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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 9 September 2024

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Order, 5 September, and Standing Order No. 3).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before we begin today's business, I remind Members that the deadline for submitting nominations and any supporting statements for the Select Committee Chair elections is 4 pm today.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Level 3 Vocational Pathways

1. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure the adequacy of the provision of level 3 vocational pathways for students. [900320]

4. **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure the adequacy of the provision of level 3 vocational pathways for students. [900323]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Qualifications must deliver on our missions, enhancing and spreading opportunity, and growing our economy. The last Conservative Government botched the roll-out of T-levels and defunded them. That is why this Labour Government have announced a pause and review of qualifications reforms, to support skills growth and students, and to bring certainty where there has been chaos. This short, focused review, along with other measures, such as the curriculum assessment review and the creation of Skills England, will allow the Government to improve skills training, unlock opportunity and harness talent.

Bill Esterson: There are a great many opportunities for technicians and engineers, which will only increase with the Government's plans for clean energy and their industrial strategy. However, we are currently short of intermediate and advanced-level skilled workers in this country, so will the Secretary of State tell us how her plans will ensure that more young people make the most of those opportunities, and how our education system will deliver the qualifications they need?

Bridget Phillipson: I know how passionate my hon. Friend is about ensuring that young people in Sefton and across our country are able to seize the new opportunities of the future. We are determined to drive forward and make Britain a clean energy superpower. Our reformed growth and skills levy will give businesses greater flexibility and enable them to take on more young apprentices. Skills England will allow us to identify the skills gaps in every corner of our country and ensure that we drive forward on that mission.

Mrs Brackenridge: As a former deputy headteacher, I have seen at first hand the impact of the previous Government's rushed plans to eliminate most BTEC qualifications, in the midst of a botched roll-out of T-levels. How does my right hon. Friend intend to fix the mess that she has inherited and ensure that the diverse aspirations and varied talents of students in Wolverhampton North East are met?

Bridget Phillipson: Given her background in education, my hon. Friend knows all too well how important it is that all our young people have the opportunity to achieve and thrive. She is right that we inherited a big mess, but we have acted swiftly and we are conducting a focused, intense review to ensure that all our young people have options that are available to them and we make a success of T-levels.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Secretary of State is absolutely right that the previous Government botched the roll-out of T-levels. In particular, the failure to deliver the T-level in hospitality and tourism was a huge blow to our communities in the lakes and dales. Her predecessor said that was caused by a failure to gain placements in the tourism and hospitality industry. Surely that is surmountable, so what plans does she have to talk to the hospitality and tourism industry in order to deliver the T-level to communities like mine very soon?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about ensuring that placements are available. I am happy to ensure that he has a discussion with the Minister for Skills to make sure we address his concerns about hospitality.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Alderman Tooling in my constituency is one of thousands of employers now investing in the talent of tomorrow. In five years' time, does the Secretary of State expect the number of apprentices to be higher or lower than today?

Bridget Phillipson: I pay tribute to all the businesses across our country that are providing high-quality skills training and apprenticeship starts. However, apprenticeship starts for the under-25s fell by 38% in the period 2015-16 to 2022-23. It will fall to this Labour Government to turn that around.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Calvin Bailey.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was not expecting to be called so soon.

I thank the Secretary of State for her focus on T-levels and her recognition of the need for a pause. I back up what my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) said about the botched nature of the T-level roll-out. Does the Secretary of State recognise that it is a challenge for many services, such as the NHS, to absorb T-level students effectively? Those qualifications need truly to give our young people the opportunities they deserve. Will she meet me and local further education experts to discuss this issue?

Madam Deputy Speaker: If Members are bobbing, they should be prepared to be called to speak.

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. In this period of review, we are speaking to employers, training providers and colleges to ensure that we get this right.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Jim Shannon to show us how it is done.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response to those questions. I know that she does not have direct responsibility for Northern Ireland, but may I ask her about apprenticeships? In defence and cyber-security—in Thales and Spirit AeroSystems—and in agrifood, opportunities should be there for young ladies as well as for young men. What is being done to ensure that there is equality of opportunity for everyone, both male and female?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about ensuring that people from a range of different backgrounds, including young women, see the opportunities that exist. I have had the opportunity to meet my counterparts in Northern Ireland and I look forward to working with them to ensure that, across the UK, we can drive forward on skills, growth and opportunities for all our young people.

Children's Social Care

2. **Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform children's social care. [900321]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Reforming children's social care is critical to delivering our opportunity mission, to ensure that a child or young person's background does not limit their ambition. The children's wellbeing Bill will remove barriers to opportunity and deliver the manifesto commitments on children's social care, so that all children have a chance to thrive in safe, loving homes.

Josh MacAlister: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is just over two years since I published the independent review of children's social care, which was commissioned by the previous Government. The review called for a radical reset of the whole children's social care system, which was urgently needed, and the previous Government took some modest steps down that track but failed to realise the potential. Since the election, a number of the children, families and care-experienced adults who were involved in the review have been in touch with me to share their hopes that we will be able to deliver on the ambition of the review. Do the Government intend to prioritise the resources that will be needed to implement the review in the upcoming spending review?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he did on the independent review of children's social care, which this Government are considering as part of our reform programme. Children's social care is a key priority for this Government, evidenced by our commitment to the children's wellbeing Bill announced in the King's Speech in July. A full programme for delivery will be produced in order to support that commitment. We have

inherited a challenging set of economic circumstances. However, we are committed to reforming children's social care, and that will be brought forward, as I have already mentioned, in the children's wellbeing Bill.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): In Norfolk, as in many other areas, we saw during the pandemic some hugely complicated issues around early years, including lack of preparation and learning difficulties, which many of our schools are dealing with. Will the Minister reassure me that, in this forthcoming Budget, real attention will be paid both to supporting that network—supporting the previous Government's introduction of early years—and to integrating better the mental health support, the learning difficulty support and the social care support? In the end, as these are children living one life, they surely need only one network of support.

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for his explanation of all the various challenges experienced by young people and children. If I had a crystal ball, I would be able to explain what will happen in the spending review, but as we move forward and introduce the children's wellbeing Bill, we will bring clarity to some of the Government's reforms. The spending review will also reveal where the Budget lies in these things.

Office for Students

3. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Office for Students. [900322]

23. **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Office for Students. [900342]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): For too long, universities have been treated as political battlegrounds. This Labour Government will treat them as engines of opportunity and growth. On 26 July, I published the report of the independent review of the Office for Students and appointed Sir David Behan, who led the review, as the interim chair. Under new leadership and with a sharpened remit, the Office for Students will concentrate on securing the future of universities and putting students first.

Matt Western: I welcome the Secretary of State to her position. Last year, the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee presented its report, which was very critical of the OfS—we did not need to read between the lines to understand just how poorly the Committee thought of it. It felt that it was serving neither the students nor the providers. What plans does she have to reset the relationship with the OfS so that it gives renewed focus to the students that it is supposed to represent?

Bridget Phillipson: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work in this important area to ensure that our universities are recognised as a crucial part of how we drive growth in our country. Sir David's review, which we published in July, is a platform for improvement, and I welcome and accept its core findings. The Government will support the OfS in refocusing on fewer key priorities, to do what is most important for students and universities, and to do it well. We will take the necessary action to support that work.

Dan Aldridge: Young people in Weston-super-Mare and across our country deserve the very best opportunities. Since 2016, University Centre Weston has transformed access to higher education in our town, meaning that more can study closer to home, improving access. How will the Labour Government seek to strengthen the strategic objective of the Office for Students to widen participation in communities such as mine?

Bridget Phillipson: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of widening participation, and he sets out clearly how universities are a key part of towns and cities right across our country. The last Government wanted to use our world-leading sector as a political football, talking down institutions and watching on as the situation became even more desperate. I have appointed the new interim chair to sharpen the focus of the Office for Students, focus far more on the financial sustainability of the sector, and return universities to being the engines of growth and opportunity that we want to see after 14 wasted years.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I am delighted to hear the right hon. Lady talk about engines of growth and opportunity, because that is exactly what universities are when they are well run. In my county we have a new university, the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering, which is doing exactly that, and offering incredible opportunities for young people to do a masters programme in three years, and then, as we are seeing with the new cohort, to go into companies as good as BAE Systems, Kier, Balfour Beatty, the Atomic Weapons Establishment and others. That work has been assisted by the Office for Students, which granted new degree-awarding powers. Does the right hon. Lady share my view that this is a deeply worthwhile enterprise that could be replicated around the country, and will she come and visit herself?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. I would be happy to meet with him to discuss it further.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): We have seen attempts by hostile states to influence our higher education sector, which the last Conservative Government took action to counter. Does the Secretary of State therefore share the concerns about reports that Peking University HSBC Business School in Oxford may be partly operating under Chinese Communist party rules, and does she expect the Office for Students to investigate that?

Bridget Phillipson: The shadow Minister will know that the Office for Students is independent, but I will ensure that it looks very carefully at the concerns that he has set out, and addresses them accordingly.

Academic Freedom in Higher Education

5. Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of levels of academic freedom in the higher education sector. [900324]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

The Government fully support academic freedom. Higher education must be a space for robust discussion and intellectual rigour, and it was a Labour Government that enshrined freedom of expression into law. Our recent decision to pause the implementation of further parts of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 was precisely because we believe in academic freedom. It is therefore crucial that the legal framework is workable. Baroness Smith in the other place and officials are speaking with a range of stakeholders. Their views will form part of our consideration of all options for protecting academic freedom into the future. No options are off the table.

Mr Holden: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and welcome her to her new position. Can she give the House a cast-iron guarantee that when she decided to reverse the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, she gave no consideration to the consequences of the new freedom of speech duties that the Act would impose on universities in terms of their financial relationship with authoritarian regimes such as the People's Republic of China?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, I can give the right hon. Gentleman that reassurance. We looked very carefully and very closely at the way in which the legislation was going to operate. I want to ensure that we have good, strong, workable legislation. I was concerned about what I had heard from Jewish groups and other minority communities about the unintended consequences that might follow from the legislation. That is why I paused commencement, with a view to getting this right, ensuring that we protect academic freedom while avoiding a situation where hate speech is allowed to flourish on campus.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on taking the hard decisions that are needed in Government, and I am very pleased to hear that no options are off the table. What reassurances can she give me and other women that she will protect female academics, such as Jo Phoenix, Kathleen Stock and Selina Todd, from being bullied and hounded out of successful university careers?

Bridget Phillipson: Like my hon. Friend, I take having strong freedom of expression in our universities, and students being exposed to a range of views—some of which they might find difficult or disagree with—extremely seriously. That is why it is so important to have a wide-ranging education. Officials will ensure that we engage with a wide range of views in this important area as we look at next steps, and I would be more than happy to discuss that in more detail with her.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 would have ensured that universities in England had the tools they needed to deal with interference and threats to freedom of speech and academic freedom, wherever they originated. Now that the Government will no longer implement that Act, will she clarify her alternative plans to protect academic freedom in the higher education sector?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman will know that freedom of expression and academic freedom are incredibly important. The Office for Students sets out duties, and many of those principles are already enshrined in law. However, I want to ensure that we get this right. I am confident that he would not have wanted to be in a position where the Act opened up the potential for hate speech, including Holocaust denial, to be spread on campus—something that the Minister in the previous Government was unable to rule out.

Private School Closures

6. **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What information her Department holds on the number of private schools that closed in England between 11 May 2010 and 5 July 2024. [900325]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): Excluding private special schools, around 50 private schools close each year. There are a range of reasons for closure, including financial viability and departmental action where schools are not meeting required standards. Some 1,102 private schools closed between 11 May 2010 and 5 July 2024. It is also worth noting that the number of pupils in private schools increased in 2023-24, and that there has been a net increase of 13 private schools over that period.

Gareth Snell: St Joseph's preparatory school, a small fee-paying independent school in Stoke-on-Trent, announced that it is closing its doors at the end of this year after a period of financial viability questions. What support will the Department offer the city council and parents in Stoke-on-Trent to ensure that those children can still access first-class education?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and welcome him back to this place. He is a tireless champion for children in his constituency and regularly speaks up on local schools. I am aware of the situation at St Joseph's preparatory school. Private schools are of course businesses that are responsible for their own finances, but the Department stands ready to assist. The Government are committed to high and rising standards in schools, and I hope that we can work together to achieve that.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Malvern college, Malvern St James girls' school, Bredon school and other schools in West Worcestershire that offer places to children with special educational needs not only play an important role in our education system, but support the local economy. Will the Minister state that he does not want to see the closure of any of those important independent schools in West Worcestershire?

Stephen Morgan: This Government's ambition is that all children and young people with SEND receive the right support to succeed in their education as they move into adult life. We are committed to taking a community-wide approach, improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, and ensuring that special schools cater to those with the most complex needs. Children whose places in private school have been deemed necessary by the local authority will not be affected by the tax changes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nurat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): At the start of the new term, we all wish everybody well for the academic year ahead. What will Ministers say next September to parents who, because of Labour's education tax, find that class sizes are bigger and more schools are full, and that fewer children are able to get a place in their first-choice school in Bristol, Bury, Salford or Surrey?

Stephen Morgan: I welcome the right hon. Member to his place, and I very much look forward to working with him to ensure that every child gets the best start in life. The number of children in private schools has remained steady despite a 20% real-terms increase in average private school fees since 2010, and an increase of 55% since 2003. We cannot predict closures, but we will use indicators such as occupancy to monitor that. My Department works with local authorities to help them to fulfil their duty to secure places.

Apprenticeships: Critical Minerals

7. **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Whether her Department is taking steps to create degree-level apprenticeships in critical minerals industries. [900326]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): This Government will unleash the green skills we need to make Britain a clean energy superpower and spread sustainable economic growth across the country. Businesses can already benefit from the level 6 mine management degree apprenticeship and we are establishing Skills England, which will work across the country and across the Government with employers, local partners, unions and other experts to ensure that we have the highly trained workforce that England needs.

Noah Law: In Cornwall, apprenticeships in the critical minerals industry are so important, creating great work for the next generation, fostering innovation and supercharging our mission for clean energy. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps are being taken to expand our investment in these apprenticeships and meet the growing skills demand in that industry?

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the importance of apprenticeships and skills in creating local opportunities and national prosperity. Skills England will work with employers and other partners to identify the skills needs of the next decade, and ensure that the training needed for those skills, including apprenticeships, is accessible through the growth and skills levy.

SEND Provision

8. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of SEND services. [900327]

10. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of SEND services. [900329]

12. **Sadik Al-Hassan** (North Somerset) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of SEND services. [900331]

13. **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of SEND services. [900332]

15. **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of SEND services. [900334]

25. **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of SEND services. [900344]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The Conservatives left a trail of devastation across education, and nowhere is that clearer than in our current special educational needs and disabilities system. We know that, for too many children and families, the system is just not working, but I give my personal commitment to hon. Members across the House that the Government will listen to and work with families to deliver reform, improving inclusivity in mainstream schools and ensuring that special schools are able to help those with the most complex needs.

Dr Gardner: Last week, I visited Expert Citizens in Stoke-on-Trent, where people with lived experience of using public services help to inform system redesign. Many of my constituents across different councils have reported issues with SEND transport, which highlights the importance of listening to people with lived experience. In one example, a single working mother may need to give up her job because she does not have a car. She does not get SEND transport because she is 0.1 miles outside and therefore she cannot get her child to school. Does the Secretary of State agree that SEND transport needs a service rethink—one centred and built on the lived experience of the parents and children who use that service?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to stress the need to listen to children, families and all those working in the system in order to deliver reform. If she can share some more detail with me, I will happily take a look.

Kevin Bonavia: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her answer and to the Minister for School Standards for her response to last week's Westminster Hall debate, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), on SEND provision in Hertfordshire. As the Minister will recall, there are many heartbreaking experiences faced by children and young people in Stevenage and across Hertfordshire, where waiting times are much higher than the national average. Will the Secretary of State therefore consider a fairer funding settlement for SEND provision in Hertfordshire when she is next able to do so?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the significant interest in the Westminster Hall debate, and the level of interest today demonstrates the importance of getting this issue right. I know from speaking to him that he is concerned about the issue.

I agree that it is important that there is a fair education funding system that directs funding where it is most needed. One aspect of that is the national funding formula and allocating high-needs funding. We will take our time to look carefully at whether any changes are required, including in Hertfordshire.

Sadik Al-Hassan: May I ask my right hon. Friend to detail the Department's plans to help to solve the recruitment problem for SEND professionals, to enable schools to deal with education, health and care plans in constituencies such as mine, North Somerset?

Bridget Phillipson: It is certainly the case that there is a big workforce challenge, and making sure that we have specialists in critical areas is a central part of making sure children and young people can access the support they need. Our school support staff will play a crucial role in that, which is why Labour will reinstate the school support staff negotiating body. We will make sure that teachers have more training alongside support staff, in order to deliver better support and education for our young people, and this year we are investing over £21 million to train 400 more educational psychologists.

Luke Murphy: I welcome the Secretary of State's answer. On doorsteps, in surgeries and over email, families across Basingstoke have told me countless stories of the obstacles they have to go through just to have the barest acknowledgement of their child's needs, only to go through a similar obstacle course for their child to be assessed, and yet again for them to get the help they are legally entitled to. Can the Secretary of State offer families in Basingstoke with experience of this failing system some hope that they can expect better in future?

Bridget Phillipson: I joined my hon. Friend in Basingstoke during the general election campaign, so I know that many families in Basingstoke and right across our country were concerned about this issue, and I can give him that commitment. Members on the Conservative Benches may recall that the previous Education Secretary described the system that she left behind as one that was "lose-lose-lose". I agree. We are determined to turn that around, which is why we have already restructured the Department for Education, with much more focus on support for children with SEND as part of our schools provision.

Deirdre Costigan: Speech and language support for children with special educational needs and disabilities was clearly not a priority for the previous Government. I have seen the damage that that has done to families in my constituency of Ealing Southall: at a recent surgery, one mum told me that she just wants her young son to be able to tell her when he is in pain. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that children like those in my constituency receive the speech and language support that they need?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight how important it is that all of our children have strong speech and language skills. That is why this Government will roll out early language interventions to make sure that all of our children get support at the earliest possible point, including extending the Nuffield early language intervention for this academic year, because it is so important that we make a difference when our children are young.

Joe Morris: I thank the Secretary of State for her answers so far. People in my constituency of Hexham—one of the largest constituencies in the country—routinely tell me of the struggle they face in enabling their children to access the support they need and the education they are entitled to. Will the Secretary of State or one of her Ministers meet with me to discuss the challenges of accessing SEND education in such a rural constituency?

Bridget Phillipson: As the first ever Labour MP for Hexham, my hon. Friend will be a champion of rural communities across the country. I would be more than happy to meet with him—or my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards will meet with him—to discuss this important concern, which I know many Members wish to discuss.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her answer, and for her personal commitment to creating a fairer funding system for children with special educational needs. In that light, she will forgive me if I mention that the East Riding has the lowest high-needs block allocation of any local authority in England. So many people have been genuinely committed to a fairer system in the past. Will the Secretary of State set out how she will achieve that? It is easy to support it in principle, but it is very hard to find a way of delivering it in practice.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question, and will make sure that officials engage with him on that point. If there is anything further he would like to share, I will happily look at it. He is right: this is a difficult area, and we need to make sure we get it right. I am determined to deliver a system where all children and young people have every chance and opportunity. Particularly when it comes to SEND support, we will have to work across the House to get to a much stronger and better position for our children and families.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): What is the Secretary of State going to do about the capacity crisis that is rapidly emerging as tens of thousands of children are being forced out of independent schools by this Government's deeply misguided VAT policy? I have a list of 20 schools in Buckinghamshire with no places whatsoever, and Bristol city council is considering buying places from an independent school to put back in that school, at taxpayers' expense, a child who recently left that school at the parents' expense.

Bridget Phillipson: We were elected on a manifesto of driving high and rising standards in our state schools. The public back our policy. We think it is right that we prioritise investment in our state schools where the vast majority of our children go to school, including the vast majority of children in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I suggest that he spends a bit more time thinking about their interests.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to improve the provision of SEND services in schools, but does she recognise that many ordinary, hard-working families make extraordinary efforts to find provision ahead of a formal assessment in independent schools as well? Will she commit to

making an assessment of what levels of provision currently exist within the independent sector to satisfy special educational needs, because it will be material to the solution she will need to develop?

Bridget Phillipson: As the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), has set out, we will make sure that, where children have an education, health and care plan, the VAT on fees policy change will not affect those children. I recognise the point the right hon. Member makes and I believe that parents have a right to choose where their children go to school, but the vast majority of parents in our country who send their children to state school are also ambitious and aspirational for their children.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Maria, in my constituency, has a son who was in a specialist placement, and in October last year that school said it could no longer meet his need. Since then, he has not been back in full-time education, while another headteacher keeps telling me that special needs provision in Shropshire is decades behind elsewhere in the country. If the Secretary of State aspires for all children in the country to have their special needs met, how is she going to ensure that happens in places that are struggling so much with funding, such as Shropshire?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the challenge the hon. Lady sets out, and part of it is making sure that our mainstream schools are better able to cater for children with a wide range of needs. I am very sorry to hear about the experience of her constituent, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards will be happy to meet her or to look into that further to see if any action can be taken to support the family.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): In Leicestershire, special educational needs has been a real problem that I have seen in my constituency. The last Government made it one of the trailblazers to come together and trial some of the new things that could be done in special educational needs, and we started to see some progress in that. Will the Secretary of State meet me and the other Leicestershire MPs to discuss how we can take that forward, so we can get better provision for Hinckley and Bosworth and for Leicestershire?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to any emerging evidence that shows new ways of doing things. As a new Government, we are keen to do precisely what he describes to make sure, particularly when it comes to a better join-up between health and education, that we see faster improvement. I would be happy to meet him and Leicestershire colleagues, although my hon. Friend the Minister might be able to step in.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Too many Eastbourne parents, my mum included, are forced to relentlessly fight to get their children into the school that can best meet their children's special educational needs. That is so often down to a lack of funding, so will the Secretary of State commit to meeting Eastbourne families, Eastbourne school leaders and me to hear

about the SEND landscape locally, and provide the funding that local children with special educational needs need and deserve?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Member is right in his characterisation of a system that is adversarial and where so many parents have to fight to get a good education and support for their children. I would be happy to do so, or perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister might take that meeting.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It was in response to growing demand that the last Conservative Government increased the high-needs budget to £10.5 billion and put in place a statutory override so that SEND-related deficits did not overwhelm council budgets. With that set to expire in 2026, what is the Secretary of State's message to local authorities: is she pushing the Chancellor to extend that protection or for deficits to be written off?

Bridget Phillipson: I am genuinely surprised that the hon. Gentleman thinks that question is a source of strength. It represents significant failure over 14 years that we have ended up in such a desperate position facing our councils. We will of course look closely at all of this but, after 14 years when he will have heard that families have been terribly let down by the last Government, a period of reflection on his part might be in hand.

Student Mental Health

9. **Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD):** What steps her Department is taking to support the mental health and wellbeing of students. [900328]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): This Government are breaking down barriers to opportunity by providing young people with the mental health support they need. The Office for Students is providing universities with £15 million this year to improve their mental health and wellbeing support. Our further education student support champion, Polly Harrow, is driving a strategic approach to supporting mental health for further education students.

Alison Bennett: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Children's Society has found that British 15-year-olds are the unhappiest in Europe, and school absences are at record levels, often due to poor mental health or inadequate support for special educational needs. Early intervention is key to tackling mental health issues among our children. Does the Minister agree that, by putting a mental health professional into every primary and secondary school, we could help end the youth mental health crisis?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for her question and sincere concern about the mental health of children and young people. This Government are committed to improving mental health and wellbeing support for all children and young people. It is vital that the right support is available to every young person who needs it. That is why we will provide access to specialist mental health provision professionals in every school.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): As I have already mentioned in the House a number of times, I am a former teacher, I am married to a current teacher and most of my friends are teachers—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] She'll be pleased with that. The mental health of teachers after the last 14 years is at rock bottom. What steps will the Department take to support not just the mental health and wellbeing of our students, which is really important, but the mental health and wellbeing of our teachers?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for making it extremely clear that he is a teacher and has teachers within his network. He is right to mention the welfare and wellbeing of professionals and of teachers. I would like to offer him a meeting with an Education Minister to discuss that further.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Every year in the UK, hundreds of teenagers take their own lives—children as young as 12, like Riley Townsend in the constituency of Ashfield, who took his own life just a few weeks ago because of mental health problems. What more can we do to support our young people through the social care and education systems to stop this epidemic?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for highlighting that very serious concern. Student suicide is serious and a concerning matter. In the academic year ending 2020, the suicide rate for higher education students in England and Wales was lower than in the general population of the same age group. However, every suicide is tragic and suicide expert Sir Louis Appleby is overseeing the national review of higher education suicides to learn more to prevent suicides. It has seen excellent engagement from the sector and will report on that.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Last year, there was a 38% increase in the number of CAMHS referrals in Birmingham, while also a sharp fall in the number of young people seen within six months of a referral. Does the Minister agree that we need much more preventive support in schools, and closer working between education and health bodies?

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend is right. This Government have committed to recruiting 8,500 additional staff across children and adult NHS mental health services. That will help to reduce delays, provide faster treatment and ease pressure on busy mental health services. Family hubs are also crucial to providing that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): The previous Conservative Government introduced mental health support teams in schools, and the impact of the covid-19 pandemic is still being felt by students, particularly regarding mental health. Will the Secretary of State commit to continuing those mental health support teams to ensure that students can access the mental health care that they need?

Janet Daby: I thank the shadow Minister for his question. As I have already outlined, this Government are committed to improving the mental health and wellbeing

of children and young people, and we will provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school.

Teacher Recruitment

11. Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to recruit more teachers. [900330]

17. Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): What steps she is taking to recruit more teachers. [900336]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): As a first step in our mission to break down barriers to opportunity, we will recruit 6,500 additional teachers. We have kickstarted the recruitment campaigns, and made a 5.5% pay award, resetting the relationship with the education workforce. We will re-establish teaching as an attractive expert profession after years of damage under the previous Government.

Douglas McAllister: This Government have promised change in education, and made a commitment to raising school standards and increasing teacher numbers after 14 years of Tory neglect. The Scottish National party's 17 years in power have led to falling standards, under-resourced schools and a growing attainment gap between the richest and the rest. Does the Minister agree that it is time for change, given the Scottish National party's dismal record on education in Scotland?

Catherine McKinnell: Breaking down barriers to opportunity is a key mission for this Government and the Scottish Labour party. The SNP has seen attainment gaps widen and child poverty soar, but we will transform our education system so that all young people get the opportunities that they deserve, by driving high and rising standards across our education system. That is the change that this Labour Government will deliver.

Markus Campbell-Savours: Many teachers in my constituency welcome the drive to recruit more teachers, but they also want the Government to recognise the pressures on those already in the profession. What steps will the Department take to improve teacher retention in constituencies such as Penrith and Solway?

Catherine McKinnell: I want teachers to not only remain in the profession, but to thrive in it. That is why we are listening and acting on feedback. The Department, alongside school leaders, has developed a workload reduction toolkit and the education staff wellbeing charter. We will deliver a range of measures to make teaching a better valued and respected profession.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I recently visited Herefordshire, Ludlow and North Shropshire college, which provides excellent further education opportunities for students in my constituency. However, there is not parity of funding for teachers in the FE sector and those in the schools sector, meaning that post-16 education is now better funded for those pursuing academic courses than for those pursuing vocational courses. Will the Secretary of State roll out the 5.5%

pay rise to teachers in the FE sector also, so that there is no increase in inequality between academic and vocational opportunities?

Catherine McKinnell: We accepted the School Teachers Review Body's recommendation of a 5.5% award for teachers and leaders in maintained schools in England from September. It is a substantial award that recognises the hard work of those in our teaching profession. We recognise the challenges in the FE sector also and the issues that the hon. Lady outlines. We will continue to keep the matter under review, because we want to ensure that every child has the best opportunities, whether that is in our school system or in our FE sector.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The new Government's focus on the serious recruitment and retention crisis is welcome. However, as we have heard, the recent pay announcement overlooked teachers who work in colleges, who already face a pay gap of more than £9,000. We have twice the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in our colleges as in school sixth forms, so the recruitment issue is even more pressing in our colleges. Why is it that teachers of 16-year-olds in schools deserve a pay rise, but teachers of 16-year-olds in colleges do not?

Catherine McKinnell: We recognise the challenges that the hon. Lady sets out. We are facing an incredibly challenging fiscal position. From the previous Government, we inherited a £22 billion black hole to make up. This is about the opportunities of young people in this country, and we take the issues that she outlines incredibly seriously. We will continue to do what we can within the fiscal envelope that we have, and within the system that we have inherited. That is why we honoured the recommendations of the STRB review, and we will continue to do what we can in FE.

Children in Care: Educational Outcomes

14. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve educational outcomes for (a) children in social care and (b) other care-experienced young people. [900333]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that she has done in standing up for children in social care in recent years. We will champion the ambitions of all children and ensure that background is no barrier to success. In our children's wellbeing Bill, we will set out our plans to raise standards for all children in social care and will ensure that they are supported to thrive.

Helen Hayes: The drop-out rate from university for care-experienced students is 38%, compared with just 6% for non-care-experienced young people. As thousands of students are arriving at university for the first time this week, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that there is a consistent package of support for care-experienced students at every university to help them overcome the barriers that they too often face, and to ensure that university is a place where they feel welcome and can thrive?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and the passion with which it was delivered. I recently spoke to members of a children and young people's advisory group, who told me about some of the challenges they face at university. In some cases, they had not even been informed about the option of university, which is quite shocking. We are committed to providing the best university experience for care leavers. Access to higher education should be based on ability and attainment, not background, but too many children across our country do not get the chance to succeed. The previous Government could have done much more.

We will act to address the persistent gaps when it comes to access and positive outcomes for care-experienced young people. We have issued guidance to universities on supporting care-experienced young people and introduced statutory financial support, including a £2,000 bursary, but after the last 14 years, there is still so much more to do.

Children's Wellbeing Bill

16. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): When she plans to bring forward the children's wellbeing Bill. [900335]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): The children's wellbeing Bill will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows. The Bill aims to put children and their wellbeing at the centre of the education and children's social care systems, and to ensure that every child has a fulfilling childhood, enabling them to succeed and thrive.

Dan Carden: I know from visiting schools in my Walton constituency that some of the most difficult challenges that teachers face often come from the difficult socioeconomic challenges of the area spilling over into schools, so I welcome the Government's focus on children's wellbeing. Most important to my constituents will be the roll-out of free breakfast clubs. Could the Minister tell me a little bit about how and when they will be rolled out?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Breakfast clubs are about more than just food: they provide opportunities for children to play, to learn and to socialise at the start of the school day. The Government are giving parents more choice in childcare, and are supporting families with the cost of living crisis. Our plans for breakfast clubs will remove barriers to opportunity by ensuring that every child of primary school age, no matter their circumstances, is well prepared for school.

Topical Questions

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We are moving on to topicals; the questions will be short, and the ministerial responses will be snappy.

T1. [900345] **Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): As we start the new academic year, I want to say thank you to all staff working across education, and to wish all learners the best for the year ahead. It will be the mission of this new Government to break down barriers to opportunity, so that where a person is from does not determine what they can go on to achieve, and so that

every child has the best start in life. We launch our mission against a backdrop of many inherited challenges: a childcare pledge without a plan for delivery; a crumbling schools estate; a school attendance crisis; large attainment gaps; and falling apprenticeship starts and training opportunities. I am determined to turn this around. We will drive high and rising standards across education, from early years right through to adult learning.

Tim Roca: Across the Macclesfield area, we have fantastic schools, but the legacy of 14 years of Conservative mismanagement means that they have some of the lowest funding in the country. Will Ministers meet me to discuss how we can turn the situation about and fund our schools properly?

Bridget Phillipson: I know that my hon. Friend cares deeply about the life chances of children in Macclesfield and across Cheshire East. I would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): The Opposition share the Secretary of State's good wishes to all for the new term and the new year, but does she recall that last time Labour was in office, not only did England tumble down the world education rankings, but we ended up as the only country in the developed world where the literacy and numeracy of recent school leavers was worse than that of the generation who were about to retire? If she continues to follow the same failed Labour approach, does she expect a different result this time?

Bridget Phillipson: The right hon. Gentleman, as a former Minister in the Department, knows all too well that he and others were cautioned about how they should be using data. When we look at the raw numbers, we see that under the last Conservative Government, reading standards were going down, as were standards in maths and science. One in four children did not reach the required standard at the end of primary school, and one in five young people was persistently absent from our schools. We will drive high and rising standards right across academic subjects, but we will also ensure that all our children and young people have a range of opportunities in music, sport, art and drama, not just those with parents who can afford it.

T2. [900346] **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): As the new school year begins, far too many students in my constituency have not yet been able to secure a school place of their choice. Does my hon. Friend agree that the schools allocation policy needs a desperate overhaul? Many people believe that it is not fit for purpose. Could she tell the House what steps the Government are taking to address this extremely important issue?

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): We recognise the challenges that my hon. Friend raises, which is why the Government will introduce changes, so that state-funded schools can be asked to co-operate with local authorities on admissions and place planning. Local authorities have a responsibility to allocate all applicants a school place on national offer day. If children in his area are still without places, I would be happy to meet him, and to support him in resolving those issues.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Disadvantaged pupils between 16 and 19 are likely to be up to four grades behind their more affluent peers. We know that funding drops by about a third at 16, yet 16-to-19 tuition was axed in July, and the pupil premium has never applied to that age group. If the Secretary of State is serious about smashing the glass ceiling, will she consider increasing funding targeted at this group?

Bridget Phillipson: I share the hon. Lady's concern about making sure that we target funding in the most effective way. That is why I have said that my No. 1 priority is ensuring that we support children and young people at the earliest possible point, and give a real commitment around early education and childcare, because that is the single biggest way to ensure that our children arrive at school really well prepared and to stop those gaps opening up as children progress through education.

T4. [900348] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The early years sector faces significant challenges in delivering the roll-out of the expanded childcare offer promised by the last Government. The sector consistently cites the inability to recruit and retain staff as the biggest difficulty. Can the Minister confirm when the Government plan to publish the promised workforce strategy for the early years, and what opportunities there will be for the sector to have its say?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I thank my hon. Friend for all her hard work while in opposition on these important issues. This Government see early education as more than just childcare; it is central to our mission to give every child the best start in life. We recognise the inherited workforce challenges, in both recruitment and retention. In the coming weeks and months, this Government will set out plans for reform, beginning with a complete reset with the sector, so that the workforce feel supported and valued.

T3. [900347] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): As was alluded to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), children with special educational needs and disabilities in some urban local authorities receive three times more funding than they do in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Will the Secretary of State or her Minister meet me and East Riding colleagues, so that we can secure a fairer future for our local children?

Catherine McKinnell: The Secretary of State has set out extensive responses to extensive questions on the inherited challenges in the SEND system. We recognise the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised, and will be happy to meet him and his colleagues around his local authority area to discuss this further.

T6. [900350] **Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the Shrewsbury Colleges Group in my constituency on yet another excellent round of results this summer, with A-level pass rates at over 98% and 210 vocational students achieving a triple distinction? It is a superb institution in our rural area, working to drive up engagement and standards for vocational qualifications, which are the bedrock of our industrial strategy and central to the

Government's mission to break down the barriers to opportunity. Will she join me in celebrating its success, and assure it that it has parity of esteem with its academic school counterparts, and will she perhaps book a visit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Further education is front and centre of unlocking opportunity. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Shrewsbury Colleges Group on its excellent results.

T5. [900349] **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): Schools in Devon are missing out on £23.5 million a year due to the national funding formula—the equivalent of 450 full-time teachers across the county. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how Devon's school children are missing out, particularly those living in the most deprived areas?

Catherine McKinnell: I recognise the concerns the hon. Lady raises. The Government intend to take time to consider the various funding formulas the Department and local authorities currently use to allocate funding for schools. It is really important that we have a fair education funding system that directs funding to where it is needed, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the particular challenges in her area.

T7. [900351] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Steiner school in my constituency, with its nurturing and therapeutic pedagogy, is most challenged by the VAT policy, yet it enables many children who have anxiety or who would otherwise not be in education to access school. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss my report on the impact of the VAT policy and find ways to keep this school open and the children in education?

Stephen Morgan: We expect that private schools will want to continue to demonstrate wider public benefit through the provision of means-tested bursaries and partnerships with state-funded schools after the changes are made. As this is a taxation matter, His Majesty's Treasury is leading the implementation of the policy. It published a technical note about the proposed changes on 29 July and will confirm its plans at Budget. I encourage all private schools to engage with that process, and I would happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss her report.

T9. [900353] **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am still a South Gloucestershire councillor. As last Thursday's packed debate showed, children with SEND are being let down. Many local authorities are currently locked into safety valve agreements with the Department for Education, which were put into place pre-pandemic and contain unrealistic targets that no longer reflect the situation on the ground. Will the Secretary of State review those agreements, and meet me and local leaders to discuss the situation in South Gloucestershire?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady raises a concern that many have raised. She will have seen the level of concern at the special educational needs inheritance that this Government have taken on. Current safety

valve agreements will continue to operate, as they are agreed, but we will look at their use going forward. I would be happy to meet her to discuss the particular challenges in her area.

T8. [900352] **Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to welcome my right hon. Friend to her place, and to welcome students across Stratford and Bow back to school as they start their new term? The Secretary of State understands as well as I do the struggles some parents have in getting their children back to school, especially those with mental health and special educational needs. Will she outline what steps she is taking to ensure that school really is the best place for every child?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the important point that my hon. Friend raises. Many parents are doing everything they can, often in very challenging circumstances, to support their children into school. For my part, I can assure her that this Government will do everything we can to make sure children find welcoming, safe environments at school, with better mental health support, breakfast clubs in our primary schools, a broader, richer curriculum, and more support around SEND in mainstream settings.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): There were reports in the press a couple of weeks ago that the Secretary of State took meetings with teaching unions who made the argument that multiplication times tables should be taken off the national curriculum. Given our stratospheric success in PISA—programme for international student assessment—numeracy ratings, thanks to changes introduced by the Conservative Government, can she give us a 100% cast-iron guarantee that she will not dumb down the curriculum in this country and will not take times tables off the national curriculum?

Bridget Phillipson: I would caution the hon. Gentleman about believing everything he reads in the press. Times tables are an important part of our system. We will drive high and rising standards from Government. Rather than picking pointless fights and avoidable industrial action, what he will see from this Government is a different relationship, as we work in partnership with teachers, school leaders and support staff to deliver better life chances for all of our children.

T10. [900354] **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): The last set of PISA results under the Conservative Government showed standards in England's schools going backwards: backwards in reading—[*Interruption*—maybe Conservative Members should listen—backwards in maths and backwards in science. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is far from a record to be proud of?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Conservative Members do not like it, but it is absolutely true. I would add that, when it comes to the concerns my hon. Friend raises, we see stark attainment gaps in the difference between what our poorest and more affluent children are able to achieve. That blights the life

chances of children in his constituency of Gateshead. We are determined to make progress on that, unlike the previous Government.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I congratulate the Secretary of State and her team, and welcome them to their places.

In my constituency, children are being unenrolled after 20 days of absence, even when there is a valid and compassionate reason for their leave. Will the Secretary of State commit herself to reviewing this harmful and punitive rule, which is leaving children in my constituency without a school for many months, and will she take steps to make the necessary changes to protect those children and their right to an education?

Stephen Morgan: I am happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss the points that he has raised. Attendance and off-rolling are issues that the Government take very seriously, and we will set out more policies on them in due course.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The last Government promised to publish a register of children who were not in school. I welcome the measures taken by this Government, but can the Minister update me on the next steps towards publication of the register?

Stephen Morgan: This Government have no time to waste if we are to fix the foundations of our country after 14 years of decline. We will legislate for the register through the children's wellbeing Bill, which will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows, and which will support the Government's work to ensure that every child has the best start in life.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the funding announced on 9 May by the Conservative Government for a brand-new SEND school in the county of Buckinghamshire is in no way, shape or form "under review", and that we will get that new school?

Stephen Morgan: Ensuring that schools and colleges have the resources and buildings that they need is a key part of our mission to break down barriers to opportunity and give every young person the best start in life. We are committed to improving the condition of the estate through the Department's annual funding, continuing the school rebuilding programme and fixing the problems caused by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): At the start of the new school year, may I wish all teachers, school staff and children in my constituency the very best for the year ahead?

Does my hon. Friend agree that, as part of the curriculum review, which I warmly welcome and look forward to, we need an education system and curriculum—particularly in primary schools—with much more focus on learning through play, on oracy, and on multisensory movement and the recording of learning? That would benefit not just children with SEND, but all pupils.

Catherine McKinnell: The curriculum assessment review, led by experts, will focus on the evidence—what we know from here and abroad about how we can best help children of all ages and abilities to learn, and that

includes children with special educational needs. I am sure that those conducting the review will want to investigate different approaches to the primary curriculum, including those mentioned by my hon. Friend, but I would not want to pre-empt the review's conclusions and recommendations.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. That concludes Education questions. I am sorry that I could not fit everyone in; better luck next time.

Government Policy on Health

3.37 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): It is always nice to see the right hon. Gentleman, but I was expecting to see the actual Secretary of State respond to this question. Perhaps he is at a business meeting with health firms—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. May I ask the shadow Secretary of State just to pose the question? The Minister will respond, and then the shadow Secretary of State will get her two minutes after that.

Victoria Atkins (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the involvement of people with no formal appointment in the development of Government policy on health.

I apologise to the House, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am more used to answering, but believe you me, I am looking forward to the questions.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): And I am committed to making sure that the right hon. Lady is there, asking the questions, for a very, very long time.

Unlike our predecessors, this Government cannot get enough of experts. We work with a wide range of stakeholders in developing policy, because that goes to the heart of our approach to mission-driven government. But I think the shadow Secretary of State was referring specifically to the right honourable Alan Milburn, so let me address him specifically. I walked into the Department of Health and Social Care on 5 July to be confronted with the worst crisis in the history of the national health service: waiting lists at 7.6 million, more than a million patients a month waiting four weeks for a GP appointment—if they could get one at all—the junior doctors still in dispute and on strike, and dental deserts across huge parts of our country, where people cannot get an NHS dentist for love nor money.

This Government are honest about the scale of the crisis and serious about fixing it, which means that we need the best available advice—it is all hands on deck to fix the mess that the previous Government left. If a single patient waited longer for treatment than they needed because I had failed to ask for the most expert advice around, I would consider that a betrayal of patients' interests. I decide whom I hear from in meetings, I decide whose advice I seek, and I decide what to share with them. I also welcome challenge, alternative perspectives and experience.

The right honourable Alan Milburn is a former Member of this House, a member of the Privy Council and a former Health Secretary. He does not have a pass to the Department and, at every departmental meeting he has attended, he has been present at the request of Ministers. During Alan's time in office, he gave patients the choice over where they are treated and who treats them, as well as making sure that the NHS was properly transparent, so that all patients were able to make an informed choice—a basic right that we expect in all other walks of life, but which only the wealthy and well connected were able to exercise in healthcare until Alan changed it.

He gave patients access to the fastest, most effective treatment available on NHS terms, so that faster treatment was no longer just for those who could afford private healthcare. He made the tough reforms that drove better performance across the NHS and, along with every other Labour Health Secretary, delivered the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in the history of the NHS. That is his record and Labour's record, and it is the kind of experience that I want around the table as we write the reform agenda that will lift the NHS out of the worst crisis in its history, get it back on its feet, and make it fit for the future once again.

Victoria Atkins: I fear that the right hon. Gentleman is betraying his inexperience. It is a shame that he needs all that help and experience; the rest of us have just got on with the job.

The Department of Health and Social Care manages incredibly sensitive information, ranging from the development of healthcare policy to the handling of market-sensitive information concerning vaccines and medication, and the rules regarding patient confidentiality. It has emerged that Mr Milburn, a former Labour politician, has received more than £8 million from his personal consultancy firm since 2016. He advises one of the largest providers of residential care for older people, and is apparently a senior adviser on health for a major consultancy firm. [*Interruption.*] A Member sitting opposite says, "So what?" Given the risk of conflicts of interest—that, rather than the right hon. Gentleman's inexperience, is the point of this UQ—has Mr Milburn declared his business interests to the Department? Can the right hon. Gentleman reassure the House on how such conflicts are being managed, so that we can get a sense of the scale of this open-door policy and Mr Milburn's access?

Could the right hon. Gentleman tell us how many meetings Mr Milburn has attended? How many were with NHS England? How many were conducted without ministerial presence? What sensitive information has Mr Milburn been given access to? Does it include information concerning the sale of patient information to pharmaceutical companies? Has Mr Milburn seen internal DHSC or NHSE documents regarding the pricing of medicines and vaccinations, and other market-sensitive information? This is all information that comes across the right hon. Gentleman's desk, and there is no formal record for understanding what Mr Milburn has seen.

If the right hon. Gentleman uses, as he has done just now, the excuse that this is all okay because Mr Milburn is a former Secretary of State and a Privy Counsellor, could the right hon. Gentleman set out where in the ministerial code or the civil service code such an exemption exists for unrecorded access to information by members of the public? I hope the Secretary of State will also confirm his lists of other advisers, their commercial interests and any other members of the public attending meetings that are of a deeply sensitive nature, so that we get a sense of just how far this goes.

This is just more evidence of cronyism at the heart of this new Labour Government. Following recent press reports that a Labour party worker had been parachuted into a civil service role in the Department through a closed recruitment process, will the Secretary of State

[Victoria Atkins]

finally come clean to the House and be transparent about who is running his Department and shaping policy for him?

Wes Streeting: The right hon. Lady wants to compare experience. It took me three weeks to agree a deal with junior doctors—she had not even met them since March—and in the two and a half years that I was the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, she was the fifth and among the worst. Does it not just tell us everything we need to know about the Conservatives' priorities? She does not ask me what we are doing to cut waiting lists. She does not ask about the action we took to end strikes. She does not ask about the action that has been taken to hire a thousand GPs, who she left to graduate into unemployment. She has not asked me about the news on the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* that, on their watch, 50 years of health progress is in decline. And funnily enough, there was nothing on the news from *The Observer* this weekend that the NHS was hit harder than any other health service by the pandemic because it was uniquely exposed by a decade of Conservative neglect. Having broken the NHS, all they are interested in now is trying to tie this Government's hands behind our back to stop us cleaning up their mess.

What the right hon. Lady is implying in this question is that, as Health Secretary, she never sought the advice of people who did not work in her Department, which would explain quite a lot actually. I feel sorry for her, because when I need advice, I can call on any number of Labour Health Secretaries who helped deliver the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history. But she never had that luxury, because every single one of her Conservative predecessors left NHS waiting lists higher than where they found them—except, of course, for Thérèse Coffey, who was outlasted by a lettuce.

In fact, it says a lot about the modern Conservative party's anti-reform instincts that the right hon. Lady is so opposed to Alan Milburn. They used to hug him close when they were cosplaying as new Labour. Andrew Lansley even asked whether Alan Milburn would chair the new clinical commissioning board that his top-down reorganisation created, although Alan sensibly turned him down and labelled the reorganisation "the biggest car crash" in the history of the NHS, which just goes to prove that Alan Milburn has sound judgment and is worth listening to.

But if the right hon. Lady wants to lead with her chin and talk cronyism, let us talk cronyism. Why do we not talk about Owen Paterson lobbying Health Ministers on behalf of Randox? The Conservatives care so much about cronyism that they welcomed Lord Cameron back with open arms following his paid lobbying for Greensill. For reasons of ongoing court cases, let us not even get into Baroness Mone and the £200 million contract for personal protective equipment. Where was the right hon. Lady during those sorry episodes? Cheering on that Government and presiding over a record of abysmal failure that has put them on the other side of the Chamber.

This Government are having to rebuild not only the public services that the Conservatives broke and the public finances they raided, but the trust in politics that

they destroyed. We will put politics back into the service of working people and rebuild all three. Clearly, we will have to do it without the support of the Conservative party's one-nation tradition, who are not even running and have abandoned their flag. It is clear that the Conservatives have not learned a thing from the defeat they were subjected to on 4 July, and we will get on with the business of clearing up their mess.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Secretary of State has obviously decided that attack is the best form of defence, but the operation of the House will collapse if he declines to answer any questions about a very serious matter of public concern. Can we seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on whether he is conducting himself appropriately in the House? We are seeking transparency on a matter of probity, and he has a duty to answer the House, not least under the ministerial code.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The urgent question has just started, so there will be ample opportunity to continue to hold to account the Secretary of State, who no doubt believes that his answers are responding to the UQ. We have some time to go, so if Members bob, I will endeavour to ensure that they are called to do so.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): The sheer brass neck of the Conservatives to turn up on the very day that Transparency International UK published its report showing that £15 billion of contracts were red-flagged during the covid epidemic—[*Interruption.*] I am not reading. Those contracts have been red-flagged and are worthy of further investigation, and £500 million of them were given to companies that had not even lasted 100 days. Should the Conservatives not have taken that into consideration before coming here with this urgent question?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Frankly, every single contribution from the Opposition Dispatch Box should begin with a grovelling apology for the way they conducted themselves in government, but they will not apologise: they have learnt nothing and they show no humility. To my hon. Friend's point, when it comes to covid corruption and crony contracts, the message from the Chancellor is clear. We want our money back and the covid commissioner is coming to get it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat Front-Bench spokesperson, Sarah Olney.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats find it deeply ironic that the shadow Health Secretary has raised this question on the involvement of people with no formal appointment in the development of Government policy. Are they forgetting their record in government? Perhaps we should remind everyone that, under the Conservatives, it was their friends that benefited from large contracts to supply the Government during the covid pandemic. The result is that, just today, as the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) has already highlighted, Transparency International UK has revealed multiple red flags in

more than 130 covid contracts totalling over £15.3 billion. With the Conservatives out of power, we have the opportunity to clean up our politics, so will the Secretary of State update the House on whether the Prime Minister plans to appoint his own ethics adviser or whether Sir Laurie Magnus will remain in the post? Will the ethics adviser be empowered to initiate their own investigations and publish their own reports?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the hon. Member for her serious contribution. She is right to say that transparency matters. That is why meetings in my Department, and their attendees, will be published in the right and proper way on a quarterly basis.

It is also right to draw a distinction between those areas of business and meetings in the Department that are about generating ideas and policy discussion, and those that are about taking Government decisions. It is right that people from outside government come into the Department for Health and Social Care, or any Department, to lend their expertise and share their views, and it is right that Ministers make decisions absent of those outsiders. That is the distinction I would draw. The hon. Member raises a specific point about the Prime Minister's ethics adviser. This is a Prime Minister who does take ethics seriously and will not behave in the way that his Conservative predecessors did. As for individuals, that is a decision for the Prime Minister, but I will ensure that the hon. Member gets a more fulsome reply.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I have been a surgeon for 28 years. In the first 14 years, we had a Labour Government and we saw the waiting lists more or less disappear, such that by 2010, a patient coming to see me in the clinic would be offered an operation. In the second 14 years, we have seen record waiting lists. I welcome the advice of Mr Alan Milburn, one of the most successful Secretaries of State and one of the architects of the fall in the waiting lists, and I support the Secretary of State in this.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I am delighted to see him here, bringing his experience to the House, sharing it with the nation, standing up for his constituents and being part of the team that will do what the last Labour Government did, which was to ensure that our NHS is back on its feet and fit for the future.

Kit Malthouse: Notwithstanding the Secretary of State's bluster, he must appreciate that, given Mr Milburn's involvement in the private healthcare sector, his direct access to the Secretary of State may have conferred a competitive advantage. What does the Secretary of State say to those companies who compete with Mr Milburn's companies about the access that he has had to the Secretary of State? How can we in the House be reassured about the kind of information that Mr Milburn has been able to access and what, if any, advantage that might have conferred upon him?

Wes Streeting: With the way that Conservative Members are carrying on, and with the smears and innuendo they are applying, I am surprised that Alan Milburn is not paying them a marketing commission. The right hon. Gentleman makes out that Alan Milburn has come into the Department and is making all the decisions. If he were up to what they are suggesting, I could not think of better word-of-mouth publicity.

There is a clear distinction between inviting people with a wide range of experience and perspectives into the Department to have policy debates and to generate ideas, and having meetings that are about transacting Government business. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman and the House that nothing commercially sensitive has been shared with Alan Milburn, and I am genuinely astonished that Conservative Members think it is inappropriate for a Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to seek views, input and advice from their predecessors. In fact, I wonder how one of my Conservative predecessors, who is coming in to see me soon, will feel about their objections.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): In October 2023, when I phoned my NHS dentist to get an appointment for my children, the next available appointment was in June 2024. *[Interruption.]* When June 2024 rolled around, they cancelled the appointment. The next available appointment is April 2025. Given my right hon. Friend's disgraceful inheritance, does he think the Conservative party should spend a little more time reflecting on its record and a little less time asking pointless questions?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Let the record reflect that, when he was raising the crisis that is leaving people in Hartlepool without access to NHS dentistry, Conservative Members were shouting, "What about Alan Milburn?" That says everything about their priorities, everything about their lack of remorse and contrition, and everything about why they should stay in opposition for a very long time while we sort out the state of NHS dentistry in Hartlepool and across the country.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): How legitimate is it for the House of Commons to ask about external people coming into Departments and potential conflicts of interest? In cases like Alan Milburn's, or that of a former Conservative Secretary of State, how does the Department identify and manage conflicts of interest?

Wes Streeting: It is entirely legitimate to ask questions, and it is also entirely legitimate for Government Departments to invite people with a wide range of experience and insight to advise on policy debates and discussions. That happens all the time. Where do we draw the line? Do we have to send compliance forms to Cancer Research UK before it comes in to talk about how we tackle cancer? Do we have to send declaration of interest forms to patients who want to discuss awful cases they have experienced?

Frankly, I find this pantomime astonishing. I am surprised that the shadow Secretary of State thinks this is such a priority that she should raise it on the Floor of the House rather than NHS waiting lists, ambulance response times, GP access or the state of social care. It is clear that the Conservatives have not learned why they are in opposition.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking advice from his predecessors. As someone who worked as a senior civil servant in the Department under Alan Milburn, I would like to echo my right hon. Friend's comments about what a fantastic Secretary of State he was and speak to his record in that position. I also worked as a civil servant under the coalition Government.

[Anna Dixon]

Will the Secretary of State also be seeking advice from Andy Burnham who, as Secretary of State when Labour last left office, left record low waiting times and high public satisfaction?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. How fortunate we are to be able to turn to every living former Labour Health Secretary, from Alan Milburn to Andy Burnham, and in every single one of those cases be able to draw on people whose record of delivery led to the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history. I can confirm to my hon. Friend that, both in opposition and in government, I have been talking to the Mayor of Greater Manchester. He is doing some brilliant work on prevention. I am really looking forward to working with all our metro mayors to tackle health inequalities across the country and to improve the integration of health and care services across the land.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I know it will be a novelty for the Secretary of State actually to answer a question during this urgent question, but maybe he will do the House a favour by answering this very simple question with a yes or no. He said that no pass was given to Alan Milburn, so will he guarantee that no confidential documents that could have been used for commercial purposes were accessed or left his Department? Will he take responsibility if any documents or data discussed at ministerial meetings with Alan Milburn leave the Department—yes or no?

Wes Streeting: Yes.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Fixing and getting our NHS back on its feet should be a national mission, and everybody should be able to play their part in that. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether any former Conservative Ministers have put themselves forward to try to fix the mess that the party now in opposition created over the last 14 years?

Wes Streeting: This is the extraordinary thing: notwithstanding the public job application of a former Conservative Secretary of State, which did not meet the bar, I have been approached by former Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care who served in the Conservative Government who, in a spirit of public service, have wanted either to do work for the Labour Government on issues that they care about, or have sought to share their experiences—the highs or, indeed, the many lows—of being in government. That is a totally legitimate thing to do. I suspect that, if I rang round all my Labour predecessors, I would find that the Conservative Government tried desperately hard to get them to work for them, because, as I say, the challenge for Conservative Health Secretaries was that they did not have any successful Conservative predecessors to turn to.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I share the Secretary of State's frustration and understanding of the brass neck of the Tories on this point and I do not doubt the expertise of Alan Milburn, but legitimate questions have been asked about conflicts of interest. What safeguards are being imposed or considered to address the appearance of conflicts of interest?

Wes Streeting: It is absolutely right that people appointed to roles in public life declare their conflicts of interest so that they can be assessed when taking decisions or exercising powers to ensure that they are doing so in a way that manages those conflicts of interest and no conflict arises. Alan Milburn does not, at this stage, have a role in the Department of Health and Social Care. Many people have come into the Department for meetings in the past eight weeks. We do not ask them all to declare their interests. I know there is more red tape now in health and social care than when we left office, but this Government want to reduce that not increase it.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Conservative party appointed a party donor, Wol Kolade, who wants to change how the NHS is funded, to the board of NHS England. In January, the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) held a meeting with his private equity firm, Livingbridge, less than one month after he gave her party £50,000, so is it not the shadow Health Secretary who ought to be answering questions about cronyism?

Wes Streeting: It is not for me, thankfully, to answer for the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care; it is just my responsibility to clean up her mess.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Will the Secretary of State please illuminate the House about any conflict of interest concerning the gentleman in question? Did he head into the ministerial floor or access the Department? Many of us want our constituents to access health services and GP appointments. Did the right honourable gentleman, who is the Secretary of State's friend from the old days and with whom he has worked with previously, have a day pass or a departmental pass? Beyond the bluster, can the Secretary of State assure hon. Members that there is no conflict of interest?

Wes Streeting: My right honourable friend, Alan Milburn, does not have a role in the Department. He does not have a pass to the Department. I am asked whether he has accessed the ministerial floor. I do not know where the Conservatives held their meetings, but I tend to hold them in my office on the ministerial floor.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Across Cramlington and Killingworth, I have heard countless stories—heartbreaking stories—of residents' experiences of the NHS. They talk about the staggering length of waiting lists, access to GPs and access to dentists. Does the Secretary of State agree that, rather than focusing on who he might have once had a conversation with, the Conservatives would do better supporting the Labour Government in cleaning up the mess they left behind, which my residents live with every single day?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is because of the way that she champions her constituency and her community that she was sent to this place to stand up for their interests. It will not be lost on her constituents or anyone else in the country that, with our national health service in the state that it is in and with the appalling headlines that we have been reading in recent days, the Opposition have absolutely nothing to say about the responsibility that they bear for the crisis

or what they would do to fix it. They have the wrong priorities, but, fortunately, the country has the right Government.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): How many meetings has Alan Milburn had in the Department? Will the Secretary of State place a list of all those meetings in the House of Commons Library? Knowing that the former Secretary of State has extensive financial interests in healthcare, did the Secretary of State ask him to declare those interests and publish them?

Wes Streeting: First, my right honourable friend, Alan Milburn, does not have a role in the Department. Secondly, of course we will publish, in the routine way that we do, details of meetings held in the Department and who attended them. I gently suggest that if the hon. Member has not made his way there already, there are plenty more interesting things to read in the House of Commons Library.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I think Opposition Members may be making the mistake of judging this Government by their own standards. I wish to ask the Secretary of State this: after my constituents and many others have suffered from the economic disaster that was caused in part by dodgy covid contracts and VIP fast lanes, what will this Government do differently?

Wes Streeting: I am delighted to see my hon. Friend here representing Bishop Auckland. The people of his constituency will be struck by the fact that this afternoon the Conservative party has chosen to create a mountain out of a molehill about a former Health Secretary coming in to lend his advice and experience to a Labour Government. On covid corruption, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to be angry, as indeed the country is, too. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has been very clear that, when it comes to cronyism and corruption in covid contracts, we want our money back and the covid corruption commissioner is coming to get it.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): There is just one standard and it applies to whichever party is in power, and that should be respected. All this whataboutery relating to what may have gone on under a Conservative Government! Anyone who has done something wrong should be pursued. Anyone in authority should be accountable. It is the failure of accountability, a failure of recognition, by the right hon. Gentleman that lets down the House today. Can he confirm to the House that Alan Milburn did not have access to official sensitive papers? Anyone who visits a Minister—they come in all the time—sits on one side of the table and the official sensitive documents are on the other side. Can he confirm that Alan Milburn did not have access that no other visitor would have?

Wes Streeting: In the meetings that I asked my right honourable friend to attend—I need to make sure that I get this absolutely right—I tend to think that I saw him on the other side of the table in the corner. I cannot guarantee that he sat at that point in every single one of the meetings, but he certainly was not sitting next to me. With regard to the papers for the meetings that he attended, they were discussion papers about the challenges

facing health and social care. They were not Government decision papers or recommendations for Ministers. There is a distinction between those two things. I decide who attends meetings in the Department, and, when it comes to wide-ranging policy discussions, I decide what reading material people receive.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): The Conservative party famously said that they had “had enough of experts”, and look at where that got us—the longest NHS waiting list in history. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend rejects that approach emphatically. In the spirit of listening to professionals who are trying to make a difference, I ask him and his team to consider visiting Hertfordshire, where the community trust is working on a hospital at home scheme. The scheme is making a huge difference to patients at the end of their life, who need to be supported, cared for and monitored. This is an important part of easing the burden on our NHS with which we have been left.

Wes Streeting: I would be delighted for either myself or one of my ministerial colleagues to take my hon. Friend up on that offer. What a refreshing change from so many of the contributions that we have had this afternoon from the Opposition. Of course we want to learn from people with experience and expertise in getting it right on the NHS and social care. Many of those people are outside Government. Many of them have valuable experience in other parts of the public sector, in our public services, in the voluntary sector and in the private sector—or indeed experience as patients, users or carers in our health and social care service. Our message as a Government is clear: when it comes to fixing the crisis in health and social care created by the Conservatives, we cannot get enough of experts, and we are looking forward to mobilising the country in pursuit of our mission, so that we can deliver an NHS that our country can once again be proud of.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Given the potential for commercial advantage to Alan Milburn, will the Secretary of State publish all the papers that Alan Milburn was able to read? If the Secretary of State gave them on Privy Council terms, as he seems to be saying, will he at least give them to any Privy Counsellor who wants them?

Wes Streeting: Given the state of the Opposition, I bet they would love to see what policy discussion papers we are putting forward in the Department of Health and Social Care. The hon. Gentleman is right: papers have been shared with my right honourable friend on Privy Council terms. The Opposition will, in time, be able to judge the fruits of the labour, in terms of my decisions and the decisions of this Government when it comes to fixing the mess that they created.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I welcome the decision of the Secretary of State to seek wisdom from experts across the health and care system in order to build a better NHS. Is he aware of the virtual hospital system that has been used at West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust Watford site, developed during covid in order to treat more people in a better setting?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. We know that the NHS is broken, and is going through the worst crisis in history. We will shortly hear from the noble Lord Darzi about the outcome of his investigation into the true state of our national health service, but against that bleak backdrop of political failure are stories across the country of triumph against the odds, and of some outstanding public servants doing extraordinary things, showing what the future of our health and care services could look like with a Government on their side. I am pleased that such a Government is here—this Labour Government—and I would be delighted to hear more about my hon. Friend's constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wish the Secretary of State all the best in his new role, and in the task that he has taken on. With great respect to my Conservative colleagues, the downfall of the Tory Government was due in part to the fact that people did not trust the background politics behind closed doors. I want the Government to succeed, as do most people in this House. Stability and direction are much needed, but that can happen only with openness, transparency and a desire to put nation before party. How can the Secretary of State assure us that this Government will do things differently, and that policy will be proposed by those with know-how, and passed with scrutiny in this place, not simply due to pressure from lobby groups?

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with the hon. Member. In the short time that I have been in post, I have been delighted to have had virtual meetings with the current Northern Ireland Minister of Health, as well as with his predecessor, the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann), who now sits over there on the Opposition Benches—I am delighted to see him in his place.

Ministerial meetings attended by third parties are declared in our quarterly transparency publication. People will want to lobby and influence Government, and Members of Parliament, all the time. Members of Parliament regularly receive correspondence—let alone the deluge of advice that we receive in government. The important thing is that Ministers take decisions on the basis of the best possible advice available, that they weigh up carefully the evidence and arguments in a fair and proper way, and that advisers may advise but Ministers ultimately decide.

This Government are aware of the deep crisis in trust in our politics. That is why, on his very first day, the Prime Minister talked outside Downing Street about restoring Government to service. It is why it should be no surprise whatsoever that many people who have given outstanding public service to this country, such as my right honourable friend Alan Milburn—and the same is true of Patricia Hewitt, Alan Johnson, my noble Friend Lord Reed, the Mayor of Greater Manchester and many more—want to roll up their sleeves and help the Government. They can see the state that the Conservative party left our country in, and are willing once again to roll their sleeves up to get our country back on its feet, turn the situation around and ensure that everyone in our country can look forward to the future with optimism and hope after 14 years of abysmal failure.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That is the end of the urgent question. I thank all Members who participated. In reference to the Secretary of State earlier, the privilege of choosing UQs is down to the Chair and is based on merit and the urgency of the point being raised.

Post Office Horizon: Redress

4.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the Government's response to the Horizon scandal. How appropriate it is to see you, a former Business and Trade Minister, in the Chair.

My priority as the new Secretary of State is to ensure that victims of the scandal receive the redress that they deserve. Over the past few weeks, I have begun meeting with some of the postmasters whose lives have been so badly damaged by those events. Their stories are harrowing, but their resilience and steadfastness in seeking justice are inspiring. I am also grateful for their candour in sharing insights on how the various compensation schemes can be improved.

May I make a personal point, Madam Deputy Speaker? I know I speak for hon. Members across the House when I say that it fills me with sadness to have to stand here today and address such a significant failure of the state. The role of Government must be to do right, seek justice and defend the oppressed, yet Governments have too often had to be forced into action by brave, tireless and resilient campaigning. Once again, I pay tribute to the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, and to campaigners such as Jo Hamilton, Lee Castleton and Sir Alan Bates—incidentally, I add my personal congratulations to Sir Alan on his recent wedding. Without their tireless efforts, justice may well never have been done in this case. As we stand here today, in the shadow not just of this scandal but those of Grenfell, infected blood and several more, I know that it is the firm conviction of everyone in this House that we must do better. This is an issue not of politics but of justice.

In that spirit, I cannot speak of the new Government's work to address this wrong without again acknowledging and appreciating the work of Lord Arbuthnot and the new Lord Beamish—formerly the Member for North Durham—as well as that of my friend the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) as Minister. The announcements that we make today are built on their efforts to hasten redress payments and quash wrongful convictions.

Earlier in the summer, the new Government announced the launch of the Horizon conviction redress scheme. I am pleased to report that the first payments have been issued and good progress made on processing the claims received to date. As was the case for the group litigation order compensation scheme, the Department will be setting a target to make, within 40 working days, the first offer to 90% of those who have submitted a full claim. Additionally, the Post Office has now settled over 50% of cases on the overturned convictions scheme, with 57 out of 111 cases fully settled. The Department has also now received over 50% of GLO claims and settled over 200 of them.

Progress has also been made on implementing the £75,000 fixed-sum awards on the Horizon shortfall scheme. As of 30 August, over 1,350 claimants who had previously settled below the £75,000 threshold have been offered top-ups to bring them to that amount, and the Post Office will shortly begin making fixed-sum offers to new claimants. Those interventions will have a significant impact on ensuring that postmasters can

access redress swiftly and simply. However, we recognise that this option will not suit everyone and does not address all the concerns raised by postmasters and their representatives. That is why we are taking further action today.

The Horizon compensation advisory board recommended last year that we introduce an independent appeals process for the Horizon shortfall scheme. Today I am pleased to announce that we have accepted that recommendation. That appeals process will enable claimants who have settled their claim under the HSS to have their case reassessed, with the benefit of any new information that they were not able to include in the original application. It will be delivered in-house by my Department, and we will apply the lessons learned from redress schemes to date to ensure that the process is easy for postmasters to engage with and that outcomes are delivered at pace. We will announce further details in the coming months.

There will be no obligation for postmasters to appeal their settlement, and no doubt many will be content that their claims have been resolved fairly. I know that financial redress will never fully compensate victims for their suffering, but we want to help bring some closure to postmasters as soon as we can, which is why we will establish the new appeals process as quickly as possible.

In summary, the new Government will do everything in our power to deliver justice for postmasters, to bring them closure and to ensure that such a national tragedy is never allowed to happen again. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): No doubt that statement will mean a lot to many constituents, including those in my constituency of Sussex Weald. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.22 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and for his kind words. I assure him that we will continue to work collaboratively to put the interests of postmasters first. I also associate myself with the congratulations offered by the Secretary of State to Sir Alan Bates and Lady Suzanne Bates, and the recognition of their contribution and that of others.

As the Opposition promised during the very first urgent question of this Parliament, Ministers know that they will receive our full support to deliver compensation swiftly and quash the convictions of those wronged by this terrible tragedy. In his statement, the Secretary of State has set out a new appeals process for those who have already settled their claim under the Horizon shortfall scheme. I welcome that step. I know that the Department is implementing the work of the Horizon compensation advisory board, which was instrumental during my time in office, and will no doubt be supporting the new Government.

However, I have some questions about the Secretary of State's statement. First, he confirmed that the appeals process will be open for claimants who have settled their claim under the HSS, but it is restricted to those who have new evidence to support their case. In the same breath, he recognised lessons learned from redress schemes to date, indicating that his Department is aware of the flaws in the scheme, which I also acknowledge. Crucially,

[Kevin Hollinrake]

will the appeals process also be available, as it should be, to all claimants, not just those with new information? Given the accepted flaws in the scheme, it would be wrong to leave individuals without the opportunity to appeal. If people choose the £75,000 top-up, will they be entitled to appeal? If so, there is a risk that for those wanting to go through the appeal process it will be a slower process because of the number of people seeking to appeal.

Secondly, the Secretary of State says that the appeals process will be up and running as soon as possible. Can he set out a specific timeline? Finally, on appeals, can he tell the House whether these individuals will be entitled to legal representation, as is the case in the GLO process?

Could I also ask the Secretary of State some questions about the broader compensation schemes? Some £289 million has been paid to over 2,800 claimants across four schemes. I was alarmed to find, however, that only six claims have been offered redress through the Horizon convictions redress scheme, and no full and final settlements have yet been made through that scheme. Can he explain those numbers?

I was also concerned to hear the Secretary of State say last week that only 130 letters have been written to postmasters who have had convictions quashed—I think there are 700 such postmasters—and that this was a matter for the Ministry of Justice, rather than his office. I am sure he realises that finger-pointing within Government will not wash with the people who have been through these difficulties and this horrendous scandal, so I must therefore push him on what steps he has taken to mitigate the delays in sending out letters to those affected.

Finally, delay in all the schemes is at least partially the result of an adversarial process of lawyers arguing with lawyers. As a remedy, we were working very hard for Sir Gary Hickinbottom, scheme reviewer in the overturned convictions scheme, to be appointed across all three schemes to expedite claims. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that vital appointment has now been made?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his response, and for the tone and collaboration that we tried to model when we were sitting in opposite places in this Chamber. I believe that helped advance what was a difficult piece of legislation to put on the statute book, particularly during a wash-up process, but was the only real vehicle for delivering what we all wanted to see. He has asked me a number of questions; all are absolutely reasonable, and I am happy to respond to them.

In a situation where someone has already received a top-up to £75,000, the hon. Member is right to say that the appeals scheme would not be available. It is a choice between the two best methods of redress and satisfaction for the postmaster. I recognise what the hon. Member has said—that, given the issues with the speed of delivering redress, having that system clogged up would not be satisfactory to anyone—but I think that both options represent reasonable ways forward for people who are in that position.

The hon. Member asked specifically about the remit of the appeals scheme, and I have listened to what he said. The reason we are announcing today that we will

take this scheme forward, but will then consult with postmasters to make sure the eligibility criteria are correct—he asked about the timeline, which is just a matter of months—is to make sure that we do not have to revisit the scheme, and can all be satisfied that crucially, postmasters themselves have confidence in it. That is the intention, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for his comments about the remit of the scheme.

The hon. Member asked about legal representation. Yes, that is part of the scheme, again learning lessons from where we have been in the past. As he knows, most of the schemes have now been adjusted to reflect that, but I absolutely take his point about new announcements.

I want to be clear about the difficulty that has existed with the Horizon convictions redress scheme. To update the House, I will give the hon. Member the figures: so far, 180 letters have gone out from the Ministry of Justice. Including those letters and the people who have registered with the Government who perhaps have not all received a letter yet, there are now 276 claimants. I will make the appeal again: while we are doing everything we can with Ministry of Justice colleagues to make sure those letters go out, people can proactively register with the Government. To be frank, this has been a frustration. When the hon. Member and I were having our conversations when we sat in different places in the Chamber, neither of us perhaps knew the state of the database and the records, and—having passed the legislation—the frustrations we would face in getting to people. However, doing so is clearly integral to sorting this out.

Finally, the hon. Member asked about the scheme reviewer. If I may, I will come back to him on that; I will write to him to tell him the up-to-date situation.

In summary, I say again that we will work with all parties and all postmasters to get redress at pace, and to learn the lessons from where things have not gone well in the past, to make sure new announcements carry the confidence of the people who really need to have confidence in them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Members should continue to bob if they want to be called. I am going to call everybody, as I know the Secretary of State also wants to respond to everybody. I call the previous Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I add my congratulations to Sir Alan Bates and Lady Suzanne on what looked like a very happy day.

I welcome what the Secretary of State has set out for the House this afternoon. When our Select Committee reported back in March, we said that trust in the Post Office was fundamentally broken and that the appeals scheme needed to be independent. This is an important step in that direction, but sub-postmasters have told me this morning that there is still a problem with the time it takes to get offers back when an offer is contested. The claimant's lawyers have a fixed amount of time to put in a claim; when that claim is contested, it is taking far too long for Addleshaws, in particular, to come back and provide a second offer. What comfort can sub-postmasters take from the Secretary of State's announcement today? This whole House agrees that justice delayed is justice denied.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who will, I hope, see his work as Chair of the Select Committee reflected in this announcement—specifically, that we are setting the target to issue initial offers to 90% of claims within 40 working days of receiving a full claim. On the point of how that is defined, a full claim is one where, following legal assessment, it is deemed that it does not require any further evidence to assess the claim further. Once that is in, the targets, which his Select Committee rightly called for to make sure redress is delivered at speed, are part of this process.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrats spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for sight of the statement and, indeed, for his decision to come to the House at this early stage to update us on progress.

I think it is worth saying that we are dealing with a catastrophic injustice that has affected hundreds upon hundreds of families—people who have paid with their livelihoods and, in some cases, tragically, with their lives. There is a complete lack of trust in Government, of whatever political colour, over the last 20 or so years because of this. That is why his answer to the questions raised already about the number of sub-postmasters who have been paid interim payments—only six, on the last data available, under the Horizon convictions redress scheme—is such a key issue. Likewise, as we have heard, the latest data show that fewer than one in six wrongly accused sub-postmasters have received letters confirming the quashing of their convictions.

Given this lack of trust—this mistrust—in Governments of whatever kind and in the Post Office management as a whole, would the Secretary of State also turn his thoughts to rebuilding trust in the Post Office management and in the network in the long term? In the eyes of the public, the brand of the post office is solid, but in the eyes of those who work in the industry and those who may come in as sub-postmasters, it is far less so. We were delighted in my constituency recently to see the reopening of post offices in Shap and Kirby Stephen. It was wonderful to see those two reopenings, but in Grasmere, Hawkshead and Stavely we are without post offices. In all three of those cases, it is in part because the former sub-postmaster, while not always directly affected by the Horizon scandal, but with disgust at the Post Office management, has left the industry and left those villages without a post office.

What can the Secretary of State say to this House and to the current cadre of sub-postmasters, and those who may want to join that cadre, to encourage them? Will he focus on pastoral care, financial support and other things that will bring about a package of inducements and enticements, so that those people who have felt let down so badly by Post Office Ltd management over the last 20 years will feel that the Post Office is something they can commit their lives to for the good of our communities and country as a whole?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that question. Specifically on the figures for the Horizon convictions redress scheme, he is right to say that there are only six claims where interim payments have been made so far, but I can assure him that I would

expect that to rise rapidly following the announcement we have made, and I will keep the House informed as to all of that. I agree when he says that redress of this scandal has to link to the future of the Post Office itself. I think he is absolutely right. I mentioned in oral questions last week that I will appear before the inquiry. It is about not just an assurance on the lessons that will be learnt from the inquiry, but how that will affect decisions going forward.

Like the hon. Member, I have seen the post office network change a lot in my constituency. I was at the new banking hub in Stalybridge on Friday. I think the public support for the brand and for the people on the frontline is very strong, but the business model, as it stands, is not fit for purpose. Postmasters deliver essential services, but they do not make enough money from those essential services. I think too much of the money they make goes into the centre and does not return to the frontline in a way that is a viable business model for all of our constituencies. The issue of how the Post Office functions as an organisation has to be tied not just culturally to the reforms and redress we are all seeking to deliver, but to the business model.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow and Gateshead East) (Lab): I welcome today's statement on the appeals process, and thank Ministers for their engagement with me on this issue and in advance of the meetings we will have later this week. Horizon victims are understandably wary of Post Office involvement in the compensation schemes, so can the Secretary of State confirm that the appeals process he has announced today will be completely independent of the Post Office? As well as pushing for Horizon victims finally to get full compensation, what work is the Department undertaking to ensure that people are held to account for their roles in this scandal?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and recognise her contribution on this issue over many years. She is right to say that the appeals process I am announcing today will be run in-house by the Department for Business and Trade. Obviously, information will need to be provided by the Post Office, but an in-house scheme will be delivered. On redress, we are all following Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry closely. We will need that to conclude and essential information will come out of it. After that, there will need to be a way to ensure that those findings, whatever they may be, are honoured in full and that we learn from them. In a number of cases, there is a need to hold people to account for their actions throughout the scandal.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Dewi Lewis of Penrhyndeudraeth is a former sub-postmaster who endured four months of imprisonment and had to wear a tag for another four months for a crime he never committed. He has not wanted me to raise his case in the Chamber before, because he said that to have his hopes raised and then dashed would destroy him: two weeks ago, he got a letter, I am glad to say, to say that his convictions were quashed. But the damage that has been done to the reputation of the Post Office in rural Wales is now so immense that people are no longer prepared to work in post offices. I welcome that the Secretary of State says that he believes the business model is no longer fit for purpose, but how can

[Liz Saville Roberts]

we be sure that we will have strategic planning to serve those communities that were once served so well by people like Dewi Lewis?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise very much what the right hon. Member is saying. I have had personal friends who were directly affected by this issue. Even though I was their MP as well as their friend, they did not feel able to tell me about it because they were so concerned about the impact on their reputation—they could not even tell a friend who was a Member of Parliament, even though the issue was clearly affecting their lives very significantly. I am sure that, like me, she has had situations where there is one provider of postal services in a relatively rural area—I represent Greater Manchester as it gets out towards rural Derbyshire—and people want the service to continue, but for various business reasons the provider is moving on. It is sometimes hard to find someone willing to take that business on, not just because of the scandal, but because of the business model. I assure her that the work we are already doing is about the future and recognising that, and making sure we have people in charge who recognise that that has to change. It is going to be a substantial piece of work for me and the Minister, but it is essential. We could not just provide redress for this scandal, without looking to the future and making sure we get this right.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for this statement. I also have constituents who are affected and I am grateful for the information about the appeals system. What steps are Ministers in the Department taking to secure the future of the Post Office network, and to reassure people who are considering becoming postmasters that they will not face the same unacceptable culture pervading Post Office senior management that was highlighted by the Business and Trade Select Committee, and that led to the Horizon scandal happening in the first place?

Jonathan Reynolds: As I have said in previous answers, we have to understand that that scepticism and concern is valid. The scale of this scandal is so large that people will challenge their Members of Parliament on how they feel about what they may be asked to do, and the risk that that poses to what is still an essential business and provider of services to all our constituents. That is key. I seek to reassure them by recognising the steps and commitment that we have to address, but also the future of a business model that delivers the kind of remuneration and operates in a way that recognises the scale of the failure in the past. If I was a postmaster, I would welcome those words, but I would want to see action. That is the only way we will be able to do that.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I welcome the update to the House today. We saw through the ITV series that Lord Arbuthnot, like many, was an exemplary constituency MP and something for us to all aspire to. Many campaigned for so long in this place to recognise this scandal. I congratulate Sir Alan Bates and Lady Bates on their nuptials. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that full engagement is being undertaken with the MOJ, that the learnings are being understood and that those expecting their convictions to be quashed will hear imminently, as all our constituents will want to see justice?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much echo the hon. Lady's point that, if there is one bit where our political system operated well in this, it is the constituency link and the classic Member of Parliament's surgery, although the story as a whole is clearly unsatisfactory. I recognise her words on Lord Arbuthnot and the cross-party campaign that came about. The Ministry of Justice issue is paramount and frustrating. The state of the records has delayed the process, and that is a real frustration, but she will understand that, following so much failure, if a case emerged where a letter was sent out incorrectly after all that people have been through, that would clearly be outrageous. Given I am now accountable for the scheme, I absolutely cannot have that. I could talk about some of the things we have inherited, but I do not think that is particularly helpful. I will simply give the hon. Lady the assurance that she rightly seeks: this issue is of maximum importance and we are working at pace with Ministry of Justice colleagues and the devolved authorities in relation to justice systems around the United Kingdom.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. I heard what he had to say about the involvement of the Post Office in the appeals process, but may I press him a little further? Given the mistrust in the Post Office that has built up over many years, even though the Post Office may only be providing information to the Department, is his Department satisfied with how the Post Office is providing that information? Have there been any occasions where the Secretary of State has had to challenge the Post Office? That is the degree to which people mistrust the Post Office in this process, and that has been the case for many years.

Jonathan Reynolds: I think my hon. Friend will have heard in my earlier answers that we have chosen to deliver this scheme in-house in the Department for Business and Trade, reflecting the concerns he is reasonably expressing. To command people's confidence, they want to see the schemes not only set up, but delivering. That is why the updates to the House on how we are progressing under each scheme are so important, and I commit to doing them regularly.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I associate myself with the comments made on Lord Arbuthnot, who is a predecessor but one for part of my constituency. The Secretary of State has spoken about the letters quashing convictions, but does he not understand how important it is that those waiting for the letters get them swiftly? Will the Lord Chancellor come to the House to give us an update on the progress being made with those letters?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my answers. He would surely agree that to get things wrong with these cases would be a terrible problem. Some of the errors and the problems that have been caused have been a frustration, but I want to assure him. I think it is better, in matters relating to this scandal, that it is the Department for Business and Trade, given the interests of Members, that provides the updates on these matters. However, I can assure him that work is proceeding at pace, and people can proactively register their credentials to ensure that there is no delay if they are in a position where they know they are one of the wronged parties.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the update today. My constituent Mahesh, who visited me at our surgery on Friday, told us that he had been assured that his conviction would be overturned—he was wrongfully convicted under the Horizon scandal—but he is frustrated by the length of time it has taken for it to be quashed. It is preventing him from moving on with his life. Can the Secretary of State update us on what work is going on to speed up the process to quash these convictions, so that people like Mahesh in my constituency can move on with their lives?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much recognise the conversation that my hon. Friend has had with her constituent, and her need and desire to progress that claim. The issue is about ensuring that the records are accurate. Cross-referencing between Ministry of Justice databases and court documents is proceeding apace. If her constituent has not yet had a letter and needs to register their credentials, they can do so, but I assure my hon. Friend that this is of maximum priority.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement. It is welcome that the appeals process has been set out. I pay tribute to my SNP colleague and former MP, Marion Fellows, who, as many Members will know, put considerable effort into the issue. She has provided me with wise counsel on it. How satisfied is the Secretary of State with take-up so far—there is obviously some helpful detail in the statement—and what awareness campaigns are planned? There may still be people out there who are not aware that they can claim compensation. It is important that as many methods as possible are used to get to them.

There have recently been complaints, even from legal experts, that the application form for redress is overly complex, and that even experts would struggle to fill it in. Can the Secretary of State look to simplify it, obviously without our getting away from the key points, and bearing in mind the data that need to be collected?

Finally, I associate myself with the comments made about the wider impact. It is only a week since the Grenfell report's publication, and mention was made during the previous statement about the covid contracts. These issues go right to the heart of trust in the Government, which is a really important point to address.

Jonathan Reynolds: I echo the hon. Gentleman's comments about Marion Fellows and her contribution to the scheme. He asks how satisfied I am. I will not be satisfied until everyone has had redress; it is as straightforward as that. There was a group of about 2,417 claimants under the Horizon shortfall scheme, but following the television drama, a whole range of people who were not aware that they were eligible came forward, which was incredibly positive. I think that over 1,500 people came forward. Indeed, Members may still be finding people who are coming forward because of the awareness that raised. We should be thankful for the power of the arts to get a message out to people. Given the situation, none of us can be satisfied until we can be sure that we have got redress to everyone. That is what this Parliament collectively has to commit to.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State outline what the Government are doing to investigate the predecessor Capture system?

Jonathan Reynolds: Members may know that Capture was the precursor to the Horizon software. It is of concern to us, and we are investigating. The forensic accountants appointed to look into the issue are due to report fairly soon, and as soon as we have their findings, we will be able to update the House on steps that may be necessary.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for the statement, and for the clear commitment to closure for all those affected. He said that the role of Government is to do right, to seek justice and to defend the oppressed. I say amen to that; that is exactly the Government's role. It is past time that our handling of the scheme came to an end, but that can happen only when every affected postmaster and postmistress has been restored reputationally and financially, and when lessons have been learned to ensure that our reliance on computers is never again the vehicle of persecution. Will the Secretary of State assure me and the House that that has been done, and is in place right now?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thought that the hon. Member might recognise the words from Isaiah that I used in the statement. The failure that goes to the heart of what we are talking about today is not just about the reliance on computer systems over the testimony of people on the frontline; it is also about the culture of organisations and how government operates. We will definitely turn a page on all of that, but there are Members in the Chamber who, like me, have been here not just for infected blood and the Grenfell statement last week, but for Hillsborough and Bloody Sunday.

We must reflect on what has been a very difficult set of findings. I think that we can commit to making sure that we learn the lessons from them, and take them forward. That is the challenge for all of us who believe that we are here to do good, and to do as I said in the statement. There is more to do on that, but we can move in the right direction, and that is certainly what I and my Government Ministers will do.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend will be aware, sub-postmasters such as my constituent have experienced an enormous amount of devastation without even having been convicted—30 years of reputation absolutely destroyed. Although he has had some compensation, he still does not know whether he has had the right amount of money, and whether he is paying the right amount of tax, and he still does not have an admission of responsibility and failings from the Post Office. How much of that will be dealt with by this redress scheme?

Jonathan Reynolds: I understand the situation, and the need to have different redress schemes to correct specific problems. I understand the constituent's sentiments, as described by my hon. Friend. I would like to make sure that we are doing everything we can to provide the answers in every case. If she writes to me about that case, I will look into it personally and advise her, so that she can advise her constituent to make sure that, as far as possible, we give the right advice.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): I am delighted to hear from the Secretary of State that progress is being made. Recompense, apology and all the things that should go with that cannot come too soon. This House needs to remember that but for the tenacity and the persistence of Sir Alan Bates, this issue may never have come to light. This is an issue of the state versus the individual. Given the loss of confidence in the state, it is essential that the House reassures individuals that the state will not bully them. That means a full investigation, and people who brought arguably malicious prosecutions must be brought to book. I would like his reassurance that that will happen.

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much agree. This is a major scandal, and we must ensure that the wider lessons and the wider lack of trust, which he correctly mentioned, are addressed in our response. That is fundamental. I have said many times that we might never have discovered the scale of this injustice were it not for the campaigners. That is shocking, and we must all reflect very deeply on that.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his comments, and for his recognition that the issue is about more than redress; it is about the restoration of trust. It has cast a long shadow in constituencies across the country. In my constituency, after years of sub-postmasters desperately trying to keep post offices open in the face of programmes of closures, we now face a challenge to get people to go into them. What is his message to those people, and those wondering whether the culture has changed? What lessons are the new Government drawing, across the public sector, to ensure candour, and to make sure that the culture that we saw in the Post Office is not replicated anywhere else?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise very much what my hon. Friend says. As I said in my earlier answers, there is an absolute need to not just provide redress but learn lessons for the future of the Post Office and all institutions of the state. Crucially, we must ensure that a business model is in place that rewards postmasters with a decent

return for providing an essential service, in an organisation that supports their frontline activities and gives them the income and the prosperity that they deserve for that.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Secretary of State knows that 26 postmasters in Northern Ireland were wrongly convicted. I thank him for his work with the Northern Ireland Executive to bring forward the necessary legislative process. I seek his reassurance that the redress scheme will be equally open to Northern Ireland postmasters who were wrongly convicted because of a UK-wide issue. Will the redress scheme apply to them as well?

Jonathan Reynolds: People are aware that it is fairly challenging to have a situation in which justice is devolved across the United Kingdom. At times that has very much affected the debate in this House. I believe that what the hon. Gentleman says is the case, but I will write to him about the Northern Irish situation to give him the information that he needs.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement and look forward to things proceeding to the necessary conclusion. Redress is about righting wrongs, but there was more than one wrongdoer—there was also Fujitsu. Last week, the Prime Minister told us that firms that had fallen short in relation to Grenfell would be removed from Government contracts. Bearing in mind Fujitsu's actions and that there was at least one suicide, will it be treated in the same way? Will there be redress against its unlawful actions as well?

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree with the hon. Member. That is a crucial and important question. I welcome Fujitsu acknowledging its moral responsibility in relation to these matters. I understand that it is participating fully with the Sir Wyn Williams inquiry. We will need that inquiry to conclude. We should not pre-empt that in any way and take any decisions before that process has been gone through properly, given that we all support it. Accountability will flow from the inquiry. It will be an important step and it will affect many, many organisations that have been part of this story. Fujitsu will clearly be one of them.

Speaker's Statement

4.56 pm

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the deadline for nominations for Select Committee Chairs passed at 4 pm today. The following Committees received a single nomination and the candidate will be elected unopposed: Backbench Business Committee, Bob Blackman; Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Dame Caroline Dinenage; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Mr Alistair Carmichael; Health and Social Care Committee, Layla Moran; Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Tonia Antoniazzi; Petitions Committee, Jamie Stone; Treasury Committee, Dame Meg Hillier; and Welsh Affairs Committee, Ruth Jones. I congratulate the Members concerned. The ballot for the remaining posts will take place on Wednesday 11 September, between 10 am and 4 pm in Committee Room 15. A final list of candidates and their supporters will be available in the Vote Office later this evening.

Bus Franchising

4.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): With Permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement. Today marks the first stop on this Government's journey to deliver better buses. Day in, day out, buses shoulder the needs of millions of working people across the country, whether they are getting to work or school, or seeing the doctor or friends. A reliable bus service is the difference between aspiration and isolation, between getting on and being forced to give up—a lifeline, plain and simple. But over the past four decades of deregulation, that lifeline has been on life support. Communities have suffered cuts to thousands of services, with 1.5 billion fewer journeys taking place in 2019 than in 1985, when deregulation began. Since 2010, a staggering 300 million fewer miles have been driven by buses per year. That is the legacy the previous Government left behind: a shocking decline in this country's bus services, which has done untold harm to communities across the country.

Behind those stats lie human stories—of the poorest groups, who catch 10 times as many buses as trains, regularly let down; of people denied access to work or education, because they cannot depend on the journey there; or women and girls denied access to a safe journey home. They represent a steady cycle of decline that reverberates beyond buses to our economy as a whole, and of public services not working for working people.

Enough is enough. This mission-focused Government were elected to repair what is broken, and to reform what does not work. We are clear about the fact that better buses are essential to a better Britain, and that buses are a route not just to connection but to economic growth, cleaner air, and a fairer chance in life for everyone. That is why my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary has made fixing this country's broken bus network one of her top priorities in her Department, and it is why, just two months into office, we are kick-starting a bus revolution that will put services back into the hands of local leaders, achieving in just 10 weeks what the last Government failed to achieve in more than 14 years.

The statutory instrument that we laid this morning opens up bus franchising for all local transport authorities in England. It gives local leaders more flexibility to adopt a model that works for their areas, and because we are streamlining the current two-step process, authorities will now only need to obtain the Transport Secretary's consent before preparing a franchise scheme. This is a transformative change, one that will give every community the same powers that mayoral combined authorities across the country are currently using to deliver better services, along with the power to match them to local needs. We know that the franchising model works: we need only look at the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, where buses were brought under public control just one year ago and where reliability has already improved, passenger numbers have already grown and a new 24/7 service has just been introduced; or at Greater London, where public control has meant that more bus journeys are now taken in our capital than in the rest of England combined.

[Simon Lightwood]

We are taking aim at the current postcode lottery of bus services to ensure that our most popular form of public transport starts running in the public interest. Local authorities know best how to deliver for their communities, which is why today we are empowering them to follow in the footsteps of Greater Manchester and London, to ensure that they have buses in the right place at the right time, truly serving local needs. Our plan will help to turn the tide after decades of decline. The statutory instrument will be backed by a public consultation, which my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary also launched today. It seeks views on breaking down the barriers to franchising, and on how we can support safer and more accessible services. By delivering simpler guidance, it will support and speed up the franchising process, meaning that councils will spend less time and money filling in forms, and more time planning routes and prioritising the interests of the communities that they serve.

However, this is just the start of our journey. Today's steps pave the way for a new bus Bill later in the current parliamentary session—a Bill intended to reform funding, to allow franchises to be rolled out to more places more quickly and cheaply, and to support councils that choose not to franchise but still want the flexibility to deliver on local transport priorities. The Bill will also allow us to remove the ideological ban on municipal bus companies that was imposed by the last Government despite the huge success of those companies, which can be seen across the country where they are still in place—for instance, the award-winning publicly owned services in Nottingham and Reading. This, rightly, is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and, crucially, it places no additional burden on taxpayers. It simply acknowledges a truth with which many in the House will agree: that the best decisions are not always made by Whitehall, but are made in town and city halls throughout the country by those who are accountable to local communities, and by those who, day in day out, use the very services that we are talking about.

It has been said before, and I will say it again: under this new Government, the Department for Transport is moving fast and fixing things. Today's steps place better buses at the heart of this Government's plan for change. Four decades after buses were deregulated, and after 14 years of decline, we are now empowering communities to take back control of the services on which they depend—to get Britain moving, to get our economy growing and to get more passengers, wherever they live, back on board. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Minister.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement.

We on this side of the House are in full agreement that good local transport is something that everyone deserves access to, both for helping people to live their lives and for fulfilling the economic potential of all parts of the country. At the heart of our local transport services are buses. They are some of the most convenient, well-connected and accessible forms of public transport out there—crucially, not just in urban areas, but very often in under-connected rural areas. That is why, in government, we invested billions of pounds in the bus

sector, including the vital support provided to maintain services during the pandemic. We rolled out thousands of new zero-emissions buses and introduced the “Get around for £2” scheme, saving millions of people money on their fares and helping to get passengers back on buses.

Those interventions worked. Bus passenger journeys in England increased by nearly a fifth in the year ending March 2023, and we welcome this Government's desire to build on our progress in order to improve services further, to get more routes running at better frequency, and to make sure that as many people as possible have reliable services that get them where they need to go. I am genuinely interested in understanding how the Government feel that this set of measures will achieve that. We are worried about some of the significant risks, which the Government do not seem to have considered.

This legislation places greater responsibility in the hands of local authorities. We know that a number of local authorities face financial and organisational challenges, and although I do not doubt that there will be enthusiasm for making use of the new powers, running any form of public transport brings real challenges. Of course, as the Minister said in opposition, gaps in experience could be filled by support from the Department for Transport, but depending on the number of local authorities that choose to take up franchising, this could mean that significant central Government resources are required. Unless I have missed something, today's announcement includes absolutely no funding to pay for increased capacity at the Department. What projections have the Government made of the costs, and how exactly do they expect them to be paid?

It is the same story with local government finances. Make no mistake about it: this is going to cost money. Many bus routes, especially rural services, are loss making, even before we account for the additional resources that local authorities will presumably need to operate them. In his statement, the Minister did not recognise the enormous challenges that have been created by changing travel patterns post covid. If this Government are committed to providing services at 1985 levels, as he seemed to imply, they will need to commit to enormous levels of subsidy.

I welcome the success stories in metropolitan areas that the Minister talked about, but such services operate in a fundamentally different space, because of the density of those areas' populations. It means that if passenger numbers fall next year, the financial risk will be taken on not by a private company, but by the local council and, by definition, taxpayers. Again, given that there appears to be no funding attached to the policy, surely it can be funded only by increases to council tax or cuts to other local services.

It is the same story when it comes to responsibility for capital expenditure. Will this now be the responsibility of local authorities? How exactly are they expected to fund it? As we recently made clear when debating the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, it might be the Labour party's priority to undertake ideological reforms to bring the transport sector further into the control of the state, but passengers' priorities are the price, performance and reliability of services, not who is running them. We want to hear how the reforms will make a difference to passengers' journeys and their accessibility, frequency and cost, and how they will help to restore the number of rural services and make journeys cheaper for passengers—and not just through the generic

pledges we have heard today, but through concrete commitments on which the public can hold the Government to account. The Minister made absolutely no commitment to increase levels of services or miles travelled as part of the Government's "revolution".

There are some simple things that the Government could do for passengers, such as extending our "Get around for £2" scheme, which has been hugely positive for passengers and for the viability of services up and down the country. I am aware that the Chancellor is not Labour Members' favourite person at the moment, but I encourage them to make the case for the cost-of-living benefits of the £2 scheme, as well as for the benefits of the winter fuel payment, in any hurriedly organised meetings today and tomorrow.

The Government have got the wrong priorities yet again. At the end of the day, passengers care about the preservation of existing services, the extension of routes, improvements in frequency and reliability, and cost. We on this side of the House are all ears when it comes to what difference this policy will make for them and—not to be forgotten—who is going to pay for it.

Simon Lightwood: Modernising our transport infrastructure and delivering better buses are at the heart of our plan to kick-start economic growth in every part of the country to get our country moving. This statutory instrument is just the start of a package of measures; the buses Bill will deliver further measures on issues such as funding. Despite the challenging financial circumstances we find ourselves in—inherited from the previous Government—we are determined to deliver better bus services, growing passenger numbers and driving opportunity to underserved regions. All funding is rightly being considered as part of the spending review.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for buses within local transport authorities. Franchising is just one way that this can be explored; there are also enhanced partnerships and municipal ownership. We firmly believe that our priorities to deliver better buses across the country are the right priorities, and we have the mandate from the British people following the general election to do just that.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): Last week and this week have been the best two weeks for public transport for many decades, righting the wrongs of the privatisation of the rail service and the deregulation of buses. I did not hear an apology from the Conservative spokesperson for laying waste to local government finance over the last 14 years and destroying public bus services by handing them over to be run by profiteers, pirates and other completely unsuitable people—not in all, but in many cases. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be a massive apology from the Conservatives for the damage they have done to public transport?

Simon Lightwood: I believe there should be a massive apology from the Opposition for the mess they have left this country in and for the mess they have left our bus services in. Following the previous Government, almost 300 million fewer miles are now driven a year compared with 2010. That is an appalling statistic. This Government will turn the tide for communities across the country by

giving them the opportunity to control local bus services and to have a real say in developing the local transit systems that serve them. The Secretary of State said—I will say it again—that we will move fast and fix things. Here is the proof.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We Liberal Democrats welcome today's statement to give local authorities, not just metro Mayors, more powers and the potential to run their bus services. We Liberal Democrats have campaigned for exactly that for a very long time.

The previous Conservative Government completely decimated local transport systems, but the rot set in a long time ago. Almost a quarter of bus routes have been cut in the past 10 years outside London. Whoever wants to apologise for that, we need to see some change. Bus services should be the most affordable and accessible of all forms of public transport. Good, well-used bus services would significantly contribute to getting to net zero and to improving our air quality. The previous Government, again, completely failed to make a positive case for that.

Not only are public buses crucial in urban areas such as Bath, which suffers from more and more congestion, because people can continue to increase their use of motorised individual travel, and is also still struggling with cutting air pollution; bus services are also important specifically for rural areas. What we currently have is completely inadequate, so will the Minister set out how today's announcement will improve rural bus services, not just in the long term, but in the short term?

Simon Lightwood: The ability of local areas and local transport authorities to take back control of their bus services is crucial for rural areas, because they know their communities best. Those decisions should not be made from places in Westminster or Whitehall. Again, local transport authorities understand the specific needs of their local communities, be they rural or urban, and are best placed to make those decisions and design the network around those needs.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I welcome the statement and draw to the Minister's attention the Transport Committee report, "Bus services in England outside London", which was produced under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who is now Under-Secretary of State for Transport. There are some excellent recommendations in there. In regions such as Greater Manchester, the process of introducing bus franchising has been quite lengthy. Granting combined authorities the ability to directly award contracts would significantly shorten that timeline, allowing areas such as the north-east to bring about faster improvements. Will the Minister confirm that the better buses Bill will include provisions for direct award powers?

Simon Lightwood: I can confirm that my officials are investigating the means to do just that, and I will update the House accordingly as progress continues.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. He and the House know that local government finance is under pressure, and that the delivery of services in rural areas is much more costly

[Simon Hoare]

than it is in Manchester, Nottingham or London. That is just a geographical fact, which I think we all accept. May I urge the Minister, if he has not already done so, to engage the good offices of the County Councils Network, as the lead body for county councils and the unitaries, to find their views and suggestions? I also say to him politely that if this is to work in rural areas, for all the good reasons that he sets out about social mobility and access to work and education, rural councils will require some extra money to deliver what we all want to see achieved.

Simon Lightwood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and for his constructive engagement. I will certainly take up his recommendation to meet that grouping. Of course, all funding is being considered in the round as part of the spending review, but I take his points on board.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I very much welcome the Minister's statement. Deregulation has been an absolute disaster in South Yorkshire. Since 2010, bus passenger miles have fallen by 50%. That means lots of people are not getting the services they previously had. The Minister has referred to Greater London, which gets more than 10 times as much Government finance per head for transport as South Yorkshire. He also mentioned Greater Manchester. Manchester got a very good bus service improvement plan—BSIP—settlement last time round. South Yorkshire got nothing in the BSIP settlement. Does he recognise the need to review some of these settlements? Otherwise, Mayor Oliver Coppard, who is committed to franchising, might see that the only responsibility they have is to make the cuts to bus services in a different way from what would have been the case without franchising.

Simon Lightwood: There was a host—a plethora—of different funding pots relating to buses, and we are keen to amalgamate and consolidate them, but also, importantly, to devolve them to local areas so that they have the funding flexibility they need to deliver better buses across their areas.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It is great to hear of the success the previous Government's £1.1 billion investment into Greater Manchester's Bee Network is helping to deliver. I was delighted to launch it with the Mayor of Greater Manchester. As the Minister mentioned, one of the key things about the postcode lottery is the cost of using the bus. It can really put people off, particularly in rural areas where bus costs have traditionally been a lot higher. Is the Minister going to look at extending the Get Around for £2 scheme, which has been a real success, particularly for access to education opportunities and for those in lower paid work in rural areas? It has really helped to drive bus passenger numbers upwards since the end of the pandemic.

Simon Lightwood: Delivering reliable and affordable public transport services for passengers is one of the Government's top priorities, and we know how important it is for passengers and for local growth. We are looking at the future of the £2 fare cap as a matter of urgency. We are considering the most appropriate and affordable approach, and we will update the House in due course.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): For as long as I have been a Member of this House, my constituents have looked upon London with envy for one reason, and one reason only—its cheaper and more reliable bus services with real-time bus information. Too often, my constituents do not even know if a bus is coming to the bus stop, never mind when. Kim McGuinness, our regional mayor, has committed to taking back control of buses. Can the Minister set out how he will work with her and support her to deliver the bus services that my constituents need and deserve after 14 years of Tory failure?

Simon Lightwood: I have already met the Mayor of the North-East on a number of occasions, and I am working closely with combined authorities and mayors across the country to make bus franchising simpler and easier. We will, of course, make sure that the Department for Transport provides support to local transport authorities, with a centralised resource to ensure that we spread best practice across the country.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. The town of Bordon in my constituency is extraordinarily poorly served by bus routes, and it is crying out for a rail link bus service to the neighbouring town of Liphook. Will the Minister and his officials meet me to discuss how we can get a rail link bus service from Bordon to Liphook?

Simon Lightwood: I am more than happy to meet any hon. Member.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome the statement, as will my constituents in Scarborough, Whitby and the villages who have seen the vital bus services on which they rely slashed over recent years. For example, cuts to the 95 Sleights to Whitby service have severely restricted my constituents' ability to go about their daily lives. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to move at pace to improve such routes in rural and coastal communities?

Simon Lightwood: I completely agree. This is fundamental to the work we have been pursuing to make franchising quicker and simpler, and to avoid the need for local transport authorities to spend their time filling in forms at great expense. Britain is one of the few places in the developed world that hands operators power to slash bus services and set fares with very little say for the communities that depend on those services. Decades of failed regulation have left communities with little say on the essential services on which they rely, and we are determined to change that.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): As my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, the Lib Dems broadly welcome the principle of this statement, as I think will the Somerset Bus Partnership. The volunteers of this fantastic organisation in my constituency work tirelessly to encourage people to use buses. Somerset council is facing an historic funding crisis and has narrowly avoided bankruptcy, so I am keen to understand how the Government will provide long-term funding so that such authorities can do the franchising that has been promised.

Simon Lightwood: As I said, we are looking to consolidate and simplify the funding pots for bus services, and we hope to deliver more multi-year funding settlements.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): I welcome the statement. The Minister is genuinely taking control of our buses after years of the wheels on the bus not going round and round. I look forward to seeing the return of a direct service from Runcorn to Liverpool. Will the Minister meet me and leaders in Cheshire to discuss taking control of bus service arrangements through a new devolution deal?

Simon Lightwood: I would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for a progressive, positive statement that will encourage many. I welcome the steps towards a more personalised approach to bus franchising. However, I believe it is essential, as I think the Minister does, that any changes should be rural-proofed to ensure that bus services allow our rural communities to commute to work, to access medical appointments and even to go shopping, by protecting services over profit through an iron-clad guarantee. Will he confirm that this is the Government's position?

Simon Lightwood: I absolutely agree that rural bus routes and rural communities must be carefully considered. The best people to take that consideration are local leaders, which is why we are determined to allow local leaders to take back control of their bus services.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement. Villages in my constituency, such as Eccles, Burham and Wouldham, have suffered from 14 years of Conservative cuts and a reduction to the 155 bus service, which many elderly people rely on. Will the Minister assure councils such as Medway council and Kent county council that they can now join forces and collaborate on bus routes, so that we see an improvement to bus services for all our residents, including those in rural, isolated communities?

Simon Lightwood: The plan makes it possible for all local transport authorities to take back control of their buses. There is also the option of enhanced partnerships and municipal ownership. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to achieve his objectives.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Buses are the most used form of public transport and a lifeline for those on lower incomes. The inadequacy of bus services across Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme is an issue that comes up regularly on the doorstep. Hatfield Woodhouse only recently had its bus reinstated after many months of having nothing at all. Does my hon. Friend agree that delivering better buses will be essential to the Government's missions, from growing our economy to breaking down barriers of opportunity and accelerating to net zero?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Effective public transport, including bus services, is fundamental to delivering many of our missions in government.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): At the weekend, I had the pleasure of attending the unveiling of two brand new community-owned green buses in the village of Middle Barton in my constituency. After 14 years of devastation to public bus services in Oxfordshire, such community-led schemes can go a long way to filling the gap. Does the Minister agree that a decade of renewal promised by this Labour Government must see an improvement and regeneration in rural bus services?

Simon Lightwood: Absolutely. We want to give local transport authorities and leaders the power to take back control of bus services, to shape the future of those services to accurately reflect the needs of individual communities.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement—we should speak about buses much more often in this place. Edinburgh has an award-winning bus service, which carries 2 million passengers per week. Its highly unionised workforce—I think over 90%—works in collaboration with the directors of the company. We already get around for £2 inside Edinburgh because that is the price people pay no matter how far they travel inside Edinburgh. That is a fantastic example of what public ownership in public transport can do. Does the Minister agree that more ownership and control of bus services are key to driving down costs for passengers, increasing patronage and hitting our net zero goals?

Simon Lightwood: I agree with my hon. Friend. I was pleased to visit a municipal bus company in Nottingham; the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), represents that area. I was blown away by the company's knowledge of and commitment to the local area, and its having received numerous awards, with a satisfaction rating of something like 89%. Municipal bus companies are also a fantastic option for local authorities to consider.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It was interesting to hear the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson talk about the importance of preserving existing bus routes, when their party had presided over 14 years when thousands of bus services were lost to communities across the country, including in my constituency, where we still do not have a direct bus route from Nantwich to our local hospital. It has taken this Government just 10 weeks to present a plan to fix local bus services. Does that not epitomise how underserved our communities and local economies have been by 14 long years of Conservative government?

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It was great to visit the First Bus all-electric depot in York the other week, but I was saddened to hear just days later that First had withdrawn children's monthly bus passes. After meeting representatives of the company, they are reviewing that decision, but does my hon. Friend agree that travel to and from school should be affordable? Will he meet me to discuss the future of buses in York?

Simon Lightwood: Of course I want to make sure that bus fares are affordable. I will meet my hon. Friend to discuss his particular circumstances.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): As has been said, the past 14 years of Conservative Government have left local bus services, especially those in coastal communities, in a shocking state. In East Thanet, the 33, 34, 9 and 8A bus services have all been drastically cut, meaning that in certain areas of Broadstairs and Ramsgate there is no bus service at all within easy reach, and no one in either town has access to a bus to Canterbury outside commuter times. Conservative-run Kent county council must take up the powers that are being offered by this Government to serve disadvantaged communities such as that in East Thanet.

Simon Lightwood: Buses matter to millions of people, but 14 years of the Tories' broken bus system have led to countless communities being failed and a spiral of decline in bus services. I hope all local transport authorities consider the range of options available to them to take back control of their buses and shape services for the communities that they serve.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): After the deregulation and decline of buses under the previous Administration, I imagine that local authorities are somewhat shocked and surprised at being given the opportunity to shape services genuinely in the public interest. What additional support is my hon. Friend considering to empower local authorities, especially smaller district authorities such as Rugby borough council, so that they can move fast and fix things locally?

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are increasing the capacity of the Department for Transport to assist smaller authorities, so that all local transport authorities can consider franchising and other means of improving bus services in their communities.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I am pleased to see him driving forward this policy to improve our bus services, which are a vital lifeline for my constituents in Burton and Uttoxeter. Does he agree that this plan puts us on the right route by expanding franchising powers so that local voices can finally steer bus services in the right direction?

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He has already been a fierce advocate for public transport and bus services in his constituency. Local leaders, not private operators as is currently the case, will have the power to set routes, fares and services, putting passengers first after decades of regulation. That is the option available through franchising. Municipal ownership is also an option, as well as partnerships with operators and local authorities.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): As the Minister has already pointed out, and others in this Chamber have said, bus franchising has clearly delivered fantastic results where it is already in operation in Greater Manchester and London, but it will not be right for all communities. In my constituency, there are often only two buses a day connecting the outlying villages to Dartford and other population centres. Does he agree with me that the upcoming bus Bill will be a fantastic opportunity to end the postcode lottery of bus services across the country, providing maximum flexibility to local leaders, such as those in Kent if they are prepared to use it, to choose the right system for their populations?

Simon Lightwood: I agree with my hon. Friend. We must turn the page on years of Conservative failure in local transport, which is why the forthcoming bus Bill, in conjunction with our announcements today, will help end the country's transport postcode lottery.

Point of Order

5.34 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 29 July, during a statement on public spending and inheritance, in response to my question about the effect that the scrapping of a new hospitals programme will have on Frimley Park hospital, which serves the northern part of my constituency, the Chancellor of the Exchequer responded:

“My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary will meet all those with affected hospitals—including those affected by RAAC—to ensure that we can as quickly as possible address the challenges”.—*[Official Report, 29 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1065.]*

Since then, I have had no contact from either the Health Secretary or the Chancellor. I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on how I can secure that meeting, and whether you have any advice for Ministers when making promises in this House on behalf of their colleagues?

Mr Speaker: I assure the hon. Member that I have absolutely no responsibility for Ministers, and neither would I want to have it. The message has gone out loudly. He has put it on the record, and I am sure that it has been noted by those on the Treasury Bench. If things do not happen, I say to the hon. Member—whose brother would, I am sure, also give him some good advice—that he can go to the Table Office. Many options are open to him to pursue the matter, but I am sure that the message has been heard.

Sanctions: Russia

5.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): I beg to move,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2024, (SI, 2024, No. 834), dated 29 July 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 July, be approved.

The instrument, which amends the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, was laid before Parliament on 30 July using powers provided by the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, and entered into force on 31 July. For clarity, the instrument was first laid on 24 May under the previous Government. This Government support the aims of the instrument, so we revoked and re-laid it to provide additional time post election for the required parliamentary scrutiny. There are no amendments to the policy in relation to Russia sanctions, and the substance of the instrument remains the same.

The United Kingdom’s commitment to Ukraine is iron-clad. In July, the UK contributed £40 million to NATO’s comprehensive assistance package for Ukraine, which ensures that Ukraine will access vital assistance for counter-drone technology, de-mining of reclaimed land, and the medical rehabilitation of injured Ukrainian personnel. Ukraine has placed new orders for ammunition worth £300 million through the international fund for Ukraine, which is administered by the UK.

Sanctions, too, are a crucial tool to weaken Russia’s ability to attack Ukraine. In July, the UK hosted the European Political Community at Blenheim Palace, where more than 40 countries signed a call to action to tackle Russia’s so-called shadow fleet: a fleet of ageing oil tankers, which use deceptive shipping practices and substandard insurance to attempt to undermine sanctions on Russian oil. At the event, the UK spearheaded action against the shadow fleet when we sanctioned 11 oil tankers. Through this action, we continue to demonstrate the UK’s steadfast commitment to Ukraine and underline our leading role in eroding Russian oil revenues.

Targeted sanctions against oil tankers have had a material and immediate impact. UK sanctioned tankers have been left idling, knocked out of the Russian oil trade and for the most part unable to load new cargoes. The instrument provides the basis for those sanctions, and has enhanced the UK’s ability to respond to Russia’s increasingly desperate and reckless attempts to undermine our and our partners’ sanctions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister, welcome him to his place, and wish him well in his role.

I have been sanctioned by China and Russia, along with many others in this House—it is almost a badge of courage—but that is not the issue. My understanding of today’s sanctions is that businesses and those who have super yachts will be impacted directly, but that is all that the instrument means. If that is the case, will the Minister ensure that our sanctions have enough teeth to bite, and to be painful?

Hamish Falconer: I thank the hon. Member. If he allows me, I will go a little further into the introductory remarks, which I hope will specify why this afternoon’s

[*Hamish Falconer*]

measures will provide greater teeth. I hope that will answer his concerns, but if it does not, I will return to him.

The instrument, as well as increasing the effect on shipping, also broadens the designation criteria under the Russia regime. It expands our powers to target those who provide financial or material support to Russia's war machine. That could include, for example, foreign financial institutions that facilitate significant transactions on behalf, or in support, of Russia's military industrial base. That is in line with steps taken by partners and the G7's commitment to curtailing Russia's use of the international financial system to further its war in Ukraine.

Let me turn now to the measure about which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked. The instrument adds new relevant activities to the existing power in the Russia sanctions regime under regulation 57F—"specification of ships"—to provide the criteria to sanction individuals' ships. The amendment provides that a ship may be specified by the Secretary of State where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that it is, has been or is likely to be used for any activity whose object or effect is to destabilise Ukraine, to undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence of Ukraine, or to obtain a benefit from, or support, the Government of Russia. That includes where a ship is involved in carrying dual-use or military goods, oil or oil products that originate in Russia, or any other goods or technology that could contribute to destabilising Ukraine or to undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence of Ukraine.

Where a ship is specified under regulation 57F, it will be subject to measures in regulations 57A to 57E—the shipping sanctions. Where those sanctions apply, a specified ship is prohibited from entering a port in the UK, may be given a movement or a port entry direction, and can be detained or refused permission to register on the UK ship register—or, indeed, have its existing registration terminated. Additionally, UK persons and persons in the UK cannot provide funds and financial services, including maritime insurance, or brokering services, in relation to specified ships that are transporting certain oil and oil products, and cannot use specified ships to supply or deliver Russian oil and oil products, regardless of the price of the oil on board.

Once again, the UK has already specified ships using that enhanced power. The previous Government specified six vessels on 13 June. In July, this Government specified 11 vessels that were operating as part of Russia's shadow fleet. That fleet attempts to undercut our sanctions, undermines the maritime rules-based order, and presents an environmental and maritime security threat to coastal states.

This statutory instrument also amends regulation 6 of the Russia sanctions regime. That regulation provides the criteria for the designation of individuals or entities for the purpose of an asset freeze and other relevant measures. Specifically, the instrument adds additional activities for which a person may be designated, including where individuals or entities provide financial services or make available funds, economic resources, goods or technology to persons involved in obtaining a benefit from, or supporting, the Government of Russia. In practice, that widens the set of actors and enablers that

can be targeted for providing financial and material support to Russia and its war machine as Putin continues to prosecute his illegal war in Ukraine.

The instrument also consolidates powers under the Russia regulations to designate individuals or entities involved in the destabilisation of Ukraine. Specifically, the additional activities that the instrument adds to the designation criteria make possible the designation of persons who have owned or controlled entities involved in destabilising Ukraine, as well as individuals who work as directors or managers of such entities.

In the plainest language—because that was the language that the hon. Member for Strangford used—the instrument enables us to target the ship, as well as the individuals or entities involved with the ship. We found, through the previous regime, that the ship itself is the sharpest area of vulnerability, so the International Maritime Organisation number of the ship itself is where sanctions have greatest effect, and that is the effect that we are using today.

Jim Shannon: I understand; the Minister has laid out the system very simply. It applies to the EU, but we all know that those who seem to break most of the rules are India and other countries across the world that are out to buy Russian oil. If that is the case, what discussions have been had to ensure that India does not contravene what we are trying to do through these sanctions?

Mr Speaker: I say gently to the Minister that we have only an hour and a half for this debate. I know Members want to speak and I do not want to take any of that precious time away.

Hamish Falconer: I defer to your good guidance, Mr Speaker.

In conclusion, European security is a key focus of this Government. Supporting Ukraine remains vital to that end, and the UK is committed to doing so. I am sure that, when I come to answer hon. Members' questions, I will have an opportunity to say a little more about how we work with our partners, including India, on these matters. We will work with international partners to ensure that the values of democracy, human rights and international law are maintained. This legislation and subsequent sanctions made under it show our commitment to Ukraine as it defends its freedom in the face of Russian aggression. British support remains iron-clad. I commend the regulations to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

5.45 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): As this is the first time that I have appeared opposite the new Minister at the Dispatch Box, I wish not only to congratulate him but to welcome him to his place. In a previous life, we served together in the Foreign Office. He is free to disagree, although I discourage him from doing so, but I believe we worked well together in difficult conditions and I hope that we will have the same relationship going forward. I am confident that he will bring the same dedication to his new position that he showed in his work at the Foreign Office, although it is a difficult time to take responsibility for the middle east and north Africa. We all wish him genuine success in the role.

Although the Government may have changed, the commitment across the House to support Ukraine and starve the Russian war machine remains absolutely resolute. This motion demonstrates continuity of purpose, as it was originally laid by the Conservative Government, was interrupted by the election and has now been re-tabled by the new Minister. The Conservative Government introduced the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act in 2018, allowing us to build our own sanctions regime having left the European Union. Although our co-operative approach with the EU on sanctions is vital, particularly on Ukraine, that legislation laid the groundwork for the UK to create a world-leading and effective sanctions regime, as was demonstrated after Putin's renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and concerns about the territorial sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The UK has now sanctioned over 2,000 individuals and entities under the Russia sanctions regulations, with over 1,700 targeted since Putin launched his renewed and barbaric illegal invasion of Ukraine. Major progress has been made in cutting Russia off from global financial systems, restricting its military-industrial complex, reducing oil and gas revenues and banning items with dual military use from export to Russia.

Briefly, on behalf of my party, I want to thank the countless civil servants, intelligence personnel and officials—some of them will be in the Box today—who work day in, day out to refine and improve our Russian sanctions regime. I know it is often difficult and hard work, long into the night. We are extremely lucky in this country to be able to rely on some of the most intelligent and hard-working sanctions officials. I am sure the Minister has already seen just how effective they are, and of course he will have long-standing friendships with some of them.

The motion addresses a key pillar of our sanctions regime: the identification and designation of Russian shipping, including ships operating under Russia's so-called shadow fleet. The success of our sanctions regime has forced Russia to resort to expensive and complex logistical measures to source sanctioned goods and materials and export oil and gas, often via third countries, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. It is therefore imperative that we target the maritime arteries feeding the Russian war machine, and we welcome the fact that the motion will sanction a further 17 Russian vessels, including 15 from Russia's shadow fleet. It demonstrates that, no matter how deep Russia sinks into the shadows, the UK and our partners will identify and act against Russian assets and their war machines.

The broader changes to facilitate more effective targeting of Russian shipping and of individuals aiding and abetting Russian aggression are also welcome. The Minister has our full support for those changes. Our commitment to work collaboratively and in a spirit of co-operation with the Government on the development of our Russian sanctions regime will continue, because some things, rightly, are above politics.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, two areas requiring attention are the transfer of dual-use technology to Russia from China and the kidnapping of Ukrainian children, which some say is a form of genocide. Although I understand that he cannot comment on future sanctions, I ask him to keep all options open and commit to

targeting any entity, individual state or organisation providing support for Russia's illegal and brutal war and the kidnapping of Ukrainian children.

Maintaining an effective sanctions regime requires continuous attention and effort. This instrument is an important continuation of that work, and we support the Minister's bringing it to the House.

5.49 pm

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, and welcome him to his position in the House. He brings a huge amount of experience in this field, and I know he will do a fantastic job.

Tightening economic sanctions on Russia is one of the most fundamental ways that we can help to support the people of Ukraine in their fight for democracy, and that is what I want to speak about briefly. Throughout history, conflict has been a battle of individual courage and morale—something that the people of Ukraine have demonstrated time and again over the past two years since the Russian invasion—but it has always also been a battle of technology. From the Roman legions through to the Manhattan project, the side with the better, more advanced technology often prevails, which is why it is important that our sanctions restrict Russia's ability not just to resource its war, but to fight it in the first place.

As the saying goes, chips are the new oil. Russian semiconductor technology remains around 15 years behind that of NATO allies, but by avoiding sanctions, it is able to overcome that problem. More than two years on from its illegal invasion, Russia remains able to acquire the microchips necessary for advanced missiles and drones that are used against innocent civilians in Ukraine. Many will remember—I certainly do—that, when our sanctions were first introduced, there was talk that Russia's economy would come to a standstill, that within months, planes would not be able to take off and Russia's military would be unable to function. Clearly, that has not happened. We must therefore ask ourselves why and what more we can do. Today's move to ban shadow tankers and sanction those who operate them is the right decision. It will impair Russia's ability to finance its war by selling and transporting oil, but there is still more to be done, much of which will require ingenuity and the kind of careful diplomacy that I know the Minister is more than capable of.

There are two broad strands to the ways in which Russia is obtaining this technology. The first, and perhaps the most difficult to resolve, is by repurposing common technologies, the kinds of dual-use microchips that the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) referred to. They are in washing machines or microwaves, but they are also appearing in Russian attack weaponry. For example, the Orlan-10 drone—used by Russia to target Ukrainian troops—contains some western-made components that we would normally find in weather stations, or even in dishwashers. When the Minister sums up, will he reflect on what work the Government are doing to make sure those dual-use microchips are unable to be used in that way?

The other way that Putin's military has continued to supply itself is by avoiding sanctions via third parties. The evidence is widespread: since the invasion of Ukraine, exports from the EU to some of the countries bordering

[Gordon McKee]

Russia have increased by around 50%, roughly equivalent to three quarters of the drop in European exports to Russia since the war began. It does not take a genius to work out what is going on, especially given that the biggest growth in exports is in heavily restricted product groups such as chemicals, electronics and machinery. I know that the Minister will be keenly aware of this problem, so could he inform the House of the diplomatic work that the Foreign Office is undertaking to ensure we combat it?

I fully support the Government's moves to tighten sanctions. Russia must never be allowed to prevail in Ukraine, and we must constrain its resources to fight this illegal war. The people of Ukraine have shown incredible bravery, courage and skill. The very least that we in this place can do is honour our commitment to them. I know the Minister will do everything in his power to help achieve that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

5.53 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Given that this change to the law seeks to tighten economic and trade restrictions on Russia, the Liberal Democrats support this statutory instrument, which has been carried on from the work of the previous Government. However, if we step back from the detail of what this SI seeks to do, it is worth looking at some of the context in which it has been tabled. Proceeds from oil and gas sales within Russia's federal budget rose by 41% in the first half of 2024. That is partly accounted for by the fact that oil prices have gone up and the rouble has become weaker, but we cannot get away from the fact that Russia is profiting from its oil and gas sales in a way that was not the case a year ago, and is getting far greater proceeds from the sale of its oil and gas.

That matters, of course, because Russia is using that money for its grossly illegal aggression in Ukraine. It is thought that those oil and gas sales account for between a third and a half of the total Russian federal budget, so we have to ask how that is happening. Yes, it is partly happening via Russian ships that are part of this so-called shadow fleet, and it is welcome that the SI will prohibit those ships from entering a port in the UK. It is welcome that those ships can be detained in the UK and will be refused permission to appear on the UK's ship register, but the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is exactly right: we also have to think about what other countries than the UK are doing. According to the *Financial Times*, the oil trade between India and Russia almost doubled to \$65 billion in 2023. India imported very little crude oil before the invasion of Ukraine; now it is the No. 2 importer of Russian oil, after China. It is alleged that India has been refining Russian crude and re-exporting it to European nations that are otherwise seen as subject to, and complying with, our sanctions regime.

It was also interesting to hear from the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) about the use of dual-use technology. It is true that Russia is seeking to become increasingly self-sufficient, while it also looks to China and India to import technology in the fields of artificial intelligence, space technology and energy

technology. Earlier this year, we saw the former Russian Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov, previously Minister for the Economy, become the principal Minister for Defence. We now need to move to the next stage: when we think about dual-use goods, we need to think about how to make sure we can throttle the Russian economy so that it is not importing goods that can be used for aggression in Ukraine.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Josh Simons to make his maiden speech.

5.56 pm

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that tradition dictates that these speeches pay homage to our honourable predecessors, but the history of maiden speeches delivered by Members for Makerfield is somewhat chequered. My predecessor, Yvonne Fovargue, had to face down an unwelcome opponent—an unusually persistent wasp. Just as she stood up, after buzzing around her face, it struck, leaving her to struggle through the next few minutes while her face gradually swelled up.

Her predecessor, Ian McCartney, faced an even more formidable opponent: Michael Fabricant. I am told that, for decades, the parliamentary record of that encounter has stood uncorrected. As Mr McCartney began, Mr Fabricant put his feet up on the Bench. Betty Boothroyd was sat in your chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mr Fabricant interrupted with a point of order—not the done thing during maiden speeches, I am told. “Madam Speaker”, he said, “can you ask the man to speak in English?”, mocking Mr McCartney's thick Scottish accent. Mr McCartney retorted, “If he doesn't mention my accent, I won't mention his wig.” The record does not then note Mr Fabricant's response, “Touché, touché”, or Mr McCartney's victorious retort, “Toupee, toupee.” Anyway, so far today there have been no wasps, and—a point that may perhaps unite this House in gratitude—no Michael Fabricant. While I do not wish to emulate those misfortunes, I hope to continue those Members' good work in delivering for the people of Makerfield.

Many in this Chamber may not know that Makerfield is not really a place: it is a suffix attached to a collection of towns, given the name of an ancient Lancastrian forest called Macerfield that used to stretch unbroken from Wigan to Warrington. The towns I represent include Hindley Green and Hindley, Platt Bridge and Abram, Ashton and Bryn, Winstanley and Worsley Mesnes, and Orrell and Pickley Green. The history of those towns is the history of our nation. Many dug pit mines, producing the coal that powered our industrial revolution. While men dug the coal, women sorted it—pit brow lasses, as they are known. Mine workers organised into unions and, since 1906, elected Labour MPs to represent them. Industrial decline brought great destruction to many of these towns—places such as Abram, Bryn, Bickershaw and Hindley—and they will never forget the callousness with which they were treated in those years. That is one reason why I support delivering justice to mineworkers on the mineworkers' pension scheme. Coal made this nation wealthy, and now we must ensure that those workers live with dignity in old age.

Backed by a Labour Government, Ian McCartney delivered the minimum wage, new health hubs in Platt Bridge and Worsley Mesnes, and investment in Abram

and Winstanley. Then under the Tories, 14 years of austerity deepened the wounds of industrial decline, hollowing out public services and degrading public spaces, while wealth accumulated in London and the south-east. My predecessor, Yvonne Fovargue, worked hard to protect constituents, continuing a tradition of working closely with the fantastic Wigan council on its groundbreaking Wigan deal. She delivered a new health centre in Ashton and was a leading voice in combating debt, loan sharks and those who prey on the most financially vulnerable.

Through their ups and downs—their history is the history of this country—the towns I represent have developed one simple superpower: a community spirit that should be the envy of this land. They have pride in place, and care for friends, family and neighbours. Today, this spirit manifests in some of the wonderful community organisations I have had the privilege of getting to know. In Orrell, there is Tony, Julie, volunteers at Brighter Better Orrell, the Friends of Orrell Station, Greenslate community farm and Greenslate water meadows. In Worsley Mesnes and Winstanley, there is Joe at St Judes rugby club, Winstanley Warriors football club, and the Clifton Street community centre. In Ashton and Bryn, there is the Brian Boru club and Garswood Hall Bowling, Ashton Town FC and Ashton Athletic FC, which is currently rebuilding after a mindless arson attack. In Abram and Platt Bridge, there is David's fantastic Wigan & Leigh Community Charity and Wigan Cosmos FC. In Hindley, there is Eric at the Hindley community allotment, the Friends of Hindley Station and the friends of Borsdane wood; and in Hindley Green, there is the Brunswick bowling club, the St John's church and Bethel community centre, and the Hindley Green Residents Association.

What is the future for these towns and for our country? That is the question that we Labour Members must now answer. The task is immense. People I represent have lost trust in politics and in politicians. They believe that the work we do here makes little difference to them. They feel that we lecture, we speak, and we let economists, lawyers or bankers tell us the “right” answers, but that we do not listen, or respect or represent them. That is why the weight of responsibility on this Government, on me as my constituents' representative and on all of us across this House could not be greater. Together, we must deliver for decent, fair-minded, hard-working people who love their community and their country, especially those in the former industrial heartlands of our great nation, which I am so proud to represent. We cannot and will not let these people down.

In this House, I hope to use my career to contribute on this question of the future. I spent years working on technology, data and machine learning. Too often, we talk about technology as an inexorable force, as if it bends society to its will, but it has no will. Technology is a tool. We build it, we design it and we use it in our world in ways that we choose. Now more than ever, we must have the interests of working people in mind as we harness the great potential of technology. I look forward to working with colleagues across this House who share those interests.

However, my family is what brings me more pride than anything. My parents divorced at a young age, so I grew up shifting between homes, towns and religions. I learned to see the best in people and in ways of living

that could not be more different. Now I am lucky enough to see the world through the eyes of my children. I remember friends asking me before our first child was born, “How do you feel about bringing a child into this grim world?”, but to me that has it all wrong. Children are a bridge to the future. They inject hope for what our communities, our country, and we as individuals can be. That is why childcare will be a key focus of mine. We make having children too hard, too exhausting and too expensive in this country. Radically reforming childcare may be one of the most effective ways to deliver change that working people can feel, as well as boosting our workforce, and that is why I will campaign hard for that reform over the coming months and years.

Let me end by returning to something that my predecessor Mr McCartney said about the history and the future of the towns we represent. Democracy, he said, is not solely, or even primarily, about this place, or about us. It is about the efforts and endeavours of ordinary people. It endures because people have their country and their desire for freedom and fairness in their hearts. That is a profound lesson—a lesson that bears on this age even more than on his, and one that we must hold close through the challenges ahead, for we live in an age of insecurity.

As the organisation I was proud to lead, Labour Together, has argued, we must once again focus on strength, security and working with allies to navigate the choppy waters ahead. That is what we are here debating this afternoon, which is why I urge this House to support tightened sanctions on Russia. We must navigate the challenges of this age with a constant focus on working people, who are the backbone of this country, because unless working people like those I am so proud to represent feel change, and unless we in this Chamber demonstrate humility and honesty, and act with integrity and with respect, they have no reason to believe in democracy. That is the kind of representative for the people of Makerfield that I hope to be.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the SNP spokesperson.

6.5 pm

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): First, I congratulate the new hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) on his extremely well delivered maiden speech. I am sure that he is somebody whom we will not be able to ignore over the next few years. Inevitably, given his remarks, he has somebody with a Scottish accent following his maiden speech. I hope that everybody in the Chamber will be able to follow mine, unlike Michael Fabricant in the past.

I also think it is important to speak today, and I join colleagues in backing the Government's move on sanctions. The cross-party support that the Government have on this issue is exceptionally important. We could be slightly more robust on this issue, and I have a number of very specific questions for the Minister. I know that he will not be able to answer them all, but I would like to put them on record for him to answer in due course.

First, I was very pleased to hear the Minister talk about European security. We are of course stronger in dealing with Russian aggression in Ukraine when we do so in commonality with our partners in Europe. I was

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pleased to hear the Foreign Secretary talk about the importance of common European foreign and security policy. However, that security also applies to issues such as energy, and when it comes to energy security, being outside the single market makes us less secure. I would like to hear from the Minister about the areas in which he feels he can deepen our security by working with our European partners—on sanctions, but also more broadly.

Secondly, on tightening up financial regulations, the Minister will be aware of the issue of shell companies. The former Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, Roger Mullin, frequently raised the really important issue of Scottish limited partnerships. I know that this is not something that the Minister can answer immediately, but can he look at financial regulations and the challenges around dirty money? All too often, as we know—this has been picked up on by Members from across this Chamber—that money has found its way into the UK economy. I would be grateful if he could look at that issue, although I acknowledge that putting him on the spot right now may be a little unfair.

I want to pick up on the recommendations in the report by the Intelligence and Security Committee. Yes, I know we are talking about sanctions, but there is the broader issue of polarisation and disinformation in our society. I pay tribute to the work of my predecessor, Stewart Hosie MP. He worked tirelessly on the Intelligence and Security Committee, as did colleagues from across the House, on that issue. I have not yet had the opportunity to pay tribute to him in the House for his role in raising these issues in Parliament, but also for being an exceptionally diligent, hard-working and popular local MP.

I want to pick up on points made by the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns). First, I pay tribute to colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, who have been working on this issue exceptionally hard. I also pay tribute to the intelligence services for the work they have done, often in very difficult circumstances. It would be remiss of us not to touch on the exceptional work done by the international community of non-governmental organisations, many of them based in the United Kingdom, which have done incredibly brave work in the field on this issue. Some of the work NGOs have done has found its way into policy—for others, that is not so much the case—but the international NGO community has been exceptionally good over the years, and often ahead of the Government of the day on some of these issues.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford mentioned the kidnapping of children, and I wholly endorse her remarks. The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) was right to pick up on technology and its secondary role, and I endorse his remarks. Finally on sanctions, I ask the Minister to look across the piece at the system of controls on arms exports to secondary countries. I hope—I will write to the Foreign Secretary about this—that we will ensure that we do not catch countries such as Ukraine in the measures, and impede their ability to defend their territorial integrity after Russia's aggression. I thank the Minister for his comments. He will have our support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Tim Roca to make his maiden speech.

6.10 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) on his fantastic maiden speech. There is already a little bit of confusion between Macclesfield and Makerfield, and it is good that we can continue that by giving our maiden speeches on the same day.

It is the privilege of my life to be elected to represent the communities of Macclesfield, and I start by placing on record my thanks to the House staff for the warm welcome and support that they have given new Members over the last few weeks. The Table Office, the Speaker's Office, the Doorkeepers and our catering and security colleagues have all been phenomenal; thank you so much.

I understand that just by speaking I have already outdone one of my predecessors, as those in the Library tell me that they are yet to find any evidence that a century ago William Brocklehurst said anything at all in the 12 years in which he represented Macclesfield. On the subject of predecessors, I wish sincerely to pay tribute to my immediate predecessor David Rutley, particularly for his public service on behalf of Macclesfield and our country. People of all political persuasions will tell you that he is a man of courtesy and kindness, and that certainly tallies with my experience.

After the momentous general election that we had earlier in the summer, lots of bright new Members are frenetically trying to make a name for themselves, so I need something to help me stand out from the crowd of new MPs. The House Library thinks it has found it: I may well be the first Labour Member of Parliament to be called Tim. As I grew up in the 1990s, when Harry Enfield was on television, being called Tim was a bit of a cross to bear, so it is good to see that it has finally paid off. If being the first Tim is not enough, I will make do with being the first ever Labour Member of Parliament for Macclesfield.

Seventy-five years ago, my grandad crashed his car in Macclesfield, and while hospitalised, he fell in love with a young Irish nurse, my grandma Josephine, and my family's story in Macclesfield began. I grew up in the constituency, and I am proud to call it home. From the Cheshire plain to the rolling hills of the Peak district, it is a beautiful part of our country. Indeed, nearly a third of the constituency lies within the Peak district national park. The town itself was famously home to a thriving silk industry, with 71 silk mills operating at one time, and I am proud to be wearing a Macclesfield silk tie today.

Macclesfield and its towns and villages—Disley, Poynton, Bollington, Prestbury and more—have made their contribution to our country with athletes, artists, scientists and writers of renown. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) can try to claim the band Joy Division, the mural of Macclesfield born and bred Ian Curtis dominates our town, a reminder not only of his talent, but of the very real struggle that many people face with mental health. Macclesfield also hosts a sprawling AstraZeneca campus that employs more than 5,000 people and is crucial not just to my constituency, but to the economy of our country.

At the election, it was a privilege to campaign and, importantly, listen to people's concerns, aspirations and fears. Many spoke of the climate emergency and the need for greater action. Others insisted on the need for

electoral reform—a view that I share. Universally, they worried about public services and the cost of living crisis, with the backdrop being widening inequality on a scale that is Edwardian, unprecedented, and in my view, immoral.

There is no doubt that we live in interesting times. During the last Parliament, colleagues had to contend with a global pandemic that still casts its shadow across our country, but there is a feeling that the world is drifting towards the rapids. Every day, the brave men and women of Ukraine fight for the life of their country, and these coming weeks may prove critical in that war. In the middle east, innocent civilians bear the brunt of a tragic conflict, with a ceasefire proving frustratingly elusive, and across the world economic shocks, climate extremes, and soaring prices are combining to create a food crisis of unprecedented proportions. At home, confidence in our political system is at a record low, and according to the latest British social attitudes survey, as many as 58% of people say that they “almost never” trust politicians to tell the truth.

In medieval times, Parliaments had monikers, such as the Mad Parliament, the Lawless Parliament, and the Merciless Parliament. How will we in this place be known as we face up to our responsibilities in this Parliament? I look forward to working with Members from across the House to meet those responsibilities, to act for the public good and to contribute thoughtfully without fear or favour. We must make this a place of public service, not self-service, and about the national interest, not self-interest, so that together, to borrow a phrase, we are a standing contradiction to people who wish to believe that only those with cold hearts and twisted tongues can succeed in the world of politics.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Rupert Lowe to make his maiden speech.

6.15 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): Great Yarmouth is a constituency like no other. In many ways, it feels two or three decades behind the rest of the country, but what may seem to be a criticism is in fact the complete opposite. Countless other areas that once, not too long ago, shared Great Yarmouth's unique sense of community, have lost that. In Great Yarmouth, everybody knows everybody, and if they do not know somebody, they know somebody who does. It holds a remarkable charm that is unlike anywhere else I have experienced. My constituents care about their town, they care about their community, and they care about their country. It is, as Harry Redknapp would say, “a proper place”. During the European Championships, I can honestly say that I have never seen so many England flags in my life than in Great Yarmouth—certain hon. Members from across the Chamber may have found that experience to be a reminder of past indiscretions.

As is customary, I would like to thank my predecessor, Brandon Lewis, for his contribution to the Great Yarmouth constituency over 14 years. It is a genuine honour to represent the UK's premier seaside tourist destination, narrowly beating Clacton and Skegness to the top spot, on a billing definitively decided by a straw poll of constituents on Great Yarmouth's famous Golden Mile. A particular fan of the attractions in the constituency was one Ann Widdecombe. Taking her on the world-famous

“snails” rollercoaster during the election campaign was an experience she is unlikely to forget—and her back held up rather better on the rickety ups and downs than my own!

We are blessed with some of the UK's most glorious coastline, with Great Yarmouth, Caister, Gorleston, California, Hopton and more. As those who are familiar with the geology of the area will know, my constituency's borders change on an almost monthly basis as swathes of land are reclaimed by the sea, particularly in the charming village of Hemsby. While other coastal communities have been rightly gifted the defences they desperately need, the good people of Hemsby have been left to fight the power of the sea. It has been a losing battle, and numerous constituents have lost their homes with zero compensation. In fact, one resident told me that his property was worth minus £15,000 due to demolition costs.

I pledged to fight for Hemsby, and that is exactly what I am doing. The funding criteria, as promised by a now Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on an election visit to the area, must be urgently changed. We do not have time for the usual pontification; we must act before any more of my constituency disappears into the sea. I am pleased to say that among other things, I have already secured the reopening of the Hemsby beach public loos.

Decades ago, the ocean brought huge wealth to Great Yarmouth from both fish and oil. Primarily known for its wildly successful herring fishing industry, at its peak, it was one of the most important fishing ports in Europe, often referred to as the herring capital of the world. That wealth was stolen from the people of Great Yarmouth and transferred overseas through our membership of the European Union. It is no surprise that my constituents overwhelmingly voted to leave the European Union. Evidently, it is a constituency with fine judgment. It is sad that today, having been our largest fishing port, only one fishing boat operates from Great Yarmouth, and there is no longer a local fish processing industry.

Great Yarmouth's local football club is affectionately known as the Bloaters. The Wellesley ground contains the oldest wooden football stand in the world. I am now the proud holder of a season ticket, which was an incredibly kind gift from the club's chairman following the donation of my first month's parliamentary salary to the club—don't worry, Madam Deputy Speaker; it has been appropriately declared. It is a ticket of perhaps less financial value than those that some other Members will have declared, but it holds infinitely more real value for me.

Being elected as Great Yarmouth's MP was the proudest moment of my professional life, narrowly beating taking Southampton to the FA cup final in 2003 as chairman. Sadly, we lost 1-0 to Arsenal that day, to a tidy Robert Pires finish. The town and its people have quite simply been let down and forgotten for too long, being at the end of the line, literally and metaphorically. My constituents look around their town, and they have seen their once-booming home change beyond recognition. Uncontrolled mass immigration has failed Great Yarmouth, as it has failed the entire country. Just like the majority of the rest of the country, in 2010 they voted for lower immigration. In 2015, they voted for lower immigration. In 2016, they voted for lower immigration. In 2019, they voted for

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lower immigration. What did the Conservatives do? They allowed immigration to soar, with no thought to the brutal consequences.

In 2024, Great Yarmouth also voted for lower immigration. The difference this time is that I will voice those concerns and fight as best I can to drastically reduce the unsustainable number of people settling in our country. The roads are packed, the hospitals are full, GP surgeries are bursting at the seams, and dentists are inaccessible—frankly, the system is broken and mass immigration is largely responsible.

Great Yarmouth has a long history of proudly welcoming immigrants who come to the UK to work hard, integrate properly and contribute to the economy. The current chaos could not be further from that. We have local people, particularly women, feeling unsafe in their own town. We are told that crime is down, but I do not believe it and the town certainly does not. We must be clear: the reporting of crime is down because many have lost faith that the police will act. I am determined to change that, and I am running a public awareness campaign on the importance of reporting crime. It is one that I think should be replicated nationally. Yes, of course we need more police on the streets, but without reporting crime, nothing will change.

There is so much to resolve in Great Yarmouth, but treating the symptoms can only be a temporary measure until the root cause of the issue—uncontrolled immigration—is tackled in Westminster. Our whole system of governance is broken. I have huge respect for Members of this House who have entered with genuine experience from a career in business, medicine, the military or however else. Sadly, we are a dwindling number, and the relentless rise of the career politician continues. From politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford, to special adviser, to parliamentary candidate, to MP—this well-trodden journey serves nobody but the traveller, and deprives the British people of the representatives they deserve.

Many Members of Parliament lack experience of the challenges faced by people in the real economy. A day on my farm or some work experience in one of my contracting businesses would open their eyes to the punishing reality of what hard-working Brits go through every day, much of which emanates from do-gooding legislation. I fear that people in Britain will not understand the damaging reality of socialism until they have experienced it. The only difference between this Government and the last is that they may be more honest about what they intend to inflict on the British people.

The political system serves nobody but itself. It is arrogant, out of touch and incompetent. That potent mix has delivered woeful Government after woeful Government. Who suffers? Decent men and women working hard to provide for their families. We need to back the risk-takers, back the wealth-creators and back the doers. As the greatest Prime Minister in many decades correctly said, “Let us back the workers, not the shirkers.” If we are to successfully change Britain, we need to change politics. The election of five Reform party MPs, including me, is a politically seismic event in our two-party state. We are just getting started and the winds of change are blowing much harder.

On Russia and the Ukrainian situation, I think it is a tragedy for both those countries, for Europe and for the world. In particular, it is a tragedy for those people who are needlessly dying on both sides.

I echo what one of my colleagues said about the support and help that the staff of Parliament have given to all of us new MPs. I would not call myself a young MP—I am a pensioner—but I thank them all very much indeed.

6.26 pm

Hamish Falconer: I thank Members for their contributions to this debate. In particular, I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), for her kind words about my service in the Foreign Office. Indeed, I pay tribute to hers: she did fine work on Iraq and Syria, and I was glad to work with her. I look forward to working with all of this House on matters of national security.

I welcome the maiden speeches that were made. My hon. Friends the Members for Makerfield (Josh Simons) and for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) were both funny, which is useful when I am being so dour at the Dispatch Box. I noticed that the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) paid tribute to particular kinds of experience—military, business, and so on—but he did elide the diplomats. Given that there are many of them in the Box, I would like to say that he should take a look at the good work of the Foreign Office, because there are many hard-working officers who do their very best, and I am grateful to everybody in the House for recognising that.

If I may, I will come back to some of the points raised by the other parties. I regret that I may have to write to the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) about the specific Scottish issue.

Stephen Gethins: I am grateful to the Minister for saying he will respond to me in writing, which I accept, but I should also be clear—this was the mistake that previous Prime Ministers made—that Scottish limited partnerships are not a Scottish Parliament issue, but a Westminster reserved issue.

Hamish Falconer: I understand that, and I agree. I welcome the importance that the hon. Gentleman placed in his comments on working together. I also believe that, on many of these issues, we are better together.

Some important points were raised about our partners in India and China in relation to Russia. I say to the shadow Minister that any evidence of Chinese companies providing military support to Russia would be damaging to China's international reputation, given its strong position on not being involved in the conflict. We will not hesitate to take action against anyone supplying and funding Putin's war machine.

On India, which was raised by the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), we regularly raise Russia's actions in Ukraine with India. We did so most recently in a conversation between the Foreign Secretary and the Indian Foreign Minister. We highlight the importance of tackling the shadow fleet. India is a key partner, and we are committed to working together across a whole range of issues. We underline to them how unreliable an energy partner Russia would be.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford raised the tragic forceful deportations of, we believe, almost 20,000 Ukrainian children, which is a matter of real concern to me and the rest of the ministerial team. As a member of the jointly led Canadian Ukrainian initiative, along with 28 other states, the UK is providing funding to support the rehabilitation of children.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) made some kind comments. I am unsure whether they were for Minister Doughty or for me, but, as I am here, I will certainly accept them. He made important points about microchips and various other dual-use technologies on which we are taking action with others to try to address. In the interests of the House's time, I will write to him to give further detail.

On the wider point about circumvention, I am grateful to the House for its support and recognise the widespread concern about other countries doing otherwise. We are sending senior officials to the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Serbia to highlight circumvention risks and to offer technical support. We recognise that these issues are global in nature, so we have designated individuals in Belarus, China, Iran, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Turkey, the Emirates and Uzbekistan. I will no doubt have another opportunity to update the House on our work in this area in due course. I thank the House for its support and urge it to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2024, (SI, 2024, No. 834), dated 29 July 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 July, be approved.

Sanctions: Syria

6.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): I beg to move,

That the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2024, (SI, 2024, No. 833), dated 29 July 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 July, be approved.

This instrument amends the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. The instrument was laid on 30 July using powers provided by the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 and entered into force on 31 July. For clarity, the instrument was laid on 24 May under the previous Government. We support its aims, so we revoked it and re-laid it to provide additional time post election for the required parliamentary scrutiny. There are no amendments to the policy and the substance of the instrument is the same.

With the conflict in Syria now in its 14th year, the humanitarian situation remains dire. A record 16.7 million people are estimated to be in humanitarian need, nine in 10 people in Syria are living in poverty, and nearly 13 million lack sufficient food. Many more have been forced to flee their homes and are living in settlements and camps.

Our support for the Syrian people is unwavering. The UK has spent over £4 billion to date—our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis—and we continue to provide lifesaving support to those in need. It is imperative that aid reaches the most vulnerable and that UN agencies, international organisations and non-governmental organisations have the support necessary for their work.

The UK has engaged with financial institutions and humanitarian actors to fully understand and mitigate the impact of the humanitarian provisions in our sanctions legislation, including by issuing general licences following the earthquakes in February last year. The UK has acted to ensure that aid continues to reach those most in need. These amendments to the regulations will allow trusted organisations to focus on delivering aid, support efficient and effective humanitarian delivery and provide reassurance for those organisations and their service providers. They will ensure that we continue to meet our humanitarian objectives while ensuring that our sanctions regime is robust.

UK sanctions are designed to encourage the Assad regime to refrain from actions, policies or activities that repress the civilian population in Syria. They also serve to encourage the regime to participate in good faith in negotiations for a political settlement in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 and to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria.

This instrument amends the humanitarian exception to the petroleum measures contained in the 2019 regulations with the aim of improving the delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria. The amendments expand the eligibility for the humanitarian exception from solely UK-funded persons to all organisations covered by UN Security Council resolution 2664 to the extent that they are captured by UK sanctions. The extension will enable more organisations to benefit from the humanitarian exception.

[*Hamish Falconer*]

The instrument extends the regulations to ensure that they apply to those involved in the humanitarian delivery chain. The change ensures that the delivery chain of relevant persons as outlined in the regulations will benefit from being able to use that exception. That provides assurances to relevant delivery partners on the ground and to financial service providers when improving payments.

The instrument also amends the 2019 regulations to authorise financial service providers of “relevant persons” to use the humanitarian exception, removing the requirement for financial service providers to apply for individual licences to facilitate activities authorised by the exception. The change will also provide greater assurance to both humanitarian organisations and their financial providers, reducing delays in payments.

In addition, the instrument replaces the existing notification requirement for “relevant persons” using the humanitarian exception for petroleum prohibitions in the 2019 regulations with a new requirement to notify the Treasury on an annual basis that they are involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance in Syria. The notification requirement will apply to relevant persons conducting humanitarian assistance activities in Syria, but not to financial service providers, the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the British Red Cross or downstream delivery partners.

Finally, the instrument makes two further, more minor amendments. First, there is a small amendment to the humanitarian fuel exception and a related exception for petroleum products for diplomatic and consular premises in the 2019 regulations. Those exceptions are amended to refer to “acquiring” fuel rather than “purchasing” it. Secondly, the instrument amends the record-keeping requirements in the regulations with respect to trade licences to clarify that specified information is required where appropriate. That will ensure that correct records are kept for relevant licences.

UK sanctions on Syria continue to send a clear message to the regime and its supporters: we will not stand by while they commit serious human rights abuses. The regulations ensure that the sanctions will not hinder humanitarian aid efforts. We will continue to work closely with the UN, like-minded states, humanitarian organisations and the financial sector to ensure that the sanctions work in tandem with humanitarian efforts and that the Assad regime and its allies and supporters bear responsibility for the devastation endured by the Syrian people. I commend the regulations to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

6.37 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): The people of Syria have suffered unimaginable horrors since 2011, first under Bashar al-Assad’s brutal dictatorship and then at the hands of Daesh, al-Qaeda, Iranian-backed militias and the Wagner Group. The Syrian people have endured unforgivable cruelty and suffering, with over 6 million forced abroad as refugees, 7 million displaced in their own country and 90% living within poverty. Over half lack access to clean and safe water. It is a humanitarian catastrophe that stems from Bashar al-Assad’s

oppressive authoritarian rule and industrialised brutalisation of his own people. Sadly, the earthquakes in February 2023 caused further suffering and directly impacted a further 9 million people. It is absolutely right that we continue to sanction Assad and his regime, but we must also ensure that much-needed humanitarian aid is delivered.

This instrument was initially proposed before the election as a means of improving the humanitarian exemption from sanctions for those providing vital aid to Syria. It will give humanitarian organisations access to fuel, ensuring that they can carry out important work. I am therefore grateful to the Minister for re-tableting the instrument, which the Opposition will of course support.

The sanctions regime, delivered under the Conservative Government, rightly targets those who have caused this appalling humanitarian disaster, not the rule-abiding NGOs, international organisations and accredited individuals helping to alleviate the suffering. Introducing an automatic humanitarian exemption, rather than by licence, and extending the 2023 earthquake exemptions were requested by humanitarian groups through the tri-sector group. These changes will now extend to fuel. Of course, we will expect the Minister and his officials to maintain clear protections to prevent the misuse of this exemption, and we will monitor its implementation. Sadly, new crises are emerging at an alarming rate, but we must never forget the people of Syria. Assad and his Russian backers may be content to let the people of Syria suffer, but the UK has a proud humanitarian legacy, regardless of which party is in government. These changes will help to ensure its continuation.

On our Syria sanctions regime, I ask the Minister to use his position to look into the proliferation of Captagon, a highly addictive amphetamine. The success of global sanctions in cutting off Assad’s regime from funding has led him to turn Syria into a narco-state, producing 80% of the world’s Captagon. In my view, Syria has become the Amazon warehouse for terrorists and states who behave like terrorists. There was some hope that the normalisation of relations between several Arab countries and the Syrian regime might see that addressed. When in government, we opposed that normalisation, and I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that his Government will adopt that position.

Although Captagon causes the most damage in countries neighbouring Syria, it is starting to affect those across the world. I am concerned that, having been discovered in the Netherlands—my own Committee did an inquiry into this—we are starting to see it in the UK. Addiction and misery are now bankrolling Assad’s continued tyranny and indulgence of Putin’s Russia. We must ensure that we take action on Captagon so that we are protected here in the UK.

We cannot forget Syria and the Syrian people. Anyone who has worked on Syria knows that we are haunted by our failures, the survivors we met and the photos of those who were murdered. Rarely is Syria discussed in this place, since the shameful vote of 2015, so I take this opportunity to request a few clarifications from the Government on their policy. First, I ask the Minister to take forward and give his Government’s support for a new chemical weapons tribunal—a treaty-based court that will put on trial those guilty of such heinous inhumanity and deliver accountability and justice for those in Syria.

Likewise, I urge the Minister to keep his eye on Daesh, because we are seeing a re-emergence of that evil in the caves and the mountains along the border between Iraq and Syria. There were 153 attacks in the first six months of the year, and we know that they are seeking every opportunity. Finally, I ask the Minister to use his voice and urge his office to speak up for those whom Assad seeks to silence. Hope lives on in Syria, as we have seen from the women-led protests across the country as recently as August.

We give our full support to this instrument—originally laid by the Conservative Government—which welcomes and provides exemptions for humanitarian groups to access fuel under strict management systems and which, we hope, will go some way towards addressing the misery that the Syrian people have endured for too long, and support those who are working to alleviate that suffering.

6.42 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I echo what we have heard about the effect that this dreadful war has had on the people of Syria. We understand that 300,000 civilians have been killed since the war broke out in 2011, and more than 13 million people have been displaced internally or have had to leave Syria as refugees. We have been talking this afternoon about sanctions and about how we might tighten the noose on trade and on financial transactions. If we see the situation on the ground improving we might need to loosen that noose, but what is happening on the ground in Syria is still appalling. More on that later.

First, bilateral aid between the UK and Syria has been falling in recent years, from a high of £300 million in 2020 to £205 million the following year, £158 million in 2022 and £150 million last year. We have seen the halving of our bilateral humanitarian aid to Syria. I question whether one reason for that may have been co-option of humanitarian aid—a concern that was flagged in a 2019 report by Human Rights Watch called “Rigging the System”, which pointed out that the Syrian Government of al-Assad had co-opted reconstruction funding in Syria and had

“developed a policy and legal framework that allows it to co-opt humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funding to fund its atrocities, advance its own interests”

and to

“punish those perceived as opponents”.

This SI is specifically about carve-outs for petrol for humanitarian workers. I am sure that the Government will have assured themselves that those humanitarian workers will not be siphoning fuel for the Syrian Government, but I ask the Minister to reinforce that reassurance when he responds.

Finally, we heard earlier that there have been strikes in Syria. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has suggested that the strikes, allegedly carried out by Israel, were on a programme to develop short and medium-range precision missiles and drones. If that is so, it is the same site that was struck in 2017 when an Israeli strike was suspected on a rebel-held town in northern Syria.

Will the Minister confirm that, by supporting humanitarian groups and organisations, we are not in any sense affording the Assad regime access to fuel to carry out his dreadful crimes in Syria?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Charlie Maynard to make his maiden speech.

6.45 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Members for Makerfield (Josh Simons) and for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), who gave us very different views of their constituencies, but were linked by their love for them.

I stand here today to represent the people of Witney. I am incredibly grateful to them for electing me to represent them, and I will do my best for them. I am also incredibly grateful to the people who helped me get here. We had a fantastic team who worked extremely hard, and I thank them all. I am also extremely grateful for my very large family up there in the Gallery—I love you all, too.

Until July, Witney had voted Conservative for 102 years. Famous parliamentarians from Witney include Douglas Hurd and David Cameron. I owe David Cameron a backhanded vote of thanks, because some of his decisions put me on the path to politics. I also thank Robert Courts, who worked very hard for the constituency for the past eight years.

Our constituency is beautiful. It sits at the bottom of the Cotswolds, and it is full of market towns such as Faringdon, Burford and Witney, which did well off the wool trade. They did more than trade it—they spun it, they wove it and they made it into beautiful blankets, which were famous throughout Europe from the middle ages. Then, the dastardly duvet came along and that was the end of it.

At its best, Witney innovated. We have a lot of Methodist roots in town; the people shared technology, and they cared about welfare and social justice. If there is one theme that is kept going today throughout the constituency, it is that care. So many community groups work so hard. One of the wonderful things about being an MP and a candidate is getting to see so much of them at first hand, whether it is the food banks, the larders and the fridges, the sports teams, the day centres, the councils or the churches—you name it, it goes on and on and on. That network of volunteers makes the constituency tick. They are particularly stretched now because our public services are so underfunded and stretched.

Witney is just 10 miles west of Oxford, which for many makes it one of the reasons it is so wonderful to live, work and play there. That cuts both ways. We have enormous pressure on housing. So many people have grown up there but cannot afford to live there anymore. That is brutal. Added to that is transport—in our wisdom, we tore up the railway 50 years ago and we are now stuck on the A40, taking more than an hour most days to get just those 10 miles between Witney and Oxford. That doubles down into health. We have great GP practices around the constituency, but our secondary healthcare is in Oxford, which is virtually impossible to get to. That causes an enormous amount of stress. We are trying to get secondary healthcare out of that hub in Oxford and to Witney, where we can redevelop council-owned land into better healthcare services, more social rented housing and better further education provision.

For the past four years, I have worked on a project to rebuild the railway linking Carterton, Witney and Eynsham with Oxford. It is a huge project, but we now have

[Charlie Maynard]

an opportunity. One thing that will make it harder—and easier—is that our new Government have just said that West Oxfordshire must take 62% more housing. That, by itself, would be a disaster and is too high a number. However, if we are clever we can do what our Victorian forebears did: put housing around railway stations and use that to fund the railway. That is what we are intent on doing. That would connect Witney to Oxford in just 16 minutes, a cut in travel time of 70%.

Our rivers were our original transport links. They did very well for our blanket and quarrying industries, but we have not returned the favour and they are full of sewage. We are very lucky to have one of the best advocacy groups in the country, Windrush Against Sewage Pollution, which has done a fabulous job of turning the light on Thames Water and really recognising how dire the situation is. Thames Water now has £18 billion of debt and £1 billion in cashflow. It is in breach of its operating licences, but is allowed by this Government to operate with impunity. The sooner the company is put into special administration, the better.

Our constituency plays a key part in the defence of our country. We have the biggest airbase in the UK, at RAF Brize Norton just south of Carterton, and the nation's Defence Academy at Shrivenham in the south of the constituency. Since world war one, the women and men in my family have served our country: they have fought for the Army, the Navy, the RAF, the Fleet Air Arm and the SAS. They have been awarded one MBE, two Distinguished Service Crosses, three Distinguished Service Orders and a Victoria Cross for their courage. One of the DSOs and the VC were awarded for saving lives rather than taking them. That gives me a lot of respect for how the people in our forces serve us. At their best, the academy and our air force stand up for the British values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Here in this Chamber, we need to ensure that we also stand up for those values and do not sell weapons to dodgy regimes.

Today's motion is about Syria. I fully support it, because we need to get more humanitarian aid in there. Thirty years ago, I visited Syria and it was wonderful. After a chance meeting one morning, I was invited to a wedding feast in the evening and the hospitality was fabulous. Nine years ago, a two-year-old Syrian boy was washed up dead on a British beach. This country's grief was enormous: there was a nationwide outpouring. Almost by accident, my family ended up taking quite a few Syrian refugees. They stayed with us for over a year and we still stay in very close touch with them. That taught us that one key thing the Government could do is make it easy for their citizens to help refugees to integrate in our country and society. We really have not done that very well at all. The other thing it brought home to me is that when a Government fail their citizens, it can go very, very badly wrong. In our country, I think we are complacent about how unlikely some things are; that they will not happen and that things will not go wrong.

Another trigger that brought me into politics was Brexit. I started a business when I was 25. I built it, with colleagues, over 24 years. It ended up being a global business. We had nine offices around the world, with seven in Asia, and 100 people. That was through thick and thin, and by hanging on in there and trusting

people to get things done. But when Brexit hit and, beyond that, we were taken out of the single market and the customs union, my experience of business led me to think, "Holy cow, this is really bad news. This is disastrous for our economy. It will not sink us overnight, because we have a lot of things going for us, but it is a slow puncture." We see that today in our flat GDP figures, our flat investment figures and our chronically underfunded public services. I blame our previous Government for that, but I also look across the Chamber and I am shocked. What I see now is a new Government defending those disastrous Tory policies of being outside the single market and outside the customs union. I hear that we are pro-growth, but how does that add up? It does not make any sense. I really hope—I say this in a constructive spirit—that we find a way to get out of that hole pretty quickly. We owe it to our country to do so. So please, I would love the new Government's help on that.

The people of the Witney constituency put me here to listen, to learn—as anybody who is new in this Chamber knows, there is an enormous amount to learn—and to speak up for them, but they also put me here to do things. I still have to figure out how to get things done here, but I look forward to working with Members from all around the House to do that. To the people of Witney, I say "Thank you again for voting me in to represent you. I will do my very best."

6.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard). I thank him for his excellent maiden speech. I did not agree with everything—such as the Brexit stuff, but that is by the way—but I was very pleased to hear his contribution. I am also very pleased to see his very large family in the Gallery. You've been a busy boy, by the looks of it.

I would like to touch on a comment the hon. Gentleman made about the Syrian relocation scheme, which was introduced by the previous Government. In my constituency, there is a big town called Newtonards. We took in six families and they are still there today. The scheme really worked, because the people of Newtonards recognised that the people were desperate and needed help. That brought together all the organisations: churches of all denominations, together as one; the housing executive, with responsibility for housing; and voluntary and community groups. The refugees were displaced Christian families from Syria and, if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to speak about them briefly.

Before the election, I had occasion to meet some of those Syrian refugees. They now have jobs, have had children and have moved into houses. That has happened because the people of Strangford and Ards, like the people Witney and elsewhere, saw the need and came together and responded. That, for me, is one of the wonderful things about my constituency. So, I just wanted to make that comment to reinforce what the hon. Gentleman said about Witney in his maiden speech.

I welcome the Minister to his place and I welcome his commitment. I suspect we will be in many debates together, as this is a subject matter in which I have an interest, and I look forward to that. His colleagues on the Front Bench have had responsibility for similar subject matter and we have worked together on many things. I hope we will do the same.

Sanctions are important, because throughout Syria there are pockets of conflict where Christians continue to be caught in the crossfire. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, so this is a really important issue for me, as it is for many other Members. We speak up for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith, because that is what we believe in, so it is really important to put these issues on the record. In many cases, Christians are deliberately targeted. For example in Afrin, Turkish-backed troops are reported to be targeting Kurdish Christians. Christians are particularly endangered in the Idlib province, which is still controlled by Islamic militants. In the Al-Hasakah district in the north-east, Turkish military and Turkish-supported opposition forces are active. They always seem to pick the small ethnic and religious groups. They abuse human rights and the humanitarian aid, which is so important. I understand the difficulties that exist, but I ask the Minister whether it is possible to ensure that humanitarian aid does reach those small ethnic groups in Syria, especially those in the north and the Kurdish areas—to ensure, given the human rights abuses, religious persecution, murders, rapes and physical abuse, that the aid gets to the right people. Converts to Christianity are also at risk throughout the country, but their situation is especially dangerous in the north-west and the north-east.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) referred to drug abuse in Syria. I attend the prayer breakfast here when it is possible for me to do so; it takes place on Wednesdays, and I suspect that there will be one this Wednesday. A speaker from Syria came to address us at one of those events, and told us that drugs were rife in Syria, among all sections of people. That, he said, had been encouraged by the Russians, who seem to be involved in all sorts of illegal activities in that country as well.

It is important that we recognise the difficulties in Syria in general, but also recognise the ethnic and religious groups who particularly need humanitarian help. In the past, the UK has had a strong relationship with Syria, but I ask the Minister: what can we do to help those groups, apart from imposing sanctions? I fully support the sanctions and understand the reasons for them. I know that, if we are to address human rights abuses and maintain the support that we give to ethnic and religious groups in Syria, we need to combat the brutal violence that the Syrian Government are perpetrating against those people. My question to the Minister is a simple one: what more can we do to help Syrians who are suffering human rights abuses and subjected to persecution for their religious beliefs, and to help the women and children and give them hope? We in the House always wish to give hope and, if it is possible, Minister, I think we would all appreciate hearing your thoughts on how we are to do that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the Minister, may I please remind Members not to use the word “you”—that means me!—and, specifically, not to refer to colleagues by name.

I call the Minister to wind up the debate.

7.2 pm

Hamish Falconer: I thank Members for their contributions. Let me address some of the important questions that they have raised, particularly in relation to Captagon, chemical weapons, and whether we have achieved the right balance between sanctions and humanitarian aid. I will also deal briefly with some of the points raised about freedom of religious belief.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) for his maiden speech, and associate myself in particular with his comment about the Chamber being a confusing place for a newbie—and if it was me who made those mistakes, Madam Deputy Speaker, I apologise. We are closely monitoring the regime’s links with Captagon, as you will know—I am sorry; as the hon. Member will know. My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. In March 2024, we co-hosted a conference with Jordan and we are keeping the matter under close review. I should be happy to write to the hon. Member with further details, because it is of real concern. Also of concern, obviously, is the chemical weapons situation in Syria. Last week, I was pleased to meet the director general of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and to make a further voluntary contribution on Syria specifically in relation to the significant problems that it poses in respect of chemical weapons. As for the concern about getting the balance right—

Alicia Kearns: Would the Minister be kind enough to write to me with the details of that voluntary contribution, so that I understand fully what contribution was made?

Hamish Falconer: I should be happy to do so.

I can assure the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) that no assistance will be provided directly to the Government of Syria, and that we go to great lengths to ensure proper compliance with our sanctions regime. The hon. Member also referred to the strikes in Syria. The protracted conflict clearly poses risks of other regional tensions being played out, but we have made it clear to all parties that further escalation in the middle east must be avoided at all costs, and is in no one’s interests.

I understand and welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I will no doubt face each other across the aisle in debates on many issues, and I recognise his personal commitment to freedom of religious belief. We have provided, I believe, £14 million of assistance in respect of human rights monitoring in the conflict in Syria, I know how desperate some of the human rights issues are in the country, and we will continue to keep them under close review.

I hope and trust that the House will support the regulations, and I thank Members for that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2024, (SI, 2024, No. 833), dated 29 July 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 July, be approved.

Transport

7.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): I beg to move,

That the draft Renewable Transport Fuel Obligations (Sustainable Aviation Fuel) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 24 July, be approved.

I want to take a moment to pay tribute to my former constituent Ken Eastham, who died recently at the age of 96. He served the people of Blackley and Broughton in this House from 1979 to 1997. He knew me as a child, and was delighted that I became a Member of Parliament. He worked diligently on behalf of his constituents. I will remember him, his late wife Doris, with whom I kept in contact, and his family in my prayers tonight.

As a fuel that can be used in existing aircraft, sustainable aviation fuel, or SAF, is one of the most effective ways of starting to decarbonise flights. The greenhouse gas emissions associated with the use of SAF are 70% less than those from fossil jet fuel on a life-cycle basis. This Government recognise the urgency of the global climate challenge, and the opportunities that are available from leading on the development of these technologies. It is a core part of our mission to make the UK a clean energy superpower, and it is one of the many steps that we are taking to decarbonise aviation, which include our plans for airspace modernisation. The SAF mandate will support the decarbonisation of the aviation industry by creating demand for SAF in the UK. The scheme has been developed over several years, during which there have been two formal consultations and significant stakeholder consultation. In July this year, we confirmed the detail of the proposed SAF mandate set out in the statutory instrument, and that was received positively by stakeholders.

The SAF mandate is one of several Government initiatives to support the development, production and use of SAF in the UK. The advanced fuel fund, for example, is currently supporting 13 UK plants with £135 million of grant funding. Additionally, the Government are introducing a revenue support certainty mechanism Bill, which was included in the King's Speech and will support SAF producers who are seeking to invest in new plants in the UK. It will incentivise investment in UK SAF production, helping to drive growth across the UK, secure the supply of British-made SAF, and maintain the UK's position as a global leader.

Alongside the potential for SAF to reduce carbon emissions on a life-cycle basis—compared to that of traditional jet fuel—there are significant economic benefits associated with the development of a domestic SAF industry. Industry research estimates that such development could generate up to 60,000 new jobs by 2050, adding up to £10 billion gross value added per annum. That supports our growth mission to kick-start economic growth across the UK.

The introduction of a SAF mandate marks an important step forward for the decarbonisation of the aviation sector. It will provide a long-term incentive for SAF use in the UK by setting a guaranteed level of demand, demonstrating the UK's world-leading commitment to SAF uptake. It will also provide clarity for investors: a clear signal to develop SAF production facilities and more advanced SAF technologies in the UK and globally.

Crucially, the mandate could reduce aviation emissions by up to 2.7 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents in 2030, and by up to 6.3 megatonnes of CO₂ equivalents in 2040.

Decarbonising transport is a key focus for this Government. It is central to the delivery of the UK's cross-economy climate targets, and directly supports the Prime Minister's mission to accelerate our journey to net zero. Delivering greener transport is also one of the five priorities that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has set out for the Department. This statutory instrument will deliver on our manifesto pledge to secure the UK aviation industry's long-term future by promoting sustainable aviation fuels. It will impose an annual sustainable aviation fuel obligation on every company that supplies jet fuel over a certain threshold in a specified period. The SI will operate a tradeable certificate scheme, whereby the supplier of SAF is rewarded in proportion to its greenhouse gas emissions reduction.

To be eligible for certificates, the supplied SAF must meet strict sustainability criteria, including that it must be a residual waste or residue-derived biofuel, a recycled carbon fuel, a low-carbon hydrogen fuel or a power-to-liquid fuel. The certificates can be used to discharge a supplier's obligation or sold to other suppliers. If this statutory instrument is approved, the SAF mandate will take effect on 1 January 2025. The SAF mandate will require 2% of jet fuel to be made from sustainable sources in 2025, 10% in 2030 and 22% in 2040. It is one of the world's most ambitious frameworks to drive demand for SAF.

A successful and resilient SAF industry will need a range of technologies and feedstocks to meet increasing demand. The SAF mandate drives the diversity of technologies and feedstocks in two main ways. First, we will create space for more advanced fuels by setting a future cap on fuels that will be limited by feedstock supply. Fuels derived from segregated oils and fats are known as hydroprocessed esters and fatty acids. We recognise that HEFA will make an important contribution to meeting the SAF mandate, particularly in the early stages of the mandate. HEFA can contribute 100% of the SAF demand required under the mandate in 2025 and 2026. The cap will then gradually tighten, decreasing to 71% in 2030 and 35% in 2040. The mandate will still allow around 1 million tonnes of HEFA-derived SAF to be supplied each year in the UK from 2035.

Secondly, to accelerate the development of advanced fuels, a specific obligation on suppliers to supply power-to-liquid fuels will be introduced. Power-to-liquid fuels have a lower risk of feedstock competition and other negative environmental impacts. From 2028, the power-to-liquid obligation will be set at 0.2% of total jet fuel demand, increasing to 3.5% in 2040. Fuel suppliers will be able to meet their SAF mandate obligation in three ways: they can supply SAF and earn certificates, buy certificates from others who have supplied fuel, or pay a buy-out price. The buy-out mechanism will apply to both the main obligation and the power-to-liquid obligation, which will operate as a method of compliance if there is insufficient SAF supply in the market. This SI sets out the buy-out prices, which represent a significant incentive to supply SAF to the UK market. They are set at a level that encourages the supply of SAF over the use of the

buy-out and set a maximum cost for the scheme, thereby delivering a greenhouse gas emissions reduction at an acceptable cost.

As I have mentioned, for fuel to be eligible for certificates, it must align with strict sustainability criteria and be made from sustainable wastes or residues. SAF produced from food, feed or energy crops will not be allowed. Suppliers must therefore report information to the mandate administrator to demonstrate compliance with the sustainability criteria for each application. The mandate administrator will have the power to not issue certificates if sufficient evidence is not provided. It will also have the power to revoke certificates if inaccurate or fraudulent information is provided, and to issue civil penalties to suppliers for lack of compliance.

The information that fuel suppliers provide must be independently verified before suppliers can apply for SAF certificates. To ensure that the design of the SAF mandate reflects the latest technological and commercial developments on SAF, there will be continuous monitoring of trends, and formal reviews will be conducted and published every five years, with the first review carried out by 2030. To support fuel suppliers, the administration of the SAF mandate is closely aligned with the administration of the renewable transport fuels obligation, which currently obligates suppliers of road fuels in a very similar way.

The Government recognise that sectors such as aviation are vital for achieving economic growth, shaping the future of clean energy and delivering for our communities. The development of the SAF mandate, alongside other priorities such as modernising our airspace, is a key part of this Government's ambitious and pragmatic approach to decarbonising transport and promoting economic growth, ensuring that the UK continues to lead the way on SAF globally. I commend this order to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

7.16 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): In responding to this debate on the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligations (Sustainable Aviation Fuel) Order 2024, may I say at the outset that the transition to sustainable fuel is a topic that has had my interest for many years? Some may even say that I am very capable of becoming a complete bore on the subject, but I will not push the limits too far this evening. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) knows that all too well; we both served on the Transport Committee in the last Parliament. Our "Fuelling the Future" report championed sustainable and synthetic fuel, and I have put it into practice—in my case, on the road, rather than in the air, in a classic Land Rover powered by synthetic fuel—during my past two summer surgery tours. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

There is a clear and undeniable role for such fuels across all transport modes in our path to 2050. Aviation is possibly the most difficult to de-fossilise and decarbonise, but it is also ahead of the curve, because sustainable and wholly synthetic fuels are an innovation that enables everyone to continue doing what they want to do—flying off on holiday or to see family, going on a business trip

or general motoring—in a cleaner and eventually de-fossilised, carbon-neutral way. We are not reinventing the wheel, but reinventing the fuel.

I assure the House that the Opposition are not looking to oppose this statutory instrument or divide the House on it—quite the opposite, as it is a continuation of plans set out by the previous Government. The development of sustainable aviation fuel was one of six key measures in the last Government's jet zero strategy, which supported the growth of sustainable aviation fuel in our United Kingdom. The cost-benefit analysis produced by the Department for Transport before the general election suggested that the SAF industry could add more than £1.8 billion to the economy and create over 10,000 jobs in the country. A gradual transition to SAF is the correct way to go; we should require 2% of UK jet fuel to be made from sustainable sources in 2025, 10% in 2030 and 22% in 2040, and that should be incentivised through the award of tradeable certificates with a cash value. That said—it is rare that I make this comparison—the UK target for 2040 falls short of that set by the European Union, which is 34%.

The Conservative Government recognised that SAF may be more expensive than traditional jet fuel in the intermediate term. Our plan included a review mechanism to help manage prices and minimise the impact on ticket fares for passengers. My first question to the Minister is: can the Government reassure the House that the impact on passengers will be kept to a minimum, and can we ensure that they are not footing the bill? Provided that sufficient SAF is available, any increases in air fares as a result of SAF will fall well within the range of the usual fluctuations in prices that we see every year, and the previous Government had plans in place to prevent any major hikes. Can the Government confirm that they too will guarantee that there will be no major hikes in prices, so that we can transition to net zero in an affordable way, taking people along with us?

The Conservatives kick-started the UK SAF industry by allocating £135 million through our advanced fuels fund, which was funding 13 projects to reach completion and supporting our ambition to ensure that five plants were under construction by 2025. Will the Government provide an update on those projects, as they will be vital in helping us to move towards using sustainable fuel?

I urge the Minister to focus thoughts on how to ensure that the UK is a power hub for eSAF—to clarify, that is 100% synthetic aviation fuel—and to gently kick the tyres on whether we are progressing the technology as quickly as is humanly, financially and scientifically possible. We have significant players in this space in the UK, such as Zero Petroleum, which sits on the jet zero council and, indeed, holds a 2021 Guinness world record for "first aircraft powered by synthetic fuel". Over the summer, I visited Zero Petroleum's plant, where it produces engineering-level synthetic fuel, including aviation fuel, to hear about its progress and to better understand the obstacles in its way. It is essential that such innovators be empowered to grow, develop their fuels and provide green solutions and value to our economy.

Power-to-liquid SAF has a sub-mandate starting in 2028. We will reach 0.5% SAF by 2030 and 3.5% by 2040; that is slower and less ambitious than the European Union's figure of 10% by 2040. Some experts have said that this suggests that the UK has a more cautious approach to power-to-liquid, and that the United Kingdom's strategy

[Greg Smith]

focuses on monitoring progress under the mandate, and on us having the potential to revise targets depending on technological advances.

Where the SAF mandate, and the statutory instrument, could go further in future iterations is clear. According to the explanatory memorandum, if subsidised hydrogen is used to make eSAF, under the hydrogen production business model support scheme, SAF certificates cannot be claimed against the mandate. Without HPBM support, there is the risk that the cost of green hydrogen will be far too high for eSAF to be produced at a competitive price in the UK. Indeed, there is even the risk that the eSAF production cost will be above the eSAF mandate buy-out price. If the cost is above the buy-out price, that will mean that no UK eSAF plants will get built, so all the UK's eSAF demand will be fulfilled by foreign producers.

The HPBM is needed to bring down the cost below the buy-out price under the SAF mandate. Both support under the HPBM and the revenue certainty mechanism are needed for UK eSAF projects to be bankable—for example, credit or potentially subsidy stacking needs to be explicitly allowed. This SI is clearly supportive of the power-to-liquid pathway. However, it would be prudent for the Government to express an intent to financially support domestic eSAF technology developers, such as Zero Petroleum or OXCCU—as opposed to project integrators—in order to give a boost to this much needed industry in the UK, as well as helping the country to benefit from the vast export potential of the technology. That could be through dedicated power-to-liquid technology grants, such as fuel synthesis, direct air capture specifically for fuel, and/or equity funding—for example, through the UK Infrastructure Bank. A further anomaly is that the Aerospace Technology Institute, which is UK Government-funded, is not permitted to deploy funds to power-to-liquid technologies. I put it to the Minister that that should be corrected.

We can be a powerhouse in the United Kingdom for SAF. The new Government are right to continue with the path set by the previous Conservative Government, so we support the motion, but the potential for the future is huge, and in the spirit of getting this right, I urge the Minister to consider the points that I have outlined, and to supercharge our great country's role in this technology.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the next speaker, I remind Members that it is helpful for the Chair—not least me personally, but there will be other Deputy Speakers later—if you bob up and down. Even if I have your name on a list, it is helpful if you indicate that you wish to speak.

7.25 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I will not detain the House too long—[*Interruption.*] Hooray! I just want to make a couple of points. As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), indicated, we both served on the Transport Committee in the last Parliament, and the Committee did quite a detailed inquiry on the sustainability of fuels in all

sectors. We made several recommendations, and I do not believe that there is a cigarette paper—perhaps that is a non-PC term—between the two sides of the House on the issue, but I want to ask a couple of questions.

This subject is really complicated and is plagued with acronyms—HEFA, SAF, ATF, eSAF, HPBM, Jet Zero. I will not be tempted into aviation puns, but there are some important stats. As the Minister stated, estimates suggest that the sustainable aviation fuel industry could create up to 60,000 jobs by 2050—the shadow Minister said that there would perhaps be 10,000 new jobs, but that is in a longer timeframe. The shadow Minister also said that the SAF industry could contribute as much as £1 billion to the UK economy, but by 2050, it could contribute as much as £10 billion, so it is clearly a very important sector.

I am concerned about ensuring that sustainable aviation fuels under this mandate be required to meet the strictest sustainability standards. We must ensure that they are green fuels, and that there is a staged progression towards jet zero—we have heard what that is: 2% from 2025, 10% by 2030 and 22% by 2040—and we really must ensure that the greener fuels are responsibly sourced from the most sustainable locations, preferably in the United Kingdom. We had a debate last week about the launch of GB Energy and the importance of not exporting the jobs created through our efforts on decarbonisation. Will GB Energy play a role in some of these new technologies? We may well develop a hydrogen fuel cell that can produce green hydrogen much more cheaply, but in the meantime, to plug the gap, we must ensure that efforts are made to onshore as many of the jobs and benefits of this exciting opportunity as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

7.28 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I sense that there is a great deal of consensus across the House on this statutory instrument. There is consensus that the aviation sector is one of the hardest to decarbonise, and probably also that the new technology that is being proposed—SAF, in its different iterations—needs a great deal of technological knowledge. However, the principle of taking the first steps towards creating the SAF mandate—of the requirement for SAF to meet 2% of total jet fuel demand from 1 January, and of increasing that on a linear basis, to 10% by 2030 and to 22% by 2040—has no opposition, and we will absolutely support the Government in that effort.

Virgin Atlantic has already demonstrated that a plane can fly across the Atlantic on 100% SAF, but that was just one flight, and there are hundreds of flights every day. That is the challenge. I congratulate Virgin Atlantic on this groundbreaking achievement but we really need to see how industry, the Government and indeed everybody who is developing new technologies can produce sustainable aircraft fuels at the scale that is needed. This needs a great deal of investment.

We know that biofuels are not a long-term solution, as they compete with food production. SAF from waste, the next generation of SAF, is not a long-term solution either. It is obviously part of the solution, but as the shadow Minister has pointed out, the real challenge is

to get to the third generation SAFs—that is, synthetic fuels. We need to develop them as soon as possible, and they need a great deal of electricity. Whatever we say about this, direct air capture needs a great deal of electricity. Producing hydrogen in a sustainable way—that is, getting to green hydrogen—will also need a great deal of electricity. The crunch in all this is: where is all that renewable energy coming from, unless we are ultimately overproducing renewable energy? I believe that GB Energy will have a big say in this and will be crucial in developing all the renewable energy that will ultimately help us to decarbonise the aviation sector. This is really the challenge.

While I welcome the kick-start of a journey to net zero in aviation, the 10% to 22% mandate between 2030 and 2040 is a concern for the Liberal Democrats. We want to get to net zero by 2045, but having planes still running on 78% fossil fuels is just not good enough. The UK has the third largest aviation network in the world and the second largest aerospace manufacturing sector. Almost 1 million UK jobs are directly or indirectly supported by the aviation sector. The future of the aviation industry with SAF is obviously a wonderful opportunity and challenge. Making the right choices on SAF will ensure that the UK can continue to be a global leader, and I think that we are as one across the House in wanting this to happen in order to make the UK the global leader in this area.

It is only right that we take these steps, which support decarbonisation and also create the jobs that we need in the future. What is important is that the Government collaborate with the aviation fuel suppliers to ensure that this initiative really succeeds. I would like to hear a little more detail from the Minister about how the Government will work alongside suppliers to make this a long-term success.

As I have said, we welcome this, but there are other examples of what we can do in the meantime to decarbonise the sector. For example, we could ban short-haul domestic flights on journeys that can be done by rail in less than 2.5 hours. Such a ban already exists in France, so it would be good if the Government at least looked at this. The cost of flying must be linked to the environmental cost. It is ridiculous that I can, at least on some journeys, fly 100 miles to a European city for less than it costs me to go by train from Bath to London. The Liberal Democrats would focus on those who fly the most to reduce the unfair burden on households who fly only once or twice a year. Plus, we would impose a new super-tax on private jet flights and remove VAT exemptions for private, first-class and business-class flights.

To conclude, while we welcome today's introduction of the SAF mandate on 1 January, I urge the Government to review the targets set from 2030 to 2040 and to be more ambitious than what they are proposing today, so that by 2040 a much higher percentage of aviation fuel comes from sustainable aircraft fuel than the 22% that is currently proposed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Steve Race to make his maiden speech.

7.34 pm

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I take this opportunity to put on record my congratulations to you on your election and to pay

tribute to the staff of the entire House, who have worked so hard to make us all comfortable and able to get on with our jobs in this very complicated and complex place?

I pay tribute to those who made their maiden speeches in previous debates today, including my hon. Friends the Members for Makerfield (Josh Simons) and for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) on this side of the House, and the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) on the Liberal Democrats Benches. Given the hon. Member for Witney's reference to the wool trade, and given that Exeter's wealth in the middle ages was built on the wool trade, with the wool being brought down from Dartmoor, it is entirely possible that our two places had significant trading links in the past.

I am delighted to give this maiden speech as the new Member for Exeter—only the third in over half a century. In his own maiden speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer), who was here earlier today, stated that Lincoln was the oldest parliamentary seat in the country, established in 1265. Exeter, another great cathedral and university city, is by comparison a mere whippersnapper, with our seat being established in 1295.

Of the many Members who have represented Exeter in the subsequent seven centuries, my immediate predecessor, Sir Ben Bradshaw, needs little introduction. He served the country diligently throughout his 27 years as a Member, including a decade as a Minister. Elected in the 1997 Labour landslide, he gained early notice as one of the first out gay men ever to be elected to the Commons. After a notorious campaign, Exonians in their wisdom rightly and roundly rejected the outrageous homophobia of his opponent, and I and many others here today are among the many proud successors of his trailblazing role.

Ben loved our city, and the city took him to its heart. He was re-elected six further times, and even this July, despite no longer being the candidate, he was as active knocking on doors as he has ever been and as popular as ever. I might have been having a particularly difficult conversation on a doorstep, but the face of even the most hardened and sceptical voter would light up as Ben marched past in his canvassing uniform of cargo shorts and a check shirt, usually whistling the theme tune from "The Great Escape". Hugs were exchanged, selfies taken and heartfelt thanks expressed. He is almost universally accepted as having done Exeter proud. He has certainly been a friend and mentor to me over nearly two decades, and I thank him for that.

Ben took particular pride in the turnaround in Exeter's education under his watch, something to which, as MP, he made a huge contribution. By 2010, not only had every single state secondary school in Exeter been rebuilt, but a new leadership culture had been established where low attainment became unacceptable for our young people in every single part of the city. From having some of the worst state secondary schools in the country, Exeter secondary schools became some of the most improved, to which the most recent exceptional GCSE results bear testimony.

Exeter can now also boast one of the best further education colleges in the country—again, as our recent A-level and T-level results show—a vital but, in much of Britain, badly neglected element in providing wider opportunity for young people, including those who

[*Steve Race*]

choose alternative routes into work. As a school governor at Willowbrook primary school in Exeter, which serves one of our most economically deprived neighbourhoods, I also pay tribute from first-hand experience to the primary school teachers everywhere, who go above and beyond to give their young children the very best start in life.

This turnaround in Exeter's education system did not happen by accident. It took hard work, strong leadership and a collaborative culture. I would like to thank some of our leaders for everything they have done to give our young people better life chances in Exeter. They include Moira Marder at the Ted Wragg Trust, John Laramy at Exeter College and Molly Marlow at Willowbrook primary school. And of course, I want to pay tribute to the politicians, including former Devon county councillor Saxon Spence and the then Schools Minister Lord Adonis, who had the vision and the ability to deliver for Exeter.

Exeter's standing in learning goes beyond our schools system. Next year, the University of Exeter celebrates the 70th anniversary of its royal charter. In that time it has grown to be an outstanding institution, now with well over 30,000 students, but it builds on a tradition of an unbroken history of learning and academia stretching back at least to the 10th century. In Exeter cathedral rests the Exeter Book, an exquisite anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry and riddles that is still the largest known collection of Old English literature. It is recognised by UNESCO as one of the world's principal cultural artefacts, making Exeter a UNESCO city of literature.

Today, five of the world's top 21 climate scientists are UK based and all of them work for our globally renowned University of Exeter and the Met Office. Along with these two institutions and a growing ecosystem of businesses, Exeter is home to a large and ever-growing research and innovation base that is at the forefront of combating and mitigating the effects of climate change. It has become fashionable in some circles to denigrate our universities. I reject this entirely: they stand as beacons of intellectual excellence, the future success of our knowledge economy and the hope of wider educational opportunity for many people.

A good education is what helped me to become a Member of Parliament. I grew up in a council house with my mum, who spent her entire childhood in care, and I was the first in my family to go to university, so I pledge to work with all our education leaders to make sure that every young person in Exeter has the best education to help them to reach their potential. I want this Labour Government to deliver an equivalent leap forward in educational opportunity that their predecessors achieved for their time in 1945, 1964 and 1997.

In relation to this debate, Exeter University is home to the centre for future clean mobility, a partnership with business to develop low emission power systems for the aerospace and automotive sectors.

Our university is also world leading in genomics research. One of the main reasons I am in politics, as a Labour MP, is my sister. She was born when I was 10, and when she was a year old, she was diagnosed with Hurler syndrome, a rare genetic condition with no cure. Given a life expectancy of around five years, she finally died two days short of her 10th birthday. Much of her life was spent being cared for by the NHS and our local

children's hospice, and I will be eternally grateful for everything they did to give us so much more time with her than we expected.

At the time of my sister's birth, we understood genetic conditions but did not yet have the tools to help. The human genome was finally mapped just a year before she died, and that same year the first enzyme replacement therapy trials for her condition commenced in the UK. People born today with my sister's condition have a range of treatment options to help to make their life more comfortable and more fulfilling. I am particularly proud that Exeter University, in partnership with our local NHS trust, is at the forefront of this new wave of innovation.

We know that scientific research and innovation, whether on tackling climate change or in medical advances, will make the lives of people in this country and around the world better, but the Government have to recognise the vital role of our universities in economic growth and take advantage of the many opportunities for partnership with the NHS and across the public sector.

I know that this Government will understand the need to ensure that the UK continues to be at the forefront of scientific endeavour; and, as a pro-European, I believe that this is where Britain can make a huge contribution, working with our European friends and partners despite the tragedy of Brexit. I also ask that Ministers recognise that Exeter and the wider south-west have the talent and the institutions in which to invest to ensure that the UK remains at the cutting edge of UK and European innovation.

To succeed in these endeavours we also have to recognise that diversity is a strength, so building communities together on the principle of equality for everyone is vital to our success. In Exeter, the university and the local council play an important role in bringing people together. We have a thriving mosque and Muslim community. We have welcomed hundreds of Ukrainian and Hongkonger families over recent years, and we have large and growing Kurdish, Afghan and Nigerian communities, among others. Everyone brings something new and positive to our city, and I love nothing more than our annual Respect festival—a celebration of all our many communities—and our Pride parade. Inclusive Exeter, a community interest company, also plays an important role in bringing communities together. Exeter has become a true beacon of living well together.

It is a privilege and an honour to represent all the people of Exeter in this place, and I thank them for their vote of confidence in sending me here. I also thank my local activists and, of course, my family and friends, some of whom are in the Gallery, for all their support over the years. Without them I would not be here.

Exeter is a happy and optimistic place, and I hope to do it proud by serving it as conscientiously and as successfully as my distinguished predecessor.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Lee Dillon to make his maiden speech.

7.43 pm

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Exeter (Steve Race) on his maiden speech. My hometown of Thatcham was recorded in "The Guinness Book of Records" in 1990 as the country's

oldest continuously inhabited settlement, dating back some 3,000 years, although it is not quite a parliamentary seat. I pay my respects and tribute to his sister. I will also reference my sister and her reliance on the NHS.

I have been in the Chamber for many maiden speeches, and I have been impressed by them all. I congratulate them on sharing their passions and their local knowledge.

Newbury has returned a Member of Parliament since 1835 but, following the recent boundary changes, the constituency has lost the south bank of the Thames at Streatley and villages including Compton, West Ilsley and, pertinent to me, Hampstead Norris, the village of my grandparents, but I know they are safe in the stewardship of the hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey). However, we have retained our market towns of Newbury, Thatcham and Hungerford, alongside our beautiful villages of Lambourn, Peasemore, Inkpen, Hermitage, Chieveley and Cold Ash, where I went to primary school, to name but a few.

My constituency has a proud racing heritage, with Lambourn training some of the world's best racehorses and Newbury hosting one of the most prestigious horse races in the calendar. In Hungerford you can spend the afternoon antique shopping, and in Thatcham you can visit one of the largest inland reed beds in southern England, home to internationally important species.

We are also home to Vodafone, one of the global leaders in telecommunications. Xtrac in Thatcham supplies Formula 1 components, and Stryker is one of the world's leading medical technology companies. Away from cutting-edge technology, we also have: traditional craftsmanship at companies like Benchmark in Kintbury, which has been building and designing furniture for over 40 years; delightful country homes like Welford Park, which is home to "The Great British Bake Off"; and one of the most unique and beautiful theatres in the country, the Watermill at Bagnor.

And, of course, we are supported by many great charities: Greenham Common Trust, the Community Furniture Project, Eight Bells for Mental Health, local alms houses and, sadly, West Berkshire food bank and Newbury soup kitchen, which are needed to help a growing number of local residents. We also enjoy being surrounded by the area of outstanding natural beauty and 200 of the most precious chalk streams in the country.

In giving our maiden speeches, we all like to claim the beauty of our own area, but the author Bill Bryson has it spot on and may be able to stop future disagreements in the Chamber. In "The Road to Little Dribbling" he writes:

"There isn't a landscape in the world that is more artfully worked, more lovely to behold, more comfortable to be in than the countryside of Great Britain. It is the world's largest park, its most perfect accidental garden... All we have to do is look after it."

As a member of a political party with a proud heritage of standing up for the environment, I can assure hon. Members and my constituents that I will do my bit in this place to make sure that we do look after it. The decision that I believe will conclude this debate, given the cross-party support, will contribute to that ideal. I welcome the proposed changes.

As the Member for Newbury, I will uphold our traditions and protect our environment, because without them the Newbury constituency would not be what it

is—a balance between our environment, our traditions and our ability to innovate. These were also supported by my predecessors.

My immediate predecessor Laura Farris—strangely, I saw her in Central Lobby just before coming to the Chamber—delivered meaningful change in this House on sexual abuse and violence against women. She secured new laws on sexual violence in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and campaigned for tougher sentences for fatal domestic abuse. It is a further credit to her that the handover to me was as smooth as one could have hoped for. I wish Laura and her family all the best for the future, and I am sure she will continue to make a difference.

Richard Benyon, now Lord Benyon, served Newbury from 2005 to 2019 and has always been open and approachable, offering me some early advice when I was first elected. The Liberal Democrat David Rendel held the seat following a then record-breaking by-election—my party is rather good at those—from 1993 to 2005, and I ran with him in my home ward back in 2007, starting my electoral journey in West Berkshire.

All three predecessor cared deeply about Newbury and West Berkshire, as I do, too, but in new times there are new challenges. The Royal Berkshire hospital in Reading is in great need of replacement, and I look forward to a swift review of the new hospitals programme. The West Berkshire community hospital in Newbury is willing to do more so that diagnostic services can be provided locally. Without the NHS, my sister, Michelle, would not be here today. We need to cherish it, fund it and modernise it.

Despite our apparent wealth, we have pockets of poverty in Newbury. As I alluded to earlier, we are seeing an increase in the use of food banks and soup kitchens, the cost of living is still hurting and the proposed removal of the winter fuel allowance will compound that problem even more, despite our best efforts to get those who are entitled on to pension credits. House prices have soared and are now over 10 times the average salary, increasing demand for rented homes and adding pressure to housing waiting lists. The ability to have a warm and secure home is the foundation of a settled life. Children learn better, crime is lower and community cohesion is stronger when people have a settled community. I have worked in the social housing sector for the last 14 years. We must do more to deliver much needed homes for social rent.

I wish to conclude my speech by giving a small round of thanks. First, I thank my constituents for entrusting me with the honour of representing us here, and my local team for engaging in so many positive conversations on the door steps. I will endeavour to pay back their support with my deeds in the House. To my wife, Gemma, and my children, Oliver, James and Eleanor, I say thank you for your constant support and love that has allowed me to fulfil my dream of being the Member of Parliament for my home.

As a 16-year-old, I arranged a visit to Parliament. As we were being shown around the Chamber, we came past the Opposition Front Bench and a school friend cheekily sat down. I will not use parliamentary privilege to name him but he encouraged me to do the same. You will be pleased to hear that I declined, Madam Deputy Speaker. However, I said that I would sit there if I ever

[Mr Lee Dillon]

got elected. Well, 25 years later, I can now rightly take my place on the famous green Benches, so some dreams do come true.

As the son of a trade union official, I suspect I was always going to end up in a role where I could speak truth to power. I thank my father, Raymond, for instilling in me a sense of fairness and a belief that we can make change happen. My mother, Geraldine, and step-father, Colin, have supported me in every election I have stood in—I thank them for being there for me, keeping me honest and reminding me that it is nice to be important, but it is more important to be nice.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call James McMurdock to make his maiden speech.

7.52 pm

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): Thank you for the opportunity to address the House, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Members who have already spoken today, whether about falling foul of a wasp, what levers to pull—I can certainly empathise with that—or genuine courage, which we can all agree is absolutely necessary in this House. I thank them all for their words.

I start by thanking my predecessor, Stephen Metcalfe. I extend to him my gratitude, not least for his gentlemanly conduct throughout the campaign. He was gracious and dignified throughout, so it is easy to understand why he was, as far as a politician might expect, well liked by both MPs and constituents.

As we navigate life's milestones, it is natural to become philosophical. First and foremost, I am a husband and a father. While no professional achievement rivals the significance of personal events such as childbirth, being given the tremendous opportunity to serve our country and constituents, those in need and, if we do our jobs right, those whom we can help to avoid need altogether, comes close.

Speaking of fatherhood and childbirth, I draw hon. Members' attention to the tremendous work done by the Basildon university hospital, a place where miracles are commonplace. It is the place where my children were born and where, at one time or another, virtually everyone I love has been nursed back to health. I extend my heartfelt appreciation, admiration and respect to everyone who works there.

Since its inception as a constituency, people in South Basildon and East Thurrock had always voted blue, until they chose turquoise for the first time this July. To stand here today, I had to overcome a previous winning margin of 19,922. My own winning margin was less dominant: it was one of the tightest in the country, at just 98 votes. A swing that large is strong testament to the importance of listening to the people who put us here—all of them. That is a lesson I will not forget.

It goes without saying that I did not achieve that swing alone. Although I would like to think that my efforts, and those of my mother, who marched tirelessly next to me, handing out fliers in the baking June sun, earned me the 100 or so votes that got me over the line, the vast majority of that shift was carried by my colleagues and fellow Reform UK MPs. Their tireless championing

of the British people is something we should strive to emulate. I am extremely grateful to them. Although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) has said, this has ruined my life, I would not have it any other way.

I am eternally grateful to the good people of South Basildon and East Thurrock for sending me here. I intend to repay their trust by being open and honest, accessible and available. Never has it been more important to reconfirm that they have the right to a voice. It is my duty to hear it and protect their right to it. Having volunteered to stand as a parliamentary candidate on 4 May and having been invited to stand on 4 June, it is poetic that my seat was one of the last to be called in England, having to endure three counts. I might add that I won all three.

South Basildon and East Thurrock is a beautiful cross-section of this country. Situated just 30 miles east along the Thames from this beautiful Palace, it is an area of great natural diversity, joyfully combining the new with a rich and varied history, rural and industrial. South Basildon and East Thurrock boasts Europe's largest Amazon centre as well as glorious countryside and a prime location on the Thames. Many of our quaint villages have historical significance. Horndon-on-the-Hill is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 and one of the earliest uprisings that led to the peasants' revolt took place in Fobbing in 1381. Those uprisings marked the beginning of the end of serfdom. I am hopeful that the lessons taught to the ruling class then never need to be relearned.

How appropriate it is then that I have the privilege to stand and champion the core values that so many from my home hold dear: independence, equality of opportunity, upward social mobility, courage, long suffering, honesty and forgiveness. I am grateful to champion these qualities not just because I believe in them but because I have benefited from them. I was the first in my family to go to university. I have been shown forgiveness, given opportunity and climbed upwards. As the door was opened for me, I will help hold it open for others.

Most importantly, I must thank the wonderful women in my life: my late grandmother, a survivor of the blitz, who dedicated her life to her family, and my mother and sisters, whose strength, courage and determination inspires me. I have not written this down, but I had better mention my mother-in-law.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Very wise.

James McMurdock: To my wife, the mother of my children, who in a crowd of powerful women stands as the most glorious of all, you are my strength, my light and I love you with all my heart. To my father, brother and late grandfather, who fought for this land and spent his last years in peace in the constituency I now represent, and to the rest of my big, wonderful, eclectic family, thank you for mocking me so ruthlessly that my feet will never leave the ground.

If hon. Members will forgive me, I will now fulfil a dream nearly a quarter of a century in the making and end by misquoting the immortal words of Ali G—"R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Minister Mike Kane.

7.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): My goodness, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Congratulations on your election.

It has been a collegiate debate and I am grateful to all the hon. Members who have attended. I am grateful to the Opposition for their support. I say to the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) that I am looking forward to a picture on his social media of his SAF-powered Land Rover as he goes canvassing in his constituency—that is a must-see for us all.

Greg Smith: It is on its way.

Mike Kane: That is good news. The issue has had good cross-party support: when I was in opposition, I supported the Government on it.

In his maiden speech, the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), who is no longer in his place, thanked his predecessor, and I put on record my own tribute to the former Member for Witney; he undertook my current role with diligence, care and good humour and I wish him the best for the future.

Really, this legislation was set out by the Labour Government in 2003 in the aviation White Paper, “The Future of Air Transport”, in which we talked about the future of decarbonising aviation for the first time and about bringing in new sustainable fuels.

The shadow Minister had some specific questions. He asked about ticket prices. The Government recognise that SAF will be more expensive than traditional jet fuel, and it is right that the costs, as we have agreed in the past, are borne by the polluters—they will not be borne by the Government. I think the figures are that, by 2030, we expect tickets to be £4 more, which will be a 2% increase, and by 2040, we expect them to be £10 more, which will be a 5.5% increase. Before Mayor Burnham re-regulated the buses in Greater Manchester, a person could fly from Manchester airport to Dublin for £12.99 but they could not cross my conurbation on a bus and change transport providers for that amount of money. The shadow Minister was right to raise that point, but the increase is negligible.

The shadow Minister asked about the future fuel funds. We have seen some great things going on in private industry. In the north-west of England, we see Fulcrum BioEnergy producing sustainable aviation fuel at Ellesmere Port; we see Velocys in the north-east doing it at Immingham—I will come to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) in a minute—and Alpha Air doing it in Teesside. That is really good for the regeneration of post-industrial areas in parts of the north of England.

The shadow Minister talked about power to liquid. Yes, that is the future. In my speech, I set out some ambitious targets that we will have to meet to reduce the HEFA and improve power to liquid. He asked about our ambition. The UK does not want to be at a competitive disadvantage, which is why we have carefully balanced the HEFA cap in a way that recognises that HEFA is, currently, the only commercially available type of SAF, but that does not mean that we cannot go further and faster. I mentioned in my speech that there will be

reviews every five years, starting in 2030, so I hope that that satisfies the Opposition. I am grateful for their support in this area.

Let me turn now to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington. I always like to thank him for his contribution to transport debates; he is always in these debates. He is a stalwart when it comes to transport issues and he is really considered. He is right that there are too many anagrams in the field of sustainable aviation fuel. When the Conservatives were in power, they always talked about the bonfire of regulations. Perhaps we should start the bonfire of anagrams. My hon. Friend is not wrong, but we will have to see. He did say that these are good, sustainable industrial jobs in parts of the country where we need them. That is what SAF brings us and that is what the Government are trying to achieve.

I also thank the Liberal Democrats for their support on this issue. We are working with suppliers. I have had roundtable discussions with suppliers, particularly in opposition, and there is more to come in government. I have mentioned some of the companies that we were working with. This is an ambition, but I think that we can go further and faster. The figures that I gave are not set in stone. We should be promoting new technologies, because there are new technologies beyond this area. There is hydrogen battery power. When it comes to UK emissions, would it not be a great day when a Minister can say that there will be no carbon burned in any planes flying internally within the UK? That would be a great place to be.

As a north of England Member, however, I have to disagree with the idea that we should stop people flying because there is a train. That might be fine in an area where there are great, reliable train services, but I invite the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) to come on my Avanti train occasionally to see how unreliable and how poor that service is. We have to keep it in mind that, one day in the future, we will improve the rail services through our great British rail Bill, but at the moment we have absolutely no plans as a Government to stop people flying.

Mr Holden: I welcome the news that the Government are not going to pursue some form of new attack on short-haul planes. How glad we are to see that he is ignoring the Liberal Democrats on this issue.

Mike Kane: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but I am grateful for small mercies; the Liberal Democrats are supporting this move. I thank the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) for his time in the Department and in this role.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race), I say very well done. What an excellent and considered maiden speech he made. The personal testimony about his mother and his sister was really poignant. That speech will stand him in good stead. I was, however, a bit perturbed to hear about the former Member for Exeter, who was a passionate advocate of sustainable aviation in this place, whistling the tune to “The Great Escape” while out canvassing. A day probably does not go by in this place without one of us whistling “The Great Escape”. I was once taught by a sage old Whip that most MPs spend their whole life trying to get here and then the rest of the week trying to get away. I say to

[Mike Kane]

my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter again that that was a really great, well-considered maiden speech, and I wish him all the very best for his years ahead on these Benches.

That speech was followed by another very well-considered maiden speech from the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon). I do not think that anyone can beat the fact that he has the home of “The Great British Bake Off” in his constituency. That is amazing and no Member can beat that. When it comes to our beautiful chalk streams such as the ones in Newbury, or to our skies, it is our sacred mission to protect our environment for future generations. That is why we must keep talking about decarbonisation, which is what we are doing here tonight. I say very well done to the hon. Member and I wish him well for the future.

Finally, let me come to the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock). I, too, pay tribute to his predecessor, Stephen Metcalfe. My first speech in a Bill Committee up in a dusty corridor was terrible and he wrote me a note saying, “Really well done, Mike”, and I still have that note on my wall today. What a lovely, lovely man he is. I congratulate the hon. Member, who raised the subject of childbirth and early maternal care, which we should come back to a lot more in this House in the future; there is still a lot more to do in that area. He may be a latter-day Wat Tyler, with the peasants’ revolt quote, but on a personal level I hope that there is not a great rising of Reform. However, I wish the hon. Member the best for his career in this place.

I thank Members again for their consideration. For those questions where it has not been possible for me to provide a response today, I ask Members please to let me know and I will write to them. SAF presents a key opportunity to decarbonise UK aviation and secure a long-term future for the sector. These draft regulations demonstrate how we can capitalise on this opportunity. Mandating the use of SAF has the potential to generate significant greenhouse gas savings, and ultimately play a pivotal role in achieving net zero. I commend this order to the house.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Renewable Transport Fuel Obligations (Sustainable Aviation Fuel) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 24 July, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We now come to the next item of business. I call the Minister to move the motion.

Medicines

8.9 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I beg to move,

That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments Relating to Naloxone and Transfers of Functions) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 29 July, be approved.

I, too, congratulate you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker; it really is a pleasure to see you in the Chair.

The draft statutory instrument will amend the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 to expand access to naloxone: a lifesaving medication that reverses the effects of an overdose from opioid drugs. In addition, the SI will keep the regulations current by updating references to Public Health England and the Health and Social Care Board, following the dissolution of those bodies.

Hon. Members will no doubt know of the devastating impact of illicit drugs. Drugs destroy lives, tear families apart and make our streets less safe. Almost 3,000 people died of drug misuse in England in 2022—the highest number since records began in 1993. Drug misuse deaths have doubled over the past 10 years, and people die from drug misuse at a tragically young age, often in their 40s. Almost half of drug misuse deaths in 2022 involved opiates such as heroin.

These deaths are avoidable. Dedicated drug treatment services provide the path to recovery, and my Department is continuing to invest in improvements to local treatment services, which have faced significant cutbacks. We also know that over half the people struggling with opiate addiction are not engaged in treatment at all. That means that significant numbers of an incredibly vulnerable population are at increased risk of accidentally overdosing and dying.

People who experience addiction often have multiple complex needs, and we know that there is a strong link between addiction and deprivation. The rate of drug misuse deaths in the most deprived areas of England is almost three times higher than in the least deprived. Nearly a third of people in treatment for drug or alcohol problems reportedly have a disability, around one in six have a housing problem, and around 70% have a mental health treatment need. Tackling this issue supports the Government’s health mission, ensuring that people can live longer, happier lives, as well as our collective efforts to break down barriers to opportunity and create a fairer society.

Naloxone is a highly effective antidote against opiate overdose. It can be administered quickly and safely by anyone in an emergency, but currently exemptions in the human medicines regulations targeted at specific providers enable supply only by drug and alcohol treatment services, which limits the reach of this lifesaving medicine. Widening the statutory framework will mean that more services and professionals are able to supply this medication. That means easier access to it for people at risk and their loved ones. In short, the legislation will save lives. We are already seeing the benefits of professionals outside the health service, such as police officers, being able to administer naloxone. North Yorkshire police have already saved seven lives since April, when naloxone was rolled out across the force.

The draft instrument proposes two key UK-wide changes to existing regulations. First, it will expand the list of services and professionals named in the regulations who are able to give out naloxone without a prescription. In short, that means that professionals such as registered nurses and probation officers will be able to provide take-home supplies of naloxone where appropriate, should they wish to do so. Secondly, we propose to establish national registration services across the whole of the United Kingdom. That will enable all other services and professionals who are unable to be named in the legislation, including housing and homelessness services, to register and procure naloxone, subject to the passage of this statutory instrument. I look forward to working with colleagues across the devolved Governments on this important issue; I thank them for their work to date, and their continued support.

I reassure hon. Members that we are not compromising on safety with these changes. This is an extremely safe and effective measure, even when administered by a layperson with no prior experience. It has an effect only if the person has taken opioids, and is already widely used across the UK and internationally. We are taking steps to mitigate any, very limited, risks associated with wider access. We will provide updated guidance for services in scope, and set out robust requirements for training and safeguarding. The new powers are enabling but not mandatory. The intention is not to create new burdens for services, but to provide an opportunity for provision based on local need. I am confident in the support for the changes across sectors, which was evident in the responses to my Department's consultation earlier this year, over 90% of which were in support.

I recognise the long-standing calls for these changes among experts in this area. For instance, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs is an independent expert body that advises the Government on drug-related issues in the UK. In 2022, it published a review of naloxone implementation that called for more work to widen access to the medication. Similarly, Dame Carol Black's independent review of drugs also highlighted expansion as a vital harm-reduction measure. I pay tribute to Dame Carol for the work that she has done to drive improvements in drug treatment and recovery, and express my gratitude for her continued advice and expertise.

The importance of this work only continues to increase as time goes on. Hon. Members may be aware of the growing threat posed by synthetic opioids. These synthetic drugs, such as nitazenes and fentanyl, are often more potent and more deadly. The Government are taking a range of steps to prevent the rise of these dangerous drugs in the UK, but the availability of naloxone will be vital to our ability to respond and save lives.

Addiction is not a choice. It is often fuelled by wider issues, such as trauma and housing instability. This is a complex public health issue and must be tackled as such. We must change the narrative on addiction to one that is about preventing drug use, reducing harm and enabling recovery. The changes in the legislation are simple and low risk, but have the potential to save countless lives. On that basis, I commend the draft regulations to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

8.15 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is not often that one speaks in this place on changes to the law that will have the direct result of saving lives, but once the draft regulations pass, as I hope they will this evening, we expect them to save many peoples' lives. Today is a very special occasion. I do not say this to disparage people who work in the public health industry, but at its core, public health is not about flash or pizzazz; it is about incremental changes that make a real difference to people's lives, and have an ongoing, cumulative effect. Naloxone reverses the effects of opiate intoxication or overdose. It stops people from dying of accidental or deliberate overdoses of heroin and other opiate drugs, and opiate medications. It is quite literally a life-saving medication. Accordingly, it is one of the World Health Organisation's essential medications.

Tomorrow is World Suicide Prevention Day, so I am pleased that we are supporting and debating a motion to expand access to and administration of a vital antidote to opiate poisoning. Suicide is the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50. The stats vary, but while I was looking for the best and most recent data, I read that around three quarters of suicides each year are by men, and that suicide is the biggest killer of under-35s, impacting people from all walks of life. Many people are affected by such deaths. On World Suicide Prevention Day, we remember all those affected by suicide, and the work that we need to do to reduce suicides through public health measures and mental health service provision and treatment.

The use of highly addictive, lethal opiates, perhaps in combination with other substances, is often responsible for death as a consequence of drug misuse. In 2022, opioids were involved in 73% of drug misuse deaths in England, and 82% in Scotland. The last Government worked very hard to make progress on reversing the upward trend in drug poisoning deaths. Our 10-year, cross-departmental drugs strategy, published in 2022, aimed to prevent nearly 1,000 deaths in England by 2025. The naloxone roll-out has been highly effective in reducing drug misuse deaths by treating the effects of opiate overdoses.

There have been several regulatory changes that have expanded access in the last decade. Under the last Government, the Human Medicines Regulations were approved in 2012 to regulate the supply and use of drugs in the UK. That was followed by further amendments in 2015 and 2019, which focused on expanding access to naloxone for emergency use. The last Government then called on Dame Carol Black to lead an independent review of drugs policy. I thank Dame Carol for her work in this space, and indeed everyone working in this area, and those who contributed to our consultation earlier this year.

One of Dame Carol's key recommendations was that more individuals supporting drug users be able to access and give out naloxone. I am pleased that she welcomed the proposals to expand access to naloxone earlier this year. When we launched a consultation seeking views on improving naloxone access through named services and professionals, as required by the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021, there was strong support. There were over 300 responses, of which a third were from organisations and over 200 from individuals and professionals. More than 80% were supportive of improving

[Dr Ben Spencer]

access through named services and professionals, and of introducing registration with a naloxone supply co-ordinator.

I am pleased that Ministers have followed the direction of the previous Government in legislating to expand access to naloxone to more healthcare professionals and services, as they want and need it. That will build on work across the UK to reduce the scourge of drug-related deaths caused by opioids. On this legislation, the Government will have the support of His Majesty's loyal Opposition, and I encourage all colleagues from across the House to give it their backing.

Of course, I have a question for the Minister about training, which is critical. During my psychiatric training at medical school, a key thing instilled into my head about the use of naloxone is that it is a wonderful drug for the first 30 minutes, but then it starts to wear off. It has a short half-life—the time that it takes to leave the body—and then the effects of opiate overdose can start to reoccur, especially when we are talking about long-acting opiates, so although it fixes one problem, another problem is coming down the track. The patient must have adequate treatment quickly so that they do not suffer after effects when naloxone wears off. Can the Minister reassure me that for those involved in the administration of naloxone kits and aftercare—she mentioned families, and broader access for homelessness charities—the training component is as secure as possible, so that everything is done to avoid further drug-related deaths?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

8.21 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is good to hear consensus building across the House on naloxone because, as we have heard from other Members, it is a lifesaver. Since its roll-out in the UK, that highly effective antidote to opioid intoxication has doubtlessly saved hundreds of lives and prevented many more harmful overdoses, as organisations working in my community have known for some time.

On the day that my local branch of Cranstoun—the harm reduction charity—received its first supply of naloxone, staff members noticed that someone was overdosing in the reception area. They were still unpacking the pallet, but they were able to get access to the medicine, administer it, bring the person back around, and then help them further. Within an hour after that vital medication was received, it potentially saved a life in my borough. The local staff describe naloxone as a game changer. That is why I and the Liberal Democrats welcome this motion to expand access to that vital treatment.

Naloxone is not a difficult drug to administer: just 30 minutes of training can be enough to equip somebody to treat a person in need. Naloxone is also low-risk. The person administering it does not need to know for sure what drug someone is on: if they have taken an opioid, Naloxone will help; if they have taken something else, it will likely do no harm. The combination of it being easy and safe to use, along with its life-saving potential, means that, as long as the correct training is given, it is common sense to get naloxone into as many hands as

possible. That is particularly true given the frightening rise of the use of synthetic opioids, such as nitazenes, in our country. Most people are aware of the dangers of one particular opioid—heroin—but the crackdown on supply in Afghanistan means that a new synthetic alternative is rapidly taking its place in the market. Nitazenes are estimated to be anywhere between 30 and 500 times as potent as heroin. That is scary. If we do not act fast, we could be dealing with a national emergency comparable to the fentanyl crisis sweeping across the United States. Although I welcome the measures, this urgency means that I must encourage the Government to think quickly about going further.

The expanded roll-out of naloxone to police, prison, probation and youth justice services is welcome, but I ask the Minister to monitor the success of that expansion closely, to listen to the organisations on the ground, and to keep under review whether it is practical and desirable to expand access even further. For instance, some charities have called for taxi drivers and nightclub door staff to be able to access it if they want it. That would have to go alongside the appropriate training, so that they can recognise the effects wearing off in 30 minutes. If that training is in place, we should expand access further still. If we build the evidence base, we can be led by it and ensure that harm reduction measures reach as many people as possible.

Going further also means taking a whole-system approach to drugs policy—from appropriate sentencing to investment in addiction services and other specialist support for users. We have tried the tough talk and the war-on-drugs route in this country, but they have left us with one of Europe's worst drug-related death rates. If we transferred the departmental lead on drugs policy from the Home Office to the Department of Health and Social Care, it would go a long way towards our recognising that our drugs policy should ultimately be driven by the desire to reduce harm and save lives. The Liberal Democrats support this measure to improve access to naloxone, and I thank the Minister for bringing it forward.

8.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank all those who have made maiden speeches and valuable contributions today. As the Democratic Unionist party's health spokesperson, it is important that I speak on this issue to provide, as I always do, a Northern Ireland perspective for the Minister, the shadow Minister and all others who have spoken. The experience in Northern Ireland mirrors that in the rest of the United Kingdom. I add my support for what the Minister has brought forward—nobody in the Chamber is unable to see the benefits.

As Members will be aware, naloxone is a life-changer. The DUP has consistently supported the administration of naloxone by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the ambulance service. The legislation before us will extend that remit to further professions and staff, as well as confirm necessary rules around storage and training. I have talked to colleagues and friends back home about this issue. They were clear that we need to address it, and the provisions are a method of doing just that.

The figures around opioid-related death in Northern Ireland are absolutely heartbreaking: 154 drug-related deaths were registered in 2022. Although that represents

a reduction of 59 from the 213 drug-related deaths registered in 2021, I think we can all agree that that is simply too many deaths. We must do whatever we can do reduce that number and the impact on all those families who wish something was available to save lives. Since 2012, deaths from drug-related causes have risen by 98% in Northern Ireland. They have gone from 110 to a peak of 218 in 2020, and to 213 in 2021. The 2022 total of 154 represents a 40% increase on the number of drug deaths registered a decade ago. All those figures show a worrying trend.

My constituency gained new territory from South Down in the boundary changes prior to the last election. Drug-related activity there is incredibly worrying, and I am taking up those issues with community representatives and the PSNI. Of the 154 drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2022, over two thirds were of men. If we look at the number of deaths by age, the 25-to-34 and 35-to-44 age groups accounted together for 56% of all drug-related deaths in 2022. Each year, over half of drug-related deaths involve an opioid. In the years from 2020 to 2022, the death certificates for an average of 118 drug-related deaths mentioned an opioid.

The Minister mentioned homelessness. The provincial press back home—I think it was a newsletter that I read before I left this morning—mentions an increase in the number of homeless people in Northern Ireland. We have never before experienced such figures in all these years. The Minister is right to underline that issue, because it is not just happening in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Glasgow or Cardiff; it is happening everywhere. It is happening in Northern Ireland. The numbers of people looking for properties and accommodation in my constituency are at some of the highest levels I have ever seen, in all my years as an elected representative—as a councillor, as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly and latterly as a Member of Parliament.

The need for the appropriate use and storage of this medication, which can bring people back from the brink and hopefully give them a chance of a normal life, is all too clear. I also ask the Minister to outline whether, within the legislative process, there is any protection for public health staff. That is very important; I say that respectfully, because I know how important it is for the staff I speak to back home that they receive protection from legal liability for the administration of naloxone. We need to ensure that staff do not fear stepping in and that they fully understand that their intentions to do good in the circumstances will come with a cloak of protection. I ask that for the sake of the people I represent; I know that the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) will speak shortly, with his vast knowledge of health issues, and will probably reiterate the same point.

It is a terrible thing to understand, but whenever I speak to medical personnel, they say that there must be no hesitancy about stepping forward for fear of repercussions. Many people wait to see whether someone else will step forward—not because they lack confidence in their ability or because of a mentality that they are off the clock and about to go home, but because of a deep fear that if their help is not successful, they will face repercussions. The situation needs to be clarified for the workers allowed to administer the drug, who must always be protected while administering it.

I very much welcome the Minister's proposals, and I look forward to the House's endorsement of the draft regulations. There has been magnanimous support for them from the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean), as I am sure there will be from the hon. Member for South Antrim and from other Members who contribute. This is the right thing to do. Let's do it. I look forward to the Minister's response.

8.32 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Alongside hon. Members who have spoken on behalf of other parties, I welcome the changes. Naloxone saves lives: it brings people back from one of the most final and, in many cases, fatal mistakes they can make.

This is a really important change to make, but I hope that the regulations will be kept more closely and continuously under review, rather than us just coming back to the topic in two years' time, as is mandated. Drugs policy must be evidence-led. As we see the benefits, hopefully quickly, of wider access and of more people having naloxone available in their work, it might be a good idea to see whether we can widen access any further.

I have been reading the careful, evidence-based and considered responses from a range of different charities, including Release. It seems that there are quite a few groups of workers who ought to be able to use the first route—the expanded definition of workers who can easily access and use the drug—rather than the second route, under which they access it not directly but via a separately accredited provider of naloxone. As Release says, one of the simpler ways to achieve that might be to make it a pharmacy-available drug rather than a prescription drug, with some exceptions, as we have now.

I do not want to say, "Don't do this"; I am saying, "Do it, then review it and go further if you can." Many groups of workers will have the experience of unexpectedly meeting people who are going through overdose more often than others will in their daily work. There are now also more people working with those who will unexpectedly be going through overdose because of the wider prevalence of synthetic opioids and the other routes to becoming a victim of opioid overdose. They include student welfare workers, youth workers who are not necessarily involved in youth justice, local councillors potentially, night-time venue staff, transport workers, who are not currently on the list, street cleaners and park workers. Once we see the benefits of wider groups being able to access naloxone easily, it may become obvious that some of these other groups ought to be trained and given simple access—potentially through pharmacies to anyone who asks.

This is not to quibble. I am obviously restating quite a lot of what was said in the consultation. I hope that we continue to look at the evidence and expand this as quickly as possible. Every life that we could save, we should save. The harm that could be done is minimal in comparison.

8.35 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Minister for bringing this statutory instrument to the House. As I think all hon. Members have said, naloxone has proven itself time and again to be the lifesaving

[Robin Swann]

drug that reverses the effect of a devastating opioid overdose. That is especially important because opioid-related deaths now make up the largest proportion of deaths from drug misuse across the UK; in Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, they represent over 50%.

The purpose of these amendments, which I fully supported when I was Minister of Health in Northern Ireland, is to increase the number of services, professionals and organisations that can supply naloxone without prescription or even a written instruction. In June 2021, when I was in post in my Department, the then Government agreed to a UK-wide public consultation on the proposed changes to the Human Medicines Regulations 2012, which sought views on the viability of proposals to widen access to naloxone by expanding the list of services and individuals who can give it out without a prescription or a written instruction.

I support the contribution from the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry). We need to keep the matter continually under review, with additional training to ensure that we can get naloxone into as many people's hands as possible, so that it can be administered at the right point at the right time.

I thought at the time, and I still think today, that these changes are not just perfectly sensible; they are a small legislative step that will have big, real and life-changing consequences. I am glad to see that they have received support across the House. Thankfully, the consultation indicated strong support for each of the proposals, including from those who responded solely from the Northern Ireland perspective. The evidence is clear: countless lives have been saved as a result of naloxone. I am confident that today's changes will help to prevent more people who use drugs from sadly losing their lives to that use.

8.38 pm

Karin Smyth: This evening, I am standing in for my hon. Friend the public health Minister, who could not be here. I might offer to stand in again, such has been the rare outbreak of unanimity across this House. I know from my own experience in the sector that that is often the case with public health measures, as so much work is done in the background, and there is broad agreement on the need for prevention and the great work that has been done before. I thank Members, particularly the Opposition spokespeople, for their support this evening and their comments, which are testament to the work done by officials and by the previous Administration to get us to this point. The consultation was very well received.

I support the comments of the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), about recognising World Suicide Prevention Day. Suicide, particularly among men, is something that has affected most families—most of us, I think—and it has certainly affected many people in this House, so the hon. Member is right to raise those issues. He asked about training, and I can confirm that training and data reporting requirements will be attached to this measure. That training will be required to meet some broad objectives, including the safe administration of naloxone,

safe storage, and how to train someone else to handle and administer it safely. Training on its use is already well established in most parts of the country alongside naloxone provision, and each product has its own established training set out by the manufacturer. I have heard the professional points that the hon. Member has raised, and if he has any further requirements, my hon. Friend the public health Minister would be happy to write to him.

Other excellent points were made about keeping this issue under review, which we absolutely will be doing. The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) made her points well, and they are now on the record. The Government will be looking to work on our prevention strategy across all Departments—including the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Education—to ensure that we take a preventive, public health-led approach to this issue. I also thank the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann), who has brought his expertise in Northern Ireland into this House for this debate. I am sure this issue will come back before the House in the future.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution I asked a question—which the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) has reminded me of—about ensuring that medical staff who have the expertise to administer naloxone, but do so outside of their job, are covered and that there is no comeback against them. Could the Minister answer that question?

Karin Smyth: I understand that there are some concerns about that issue, and we will make sure that the hon. Member receives a full answer from my hon. Friend the public health Minister.

In short, these changes will widen access to life-saving medicine. I am sure hon. Members will agree that any death from an illicit drug is tragic and preventable, so I am pleased that we are taking this step and that we have the support of the House this evening for reducing drug-related deaths. On that basis, I hope hon. Members will join me in supporting these important regulatory changes, which I commend to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments Relating to Naloxone and Transfers of Functions) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 29 July, be approved.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last Thursday, during questions to the Leader of the House on the statement of business, I asked a question about BTecs in relation to colleges. Although it is registered in the Register of Members' Financial Interests that I am a governor of two colleges, I failed to draw the House's attention to that fact before asking my question. The two colleges that I am a governor of are affected by the answer, so I take this opportunity to place that on the record, and offer my unreserved apology to the House accordingly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and his clarification. I am sure the record will stand amended and corrected.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That at today's sitting the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Lucy Powell relating to the Modernisation Committee not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on that Motion may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Modernisation Committee

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That—

(1) Mike Amesbury, Mr Alex Barros-Curtis, Markus Campbell-Savours, Wendy Chamberlain, Sir Christopher Chope, Sarah Coombes, Chris Elmore, Kirith Entwistle, Paulette Hamilton, Marie Goldman, Joy Morrissey, Chris Philp, Jo Platt and Lucy Powell shall be members of the Modernisation Committee; and

(2) Lucy Powell shall be the Chair of the Committee.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

8.43 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am surprised that the Leader of the House did not speak to this motion. Obviously the House needs a Modernisation Committee, and obviously there is a great deal of work to be done by that Committee—there are many things we could modernise, including the voting and the hours, which the Committee will have to draw attention to.

My question to the Leader of the House is this. There is a group of five colleagues who were elected independently to Parliament for the first time. I am not seeking a job, by the way—I am not seeking to be on the Committee. However, I do think that the knowledge and experience that is brought to bear in this House by people who have come here through an abnormal route—that is, not through party machinery—could bring a great deal of value to the work of the Committee and help to inform its work. Is the Leader of the House prepared to consider changing the format of the Committee to include representatives of all groupings in the House, so that they can all help to make it work in a more modern and efficient way, and so that our time is better used than—in my experience—by spending hours and hours going through the Division Lobby when we could quite easily vote electronically, for example?

8.44 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell):

I thank the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for those points. I am sure he and I share many of the same frustrations, which is one reason we are establishing the Modernisation Committee. He may not be aware that the substantive motion establishing the Modernisation Committee was considered at length during several hours of debate before the recess. The motion before us is about the membership of that Committee, the names having been nominated by the party they represent.

In the debate before the recess, I said very clearly that I want the Committee to fully engage with all the parties and all the groupings in the House. It has not been possible to do more, because of the maths of the situation. For example, how would we pick which smaller party was represented on that Committee through a formal membership? However, both in the Chamber at this Dispatch Box and subsequently in writing, I have made it absolutely clear that the Modernisation Committee will meaningfully and continually, on an ongoing basis, engage with the smaller parties across this House. As the right hon. Gentleman says, their input will be vital to its work. I think that is the best way to represent all the different smaller parties and their very differing views about some of these issues.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for what she has said about inclusion. That is welcome of course, but it seems to me that an even better form of inclusion of the views of all parties in the House would be through membership of the Committee so that they are at every meeting, rather than dependent on the generosity or largesse of the Committee as a whole to invite them to give evidence.

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman again for that, but this is a balance. The membership make-up of the Committee reflects that of all Select Committees of this House, and to achieve a proportion where one place would be available for a smaller party would mean a very big Committee indeed—even then, only one smaller party would be represented and not all. My approach will be to make sure that the smaller parties are regularly invited into the Committee, are regularly engaged and are regularly asked for their thoughts ahead of and during inquiries. That is a more meaningful way to collate all the views of the different parties and groupings in this place, given how the membership of the Committee has to come about.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to follow on from what the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said, and to raise a specific query about my own party, the DUP. We have five Members, while there are other single Members from Northern Ireland as well, and there is a big interest in, for example, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I do not expect an answer from the Leader of the House straightaway—I am not putting her on the spot—but I am very keen to hear her thoughts on the best way to do this. With our deep interest in Northern Ireland affairs, is it the intention of the Government, ever mindful of the statistical and numerical change there has been in this Chamber, to ensure that our party has representation to reflect that?

Lucy Powell: It has been the long-established practice, particularly on the Committees that relate to the devolved nations of the UK, that there is representation from all the parties that have been elected from that area. I think that has been a long-standing tradition, and I do not think there is any intention to change that at this stage.

Question put and agreed to.

PETITION

Helme Chase Maternity Unit

8.49 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 2,200 of my constituents on, and indeed against, the temporary closure of Helme Chase maternity unit at Westmorland general hospital. This is the third such temporary closure in five years of our maternity unit, and over the past 20 years we have seen a 90% reduction in the number of births at Helme Chase, due to the steady erosion of that vital and much loved unit. We are determined to reverse that and see a renewed, properly resourced and safe maternity unit for Westmorland's mums and their babies. The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Helme Chase Maternity Unit has been underfunded by the Morecambe Bay NHS Hospitals Trust; further declares that responsibility for this falls upon previous Conservative Government's cuts to rural health services; further notes that sufficient money and resources from the Government to fully staff Helme Chase would stop the threat of permanent closure to this local maternity unit from closure.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider Helme Chase Maternity Unit's resource needs when providing funding to Morecambe Bay NHS Hospitals Trust.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003006]

Housing: Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

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

8.50 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to raise the rather grave issue of providing affordable housing in the housing emergency-ridden communities of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. I am grateful to those engaged in business earlier this evening who have permitted us a little extra time to explore the issue. Perhaps that was done for good reason, so that the grave and important issues of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly could be properly and fully debated. I welcome the Minister to his place. Indeed, Liberal Democrat Members warmly welcome him and fully take on board the sincerity, intensity and determination of the Government to address the serious housing problems that exist across the country, and the housing emergencies that exist in many communities as well as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

I should also declare an interest. During my nine-year sabbatical from this House I went back to my profession as the chief executive of a registered provider—a housing charity—working at the front line on predevelopment work and delivering affordable homes for local people. It is a challenging environment, and because of the man-made—or man and woman-made—nature of the regulatory environment in which professionals operate, and the topographical challenges that we face in places such as Cornwall, it is a little like trying to push boulders up a steep slope. I hope the Minister will take into account that if measures can be taken to improve the availability of opportunities for those who are ticking all the right boxes to deliver genuinely in-perpetuity affordable homes, which are desperately needed in our communities, the Government will do that.

This is not my maiden speech, and after having taken a sabbatical—perhaps it was an enforced sabbatical, but it was one I enjoyed—away from the Chamber for so long, I would in normal circumstances praise my predecessor. We did not share much in the way of political agreement, but he worked hard for the constituency and achieved a great deal. Indeed, Mr Derek Thomas strived on a large number of projects, and I hope that I will reflect the efforts he made to ensure that those projects are delivered during my time in this House.

Because it is not my maiden speech, I therefore do not need to remind the House, as I did on 22 May 1997, that my constituency is the most beautiful and most remarkable place in the country, occupied by the most beautiful, remarkable people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On that point, will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew George: Am I giving way on “beautiful” or “remarkable”?

Jim Shannon: On both.

Andrew George: Okay, on both points.

Jim Shannon: First, I commend the hon. Member on securing the debate. It is good to see him back in his place. He brought much to the Chamber when he was here before, and I was fortunate to share some time with

him in the Chamber. We have many things in common. The first is that we have beautiful constituencies, and the second is our concern about affordable housing and its accessibility. Does he welcome the Government’s manifesto pledge to increase housing? In my area, the housing lists are massive. Does he agree that when it comes to the Government’s policy, it must first be better streamlined planning? Secondly, they should allocate funding to getting families into homes. Thirdly, does he agree that we need a strategy and a programme motivated and driven by Westminster for all the regions of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, because, as I always say, we can do it better together?

Andrew George: The hon. Member anticipates many of the subjects that I will be coming on to, which are about the delivery and streamlining of planning and so on.

Part of my background is not only in the delivery of housing through a community land trust and the charitable housing sector, but also in my volunteering. For many years, I was involved in Penzance street food project and was working at the frontline addressing and speaking to people who were suffering from the most severe housing problems in the country. Indeed, in Cornwall we often have to repeat that although people come and have enjoyable holidays, as I know the Minister did, beneath that veneer are extremely severe housing problems and severe and exceptional levels of homelessness, which perhaps are beyond the vision of those who come and enjoy our beautiful beaches, our beautiful environment and our wall-to-wall sunshine.

I have given the Minister advance notice of some of the subjects I intend to cover, but one is to probe a little harder on the Government’s intention to raise house building targets and to challenge how we can properly ensure that if we are to build more homes, that will address need, rather than developers’ greed. I will come back to that in a moment. Under the surface—I think a lot of people are not fully aware of this—the public purse is making a major contribution to the injustices going on in the housing sector; in that multi millions of pounds in public money are going into the pockets of holiday home owners, especially through various tax loopholes and covid aid grants and so on. That clearly is driving the sector in the opposite direction to the one in which it should be going.

By way of background, Cornwall has high levels of housing need. The latest Homechoice register is 20,332, but that is after the annual administrative process of removing people who have not been active on the register for the previous year. The month before that, the register was 27,000, so the numbers oscillate. From my experience of undertaking housing need surveys across many communities in Cornwall, the numbers often underplay the significant level of unexpressed housing need. We often find that the level of need in most communities is at least double what is recorded on the Homechoice register, because many people think it is a waste of time putting their names on it, because they have little chance of ever getting a home.

Of course, every location has housing problems of one type or another—other places experience similar problems—but in Cornwall we face a rather unique combination. For example, just 12.8% of our housing

[Andrew George]

stock is social housing against a national average of 17.1%, and although 20% or thereabouts of the housing stock is privately rented—that is about the national average—it is an extremely vulnerable sector for people to find themselves in. Particularly in recent years, a large proportion of families in that sector have found themselves on the verge of being evicted to make way for yet more holiday lets.

Housing completions have been good. We have an effective register and a housing association sector that is delivering well, and indeed Cornwall is one of the best local authority areas in delivering numbers, but it achieves that as one of the larger local authorities, so it is bound to be up at that end of the league.

My first substantive point for the Minister is about the Government's stated intentions on house building targets. I fully endorse and support the Government's intention to deliver in order to meet housing need, but, as I said to the Deputy Prime Minister when the announcement was made in July, Cornwall shows how simply having house building targets does not work.

Cornwall is one of the fastest growing places in the United Kingdom, having almost trebled its housing stock in the last 60 years—I have been living there through most of those years—and yet at the end of all that the housing problems have got worse. I am not saying that it would be better if we had not built any houses, but simply setting very high housing targets in itself does not address housing needs. The two-dimensional view of housing being somehow a simple relationship between supply and demand in which equilibrium will be found and prices will therefore reflect what local wages can afford has never been the case in Cornwall. That reflects, in effect, a sub-London housing market, with house prices having been significantly inflated by people and property investors buying second and holiday homes.

In the present local plan for Cornwall, covering 2010 to 2030, the house building target is 52,500. The Government propose to increase those projections under their new formula from 2,707 properties per annum to 4,454. I urge the Minister to allow places such as Cornwall to be granted devolved powers to vary the way in which we achieve what needs to be done in our local environment: not simply to give us house building figures but to set targets to reduce housing need. After all, house building targets are a means to an end—the end is to meet the housing need—and if we have built the homes but that has not achieved the purpose, we must ask ourselves: are we going about it in the right way?

The Government's new standard method has a different starting point from the old method. It is based on a two-step process of a 0.8% annual uplift on existing housing stock, plus a further uplift for the affordability gap. The problem with that approach is that, in places such as Cornwall, it bakes in demand for second and holiday homes, because that has to be included in those overall figures. That was a problem in the previous plan, when we had our local plan projections rejected and the inspector wrote in much higher figures, saying that we had to increase the numbers to 52,500—more than another 5,000 homes—in order to address, as they put it, “the growing demand for second homes in Cornwall.” We have high and growing demand for affordable homes—that should be baked into the figures.

We should have a mechanism by which we can deliver those homes, because the way in which the system works is that we get all the second and investment properties—the developers are very pleased to do those, but they are not so keen to deliver the genuinely affordable homes, which are the ones that we need. There is a simplistic view that there is equilibrium between supply and demand, and there is a presupposition that developers will release properties in the market when the Government's policy achieves its stated intention of reducing house prices in that locality. We found that they only release them at times of housing inflation, so that is simply not the case.

In my experience at the development end, trying to deliver the affordable homes that local people need, the policy is counterproductive because if the number of homes announced in the local plan increases, the hope value of land adjoining every single community in Cornwall goes through the roof. If a local housing charity goes there and says, “I would like to look at your land and build some affordable homes on it,” the developer will not talk to them. They will wait for the lottery win when they get the full open market development value on that land, which is significantly greater than what a local charity can offer. I urge the Minister to have a conversation with those who are trying to deliver the products on the ground, to set targets to reduce need rather than feed developers' greed, because that is what housing targets do in places such as Cornwall—elsewhere they might have a different impact. Again, I ask the Minister to come to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly and see what it is like. I am sure that all the local MPs, who are all champions for their own localities, will be fighting hard to address these issues.

A further point I wish to make is on the rural exceptions policy, as I used that tool when working in the sector on a regular basis, and I have raised it with the Minister already. It works well; since the 1990s when it was introduced, it has been very effective in delivering affordable homes on land that otherwise would not get planning permission. All I would say to the Minister is that we should look at ways in which we can expand and grow development on rural exception sites. In Cornwall we are doing very well; we deliver 50% of what is delivered on rural exception sites across the whole of England. About 20% or 30% of delivery in Cornwall is through rural exception sites. What the local authority has done, and what we as a charity sector campaigned for it to do, is extend the entitlement to deliver rural exception developments from the smaller villages to the edge of towns. It may sound counterintuitive, but one of the best ways of delivering affordable homes is to draw the development boundary very tight around a local community and to use rural exception as a way of ensuring that we keep the development land values low and deliver genuinely affordable homes.

The other thing I urge the Minister to do, perhaps to correct the mistake made by Cornwall some 15 years ago, is not to allow cross-subsidy on rural exception sites. That has created a slippery slope where more and more landowners and private developers find ways around normal planning procedure and use rural exception sites as a Trojan horse to crowbar in far many more unaffordable homes on those sites than would otherwise be the case if we stuck to the principle of the policy itself.

Against that, there is a very significant challenge of construction industry inflation, which is affecting Cornwall as it is many other places. That has caused a lot of developments in places all around Cornwall to be stalled, as the cost-to-value ratios have resulted in the unviability of many projects. I urge the Minister to look—I am sure he is—at Homes England's affordable housing programme. While it is looking to the next five to 10 years, the current programme up to 2026 needs a further injection to address the current difficulties that many developments face.

I said that I would address housing injustice. I am conscious of time and I know other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will be brief. When I was first elected, in 1997, the Conservatives had just introduced the 50% council tax discount for second homes. I campaigned against that at the time, and was grateful to Chris Mullin and the late Michael Meacher for being receptive to the arguments to remove the 50% council tax discount. However, in 2012, the Conservatives then introduced another loophole, which allowed second home owners to flip their properties from being registered as second homes for council tax to being registered for business rates as a holiday let, if they could demonstrate that the property was available for 140 nights a year. They did not need to let it, but it had to be available for 140 nights a year as a holiday let. Then they could apply for small business rate relief and pay nothing at all.

We have ended up with a situation where all that has to be covered by the Treasury. Initially, in 2012, when I first blew the whistle on it as an MP, that resulted in £6.5 million going each year to holiday homeowners in places such as Cornwall. Within a couple of years, that had doubled. There has been an industrial-level movement of properties from council tax to business rates. When covid happened, they were all entitled to a covid grant as well, on top of that. As a result of that, the furnished holiday lettings and other loopholes, in Cornwall alone over 10 years we ended up with over £500 million of taxpayers' money—that is our money—going into the pockets of holiday homeowners, at a time when only half that amount was going into housing associations to deliver affordable homes. I urge the Minister to work with his Treasury colleagues to close those loopholes and to find far better ways of using that money. If, as the Prime Minister rightly says, those with the broadest shoulders should bear the greatest burden, this is an area where that burden should be borne by the people who can afford extra properties and property investment in holiday and second homes. That is not, in my view, an appropriate way for us ever to spend public money.

I said to the Minister earlier that I wanted briefly to mention the Isles of Scilly, and I hope that he will come and visit the area. Many people find it surprising that it is currently experiencing depopulation, which is largely driven by the lack of affordable housing. Here I declare an interest, as one who has been working in the sector. Our charity had been working with the council on a project for which we had planning permission, and everything else, to deliver 12 self-build affordable homes for local families. Those homes were desperately needed—I believe that only eight homes have been built on the Isles in the last 10 years—but the construction costs were extremely high. It costs three times as much to build a home there as it does to build one on the mainland. Moreover, the project did not meet the requirements of Homes England in relation to subsidies.

I urge the Minister to have a look at the very special environment that exists on the Isles of Scilly, and to address its housing needs. It is 28 miles from the mainland coast, and it should not be said that members of its community can commute, because they simply cannot do so. I also urge the Minister to consider the community-led homes sector. If we want to change the whole narrative and the way in which communities operate, we should give people the power to start representing themselves and local housing needs through, for instance, community land trusts and co-housing communities. The last Government had a flirtation with that sector and gave it some support, but then withdrew it. However, this work has started, and I think that more can happen to deliver more. If communities have local land trusts or local housing working parties, that is far better than allowing the nimbys to take over and start driving the development process.

Let me also encourage the Minister to consider the issue of discounted sale homes. Before I worked in a community land trust I was a sceptic, but I have to say that I am a convert to that method as one of the additional mechanisms to provide intermediate housing. I believe that it would be a cost-effective way for Homes England to engage with communities that want to deliver in-perpetuity homes for locals, which is clearly very important.

Of course we do not want Rachmans and of course we want to drive bad practice out of the sector, but I hope that, perhaps taking a cue from what is happening in the holiday lettings, the Minister will consider this suggestion. As well as regulating the private rented sector, why should we not reward good landlords? If they are delivering security—affordable rents, a high-level energy performance certificate and the decent homes standard—surely there must be a way, within the tax system, of rewarding those good landlords, as well as regulating and penalising the bad ones.

I hope that the Minister will consider each of the points that I have made to him. I am grateful for the additional time that I have been given to elaborate on those important points, and, of course, he has plenty of time in which to respond. I do not know whether other Members wish to speak as well.

9.18 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting extra time for a debate that is so important for Cornwall and for giving others a chance to speak about its very particular housing issues. I also thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) for initiating the debate. As he said, about 27,000 people are on Cornwall's housing waiting list, and about 800 are in temporary and emergency accommodation. Many of them are families with young children, who are placed in caravan parks and holiday homes that are up to an hour and a half or two hours away from their support networks, their schools, their jobs and where they live. This is really affecting community cohesion, upsetting families and causing real hardship.

The council is struggling with the need, and the cost is vast. It is providing bunk cabins in council car parks for people to live in as emergency and temporary accommodation, which is very difficult. So many people in Cornwall are now living in their vans, because they

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simply have nowhere else to go. I am finding that families are moving into emergency accommodation, and that the single people who were becoming homeless when I was first a councillor in Cornwall are now living in their cars. The situation has become really dire.

Businesses are now finding that key workers have nowhere to live, so we have people coming down to work in the hospitality sector or in agriculture. The same is true for professionals, such as teachers, nurses and doctors—a headteacher in Cornwall struggled to find somewhere to live, and she had to give up her job and move away again. There is now a movement called Homes for Cornwall, whereby businesses are coming together to try to find alternative solutions to deal with the housing crisis, which has become so bad that they cannot find staff. As the hon. Member for St Ives said, we have a very low number of social houses in Cornwall—only 10,300 council homes.

I want to talk about the affordable housing programme grant, which a previous Secretary of State, Michael Gove, suspended for Cornwall because of the poor performance of the housing provider Cornwall Housing, which is an arm's length company owned by the council. That performance has now improved, and the grant is desperately needed for a new social housing scheme in Redruth, but it has not been returned. I ask the Minister to look into that, and to see whether other local authorities in this situation have been treated in the same way and lost their grants. Has that grant moved to other registered providers in Cornwall, or has it left Cornwall completely? Is there any way we could get that back and backdate it?

The other issue, which the hon. Member for St Ives spoke about, is second homes and holiday lets, which have absolutely exploded in Cornwall, particularly since covid. The private rented sector has been decimated and is now virtually non-existent. We have struggled so much with section 21 notices, which explains to a great extent why so many of our families are now in emergency and temporary accommodation.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) for securing this excellent debate. It is great to welcome him back to his place; he brings a wealth of expertise in this area. I also welcome the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) to his place. I hope that he understands some of the issues that have been raised in this debate, given that he is a close neighbour of ours.

I welcome the cross-party co-operation that we are seeing from hon. Members across the House this evening—although not so much from the Conservative Benches, unfortunately. Cornwall faces a real housing emergency, and it is critical that we work together to fix it. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we must finally move away from building more and more executive housing that has little to no infrastructure, and focus on local need.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Member that interventions should be short.

Ben Maguire: Does the hon. Member agree that the long-standing Liberal Democrat policy of introducing use classes for non-permanent occupancy is a good idea?

Jayne Kirkham: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I will shortly move on to some of the ways in which we can deal with the proliferation of second homes and holiday lets, and address the imbalance.

I want to reinforce the point that the hon. Member for St Ives made about the tax loophole. I think £18 million is now lost in council tax because so many housing providers have taken advantage of the loophole whereby they can claim business grants and the zero rate of exemption, rather than pay council tax, if their houses are let out for 10 weeks of the year. As the hon. Member said, so much money was lost in business grants during covid. I think £170 million in business grants went to properties that were registered as holiday lets.

I want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who cannot speak in this debate. He has worked hard with us in Cornwall on the issue of protecting first homes, rather than second homes, and he has supported us, as I know that the same issue applies up in Devon. We have spoken with the Minister about potentially having a toolkit of measures that could be used to deal with issues relating to second homes and holiday lets. I know that our Government will introduce one of those measures: the licensing of holiday lets, hopefully with fees and safety checks on those lets, which is not done at the moment—some properties are not checked for fire safety, or for safety in any way. That is a massive loophole that needs to be dealt with.

The hon. Member for St Ives talked about planning requirements. The previous Government had a review on introducing a use class for holiday lets—but then did not do very much about it—so that is one possible measure. The default could be second home owners having to apply for a change of use if they flip their homes to holiday lets.

Andrew George: On the C5 category, and further to the excellent point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) made, the last Government tinkered with this, announcing and reannouncing on many occasions a proposal to introduce a use class for holiday lets, but does the hon. Lady not agree that that would be far better if it applied to all non-permanent occupancy, whether second homes or holiday lets? Otherwise, there will continually be flipping from one to the other to avoid regulation.

Jayne Kirkham: I thank the hon. Member for that point. I wanted to talk about council tax in particular, because, strangely, one of the few things that the entire council agreed on—we have a Conservative council in Cornwall at the moment—was doubling the council tax on empty second homes. In fact, we wrote to the Secretary of State at the time to ask whether we could triple the council tax on second homes, as they do in Labour Wales—that was a very unusual thing to do. Of course, as has been discussed, this is about looking at closing the loophole so that the owners of the property cannot flip between business rates and council tax. That would mean an £18 million a year gain in council taxes.

I agree with the hon. Member that we should encourage co-operative and community housing in Cornwall. That is very popular, and if it was supported more, there would be a great deal more of it. In fact, our cabinet housing member in Cornwall has said that if every village built 10 homes, that would deal with the housing

crisis completely. Discouraging hope value, particularly in certain parts of Cornwall, would be very helpful. I know that forcing developers to deliver their affordables rather than relying on the viability defence is part of the Government's plans, because so often developers get to a point and say that they cannot afford to build the affordable houses that they promised. Another real problem is that the cost of building has shot up because the contractors in Cornwall have dropped in number and have become a great deal more expensive.

9.28 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) on securing this important debate, and I commend him for the forceful but thoughtful case he made on behalf of his constituents. He has considerable experience and expertise when it comes to housing policy and practice, and I listened with great interest to his views and many of his proposals.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) for her incisive contributions and all those who have added to the debate this evening. There is clearly a fierce clarity of purpose on both sides of the House in respect of meeting housing need across the county, and I assure all hon. Members present that the Government are resolved to do what is necessary to ensure that that can happen.

It would also be remiss of me not to acknowledge my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). He is not a Cornish MP, but his constituency suffers from many of the challenges that hon. Members have touched on; indeed, he is impacted by the challenges coming from Cornwall. He has been a champion over many years for bold action to tackle the housing crisis across the south-west.

As we have heard, the housing crisis in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is acute. Eye-watering house price-to-earnings ratios are putting home ownership out of the reach of most local people; an overheated and shrinking private rented sector is placing a severe strain on local economies as well as families and communities; and social housing waiting lists are growing steadily. I recognise that second homes and short-term lets are not the sole causes of those pressures, but none of them can be properly understood without taking into account the sharp increase in the numbers of second homes and short-term lets in the county over recent years—an issue to which I will return in due course.

In the time available to me—there is more of it than I expected when I drafted this speech—I wanted to provide the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members representing Cornish seats with an overview of the Government's thinking in this area, and a sense of how we intend to address the challenges around housing availability in the county, with the caveat that there is a limit to the detail I can provide at this point, given that we are a new Government still considering the best options to achieve our aims.

The causes of England's housing crisis are multiple, but among the most important is our singular failure as a nation to build enough homes of all tenures. That is why this Government are determined to do what is necessary to get the country building again, including by ensuring that we put in place a planning system geared towards meeting housing need in full. On our

proposed reforms to the national planning policy framework, I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the introduction of mandatory housing targets, and I appreciate that he made a nuanced argument, but I am afraid that I am unconvinced by it. The fact that the distribution of homes in his constituency is creating significant challenges for the communities he represents is not, in my view, an argument against ensuring that sufficiently ambitious targets are in place to boost housing supply. Rather, it is an argument for making sure that local planning authorities have the full set of tools they need to manage those distributional challenges, and to plan for development in line with their targets in a way that meets local need.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Will the Minister give consideration to the hypothesis to which the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) alluded, which was that building the wrong kind of housing in Cornwall can beget demand for the kind of housing that we have so struggled to build—namely, truly affordable and social homes?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I acknowledge the pressures and the challenges. We need to give local authorities the tools to shape the type of development undertaken—not only through their local plans—and to get a grip on excessive concentrations of second homes and short-term lets. That is the Government's intention. On the NPPF and housing targets, it is the Government's considered view that we need to act to increase supply in all parts of the country, and need to take steps to ensure that the housing market responds to the needs of communities. These are complementary, not conflicting, policy intentions.

Andrew George: I entirely endorse the sentiment of what the Minister is trying to do, but this is about practicalities. There are enormous opportunities for unscrupulous developers to use the NPPF as a Trojan horse, so that they can crowbar in significant lottery-like wins on land. If someone can convert an agricultural acre into an open market acre of development land, they do not need to work for a living; they just need to keep shoving in planning applications, and they will make a lot of money. Having some intermediate measure by which we can deliver affordable homes on that land is surely the way forward.

Matthew Pennycook: I will touch on rural exception sites, and the land market in particular, but I come back to the point that none of that negates the need for ambitious housing targets, via consents and oversupplying consents, to ensure that we build the number of homes that we need, but I take the hon. Gentleman's point and will address it directly in short order.

I shall start with land values, because the hon. Gentleman has raised a concern, not only in this place but in other forums, about our proposed changes to national planning policy potentially placing upward pressure on land values, thereby frustrating our objectives. We fully appreciate the risk, which is why we are committed to further strengthening the system of developer contributions and to the reform of compulsory purchase compensation rules. Indeed, just today I brought into force regulations that allow action to be taken on hope value, where required in the public interest, but we will go further in the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill.

[Matthew Pennycook]

The hon. Gentleman touched on rural exception sites. The Government very much recognise that people living in rural areas often face challenges finding adequate affordable housing. Ensuring robust support for the necessary housing in rural areas is essential to supporting the broader sustainability of rural communities. The national planning policy framework is already clear that planning policy and decisions should support opportunities to bring forward small sites for affordable housing in rural areas. These rural exception sites should help to meet the housing needs of rural communities, enabling local people, and those with family or employment connections, to live locally and help sustain thriving places.

However, I want to go further in supporting rural affordable housing. In the consultation on the proposed reforms to the NPPF, launched on 13 July, we are actively seeking views on what measures we should consider to better support an increase in affordable housing developments in rural areas, and I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's engagement with that. I will take away his point on cross-subsidy and give it further consideration.

I very much recognise the unique situation on the Isles of Scilly, particularly the challenges to the viability of construction. My officials are working closely alongside Homes England to support the council in achieving its housing ambitions, and it is important that this close collaboration continues. I also note the wider challenges on the isles and how housing challenges interact with other pressures faced by residents. In recognition of this, my officials are looking to convene a working group with other Departments to highlight the plurality of issues, and to ensure that the Government can best support island residents.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's interest in community-led housing, including the role of community land trusts, and his professional experience in this area. I recognise the role that community ownership of land and affordable homes can play in delivering the Government's agenda, although I hope that he will recognise that the support we are able to offer must be considered in the round, alongside the full range of departmental programmes. Again, the Government have set out changes to how we plan for the homes we need as part of the NPPF consultation, which includes proposals designed to strengthen support for community-led housing.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) for securing this important debate. Local residents are being priced out of the constituency I represent, the beautiful South East Cornwall, and we do not have the homes we need. Earlier this summer, an elderly couple from Torpoint, both in their 90s, were forced to live apart for more than four months after an accident at their home left one in hospital. A lack of suitable housing meant they could not live together. Does the Minister agree that we need action on second homes so that local people, such as this couple from Torpoint, can benefit from more of the housing that is being built?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend pre-empted what I was about to say; I was just about to address second homes and short-term lets. I take her point, and I am

sorry to hear about the situation in which her constituents from Torpoint find themselves. The Government recognise that this is an area in which more needs to be done.

Both in the constituency of the hon. Member for St Ives and in the county more widely, it is beyond doubt that the prevalence of second homes and short-term lets has constrained the availability of homes for local residents to buy and rent, and that it is having a detrimental impact on local services in many areas. A balance obviously needs to be struck between the benefits that second homes and short-term lets can and do have for local economies and their impact on local people, but many coastal, rural and indeed urban communities are grappling with excessive concentrations of such properties. When I was shadow Minister for Housing and Planning in the last Parliament, I spoke to many colleagues who faced acute pressures in their constituency, and the feedback we are getting from coastal, rural and some urban communities makes it clear that we have not yet got the balance right.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) for raising these difficult issues around housing and second homes in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. We have parallel issues in my constituency of South Devon, a little further up the coast. It is apt that we are having this discussion today, after the presentation of Devon Housing Commission's report at lunchtime, which highlighted many of the issues and just how difficult the situation is in Devon, as in Cornwall. Second homes are hollowing out communities in my constituency. Like the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), I have had a headteacher and the local hospital—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call the Minister.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Lady and appreciate that she was cut off. As Mr Speaker, Madam Deputy Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers remind us, interventions have to be short, but I am sure we can pick up the conversation outside the Chamber. I recognise the impact on communities of the unique challenges that she mentions, particularly the excessive concentrations of second homes and short-term lets.

The hon. Member for St Ives said that the previous Government introduced a limited number of measures in response to concerns expressed in the previous Parliament. In Opposition, I welcomed those measures, while making it clear that they did not go far enough. That remains my firm view, so although we will progress with measures such as the introduction of a registration scheme for short-term lets in England, and the abolishment of the furnished holiday let tax regime, we are also considering what additional powers we might give local authorities to enable them to better respond to the pressures that they face. I will update the House as soon as I am in a position to.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for St Ives once again for giving the House an opportunity to consider these important matters. I look forward to engaging closely with him and all other Cornish Members, so that together we can ensure first homes for all local people in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

Question put and agreed to.

9.41 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 9 September 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act received Royal Assent on 24 May 2024. The Act will make significant changes to the UK's competition and consumer landscape that will protect small businesses, save consumers money, boost innovation and drive growth.

Part 1 of the Act will establish a pro-competition regime for digital markets that will promote more dynamic markets and ensure the most powerful tech firms treat consumers and business fairly.

Part 2 makes several enhancements to our wider competition regime, to give the Competition and Markets Authority greater powers in tackling illegal, anti-competitive, behaviours and to focus competition regulation on the areas of greatest potential harm.

Parts 3 and 4 strengthen the enforcement of consumer law and introduce new consumer protections, including tackling fake reviews and drip pricing, new rules for consumer saving schemes and introducing new rights relating to subscription contracts.

Part 5 contains miscellaneous measures including provisions which deal with investigative assistance to overseas regulators, disclosing information overseas, providing for a duty of expedition on the CMA and sectoral regulators, and giving the CMA new information gathering powers to support a function of monitoring competition in the retail motor fuel sector in the UK.

A key focus of the Act is providing greater powers and responsibilities for the CMA, the UK's primary independent competition and consumer protection authority. This will help the CMA meet the challenges of the modern economy.

The Government recognise the importance of implementing the Act as soon as possible so that businesses and consumers can reap its benefits. We also understand those affected by the Act need to know when its changes will come into effect. That is why the Government are publicly setting out our plans for implementation.

Key steps must be taken to implement the Act. Secondary legislation must be laid in Parliament, under powers set out in the Act, before the Act's measures can be commenced and enter into force. The CMA must publish guidance setting out how it will carry out its functions and use its powers. The Secretary of State for Business and Trade must approve CMA digital markets guidance. The Government are working closely with the CMA to ensure these are in place as soon as possible. Of equal importance is the need for secondary legislation and guidance to be detailed, robust and clear to ensure the Act's changes are understood and can be complied with.

The Government aim to commence parts 1, 2 and 5 of the Act in December 2024 or January 2025. In the autumn, secondary legislation will be laid before Parliament for scrutiny before it enters into force. Commencing part 1 will bring the digital markets regime into effect, and we expect the CMA to launch the first strategic market status investigations shortly afterwards. The reforms to the existing competition regime, the new motor fuels function and other part 5 measures will take effect on the commencement date.

The commencement order will be made at least 28 days before the commencement date.

In April 2025, the Government expect to commence part 3 of the Act, which provides for the consumer enforcement regimes, and part 4, chapter 1 of the Act, which replaces the unfair trading regulations. Secondary legislation will set out rules for the CMA's new direct enforcement powers, alongside guidance on these new powers. New savings schemes rules will not commence before April 2025, and this timeline is subject to continuing engagement with consumers and industry. Reforms to subscriptions contracts and alternative dispute resolution will follow later, with subscriptions reforms not commencing before spring 2026, at the earliest. These timelines follow commitments made in the previous Parliament, and reflect the quickest possible delivery of the reforms, while ensuring that the necessary consultation and other steps can take place.

The Government's implementation plans will deliver the Act's benefits as quickly as possible, while ensuring its changes enter into force smoothly, allowing those that will be affected by them adequate time to prepare.

[HCWS74]

Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023: Repeal

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): Minimum service levels unduly restrict the right to strike and undermine good industrial relations. The introduction of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 was met with widespread condemnation from employers and trade unions. Many employers across different sectors pointed to its unworkability and impact on the ability of employers and trade unions to negotiate and to resolve disputes.

As such, the Government announced on 6 August 2024 that we will repeal the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 to get public services back on track and strengthen the rights of working people. The Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade have also written to other Secretaries of State, the First Minister of Scotland and the First Minister of Wales asking them to encourage employers to avoid imposing minimum service levels on their workforce, until the Act is repealed.

We have begun preparations to repeal the 2023 Act as part of the forthcoming employment rights Bill. Amendments made by the 2023 Act to the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 will accordingly be reversed and any minimum service regulations will lapse automatically once the employment rights Bill has Royal Assent.

Although the ability of employers to give work notices will legally continue until the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 has been formally repealed and amendments to the 1992 Act are accordingly reversed,

in this interim period we have strongly encouraged employers to seek alternative mechanisms for dispute resolution, including voluntary agreements, rather than imposing minimum service levels.

I also wish to make clear that, following the High Court ruling in August 2023 which upheld the judicial review challenge on the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses (Amendment) Regulations 2022, employment businesses are prohibited from providing agency workers to cover the duties normally performed by a worker of an organisation who is taking part in a strike or other industrial action. In the light of the High Court ruling, it is not necessary to repeal these regulations.

The upcoming employment rights Bill will remove barriers to effective dispute resolution and we will continue to work with businesses as we develop and implement our plan to make work pay.

[HCWS75]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Death Certification Reform

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health (Baroness Merron) has made the following statement:

I wish to inform the House that reforms to the death certification process in England and Wales begin today.

These reforms focus on the experience for bereaved people and seek to support improvements to patient safety. Importantly for bereaved people, the introduction of a statutory medical examiner system provides an opportunity for them to raise questions or concerns with a senior doctor not involved in the care of the deceased. The statutory system will also help deter criminal activity, improve practice and ensure appropriate referrals to coroners for further investigation.

These reforms respond to multiple inquiry recommendations over many years and mark a significant change to processes for medical practitioners, registrars and coroners. Under these reforms all deaths will legally become subject to either a medical examiner's scrutiny or a coroner's investigation irrespective of whether the deceased is to be buried or cremated, delivering a more equal and comprehensive system of assurance. From today, all of the medical examiner system's obligations, duties and responsibilities are enshrined in law.

These reforms are the result of work across a number of Government Departments including the Department of Health and Social Care, Ministry of Justice, Home Office and General Register Office, Welsh Government and the Office for National Statistics. The National Medical Examiner in NHS England oversees the medical examiner system. The Royal College of Pathologists, the lead college for medical examiners, provides training for medical examiners and shares relevant communications to all those involved in the death management process.

I wish to share my gratitude to all those involved in delivering this important reform to death certification to provide greater transparency to bereaved people on the circumstances surrounding a death.

[HCWS76]

World Health Organisation Pandemic Accord Negotiations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): I would like to update the House regarding the ongoing negotiations on a new, legally binding international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response—a pandemic accord—at the World Health Organisation.

Infectious diseases do not respect borders. As the covid-19 pandemic showed, and the current mpox health emergency has reminded us, we can only protect citizens and economies from health threats if we collaborate closely with other countries.

Whether it is to monitor the spread of disease or to develop new vaccines, in future health emergencies we will likely rely on others, and they may rely on us, to share the information and resources we all need to save lives. It was only because of the information shared with us from countries which covid reached first that we were able to develop the vaccines that protected the UK and many around the world. More global collaboration on health threats will make Britain stronger and safer.

That is why the Government are committed to working with our international partners, including those in the global south, to negotiate a pandemic accord that enhances global health security across the world and is firmly in the UK's national interest.

The pandemic accord presents a unique opportunity to:

- protect lives, livelihoods and the NHS by strengthening pandemic prevention and response;

- contribute to economic growth by promoting innovation in pandemic-related R&D;

- signal to the world that the UK is taking a new approach to multilateralism and is sincere about improving equitable access to vaccines, treatments and tests.

The Government are also determined to use this opportunity to support delivery of our health, growth and security missions. We will engage closely with our developed and developing country partners to reach a consensus agreement that reflects their priorities as well as our own, to keep us all safer. We will also continue to engage with civil society, industry, and the devolved Governments, Crown dependencies and overseas territories.

Member states of the WHO have until the World Health Assembly in May 2025 to reach an agreement on the pandemic accord, following an extension agreed at the World Health Assembly in May 2024.

Targeted amendments to the international health regulations to improve information sharing and collaboration for public health emergency response were agreed at the World Health Assembly in May 2024. The international health regulations are an important technical framework that helps to prevent and protect against the international spread of disease. This set of proposed amendments updates the regulations to reflect lessons learned, including from covid-19.

Every WHO member state, including the UK, now has the right under the international health regulations to evaluate each and every amendment before exercising its sovereignty to decide whether to accept or opt out of each or all of the amendments. This Government will of course agree to amendments only if they are in the UK national interest. Officials across Government are currently analysing the amendments and will provide advice to Ministers. The Government will provide an update to Parliament on the UK's approach in due course.

The pandemic accord and international health regulations negotiations have been the subject of significant misinformation. Both the WHO and the UK Government are clear that respect for member state sovereignty is a guiding principle of the negotiations. Co-operation with countries around the world does not compromise our sovereignty; it strengthens our security.

The Government are firm in our belief that a new pandemic accord and strengthened international health regulations that set out how countries will work together to address health threats is in all of our best interests. The world is safer when we stand together.

We will continue to update the House through the course of this Session at relevant and important junctures in the negotiating process.

[HCWS77]

Written Corrections

Monday 9 September 2024

Ministerial Corrections

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Sudan

The following extracts are from the urgent question on Sudan on 3 September 2024.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising those important points. On the UK's support, we have doubled the official development assistance contribution, recognising the severity of this crisis. I announced another £15 million of vital assistance on 22 August, bringing that up to £97 million, which will be focused on where it is possible to operate in Sudan.

—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 164.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Development, the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds):

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising those important points. On the UK's support, we have **nearly** doubled the official development assistance contribution, recognising the severity of this crisis. I

announced another £15 million of vital assistance on 22 August, bringing that up to £97 million, which will be focused on where it is possible to operate in Sudan.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that point. I mentioned that the UK is supporting the Centre for Information Resilience, a research body that is gathering evidence of what is taking place on the ground. For example, funding is being provided for the Sudan witness project, which is investigating attacks against civilians and infrastructure. On the specific finding of genocide, I am clear that that is an internationally focused definition, but we are concerned that we are seeing patterns of violence that bear the hallmarks of that kind of development, so we are keeping that very closely under review.

—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 168.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Development:

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that point. I mentioned that the UK is supporting the Centre for Information Resilience, a research body that is gathering evidence of what is taking place on the ground. For example, funding is being provided for the Sudan witness project, which is investigating attacks against civilians and infrastructure. On the specific finding of genocide, I am clear that that is an internationally focused definition, but we are concerned that we are seeing patterns of violence that **might** bear the hallmarks of that kind of development, so we are keeping that very closely under review.

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