Mercer)

Birmingham City Council [Col. 1265]
Statement—(Michael Gove)

Departmental Response Times [Col. 1280]
Select Committee Statement—(Mr Clive Betts)

Import of Dogs [Col. 1284]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Elliot Colburn)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Backbench Business
Conference Adjournment [Col. 1287]
Motion—(Bob Blackman)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 1329]

Ann Clwyd [Col. 1332]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Freedom of Religion and Belief [Col. 453WH]
South West Water: Environmental Performance [Col. 479WH]
Proposed Merger of Three UK and Vodafone [Col. 487WH]
Youth Programmes and Girlguiding [Col. 504WH]
Further and Higher Education Students: Cost of Living [Col. 513WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 65WS]
