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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 12 March 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

QUEEN'S SPEECH (ANSWER TO ADDRESSES)

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF HER MAJESTY'S HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That Her Majesty, having been attended with its Addresses of 24 October 2019 and 20 January 2020, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answers:

I have received with great satisfaction the dutiful and loyal expression of your thanks for the speech with which I opened the last Session of the previous Parliament.

I have received with great satisfaction the dutiful and loyal expression of your thanks for the speech with which I opened the present Session of Parliament.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Bus Services

1. **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve bus services in (a) rural and (b) other areas. [901489]

11. **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage more frequent bus services. [901500]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Our £220 million better deal for bus users includes measures to improve bus services in rural and urban areas. This is together with the new £5 billion fund for overhauling bus and cycle links throughout the country.

Mr Holden: Towns such as Crook, Willington and Burnopfield in my constituency are starved of late evening and weekend bus services. What plans will the Government bring forward in the next few months to enable those areas to have better services?

Grant Shapps: As I mentioned, there is not only the £220 million fund, but the £5 billion fund, which will enable us to bring forward a comprehensive package of measures, which I hope will significantly boost Durham County Council's current £347,000 towards the bus service operators grant.

Dr Mullan: My constituents tell me that very often buses come late or do not turn up at all. As we look to invest more in buses, what are we going to do to make sure that the companies delivering the services are doing a decent job for our residents?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right: it is really important to make these bus services work in a manner where people can just rely on them and where they do not even have to look at a timetable because the frequency is there. As part of doing that, we will be opening up bus open data powers, which will ensure that that information is transferred and available to people at bus stops and in their apps, enabling a much more frequent service to run.

Rail Fares

2. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the cost of rail fares. [901490]

5. **Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the cost of rail fares. [901493]

8. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the cost of rail fares. [901496]

9. **Mr Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the cost of rail fares. [901497]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): Fares are crucial to funding railway operations and our upgrade programme. We have frozen regulated rail fares in line with inflation for the seventh year running.

Mike Amesbury: Given that rail fares have gone up by a massive 40% since 2010, we now have the second most expensive railway in Europe. However, I still have a situation where constituents in the Northwich part of my constituency cannot get a reliable train service—in fact, disabled passengers cannot get one on one side at all. What are the Minister and the Government going to do about that?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman would probably like to know that 98p of every £1 paid in fares goes back into the railways, which allows investment in all the areas where he would like to see it, including accessibility for his constituents.

Zarah Sultana: Under the Conservatives, rail fares have rocketed by 40%. An annual season ticket from Coventry to London is now £5,760, to Birmingham it is £1,400 and to Nuneaton it is £1,200. That unfairly puts rail travel beyond the reach of many of my constituents and it discourages green travel. Privatisation has failed, so will the Government bring our railways into public ownership to slash fares and combat the climate emergency?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am sure the hon. Lady will look forward, as I do, to the issuing of the Williams review, which answers some of the questions she raises, but she should be careful what she wishes for because, today, using a single fare—£7, I believe it is—to go from London to Coventry, a host of Conservative Members are going to campaign in her hyper-marginal seat, at very good value for money.

Kate Osborne: Trade unions represent the hard-working staff on Northern who have had to take the brunt of passenger frustrations as the franchise has collapsed under Arriva Rail North. Will the Minister explain why, with Northern having been taken back into public ownership, the expert advisory panel established to guide the new service through its first 100 days excludes rail unions, the experience and expertise of which could ensure that passengers in the north finally get the rail service that they need and deserve?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is a fair question. The answer is that Richard George, the head of the operator of last resort, is working closely with the unions and will continue to do so, because the workforce is all important to the delivery of a reliable service for passengers.

Mr Morgan: Many Portsmouth people rely heavily on South Western Railway for their daily commute. The service that they receive is substandard, with less than 50% of mainline services operating on time, while rail fares have soared by 2.7%. Put simply, Portsmouth people are paying more but getting less. Will the Minister confirm what steps his Department is taking to address this injustice for my community?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his correspondence and the way that he has engaged with my Department over this issue. He has been representing his constituents on this matter very well. As he knows, a request for a proposal has been issued to the south-west franchise owners, FirstGroup and MTR, and to the operator of last resort. Parliament will be kept informed of those developments. It is all about trying to improve the service for the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): As we have heard, rail passengers throughout the country are struggling with the exorbitant cost of train travel, with fares having risen by a staggering 40% since the Conservatives took office. In stark contrast, Germany has recently cut rail fares, and in Luxembourg public transport has been made entirely free, thereby both supporting families and helping to tackle the climate crisis. The Government used yesterday's Budget to prioritise once again unsustainable and expensive new roads ahead of support for public transport. When will the Government finally treat this issue seriously and take the urgent action that is needed?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I completely get where the hon. Gentleman is coming from, but he should understand that taxpayers already subsidise the rail network by more than £4 billion a year, meaning that 54% of our transport budget is spent on the 2% of journeys that the railways account for. He mentions Germany, which has cut rail fares, but to do that Germany cut the VAT on rail fares from 19% to 7%; he might like to know that we charge no VAT on rail fares in this country.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Question 18, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* Will my hon. Friend give an indication of his estimate for completing the new airports national policy statement? Will there be sufficient time to take into account—

Mr Speaker: Order. It has to be linked to the question that you were standing for. Do not worry; we will come back later.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): I note that the questions that my honourable and hairy friend has answered so far were about reducing the cost of rail fares, but that implies that either more people must make more journeys by rail, or taxpayers generally, such as those in Lincoln, must subsidise the rail industry more. Which would my hon. Friend prefer? Does he have any plans to improve the franchise process to make bidding for them more attractive to businesses?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are going to change the franchise model—the Williams review is absolutely going to change how our franchise model operates—but my hon. Friend will have to wait a bit longer to see how that is going to happen. We have strong views on the direction of travel and look forward to informing the House shortly.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): It is important to have affordable rail fares so that residents can access our railways, but many of my constituents do not have any access to trains at all because they do not have a local train station. The people of Gamesley were promised a railway station more than 50 years ago, but it has still not been delivered. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the bid for Gamesley train station?

Chris Heaton-Harris: My hon. Friend wisely highlights a proposal that will be considered among the bids for the Restoring Your Railway fund. I would be delighted to meet him to talk about it.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Secretary of State is already aware of how unhappy my constituents who use Lockerbie station are—after fare increases, they have seen an appalling level of service from TransPennine. TransPennine has now made certain commitments to improve the service; what can the Department do to ensure that it meets those commitments?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Secretary of State and I met the TransPennine leadership not so long ago to put the very points that my right hon. Friend has just made. As he knows, there has been quite a big change at the head of that franchise. We are working with the new management to ensure that the new trains operate correctly and that the service his constituents would like is actually delivered for them.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): While rail fares remain too high, the cost of disruption to our commuters when services go wrong, as is so often the case with Southern, is considerable. Although Delay Repay has been helpful, it does not reflect the true cost of taxis, hotels and loss of work that our constituents have been suffering. Can the Minister tell us whether the new ombudsman is going to tackle the issue and make sure that we have a compensation scheme that accurately reflects the costs that our commuters and constituents suffer?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is absolutely true that there are huge numbers of delays and cancellations on our railway on a daily basis. That completely disrupts people going to work and kids going to school, and it also affects students and people just socialising. Different plans are being mooted. The Williams review will have a fuller plan, on which I will be able to communicate with my hon. Friend.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): People who live and work in Nottingham need Ministers to do something about fares, sooner rather than later. Highways England's partial closure of the A52 Clifton bridge is making their car journeys unbearable, and we urgently need more people to use trains, trams and buses to get into the city. Will the Minister or one of his colleagues meet me and other hon. Members representing constituencies in and around Nottingham, to discuss how the Department and Highways England can support Nottingham City Council and its efforts to get our city moving during this serious disruption?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Again, the hon. Lady raises valid points on behalf of her constituents. I or perhaps another appropriate member of the ministerial team will be delighted to do that.

Bus Links

3. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve bus links in North Warwickshire. [901491]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): The bus market outside London is deregulated, with service provision being a matter for bus operators and local authorities. We are, however, providing £5 billion of new funding to overhaul buses and cycling across the country.

Craig Tracey: The reality in predominantly rural North Warwickshire is that I can get to London quicker by train than it takes for me to travel by bus from outside my house to my constituency office just 6 miles away. The situation makes it really difficult for people to get to hospital appointments, to work, to school and, as I found out last week, to Jobcentre Plus appointments. What can we do to reinvigorate transport across North Warwickshire and Bedworth so that my constituents can access the fantastic opportunities that this Government are keen to deliver as part of their levelling-up agenda?

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand my hon. Friend's frustration. I am pleased to say that the Government have launched two schemes that are relevant to North Warwickshire. The first is a call for an expression of interest in a £20 million rural mobility fund to support innovative solutions to transport problems in rural areas, and the second is the allocation of £30 million to every local authority in England to support new bus services or replace lost services.

Covid-19: Public Transport

4. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps he has taken to help avoid the spread of covid-19 on public transport. [901492]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): We have published health guidance for staff and the transport sector, following carefully the Public Health England advice on protocols. In addition, I have contacted the various ports on several occasions.

Mohammad Yasin: As the Secretary of State knows, the World Health Organisation has declared covid-19 to be a pandemic. Will he clarify what new measures will be taken to keep passengers and transport workers safe on public transport?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Obviously, the issue of covid-19 is occupying the minds of everybody in this country at the moment. As an example, 2,500 posters—digital as well as printed—have gone up in our railway stations. There is a very wide programme of enhanced engagement, and we are working with the Public Health England protocols. Yesterday, I met the chief executive and chair of Network Rail to discuss the subject. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who has responsibility for aviation, and I have also had similar discussions with all the aviation industry leaders.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Yesterday, we saw welcome support in the Budget for small and medium-sized enterprises to deal with coronavirus, but ferry companies and airlines are very much at the forefront of that challenge. What financial support and liquidity are available to these companies? Will the Secretary of State update the House on what progress he has made on reforming slot allocation, and will he meet me and sector representatives to discuss the adequacy of the Government's support so far?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend was absolutely right last week to raise the issue of the so-called ghost flights; I think he was the first person to raise the matter in this House. I have since written both to the slots allocator in this country, Airport Coordination Limited, and to the European Commission, which has indicated that it will alleviate those slots to stop empty flights flying. My hon. Friend is also right about the pressure that the airlines are under, and we are doing further work with the Civil Aviation Authority and the EU, particularly over EU regulation 261. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the matter.

Bus Patronage

6. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase bus patronage. [901494]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced powers for local authorities and operators to work to grow their patronage. That is in addition to the £5 billion national bus strategy that I just mentioned.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Secretary of State back the "Bring Back the Buses" campaign to reconnect communities and isolated villages in my area that have lost their services?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I will gladly back that campaign. Everyone recognises that buses could and should be doing a lot more. I recognise that we have lost services over a period of time. Buses are still the chosen form of transport for 50% of travel, so it is important that we get this right. Even going back as far as 2017, we were passing legislation to ensure that franchises can work in conjunction with local authorities, and those processes are going into place. We want to see the London standard of bus service everywhere in the country.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): As we have heard, the Government like to say that they support bus travel. However, they have cut bus funding for supported bus services by 45% since 2010. To make matters worse, the Chancellor has just announced 27 times more spending on new roads than on supporting buses and local transport. Will the Secretary of State tell the House when the Government will finally stop paying lip service to public transport, and actually provide the investment that bus passengers so urgently need?

Grant Shapps: I am surprised that the figure 5 with “billion” after it did not answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. We are not just paying lip service; we are doing it. What he does not seem to understand about building roads is that buses run on them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Of the £250 million in direct revenue support for bus operators, just £43 million goes to local councils outside London. We are going to need a lot more than that if we are going to reinstate local bus services in rural areas, aren’t we?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is where the £5 billion national bus strategy, which we will be publishing shortly, comes in. Our aim is quite simply to get to a London standard of service throughout the country, including in rural areas and his constituency.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): For £1.50 in London—which the Secretary of State mentioned—I can get two buses anywhere across the capital for up to 30 miles. In Newcastle, £1.50 will not even get me three stops up the West Road, while if I want to go to Ashington, which is 18 miles away, it will cost me £8. Can we have a comparative study of bus fares in London and the north-east so that we can understand what we need to do to make them fairer and improve bus patronage?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I can assure her that that is exactly the process that we will be following in developing the national bus strategy, and I would be more than happy to work with her and incorporate her ideas. We can argue about the past, but it sounds to me that we both want to see bus services that are excellent for all our constituents, so I completely agree with her.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, to get more people on the buses, we need to make them cleaner and greener? In that vein, what is the Secretary of State doing to promote the use of hydrogen?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want buses that are cleaner and greener. We want them to be the right temperature—air-conditioned in summer, and warm in winter—with 5G plug-in points for phones. And we want to have electric buses—4,000 of them, with this new money. These new buses can be electric or, indeed, hydrogen powered, like the buses being developed by Wrightbus in Northern Ireland. We warmly welcome all such developments. My hon. Friend can be reassured that we are working closely with bus operators to develop new British buses.

Airport Expansion: Paris Climate Change Agreement

7. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Whether he plans to take into account the Paris climate change agreement in future decisions on airport expansion. [901495]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): The Court of Appeal judgment on the airports national policy statement is complex, and we will set out our next steps in due course. This Government remain supportive of airport expansion, but we will permit it only within our environmental obligations.

Dr Huq: From “No ifs, no buts, no third runway” to engineering a trip to Afghanistan to skip the vote, the last three Prime Ministers have started off very clear on Heathrow expansion and then obfuscation and U-turns have set in. Why do not the Government take the opportunity of the Court of Appeal ruling that expansion is incompatible with our Paris climate accord obligations and make this dead and buried once and for all, and also review the other 21 planned airport expansions?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have already outlined, the Government are, and remain, supportive of airport expansion where we are able to deliver it within our environmental obligations. I must point out to the hon. Lady that the Court did not conclude that airport expansion is incompatible with climate change. As I have already outlined, we are reviewing this complex judgment and will lay out our next steps soon.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): In the light of the Court of Appeal’s decision, the Government were wrong to deny the relevance and application of the Paris agreement. Do the Government now accept that their overriding obligation is one of compliance with our Paris accord commitments in reducing emissions, meaning that their national policy statement on aviation has to be revisited and revised and that they should be saying no to climate-busting expansion at Heathrow?

Kelly Tolhurst: I can understand the concerns that many hon. Members may have around the Government’s next steps. That is why we have outlined that it is currently an ongoing legal process. We have said that we will review the judgment, which is complex, and set out our next steps. As I have already outlined, the Court did not judge that the airport expansion is incompatible with climate change. But we will obviously update the House as soon as possible on any future steps that we will be prepared to take.

Andy McDonald: The Court of Appeal said that it was illegal.

In the midst of a climate crisis, the Chancellor announced the biggest-ever programme of road building—a £27 billion splurge that will increase car use, worsen congestion, and increase climate emissions. In anticipation of legal challenges, as with airport expansion, and before the Government go any further, can they confirm that the roads programme has been subject to rigorous environment impact assessments and complies with our Paris agreement obligations?

Kelly Tolhurst: Yes.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The climate emergency concerns us all, and the aviation sector faces a particularly tough challenge to decarbonise, whether or not additional airport capacity is added in the south-east. However, we cannot shirk that challenge, so I am proud that Loganair, based in my constituency, is currently working to provide passenger services using electric planes to help to tackle our climate change targets. In Scotland, these targets include aircraft emissions. Will this Government match that level of transparency and honesty, and include emissions in their targets?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for outlining his particular interest and his understanding of the situation within Scotland. As he will know, Sustainable Aviation has committed to delivering on its net zero target.

Gavin Newlands: As the Minister has outlined, progress has been made with new engine technology continually setting new standards of efficiency and reducing carbon emissions, and there is huge research and development in the sector right now. Given that background, plus the fact that it may cost up to 10 times more, and that it is one of just two bodies whose regulations are followed the world over, replacing the European Aviation Safety Agency properly may take up to a decade, and recruiting the expertise required will be extremely difficult. Does the Minister not realise that leaving EASA is an act of sheer folly that is putting Brexit politics before passenger safety?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will know—I believe he spoke about it last week—that we will potentially see the first electric flight this year. We have invested £300 million in the future flight challenge fund. We are committed to working with everyone across the industry to ensure that we have the technology and the skills and can deliver on our target.

Electric Vehicles: Charging Infrastructure

10. **Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the roll-out of charging infrastructure for electric vehicles. [901499]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (**Rachel Maclean**): As the Chancellor announced yesterday, the Government are providing an additional £500 million over the next five years to support the roll-out of a fast

charging network for electric vehicles, ensuring that drivers will never be further than 30 miles from a rapid charging station.

Adam Afriyie: I thank the Minister for that answer. I commend the Government on the progress that has been made on charging infrastructure over the last decade, from dozens to hundreds and now thousands of charging points; that challenge is being well met. My concern is that, even with the current grants, the purchase price of electric vehicles is still out of reach for most people on lower incomes. Does she agree that, if we are to see more electric vehicle use in the years to come, the purchase price of electric vehicles is equally as important as the availability of charging infrastructure?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks about the Government's support. It is right that the Government are committed to supporting the up-front cost of an electric vehicle. That is why I am pleased that, at yesterday's Budget, a further £532 million of funding was announced to keep the plug-in vehicle grant for another three years. He will know that those with fully electric cars will pay no company car tax this year, and vehicle excise duty for all electric vehicles in all price brackets has been abolished.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The extension of the plug-in taxi grant until 2022-23 is welcome. That works for bespoke vehicles, but what about cities such as Cambridge, where the city council rightly expects higher standards, but for hard-pressed drivers, the cost of the vehicles is prohibitive, as the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) said? What are the Government doing to help them?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for what is happening in Cambridge. He will know that a range of support is available for all vehicles, including taxis that want to upgrade to electric vehicles, and the Government are committed to continuing the funding for those grants.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I wonder whether the Minister could help me with the next vehicle I should buy. I used to drive a petrol car, then Dave persuaded us all to go green, so I bought a biofuel car, which was destroying the planet, so they said, "Buy a diesel car because it emits less CO₂," so I bought a diesel car, and now I am poisoning people. An electric vehicle might be the solution, though it might be terrible because of the batteries, but I live in a flat both here in Westminster and in my constituency, so an electric car is not the answer. Is it a diesel car with AdBlue? Help me!

Rachel Maclean: I am delighted to assist my hon. Friend. I encourage him to think about purchasing an electric vehicle. The answer is to ensure that there are charging points at his block of flats and across the country. In fact, the Government have doubled the funding available to local authorities to install charging points for electric vehicles on-street, to £10 million. I am sure that that will assist him.

Mr Speaker: Or he could get roller-skates!

Road Network National Policy Statements: Climate Change Commitments

13. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Whether he plans to make road network national policy statements compatible with the UK's commitments on climate change. [901503]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): We take our commitment to climate targets seriously. We have one of the world's most ambitious plans for reducing carbon emissions from our roads, and our infrastructure policy is entirely consistent with that.

Clive Efford: Does not the decision on Heathrow demonstrate that the Government need to upgrade their statements in the light of climate change, otherwise there is a danger that their massive expansion of road building will get bogged down in legal challenges?

Rachel Maclean: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Court of Appeal judgment on Heathrow is a very complex issue. Our road policy contains many elements, including a plan for decarbonisation, funding to improve public transport and plans for road improvements. That balanced package is entirely consistent with reaching net zero, which is what the Government are committed to doing.

Noise: Heathrow Airport Flight Paths

14. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What plans he has to reduce the number of people affected by aircraft noise living (a) near and (b) under Heathrow airport flight paths. [901504]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government's airspace modernisation programme should allow aircraft to climb more quickly and descend continuously, which will have a noticeable noise reduction benefit for communities overflown by Heathrow flights.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the Minister for that answer. She will know that 70% of the aircraft that arrive at Heathrow do so via what is known as westerly operations, involving a final approach over my constituency and others in south London. Given the concerns about noise on the part of those living under these flight paths, can the Minister tell the House whether the Bill on modernising our airspace that the Government have committed to will include provisions aimed at reducing the concentration of flight paths and mandating measures to reduce arrival noise?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I understand his concerns. Airspace modernisation is intended to reduce the amount of noise per flight for those living under concentrated flight paths. However, there is a risk that they may experience more noise than currently. Whether this is the case will depend on the final routes proposed by airports, including any respite routes, and on the outcomes of consultation with local people, and I expect he will be very vocal at that time.

Rail Services: North of England

15. **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve rail services in the north of England. [901505]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): We are working with Network Rail, operators and stakeholders to raise performance, and we are investing billions of pounds to improve services for passengers.

Chris Clarkson: I thank the Minister for that answer. Does he agree with me that, in addition to national rail projects, light rail projects such as extending the Metrolink to Middleton and Heywood in my constituency form a vital part of levelling up and increasing capacity?

Andrew Stephenson: Under this Government, the Metrolink has been extended to reach new destinations right across Greater Manchester. The most recent extension to the Trafford centre is due to open later this month. While the development of light rail proposals is a matter for the mayoral combined authority, we will work closely with them. I hope to see the Metrolink extended to my hon. Friend's constituency. As the Chancellor said yesterday, we are getting investment done.

European Aviation Safety Agency Membership

16. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What his policy is on the UK's membership of the European Aviation Safety Agency after the end of the transition period. [901506]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The UK will leave EASA at the end of the transition period.

Mr Carmichael: The Secretary of State will be aware that that news has not been well received by the aviation industry. The ADS, which represents over 1,100 UK companies, has noted that the UK and the EU could have an arrangement, in the same way that Switzerland does, giving us full membership of EASA without even having any jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. Why would that be a problem for the Government?

Grant Shapps: Because the EU said in its statement of negotiating parameters on 15 January that UK participation in EASA is not viable from its perspective. It would not be viable from a UK perspective either, because we would be subject to ECJ rulings in one form or another, and certainly, without any doubt, we would have to accept the European Commission creating the laws under which we would exist—and this country voted for Brexit. However, we will have a bilateral aviation safety agreement—a so-called BASA. We will also have a comprehensive air transport agreement—a so-called CATA—to enable smooth transport to continue.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The aviation industry is in crisis and 84,000 UK jobs are potentially under threat, yet the Government plan to withdraw from EASA, despite the warnings from the industry and despite its costing 10 times as much money.

Will the Transport Secretary put a stop to this reckless plan, stop this needless waste of public money and protect Britain's impressive and world-leading role in aviation safety?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is right that the UK has the third largest aviation network, but the idea that we are there because of EASA is untrue. The reality is that we already have the expertise in this country. It is the Civil Aviation Authority that administers the entire system, so there is no particular role that we cannot step up and fill. In case the hon. Gentleman had not noticed, this country voted to leave Europe. I know the Labour party has struggled to understand this fundamental point about when we vote to do something, but people voted for it in a referendum and they voted for it again in a general election, and we are leaving.

M66: Safety

17. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve safety on the M66. [901507]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Highways England has a programme of works under way, north of junction 2 of the M66, to resurface and renew road markings and studs. Once completed, those works will deliver safety benefits for all road users.

James Daly: In 2011, lighting on the M66 between junctions 1 and 3 was decommissioned. Many of my Bury North constituents have contacted me, expressing their concerns that that has created unsafe driving conditions, especially during heavy rainfall. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me, and a number of local residents, to discuss those concerns and investigate what actions can be taken to address them?

Andrew Stephenson: I appreciate the concerns of my hon. Friend's constituents about motorway driving without lighting. Highways England is working closely on that topic and monitoring the safety situation on that section of the M66. Baroness Vere, the Minister responsible for roads—she is in the Gallery—will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

Airports National Policy Statement Review

18. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Whether he has made an estimate of the time it will take to review the Airports National Policy Statement. [R] [901508]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): The judgment by the Court of Appeal was complex, and the Government need time to consider it carefully. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State issued a written statement on 27 February.

David Simmonds: I apologise for my earlier mistiming, Mr Speaker.

Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as digesting what I agree are the complex implications of that judgment, she could take this opportunity to consider the report by the New Economic Foundation, entitled "Baggage Claim"? That report debunks many of the received wisdoms about the value to the UK economy of Heathrow

expansion and sets out in detail the economic opportunities created by regional expansion, especially in terms of levelling-up, which is a clear commitment of this Government.

Kelly Tolhurst: As my hon. Friend has outlined, just as I have a number of times today, the Court of Appeal judgment is complex. We are considering it, and we will set out our next steps in due course. On regional connectivity, we are committed to delivering airport expansion that is in line with our environmental obligations. We are also committed to levelling up and ensuring that people are able to travel, whichever part of the country they live in, and that obviously relates to local and regional airports.

Rail Franchising System: Viability

19. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the viability of the rail franchising system. [901509]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): Keith Williams has been tasked by the Government with leading a root and branch review into the rail industry, and he has confirmed that he will recommend scrapping the current franchising system. Full details will be set out in the White Paper, which, all being well, will be published before the summer.

Kim Johnson: I thank the Minister for his comments. Passengers in my constituency and across northern England welcomed the decision to bring Northern Rail into public ownership on 1 March, following the collapse of Arriva Rail North. In the past decade, more than £178 million has been paid in dividends to Northern Rail shareholders, while simultaneously, there have been cuts to safety-critical staff on trains and stations. Research has shown that if our railway was in public ownership, we would save £1 billion a year—enough to fund an 18% cut in rail fares. Will the Minister assure Members that Northern Rail will be kept in public ownership, to rebuild the trust and confidence of rail users, and that it will not be privatised at the earliest opportunity?

Chris Heaton-Harris: First, may I push back on the hon. Lady's point about safety, which is completely incorrect? That issue is regulated by an independent body, and she is wrong. Since privatisation, we have seen the number of passenger journeys more than double, as well as more services and better trains. Northern Rail's fleet is now being replaced with new trains, and that will be finished by the end of May. I very much hope that the new system will include a profuse and large group of private companies that want to run services for us.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Problems with the franchising system mean that London North Eastern Railway is now under control of the Minister's Department. He will be aware of my long-running campaign to get through trains from King's Cross to Cleethorpes. Can he tell me when that will happen?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I cannot answer my hon. Friend from the Dispatch Box today, but we are working to deliver the service that he has outlined, certainly at the beginning and end of each day to start with.

Bus Accident Data Collection

20. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): If he will bring forward legislative proposals for the mandatory collection of bus accident data by bus companies for publication by local authorities. [901510]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): It is up to individual local transport authorities to determine which powers in the Bus Services Act 2017 are used to address issues of bus safety. Under a partnership or franchising scheme, bus operators could be required to provide bus safety data at specified intervals.

Matt Western: While in London this data is collected, in all other areas of the country it is not. It is public transport we are talking about and the public should be made aware, or be allowed to be made aware, of this key data on the number of accidents and the causes of those accidents. Will the Minister agree to meet me and members of the family of Rowan Fitzgerald, who sadly died in 2015 in an unnecessary accident, to discuss the proposals in Rowan's law?

Kelly Tolhurst: I know the hon. Gentleman has met a number of bus Ministers to discuss the fatal accident in Coventry in 2015. I offer my deepest condolences for this terrible tragedy. Collection of data could be considered within the national bus strategy. I, or one of my colleagues, would be happy to meet him to discuss that further.

Topical Questions

T1. [901514] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to say a few words about an issue that I know a lot of Members have been concerned about: smart motorways. I announced last year that the Department would carry out an evidence stock-take to gather the facts about the safety or otherwise of smart motorways and make recommendations. I have listened to friends and families affected, and I have looked hard at the evidence. Today, I am publishing a report into the findings. Alongside that report, I am launching an 18-point action plan to raise the bar on smart motorway safety. Overall, the evidence shows that in most ways smart motorways are as safe or safer than conventional ones, but they are not in every way. I have therefore developed new measures to further improve safety.

I pay tribute to Edmund King of the Automobile Association and the families of those who have lost loved ones, including Meera Naran who is here today watching our proceedings. I also want to thank other campaigners, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and my hon. Friends the Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and for Harborough (Neil O'Brien). Their work to help to ensure our motorways are as safe as they can possibly be is, I think, something the

whole House will welcome. I have laid copies of the report in the Library and a written statement will be laid later today.

Bill Esterson: I thank the Secretary of State for those comments on smart motorways. The new plan for a northern powerhouse between Manchester and Leeds has been announced every year since 2014. Why would anybody think it will be any different this year? If Northern Powerhouse Rail is to be a success, it has to go right across the north, so why is there is nothing about the Liverpool to Manchester part of the route, which is the easiest part to deliver? As the Prime Minister was fond of saying during the election, it is oven ready.

Grant Shapps: I share the hon. Gentleman's frustration. I have a consultation virtually ready to go. I am working with Transport for the North to get that signed off across various different parties up there. I will be expressing the hon. Member's concern to them to get on with that. I agree that Manchester to Leeds is part of it, but getting on with the bit to Liverpool, out to Hull and all the rest is also important.

T2. [901515] **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Greater Anglia, which runs the trains round our way, is currently introducing a £1.4 billion fleet of brand new trains—very good. Among other benefits, that will support the local economy and tackle social exclusion. However, the great eastern main line needs to be upgraded quickly. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that key upgrades, such as the Bow junction remodelling, extra loops between Chelmsford and Colchester and the provision of digital signalling, are delivered within the next five to 10 years?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): The new Greater Anglia train fleet will certainly deliver many benefits, including extra passenger capacity on the great eastern main line. I am particularly interested, too, in seeing the results of the great eastern main line taskforce study work on the upgrades my hon. Friend mentions, and the renewal of the strategic outline business case and wider economic benefit studies so we can move forward.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): More than 12 months has passed since the Government announced a consultation on banning old tyres from public service vehicles. The Tyred campaign and tens of thousands of supporters have waited far too long. I pay tribute to Frances Molloy and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for the work they have done. The Secretary of State has the power to act now before more innocent people are needlessly killed. Is it not time for the Government to get this done?

Grant Shapps: As with the smart motorway point that I made a few moments ago, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the need to get this right, and it has been the subject of several coroners' reports. He will not have to wait very long and I do not think he will be disappointed.

T3. [901516] **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): The A68 runs from the town of Darlington all the way up to Edinburgh and through five constituencies

in the north of England, including mine. Given that 30% of its use is from heavy goods vehicles, will the Secretary of State consider Transport for the North's recommendation that it becomes part of the strategic road network?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): My hon. Friend mentioned that briefly to me already, so I know that it is on his radar. It is important that all our roads are managed by the appropriate authority in the interests of road users and local communities, and I would be quite happy to meet my hon. Friend and the roads Minister.

T8. [901521] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): A recent survey of social media found that the M56 was the most complained about motorway in the whole country. Junctions 12 to 14 are a complete bottleneck, causing regular accidents and frustration for local people, so I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that among the many announcements yesterday, those junctions on the M56 will also get some investment.

Grant Shapps: We are very keen, unlike the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench team, to sort out the problems on our major roads. I would be more than happy to meet him or for another Minister to do so.

T4. [901517] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): At a recent community event in Middlewich organised by Redeeming Our Communities, one of the loudest calls from young people was for improved bus services in the town. What support can the Government give to help to facilitate that?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend will know that we are providing £5 billion in new funding to overhaul buses and cycling nationwide to benefit all passengers of all ages. The national bus strategy will set out further details.

T9. [901522] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Yesterday's Budget provided no further clarity on the £350 million for cycling that the Prime Minister mentioned on 11 February. As a consequence, from the start of next month, local authorities outside London have nothing earmarked for their local cycling and walking infrastructure plans. Will the Minister explain why cyclists were forgotten in yesterday's Budget?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Lady will recall that when it was announced that we would go ahead with HS2, a £5 billion fund for buses and cycling was also announced. Cycling will get a very good chunk of that money and that will be outlined in the forthcoming spending review, but I absolutely understand the point that she has made. We are working to ensure that the gap that there could be in funding is resolved.

T5. [901518] **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): A short-sighted decision by Transport for Greater Manchester and Stagecoach to scrap the 375 bus service, serving my constituents in Mellor and Hawk Green, has been met with dismay. Will my hon. Friend, the excellent

Minister, meet me urgently so that we can maintain this important service and keep the wheels on the 375 bus going round and round?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend will know that decisions are made locally for Transport for Greater Manchester, and Greater Manchester already receives just under £3 million each year to support local bus services. The Government have also committed to £5 billion more for buses, which I hope is a cause for optimism for him, but as he knows, I will always be happy to meet him to discuss any particular issues.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Fairground operators make a significant economic contribution to my constituency and use red diesel for their power-generating equipment. Members of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain have contacted me to say that the Chancellor's planned increase in fuel duty on red diesel will put them out of business altogether, and they are not in line for an exemption. Will the Minister make representations to her colleagues in the Treasury to exempt the fairground industry from the planned increase to protect the livelihoods of this unique and vibrant community?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): Red diesel has traditionally enjoyed a significant subsidy, which, as the hon. Member rightly points out, was constrained by yesterday's Budget. The Government are working across the board, with many sectors, including farmers and fishermen, and the consultation will be open to reflecting exactly the concerns she raises about fairground operators and others. I would encourage her to engage in that consultation.

T6. [901519] **Theo Clarke** (Stafford) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Chancellor announce a new £500 million a year pothole-filling programme in yesterday's Budget. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that this funding is targeted and gets to local authorities as quickly as possible, and will he confirm that the Government will work to improve the conditions of roads in Stafford?

Grant Shapps: I am sure my hon. Friend was pleased by the £500 million a year—£2.5 billion in total, which is more than the £2 billion promised in our manifesto—to help fill potholes, and I look forward to working with her and other colleagues to ensure their potholes are filled as soon as possible.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): At a recent meeting, London North Eastern Railway shared with me its ambition to introduce an extra train per hour between Newcastle and King's Cross, but owing to a lack of capacity on the east coast main line, this can only be achieved by curtailing other providers' services at York, meaning that fewer trains, if any, will run between Edinburgh, Tyneside, Tees Valley, south and west Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside. How soon can we expect the levelling-up investment on the east coast main line north of York necessary to fulfil all these competing ambitions?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am fully aware of the issue that the hon. Gentleman—no, right hon. Gentleman?

Ian Mearns *indicated dissent.*

Chris Heaton-Harris: One day. Alas, I cannot promote him to that position.

I am fully aware of the problem the hon. Gentleman has just outlined, and we are working with the franchise and throughout the industry to resolve it. As he knows, investment in rail takes a long time to come through the system, but I promise we are looking at this.

T7. [901520] **Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Government's decision yesterday on the A303. The potential to unlock the south-west has just been announced, and I look forward to seeing it come to fruition. I also congratulate the Government on their 2050 maritime strategy. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can uplift the potential in our coastal communities and make sure their local economies are not at sea?

Kelly Tolhurst: Like my hon. Friend, I represent a coastal constituency. The south-west has great strengths in maritime autonomy and renewables and clean maritime innovation. We look forward to working with the recently formed Maritime UK South West to create an environment where these objectives can be realised nationally and in the south-west. I would be more than happy to work with him as we progress some of these ideas.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Government's airports policy has been struck down by the Appeal Court, and the Government have decided not to appeal that decision. Does the Minister accept that the Government cannot be a bystander on this and leave this for a decision between the courts and Heathrow's management, who have no interest other than their own financial interests?

Kelly Tolhurst: We have been clear that the court case is complex and we will set out our next steps. We have always been clear that any expansion would be done via the private sector. It is for the promoters of the scheme to take that forward, and as I have already outlined this morning, there is an ongoing legal case.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): In my constituency, we have major issues with disabled facilities at Dewsbury railway station, where there is no tactile paving for the blind and partially sighted, and at Shepley and Mirfield railway stations, where there is a lack of wheelchair access. What assurance can the railways Minister give to my constituents that these problems will be tackled in the near future?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As my hon. Friend knows, the Government recently made £350 million available to add another 209 stations to the Access for All programme. The stations he mentioned were not successful in that round of money, but I would be delighted to meet and work with him to ensure that those stations get the funding they deserve, because our rail network needs to be accessible for everybody.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The Coventry and Warwickshire branch of the National Federation of the Blind says that people with visual

impairments are missing their destinations or cannot find timetable information as bus stops and buses are not enabled with audiovisual announcements. Can the Minister tell me what steps the Government are taking to make talking bus stops and buses a reality for visually impaired passengers?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and this is something we are really passionate about. My hon. Friend the Minister in the Lords recently made an announcement on talking buses. In addition, just a couple of weeks ago I launched a new Access for All campaign for stations in London to extend it right across our network. There are so many things that we can do to make our rather antiquated, old-fashioned railways and transport systems much more access-friendly.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's decision, in principle at least, that something needs to be done about the rules of pavement parking outside of London? Will he join me in urging people to commit to the consultation and, if there is a case for change, ensure time in this place to deliver it for vulnerable people in this country?

Grant Shapps: May I pay tribute to the Chair of the Select Committee on Transport, and indeed the former Chair, for promoting this subject so much? We are pleased to respond today to "Pavement parking" and will certainly wish to join him in taking forward those steps, exactly as he has described.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State commit today to making sure that every single decision taken in his Department is assessed for whether it contributes to or mitigates climate change?

Grant Shapps: Yes, that is absolutely the case. We are committed to 2050 and will soon be producing a decarbonisation plan, which will do precisely what the hon. Lady is after.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The development consent order decision for the Lowestoft third crossing should have been made by 6 December. More than three months on, I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State advised us to when a decision will be announced. Does he agree that if the UK is to build the infrastructure that the Chancellor outlined yesterday, we need a timely and efficient legal process for making such decisions?

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand my hon. Friend's frustrations with the delay. We will be issuing a written ministerial statement setting out a new date for the decision as soon as practically possible, but as it is a live planning application, I unfortunately cannot comment further on the scheme. However, as he knows, we of course want to ensure that all applications are dealt with in a timely way, and our Department will work to ensure that.

Business of the House

10.32 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 16 March will include:

MONDAY 16 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 17 MARCH—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

WEDNESDAY 18 MARCH—Opposition day (6th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. The subject is to be confirmed.

THURSDAY 19 MARCH—Debate on a motion on the Government response to the Morse review of the Loan Charge 2019, followed by general debate on the Horizon settlement and future governance of the Post Office. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 20 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 23 March will include:

MONDAY 23 MARCH—Second reading of a Bill.

TUESDAY 24 MARCH—Second reading of a Bill.

WEDNESDAY 25 MARCH—Opposition day (7th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

THURSDAY 26 MARCH—Debate on a motion on errors in payments made to victims of the Equitable Life scandal, followed by a debate on a motion on human rights in Kashmir. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 27 March—Private Members' Bills.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business. He will know that the Opposition want to work with the Government on any new legislation that is put through, so could we ask for early sight of it through the usual channels and the shadow Front-Bench teams? I know that the Leader of the House was having a meeting with Mr Speaker earlier yesterday; I wonder whether the Opposition parties could also be included in those talks.

The Leader of the House will know that there is speculation in the press about the restoration and renewal programme. We are all mindful of the costs, but does he agree with the Lord Speaker and Chair of the House of Lords Commission that vacating the entire building is a far more cost-effective option? Will he find time to come to the House and explain the Government's position, if it is changing?

We had the Chancellor here yesterday and, whoever wrote it, No. 10 or No. 11, he delivered the Budget; he got it done. I do not know whether the Leader of the House is aware—he must be, because I know that he likes procedure—that the Government chose to introduce the Budget resolutions on an income tax motion instead of following the usual custom and practice of moving an amendment of the law motion. Can he explain why? It affects the ability of the Opposition and hon. Members to table amendments to and scrutinise the Finance Bill.

Is this another example of the Government trying to stifle proper consideration of their plans? Will the Leader of the House please explain why this decision was taken, given that such a motion is normally used only at the time of an election?

The Chancellor said that coronavirus was on everyone's minds; it could be in our systems as well. We wish everyone well who is self-isolating and those who are ill a speedy recovery. I am sure that the Leader of the House will join me in sending our condolences to the families of the eight people who have now died. However, the Chancellor said nothing about the key demographic of the over-70s, who are going to be affected by the virus and the most at risk. Will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to look again at free television licences for the over-75s? They need information; they need access to television; they may well be self-isolating.

The Leader of the House will have seen that our Front-Bench Treasury team were jumping up and down yesterday saying that the Budget contained absolutely nothing on social care—another thing that affects the over-70s demographic. If the Health and Social Care Act 2012 was revoked, we could move towards a more integrated system of health and social care. As a former member of the Health Committee, I know that in 2015 we were calling for cross-party talks with the shadow Health Secretary, now Mayor Andy Burnham.

It was amazing that the Budget statement contained nothing about the falling markets. We have seen the biggest fall in shares since 2008. The Chancellor has said that the UK has seen a “decade-long slowdown in productivity.”

He forgot to say that his party has been in charge for the past 10 years. I know that he called the shadow Chancellor's “little-read book” a fantasy book, but the Government are borrowing the shadow Chancellor's big red Budget book: they are borrowing to invest.

The Leader of the House will know that people affected by the floods are also suffering from the coronavirus outbreak. I know that the Chancellor has increased spending on flooding to £5 billion, but as I have mentioned in the House previously, the Labour Government increased flood funding and this Government cut it. The Leader of the House will know that the Climate Coalition has produced a report saying that extreme rainfall has increased by 40%, and the number of people in the UK facing floods during the winter is more than the population of Birmingham and Manchester put together.

I know that the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating the climate champions at the Green Heart Hero Awards, which is organised by the Climate Coalition—my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and the hon. Members for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk).

I ask the Leader of the House again about Nazanin, Kylie and Anousheh. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) was right when she said we had been here before. Nazanin was about to be released and nothing has happened; 70,000 prisoners have already been released; we have provided aid in good faith to the Iranian Government. When did the Foreign Secretary last speak to his counterpart? This is one thing that we must get done.

The Leader of the House will know that it is British Science Week. I was delighted to welcome the Royal Society of Chemistry and Lab Tots. The Under-Secretary

[Valerie Vaz]

of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway) came to see experiments and how to make lava lamps. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will join me in thanking the dedicated scientists who are looking at research and development to find a cure for the virus and developing the tests and interpretation of the tests. I place on record our thanks to Public Health England and the House staff, who are meeting daily to keep us safe. The Leader of the House will know that there is such a thing as society and community, and we will look out for each other.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to record our thanks to Public Health England, which has been remarkably helpful to the House authorities. As she knows, a representative saw the House of Commons Commission last night, and we are being kept fully up to date. Its advice is clearly well thought through and well presented, and we are following that advice along with the rest of the country, particularly in the Government's approach. That is an important point, and she is also right to record thanks to the scientists, who are not making lava lamps but are doing the serious work of looking at the coronavirus and how it operates.

Going back to the beginning of the right hon. Lady's questions, she says the Opposition are keen to work together on any emergency legislation that is necessary. I understand that today my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be talking to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and it is very much our intention to keep Opposition parties informed on what we are trying to do.

The devolved authorities have been kept fully informed and have been attending the Cobra meetings on these matters. The whole nation is coming together as one, and I am grateful for the support received so far from the official Opposition. The Government will do everything we can to ensure that co-operation continues to be given willingly, which is why I was not more specific about the Second Reading debates, because that will obviously depend on the talks.

The right hon. Lady raises restoration and renewal, which is currently a matter for the Commission, although there will be a handover to the sponsor body when the Act comes into force in April. There is always a regard to value for money, which must underpin everything we do, and there is widespread acceptance of the need to improve the mechanical and engineering plant—that is accepted—but some of the sums that have been mentioned are eye-watering, and Members should be concerned about that in relation to their constituents and tax purpose.

I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's warm words—as warm as she could manage—about the Chancellor's speech. It is fascinating that the Opposition cannot find anything to criticise. We take that absence of criticism as the highest praise for a brilliant and very successful Budget. I am not sure that it is the greatest criticism if the only point that can be made is that the Budget was moved on an income tax motion, rather than on a change to the law, because that has been done with previous Budgets. The former Chancellor, Philip Hammond,

used the procedure on a number of occasions, so it is not that unusual—[*Interruption.*] No, it is not that unusual. It has been done regularly over the past few years. This is the way of doing it. It is a perfectly reasonable way to do it, and I am sure the matters before the House will be debated vigorously and rigorously, because we will carry out proper scrutiny.

The medical advice for the over-70s will be coming forward, and we must not pre-empt what Cobra may say later today. Of course, the BBC should continue to give free TV licences to the over-75s. That is important, and it would be a great shame if the BBC failed to continue to support the over-75s. It is, of course, a matter for the BBC, but I think it would be right to do that.

The right hon. Lady is right to express her sympathy for the families of the eight people who have died from the coronavirus. It is a great sadness for those families and a worry for the nation at large that those deaths have taken place, which is why so much is being done to try to combat the effects of the virus.

Social care will obviously be an important part of tackling the virus, and the Government have asked for cross-party views to try to come up with a system of social care that will last, will have public support and will not be changed from one Government to another. It is important that we get to a settled view of social care and, therefore, the right hon. Lady's views will be welcome in the consultation, as will those of other right hon. and hon. Members.

On share price falls, I spent most of my life before entering politics in financial services, so I know it is always unwise to predict what markets are going to do. I am glad that the Office for Budget Responsibility has said that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's brilliant Budget will lead to a 2.5% increase in productivity because of the coming infrastructure investment, which is good news.

There is £5.2 billion going into flood defences, and I note that the Somerset levels, following a lot of mitigation efforts, seem not to have flooded recently, so it seems that the mitigation efforts work very successfully. There was an extremely interesting article on that in the *Daily Mail* a week or so ago, which I draw to the attention of hon. and right hon. Members.

Valerie Vaz: Did you write it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, I did not, but the article, on the success of mitigation policies on the Somerset levels, is well worth reading. The levels are not precisely where I live, but they are not a million miles away.

As always, I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for keeping up the pressure in relation to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and the other dual nationals who are held improperly by the Iranian regime. We continue to raise their cases at the most senior levels. The Prime Minister raised those concerns with President Rouhani on 9 January, and our ambassador is in regular touch. The exercising of diplomatic protection in Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case has formally raised it to a state-to-state issue, and there are concerns about the coronavirus in Evin Prison, which we referred to last week. A number of prisoners have been released and we have asked, of course, for Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe to be released, but

ultimately it is the failings and the bad behaviour of the Iranian regime that we are dealing with. That is not something that the British Government can control, but we are certainly pushing as hard as possible to get them to behave in a proper way.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my admiration for the sheer calm stoicism of so many people who work in this place? We are greeted by the police officers when we come into the building, as though nothing has changed, and the Clerks of the House carry on servicing the business of this House as though nothing has changed, despite the anxiety that the whole country is feeling about the coronavirus. Will he join me in recording our thanks to everyone who works in this place who will keep the show on the road? Does that not set the best possible example to the rest of the country that we should keep things going and remain calm to make sure that we carry on making rational decisions in this crisis?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point. Yes, indeed, I would like to record our thanks to the people working in the House who are ensuring that it is kept open, which is of the greatest importance. As my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary said yesterday,

“we have resolved that we will keep Parliament open...the ability to hold the Government to account and to legislate are as vital in a time of emergency as in normal times. Our democracy is the foundation of our way of life.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 377.]

This is of fundamental importance. I can tell the House that our security and frontline staff, including catering staff, are going to be briefed in the same way as people in the Border Force, and that will take place later today. We are trying to make sure—again, Public Health England is being extremely helpful in ensuring this—that people in this House who are working to ensure that democracy is effective and that accountability is working will be treated properly.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): First, I want to return to a matter I raised last week to do with the establishment of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. Last week, the Leader of the House implied that our party had filibustered a decision on that matter and that somehow we did not want the Scotland Office to be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, what we are seeking to do is establish a Scottish Affairs Committee that will properly scrutinise the Government rather than one that is jam-packed with Government placemen and women. That is why we have now submitted amendments to the Selection Committee’s proposals that are with the Table Office, and we stand ready to debate them and to test the will of the House on them. Will the Leader of the House make time available for this matter to be discussed so that we can establish a Scottish Affairs Committee?

I too want to ask about the coronavirus and what it means for how we do our business in this place. We are commendably focused across the House on dealing with this emergency, but there seems to be an attitude that what we do here is keep calm and carry on, perhaps mitigating what we do in some respects but doing the best we can in the way that we normally do it, with the

implication that there will come a point at which that is not possible, when we will simply stop. I put it to the Leader of the House that there is actually a middle way: we can fundamentally change the way we do things in order to keep ourselves and the public with whom we deal a lot safer. For example, starting next week, we could use the deferred decision procedure in place of having to stand in Lobbies for up to 20 minutes in an extremely confined space with 600 other people. That could be done from the Budget debate onwards for as long as this emergency lasts.

We could also look at ways in which people can vote without having to be here for an extended time, for example, by concentrating all the votes, on all the topics on which they are required, into a single period of the week, so that people have to attend then and not at other times.

We must also surely be aware that the process of self-isolation, which may rapidly increase in the weeks to come, should not mean that we abandon our ability to act as political representatives. In this day and age, the technology is available for people to be able to function from the confines of their own house. Surely it is incumbent on us to look at how we can do that by using teleconferencing for Select Committees and other matters and allowing people to engage in discussions and debates even if they are not able to attend this building.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will deal with the second half of the hon. Gentleman’s question first, because this is an area where we want to have as much cross-party support as possible. It is of fundamental importance that we keep this place open, but it is also important that we are treated, and we treat ourselves, in the same way as the rest of the country and that we go ahead at the same pace as the rest of the country. There should not be a difference in how Parliament is behaving from the advice that is being given to our constituents. That is important; we should not seek to be a special case for ourselves. After the Commission meeting yesterday, I went into the Division Lobby with the expert who had presented to us from Public Health England, and his view, which I am allowed to share with the House, is that the Division Lobby is not a high risk and the only step he would recommend is that we open the windows, because a flow of air would be beneficial. On the basis that the Division Lobby is not high-risk, making major changes to the way we operate would not be the right response, but we wait upon the medical and scientific advice being given to us by the Government, and if that changes, we will of course consider whether any procedural changes need to be made. Currently, that is not the case. On those who self-isolate, it will be better to use the pairing system than to try to introduce other measures, partly so that people who are self-isolating or who have coronavirus may maintain patient confidentiality. Some people who may be affected may not want everybody to know, and if we introduce novel methods, that confidentiality may be harder to maintain.

I come to the hon. Gentleman’s point about the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. He was right to say that it would be wrong if he thought that I had implied that the Scottish National party Members had talked out the establishment of the Committee. I made it clear that I thought that they had talked it out. There

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is no question of my implying it; that was exactly what they did. They talked out the establishment of the Scottish Affairs Committee and the Government are now considering the way forward, including of course the amendments they have tabled. Deliberation will be given to these important matters.

Mr Speaker: May I suggest that we run these questions until about quarter-past?

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): My right hon. Friend will doubtless be aware, as will the Whips, you, Mr Speaker, and the Deputy Speakers, that, along with many longer-serving Members, the 2019 intake, from across the House, are having incredible problems with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. Surely it is time for reform? This is groundhog day, and, 10 years on, what does IPSA cost the taxpayer each year compared with what the Fees Office cost to do the same tasks pre-2008-09?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is of course concerning to hear about any problems new Members are having with IPSA, but the House will appreciate that IPSA is independent of government. I am a member of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, so if my hon. Friend would like to write to me with his concerns, I would be happy to raise them on his behalf. I point out that we, as SCIPSA, are raising a number of points with IPSA, and the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) has brought a number of concerns from Opposition Members on these matters.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. Will he give us an early indication of his thinking on any Backbench Business Committee time that might occur on either Monday 30 March or Tuesday 31 March, to help us with our planning for and with Members from across the House?

I now come to a constituency issue that I raised with the previous Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride). A constituent of mine, Mariam Lamidi, has again been refused asylum in this country and in my constituency with her children, who are two, six and eight, despite the fact that her two-year-old daughter would undoubtedly be subjected to female genital mutilation should she return to her district in Nigeria.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On the first point from the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, yes, I will try to give him an early indication in respect of the 30th and the 31st. Very often, the day before a recess is available to the Backbench Business Committee—that might be a helpful comment. As regards the very important constituent case, if the hon. Gentleman is having difficulties with the Home Office in getting replies, I will obviously help, but I assume that he is taking it up in the normal way.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Notwithstanding the kindly overtures from the shadow Leader of the House, may we have a debate in Government

time on restoration and renewal, particularly given the National Audit Office investigation into the shambles of the Big Ben restoration? We cannot afford to spend upwards of £6 billion on this place when there are better value-for-money options available that do not involve a full decant.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Obviously, this is a new Parliament and a new House of Commons, and it will be entitled to make decisions as it sees fit. It is accepted that the mechanical and engineering plant needs replacing, but some of the costs that one has read about are eye-watering. We have to focus on value for money, so I am sympathetic to the approach that my hon. Friend is taking.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I was recently contacted by my constituent Vikki Lewis, who, because she is paid every four weeks instead of on a monthly basis, has received two payments within the universal credit assessment period and so has had no choice other than to fall into debt to ensure that she can house, feed, clothe and care for herself and her six-year-old son. As there was absolutely nothing about universal credit in yesterday's Budget, may we have a debate in Government time about the failures of the cruel current system? We need a system that supports and protects people like Vikki, and many others across Newport West, who are paid not on monthly but rather on four-weekly pay systems.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am aware of the problem of four-weekly payments, because constituents have brought it up with me, but I point out that the universal credit has been a successful policy: 200,000 more people are in work; the withdrawal rate is significantly lower, at 63p in the pound of benefits, down from the more than 90p in the pound of other types of benefit; and 700,000 families see around £285 a month of extra money that they are entitled to. Without beginning to pretend that it is a perfect system, it is an improvement on what was there before, and its measured roll-out has been the right thing to do.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): As our economy goes digital, it is not just about retail; money is going digital, too, and there have been predictions that ultimately we will be a cash-free society. However, that cash-free trend is going at different paces in different places. There are implications for business and risks of people in certain groups being left behind, and there are implications now, because access to cash is becoming harder despite it being the main payment type for many transactions. May we have a debate to explore the changes to cash access and cash use in our society?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes an important point: 2.2 million adults in the UK use cash as their main way to make a payment day to day. There was reference in the Budget to the fact that the Government are going to bring forward legislation to protect access to cash for those who need it and to ensure that our cash infrastructure is sustainable in the long term. My hon. Friend may wish to raise the issue in the Budget debate, because that has been announced and will happen.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Yesterday, I welcomed the students of Deyes High School in my constituency to Parliament, where they were looked after extremely well by the education service, which does a fantastic job for schools throughout the country. The students in years 12 and 13 raised with me the very serious concern that they have about what might happen to teaching in the event of disruption in schools throughout the country, and about the impact that that would have on GCSEs and A-levels. Would the Leader of the House care to comment on that concern and how it might be addressed, either in emergency legislation or in other measures that the Government are going to bring forward?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that deserves to be answered at the right point. We need to wait for the Cobra meeting later today and for the Government to set out how plans will evolve. I emphasise again that we must act on the medical and scientific advice and not try to take pre-emptive steps, which may not have the benefits that people assume that they will have. We will be guided by the medical and scientific advice.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Sadly, 63% of people in Kidsgrove are no longer physically active since Labour's closure of Kidsgrove sports centre. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Kidsgrove Sports Centre Community Group and the Conservative-led Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council on having found a long-term plan to refurbish and reuse this important community asset? Will he set out the Government's plan to use local sports centres as part of a long-term plan to promote healthy lifestyles?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue and congratulate all those involved from Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and the Kidsgrove Sports Centre Community Group on their excellent work. Places such as the Kidsgrove sports centre are vital in helping local communities to come together, be more active and live healthy lives. The Government's Sporting Future strategy emphasises the important role that facilities play in encouraging people of all ages and backgrounds to get more active. Through Sport England, from 2017 to 2021 we are spending more than £120 million on grassroots facilities, to make sure that everyone, regardless of where they live, is able to access high-quality sports facilities. It is levelling up for sports facilities.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): So far, Ministers have given very little clarity on what help will be available for people who are self-employed and on zero-hours contracts. I realise that there are statements and that legislation is in the pipeline, but unless there is clarity, people who are ill and have been told to self-isolate will carry on going into work. Discussions need to be held with the relevant Departments. Will the Leader of the House make clear that this issue has to be addressed?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This was referred to by the Chancellor in his statement yesterday and solutions are being brought forward. Department for Work and Pensions staff stand ready to support anyone affected. We encourage them to get in touch to discuss their situation. Universal

credit will be paid up front to people who will need it: 100% of the first month's payment may be made. Steps are being taken to help people who are self-employed. I think £1 billion extra is being devoted to the welfare budget, to help people who are in difficulties because of the coronavirus.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I apologise for not being present at Transport questions, due, ironically, to a delay on the Jubilee line. It is extremely welcome that the Budget announced that local authorities are going to be allowed to build more council homes and to borrow money at a cheap price from the Public Works Loan Board. However, local authorities up and down the country have used the very low interest rate to buy retail centres, which are high-risk ventures, to generate income for the future. Will my right hon. Friend arrange a debate or a statement to make sure that local authorities do not abuse their new powers and that, rather than buying retail centres, they get people the homes they need?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That was why the Public Works Loan Board interest rate was raised earlier and is now being reduced for councils that will be building council houses. It is absolutely right to raise that in the Budget debate, but it is fair to say that the Government are conscious of the issue.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The very high standards of agricultural production in Angus, Scotland and the UK do not come for free; they come with significant costs of production. Those costs are not borne by foreign imports. What will this Government do to protect agriculture after Brexit from very cheap, lower standards of production from foreign producers of food?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by saying how much I enjoy Angus beef and commend the hon. Gentleman's constituency for the wonderful food it produces? He is absolutely right that the UK has the very highest food standards—higher often than those of the EU. Not only did the UK ban veal crates fully 16 years before the EU; we also want to go further than the EU in banning the live shipment of animals. The UK already ensures that, without exception, all imports of food meet our stringent food safety standards. Our independent Food Standards Agency will ensure that that will remain the case, regardless of trade arrangements. In all negotiations, the Government will ensure that any future trade deals live up to the value of farmers and consumers across the United Kingdom.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The Government are rightly committed to levelling up and creating opportunities. Two small changes to the admissions code would change the life chances of so many summer-born children. May we have a debate in Government time on making changes to the admission code, to benefit the summer-born?

Mr Rees-Mogg: With children born in June and July, I am well aware of the issue that my right hon. Friend raises. I think an Adjournment debate would be a suitable place to begin, but that is in your hands, Mr Speaker, not mine.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): This summer, the British transplant games will be held in Coventry. Nine hundred transplant athletes will travel to the city to take part in the event, which aims to raise awareness of the value of organ donation and to encourage transplant recipients to stay active post transplant. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging transplant recipients to register to compete in the games, and will he arrange debates on the life-saving benefits of organ donation and on the health benefits of sport in general?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this matter to the attention of the House, because I must confess that I was entirely unaware, in my ignorance, of the transplant games? It is a wonderful thing that she has brought attention to the games, and I hope that people who follow our proceedings, and other outlets, will become aware of them. I hope that her local paper will also pick up her advocacy for the games. She is absolutely right to encourage transplants, and to encourage people with transplants to show what successful lives they can lead.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Budget debates that he has announced allow an opportunity to highlight that yesterday the Chancellor announced an additional £640 million for Scotland—far more than the Scottish Government anticipated—which, in addition to the £1.3 billion already announced, means an additional £2 billion bonus for Scotland? Does he also agree that there will now be opportunity to call the Scottish Government to account to introduce the same measures for Scottish businesses as will apply in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend makes an absolutely brilliant point. What this Government are doing is helping the whole United Kingdom, and £2 billion extra for Scotland from United Kingdom taxpayers is a real commitment to the United Kingdom. It is extraordinary that however well we do things, the SNP always complains.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The UK Government consider Saudi Arabia an ally and important trading partner. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out what influence he thinks the UK Government should bring to bear to enlighten Saudi Arabia's medieval and backward attitudes towards women and homosexuals, such as a woman being owned by her eldest male relative and the fact that homosexuality is punishable by death—usually by public beheading or perhaps by crucifixion, of which there were 134 last year?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Saudi Arabia is indeed an important ally of this country, but that does not mean that we are unaware of human rights abuses that take place in friendly allied countries. The Government do raise the issues of such abuses with those countries. It is always harder for us to make representations about foreign nationals than about our own nationals. It is easier, for example, to make representations about Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, but we do raise these important issues, and the hon. Lady is right also to raise them in this Chamber.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): At the start of the month, I welcomed my constituent Amanda Richardson, who is chief executive of the charity Action Cerebral Palsy, to Parliament. Her charity is concerned that children with cerebral palsy are not getting the best possible care and education in a timely fashion due to the lack of a national understanding across Departments, local government and the NHS about the level of need. Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate in Government time on what the Government can do to remedy this, and better support children with cerebral palsy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend my hon. Friend for bringing this crucial issue to the attention of the Chamber. All children with cerebral palsy and other disabling conditions should get the support they need from the health service and schools. General practitioners play a key role in co-ordinating the care of disorders such as cerebral palsy, and the condition is identified as a key area of clinical knowledge in the Royal College of General Practitioners's curriculum. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has published best practice clinical guidance on cerebral palsy for adults and children to support clinicians to manage cerebral palsy effectively.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is absolutely right that the attention of the Government and businesses is currently focused on dealing with the coronavirus outbreak, but I do wonder whether there will be sufficient capacity in the system to finalise our new trading arrangements with the EU, so I ask the Leader of the House—in all sincerity—whether, in these circumstances, it is appropriate to begin considering an extension to the transition period?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is absolutely no need to extend the transition period.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): As the advice from the Government on coronavirus changes and reaches a stage where many people are recommended to stay at home, a lot of people will want to watch sport on television. But, of course, major sporting events now take place on Sky and BT Sport. Would it be possible, while this emergency occurs, for those events to be screened on terrestrial television, so that people at home could watch them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That would be difficult because there are long-standing commercial agreements, and many people already have subscriptions to the services mentioned by my hon. Friend.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May we have a statement from the Government about whether it is now time for the Intelligence and Security Committee to become a full Select Committee of this House, thereby allowing us, as Members of Parliament, to vote on who we would like to see in the Chair of that Committee?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are very good reasons for the process around the Intelligence and Security Committee being what it is, including the sensitive nature of the matters that it handles. Therefore, I do not see there being any plans to change the process that is set out in

statute. Unlike other Committees, it is a statutory Committee under the Justice and Security Act 2013 and I foresee no changes.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your endeavours to allow as many of us to ask questions as possible.

May I ask my right hon. Friend to pass on congratulations to the Chancellor on bringing forward a £400 million brownfields housing fund? That is absolutely the way to go. Will he consider a debate on relieving the real stress and strain on my constituents from repeated planning developments on greenfield countryside?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on having a constituency in which so many people want to live because it is so beautiful? My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is going to make a statement later about reforming the planning system. I think my hon. Friend's concerns would be suitably raised in an Adjournment debate on his constituency.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I clearly was not happy with the Budget yesterday. Wales bore the brunt of Storm Dennis. Nearly half the people who were affected across the whole UK were in one local authority area, and there was not a single extra penny from the Government yesterday for the families, for the businesses or for the local authorities in Wales that are going to have to pick up the tab to the tune of many, many tens of millions of pounds. When it came to the business arrangements for coronavirus, perfectly sensible measures were being introduced in England, but there was not a single penny to make them available in Wales as well. Surely, we are one United Kingdom and there should therefore be fair money for all the different parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not think the hon. Gentleman is ever happy, so there is no pleasing some people. However, I would point out that over £600 million extra is going to the Welsh Government's budget—the biggest day-to-day funding settlement for the Welsh Government in a decade—and there will also be the concomitant Barnett consequential from yesterday's Budget statement. So it is simply not accurate to say that Wales is not receiving extra funding.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the register. There were some very welcome moves on coronavirus in the Budget yesterday, and some very practical advice from the NHS. I understand the need to keep schools open if the risk is low to children, to keep workers in important work positions, but the same applies to nursery schools and other forms of childcare, which do not appear to have been covered in the Budget yesterday, or in advice. I have had a letter from a constituent with a nursery today saying that

“Morton Michel, one of the biggest childcare insurers in the UK”

is

“refusing to add Covid-19 to its list of insurable diseases”,

which could result in many childcare places going bust. May we have guidance, and a statement from the Treasury

and from the Department for Education, specifically for childcare providers, and also for children in care?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a significant subject. I will take it up and get a reply to him on what action the Government are taking on the matter.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In recent days, the price of oil has plummeted, yet in the Chancellor's Budget yesterday there was not a peep in relation to this hugely important industry. Does the Leader of the House share my concern in that regard, and will he commit to a debate in Government time on this hugely important matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The oil sector is obviously important and the price of oil affects the whole of the economy. However, I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that, yesterday in this House, his right hon. Friend the leader of the SNP raised the matter in the Budget debate, so it has just been raised.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): May we have a debate on disabled access to public transport? I want very quickly to highlight the situation in the beautiful village of Chinley, which has a growing population and a highly successful special school academy, yet the railway station has no step-free access, denying a huge number of people access to public transport. In 2020, this situation is quite simply unacceptable.

Mr Rees-Mogg: This issue affects many railway stations and it is one that is taken seriously by the Government. My hon. Friend has raised his point today, and it would be well worth asking for an Adjournment debate on the subject.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): When will we see progress on the fire safety and building safety Bills announced in the Queen's Speech? Thus far, the Government's policy on the issues raised by the Grenfell Tower fire has been a ragbag of consultations and guidance notes. Are we not overdue clarity and comprehensive action on both those life and death matters?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The fire safety Bill will be brought forward, and the Chancellor announced £1.5 billion to deal with the cladding issue yesterday. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will have heard what the hon. Gentleman said.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on how the English Football League must do more to protect the interests of fans and towns such as Bury from unscrupulous club owners? The recent EFL report stating that the Football League could not have saved Bury FC defied belief. It is an organisation that is clearly not fit for purpose. We must ensure that other clubs and their fans are protected and not sold out like Bury FC.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend my hon. Friend for his campaign to save Bury football club, on which he has been a leader. I can give him good news: the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

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has whispered to me that the Government will try to do what they can to help Bury football club. Action is being taken by some authorities, if not by the football league.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On Tuesday, the deadline passed for applications for the next set of Six Nations broadcasting rights. As I outlined in early-day motion 237, it looks likely—indeed, packages have been designed in such a way to ensure—that live coverage will be lost by terrestrial TV.

[That this House notes with concern that Six Nations organisers have refused to rule out the possibility of the tournament going behind a £300 million pay per view paywall in 2022 following the start of a new broadcast rights period; believes that by ruling out joint bids by terrestrial broadcasters Six Nations officials are making it inevitable that the rights to broadcast the tournament will be secured by a pay-to-view subscription service; is concerned that this move risks losing an audience that has been built up and will stymie the ability of the sport to attract young players to the game; notes that the Six Nations tournament has a long tradition of being aired on free-to-view television in the UK and that any decision that would limit access would be a retrograde step; calls on the Six Nations organisers to reconsider their decision on allowing joint broadcaster bids; and further calls on the Government to ensure that the long-cherished Six Nations tournament is given full protection under Group A listed event status.]

Six Nations Rugby Ltd apparently did not receive my email or letter requesting a meeting to discuss the issue, but there is another solution. May we have a debate on listed events, so that we can discuss moving the Six Nations to group A protection?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman has raised that point, and it is heard. I encourage him to go to the Backbench Business Committee, because I have a feeling that this may win a lot of support from Members across the House representing all parts of the United Kingdom.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): My office is inundated with pleas for assistance from leaseholders who cannot sell or remortgage their properties because of post-Grenfell advice on cladding and building safety. I have applied for a Westminster Hall debate, but may we have a debate in Government time about the mortgage crisis and cladding? It is clear that the external wall system process is not working as it should.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are working on that. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who is sitting next to me, has said that he would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time about the implications of the increase in the immigration health surcharge from £400 to £624 per person per year? At a time when

we face a global pandemic, can we have some answers on why the Government feel it is a good idea to put barriers in the way of public health?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That was a manifesto commitment, and therefore the British people have voted for it. It is a national health service, not an international health service. It is quite right that people coming to this country should pay if they are going to use the national health service—that is only reasonable.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): At last week's business questions, I asked for a debate in Government time on electric vehicle and hydrogen infrastructure. If the Leader of the House had been in Transport questions earlier, he would have heard many questions put by Members, including the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), about the confusion in the sector. Will he grant time for such an important debate on the industrial strategy needed for the provision of these new technologies?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am greatly flattered, because last week I suggested that the hon. Gentleman raise that in Transport questions, and he has followed my advice. I am glad that my advice is providing a useful service to the House.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I recently attended the finals of the Go4SET competition in Hamilton, which encourages young people to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and maths. It was great to see so many girls taking part in the competition, with all three school teams from my constituency being gender-balanced. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Stonelaw High School's science department on winning the pupils' choice award? Will he commit to a debate in Government time on encouraging more young girls and women into STEM careers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate the hon. Lady on encouraging more young ladies into STEM careers. That is very important, and it is something the Government wish to do. I also congratulate her high school. That is admirable and has the full support of the Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Heart failure is a long-term, life-limiting syndrome, which often gets worse over time. Current estimates suggest that 920,000 people are living with heart failure in the United Kingdom, with 200,000 new diagnoses of the condition every year in the UK. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on that very important health issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, you saved the best for last with the hon. Gentleman, who is an assiduous attender of these sessions. Of course, heart disease is an important issue. I am not sure that there will be Government time for a debate on it, but he has raised it today, and I know his persistence will ensure that a debate is held on it one way or another in the not-too-distant future.

Planning for the Future

11.19 am

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I would like to make a statement expanding on the housing measures set out in yesterday's Budget. I have deposited a document in the Library setting out our vision for the future of the planning system.

A home is so much more than four walls and a roof. It is about security, a stake in our society and investing for our future. The expansion of home ownership over the 20th century created a fairer Britain, with prosperity and opportunity spread more evenly. That is why this Government believe in supporting people who are working hard to own their own home, and ensuring that young people and future generations have the same opportunities as those who came before them.

We are making progress. Last year, we built over 241,000 homes—more new homes than at any point in the last 30 years—taking the total delivered since 2010 to 1.5 million. The proportion of young homeowners has increased, after declining for more than a decade. Yet a great deal more is required to be done. Many are still trapped paying high rents and struggling to save for a deposit. Home ownership seems like a dream that remains out of reach. Our children should be able to put down roots in the places where they grew up, but the simple truth is that too many will continue to be priced out if we do not build many more homes and take the action now that is required to remove barriers to people getting on to the housing ladder.

To achieve this, the Government are prepared to take bold action across the board. We will be introducing a building safety Bill to bring about the biggest change in building safety for a generation, and a renters reform Bill to provide greater stability to those who rent. We will be making sure that those in social homes will be treated with the dignity and the respect that they deserve through our social housing White Paper. We will be working hard to end rough sleeping. We will be bringing forward an ambitious planning White Paper in the spring to create a planning system that is truly fit for the 21st century—a planning system that supports the delivery of the number of homes we need as a country, but homes that local people want to live in, with more beautiful, safer and greener communities.

The way we work and live has changed beyond recognition since the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. The planning system has not kept pace. We intend to change this, so we will be reviewing our approach to planning to ensure that our system enables more homes to come forward in the places that people most want to live, with jobs, transport links and other amenities on their doorstep. This means making the best use of land and existing transport infrastructure.

To that end, I am announcing that we will review the formula for calculating local housing need, taking a fresh approach that means building more homes, but also encouraging greater building in urban areas. We will make the most of our transport hubs, and I am announcing a call for proposals to invite innovative solutions for building housing above and around stations. We will be backing brownfield sites for development, and we will work with ambitious mayors and councils

of all political persuasions in all parts of the country. We will be beginning by investing £400 million to regenerate brownfield sites across the country, and we are launching a new national brownfield sites map so that anyone—member of the public, entrepreneur or local authority—can understand where those sites are.

Local authorities need to play their part through their local plans. Today, I am setting a deadline of December 2023 for all local plans to be in place, before the Government will have to intervene. In addition, in the coming months, through the White Paper, we will lay the foundations for a modern, dramatically accelerated planning system. This will be a digital planning system that harnesses technology for the first time, and one where it is far easier for local communities to play a real role in the decisions that affect them, shortening and simplifying the plan-making process. As part of that, we will reform planning fees and link them to performance to create a world-class and properly resourced planning service. We will explore the use of tools such as zoning, and for the first time we will make clear who actually owns land across the country, by requiring complete transparency on land options. Where permissions are granted, we will bring forward proposals to ensure that they are turned into homes more quickly.

We are not waiting for the White Paper to begin our actions. We are encouraging local communities to take innovative routes to meet housing needs in their areas through new planning freedoms, and we are also introducing the freedom to build upwards on existing buildings. Today I am announcing a new right to allow vacant, commercial, industrial and residential blocks to be demolished and replaced with well-designed, new residential units that meet high-quality standards, including on new natural light standards. We are granting permission to get building across the country.

We know that we need to deliver at scale and at a pace that we have not seen in recent years, and yesterday's Budget set out that those vital planning changes will be underpinned by serious additional investment. The £12 billion that we are putting into affordable homes represents the biggest cash investment in the sector for a decade. We are finalising details for a new affordable homes programme, which will deliver homes for social rent, as well as for affordable rent, shared ownership and supported housing. There will be a route to ownership for all, regardless of the tenure at which people begin.

We are taking an infrastructure-first approach and yesterday £1.1 billion was allocated to build new communities and unlock 70,000 new homes in total. That is more than £4 billion invested through the housing infrastructure fund. Building on that, we will introduce a new long-term flexible single housing infrastructure fund of at least £10 billion.

I have made safety a personal priority of mine since I became Secretary of State last year. With that in mind, the Government are bringing forward the most important improvements to our building safety regime in a generation, and I am pleased that, as the Chancellor set out yesterday, in addition to the £600 million already made available, there will be an extra £1 billion to make buildings in the social and private sectors safe. I am pleased that in the private sector that investment will benefit leaseholders, many of whom I met recently, and I fully appreciate the pain and stress that they have been through by feeling trapped in their homes.

[Robert Jenrick]

In line with our commitment to end rough sleeping, we are putting in more than £640 million over this Parliament for new “move on” accommodation, and vital support for substance misuse services. That work will be spearheaded by my Department and by the new and urgent review I have set up, which is led by Dame Louise Casey.

I am also mindful of our huge responsibility to future generations and to ensuring that as we build more, we also build better. That is why I will be updating the national planning policy framework to embed the principles of good design and place making. As recommended in the recent report by the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, we will introduce a “fast track for beauty” and mandate that tree-lined streets should be the norm in this country in future.

We are backing a broader green revolution, including plans to establish a net-zero development in Toton in the east midlands, which I hope will be one of Europe’s most exciting new environmentally sustainable communities. We are seeking to establish similarly high-quality and environmentally sustainable communities through up to four new development corporations in the Oxford to Cambridge arc: around Bedford, St Neots and Sandy, Cambourne, and near Cambridge.

We should seize this opportunity to consider how the built and natural environments can work together more harmoniously, and in that spirit, I will be reviewing our policy to prevent building in areas of high flood risk. Given the recent devastation suffered by so many of our communities, we are putting an extra £5.2 billion into flood defences.

The real work begins today. Over the spring and the summer, I will work with local authorities, SME house builders and larger developers, local groups and, I hope, Members from all parts of the House. Our mission is clear: we will build more homes; we will help more people on to the housing ladder; and we will do our duty to future generations by ensuring that those homes are built in a way that is beautiful and sustainable, creating a legacy of which we can all be proud. That is what it means to level up and to unite our country. I commend this statement to the House.

11.30 am

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement, which arrived half an hour ago.

This is indeed a follow up to the Budget and the Treasury’s flawed thinking runs throughout. After nearly 10 years there is still no plan to fix the country’s housing crisis, while the promise of the White Paper is a threat to give big developers a freer hand to do what they want, ignoring quality, affordability and sustainability. Of course planning requires reform, but planning is not the major constraint on the new homes the country needs when 365,000 were given permission last year and only 213,000 were built; when only 6,200 new social homes were built last year when more than 1 million people are on housing waiting lists; and when, of course, big developers can dodge all planning permission to “abuse permitted development rights to provide accommodation of the lowest quality.”

Those are not my words, but those of the Government’s own Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

The Secretary of State has a number of questions on the planning front. In 2015, the Government set a deadline of early 2017 for all councils to have a local plan in place. Why is he now waiting another three years until the end of 2023? Will local areas have social housing targets, not just total targets, in this review of the formula for local housing need? Will new standards be set for greener zero-carbon homes? How much extra funding will the Government provide to beef up the capacity of our council planning services, which have been cut by a half over the past decade? The White Paper is a red warning. It could strip local communities of the powers they have to say no to big developers taking the easy option of building on the green belt. It could impose Whitehall’s total house building numbers on local communities without the new affordable housing that local residents need. It could mean more unsuitable business buildings turned into slum housing, with no planning permission needed at all.

We welcome the new money in the Budget for replacing dangerous cladding and I welcome the Secretary of State’s personal commitment to building safety. Since the weeks immediately after Grenfell, we have argued that no resident should have to pay simply to make their home safe. Only the Government can fix this problem. It is a profound failure that thousands are in this position nearly three years on from Grenfell. How many fire risk buildings will this new fund have to cover? Will it fund essential fire safety work to retrofit sprinklers? Will he guarantee that this fund means no leaseholder will now have to pay the costs to make their buildings safe?

The Secretary of State’s Department released new building safety figures just over an hour ago, which he has not mentioned this morning—and no wonder. Nearly three years on from Grenfell, 266 high-rise blocks still have the same Grenfell-style ACM cladding. The Secretary of State has still not published the test results or the numbers of those blocks with unsafe non-ACM cladding. The existing fund for private sector ACM cladding has already been in place for 10 months, so it is clear that funding alone will not fix the problems. Will he now also back Labour proposals for simple emergency legislation to force block owners to do and pay for this work?

Finally, with one or two minor exceptions, yesterday’s Budget was a golden, but wasted opportunity on housing. When the Government’s borrowing costs are at rock bottom and the Chancellor promises a capital spending spree, the Secretary of State must be deeply disappointed by how little funding he has for new affordable homes. Over five years, there will be just £12.2 billion, and a quarter of that is not even new money. This means an average of £2.4 billion a year. In real terms, that is only half the level of affordable housing investment made in the last year of the last Labour Government. Over five years, it will be less than housing organisations—from the National Housing Federation to Shelter—say is needed every year. Will he concede that on housing, it will be business as it was before the Budget—a continuation of 10 years of Conservative failure on housing, with no plan to fix the housing crisis—and will he admit that despite the Chancellor’s constant Budget boast on housing, this is a Government that do not “get it done”?

Robert Jenrick: We built more homes in this country last year—240,000 homes—than were built in any of the last 30 years. The right hon. Gentleman left house

building in this country at the lowest level since the 1920s when he was the Housing Secretary. Today, it is at the highest level for 32 years. We have built more affordable homes in this country on average since 2010 under a Conservative Government than under the last Labour Government. We built more council houses in this country in one year last year than in the 13 years of the last Labour Government combined. In Wales, which Labour has control of, how many council houses were built last year? Fifty seven. How many the year before? Eighty. How many in the three years before that? Zero, so I will take no lectures from him on our record.

This was a great Budget for housing. We saw the largest investment for 10 years in affordable housing—over £12 billion. We saw further investment in infrastructure to unlock homes in all parts of the country and the commitment to bring forward a new larger single housing infrastructure fund later this year. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, we saw a further £1 billion investment in building safety, which is an incredibly important step forward to give safety, security and confidence to leaseholders who are feeling concerned in their homes. Together, this package will help us to lay the foundations for the housing reforms that we intend to introduce during this Parliament and which the White Paper that I will publish later this year will take forward at pace.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me a few questions, including about the affordable homes programme. This has been welcomed by everybody in the sector, including Kate Henderson, who leads for housing federations—she warmly welcomed this. The housing and homelessness charities welcomed the announcements that we made as a very significant step forward in investing in this area.

We have also announced more money for brownfield land, so this is not about the ruination of the countryside or needless urban sprawl. It is about getting more homes in the places where they are most needed and backing ambitious councils and Mayors such as Andy Street in the west midlands, who want to get going and unlock the parcels of brownfield land.

The building safety fund will be open as soon as possible. We want to work with leaseholders who are in properties over 18 metres and ensure that they can access the funding.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the publication of the Building Research Establishment's research. That will happen in the coming weeks, but the research is already available; it is simply that we have not consolidated and published the final findings. We do not expect those findings to be any different from the ones that are already in the public domain.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked about legislation, as he did the other day, and he did not listen to the answer then. We will bring forward our fire safety legislation in the coming months, and I hope, from what he said today, that he intends to support it. That will give the powers to fire and rescue services across the country to do exactly what he wishes.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to let this run until about 12.10 pm.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Even if the shadow Secretary of State does not, may I warmly welcome the new money for affordable housing? I ask

the Secretary of State to make sure that some of it finds its way to innovators such as the National Community Land Trust Network and the Right to Build Task Force, because the new ideas that will help us to change our whole approach to how we do housing are coming from them.

Robert Jenrick: I do support groups such as community housing organisations—I know my hon. Friend has an Adjournment debate later today to which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing, will respond—and we want to ensure that they are properly resourced to take that forward. We want to help smaller communities, particularly in rural areas, to build small numbers of homes—five, 10, 15, whatever might be appropriate for their community—through rural exception sites and the other things he has championed over the years, such as self-building. We will bring forward more measures in the White Paper to help facilitate that.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): There are many things in the statement that I welcome and that I am sure the Select Committee will welcome and will want to look at. Shortly after Grenfell, the Select Committee recommended that all cladding not of limited combustibility be taken off existing high-rise buildings and banned from new buildings, and the £1 billion is a step in that direction, but we will want to analyse whether it is sufficient. On the planning review, in the past the Committee has suggested a comprehensive review of planning, particularly of the changes since 2010. Will the review look at what has worked and what has not worked with regards to the changes and also at the recommendation of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission that there be reform to the permitted development system to ensure minimum standards? Finally, will the Secretary of State have another look at reform of the Land Compensation Act 1961, which we suggested, so as to run down the cost of land, which is an obstacle to development? On the housing needs assessment reforms, which again I welcome, the first changes the Government made actually shifted development from the north to the south. Will he look at whether the system should not be going in reverse and trying to level up by putting more development into the north?

Robert Jenrick: I will pay close attention to all those points. Everything the hon. Member listed is within the scope of the planning White Paper, and I would welcome his views and those of the members of his Committee. In reviewing local housing need, we will take account of the need to level up and rebalance the economy, both geographically, from the south to the north, and between areas—for example, by trying to ensure that cities that have depopulated in our lifetime can have more homes built in them to get people and families back into and living in some of our great cities where sadly fewer people are living now than 20 or 30 years ago. I welcome the work he did on the building safety fund, and I hope this will now make a significant difference in helping leaseholders, particularly in private buildings, move forward. We have also opened it up to the social sector, because some housing associations, particularly small ones, and some smaller councils do not have the finances readily available or the ability to borrow to do the work now required. This fund will be open to them to do that, so money should not be a barrier to their moving forward with the remediation works required.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As the Secretary of State is aware, I have been much involved in reform of the planning system under previous Governments, and I urge him to be radical when he produces his White Paper. I am glad he has retained his commitment to involve local communities. Strengthening the role of neighbourhood plans against the problems put in their way by district councils would be a very good way of taking that forward.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There is evidence that some local plans have been undermined and that the hard work put in by local communities has not reaped the benefits those areas would have liked—they can spend years creating plans only to see development happening on other sites, not those they have chosen themselves. We are reviewing that, taking examples from across the country where we think that has happened and trying to learn lesson from it, and I hope that will feed into our work and create a strengthened plan-making system in the future.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The built environment and planning professions have a core role to play in tackling the climate emergency, yet in his statement the Secretary of State made only tangential mention of the climate emergency. I gently say to him: he will not achieve a green revolution with one single net-zero development across the whole UK. Can I encourage him to think again about this most urgent of challenges, to enshrine the climate emergency as a core purpose and responsibility of the planning system and to set the highest possible standards for net-zero development across our planning system to ensure we are not building new homes that will need to be retrofitted in the future?

Robert Jenrick: We are committed to a green revolution in the housing industry. We are doing that in many different ways, most notably through the future homes standard, which we have just consulted on. We have received more than 3,000 responses and will bring forward our final proposals shortly. We have consulted on a substantial reduction in CO₂ emissions in new homes of between 75% and 80%. I do not want to pre-empt what we might choose to do, having listened to the views in the consultation. However, the evidence that we saw prior to the consultation was that that was the most credible reduction in CO₂ emissions that we could deliver across the whole of the country, although some parts could go further and faster if they chose to do so. We are listening to the responses, and I want to see the industry respond, change and have much higher levels of energy efficiency and to see new heating systems come in as quickly as possible.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Supply alone will not solve all the affordability problems in the housing market. It will require intervention, such as his excellent First Homes initiative. Will he consider extending that initiative to directly commissioning first homes on public land and perhaps combining First Homes with Help to Buy to further improve the affordability of home purchase?

Robert Jenrick: That is a very interesting idea and one that I will give careful thought to. My hon. Friend and I worked together on the creation of First Homes,

and I am very grateful for his views on that. He is absolutely right that this will require both supply and demand-side reforms. That is why the planning system is so important in unlocking more land in the places where people want to live, but it is also important to have ways of getting people on to the housing ladder, and First Homes is just one of those options. It will enable people in their local area to get 30% discounts on new homes. I recently met the major house builders, who are fully supportive, and I hope that we will see those homes on the market in this country by the end of the year.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that we are building at some of the lowest densities in Europe, which is causing us to have to build on floodplains—although I appreciate what he said earlier. If we are really talking about sustainable development, surely we have to build at density in and around our towns, as opposed to allowing the spread into our rural communities.

Robert Jenrick: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I hope that that is what he took away from the tone and substance of my earlier remarks. In reviewing the planning system and how we calculate local housing need, we will be trying to push development towards urban areas and existing clusters and away from needless urban sprawl and the ruination of the countryside. We will be using the planning system to encourage that. Some of the planning freedoms, for example, will help people in their everyday lives, allowing them to extend their own properties or build upwards on their homes, and allow entrepreneurs to buy derelict, disused buildings and turn them into housing, to get housing going in towns and cities at a pace that we have not seen for many years.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On Monday, the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government heard some rather extraordinary claims from certain London councils about the cost of building council homes in London. My right hon. Friend's announcement and the Budget are an excellent start on building new council homes. Can he set out how many council homes he expects to see and what safeguards he will put in place to ensure that those council homes can be brought under the right to buy and that the receipts from right to buy are then reinvested in new housing?

Robert Jenrick: The new affordable homes programme, which we announced yesterday, will be over £12 billion. We have not yet finalised the details, but will set them out shortly. They will show the proportion of those homes that will be for different tenures, from shared ownership and affordable rent to social rent. We want a significant increase in the number of those homes in the social rent category. I hope we can make a positive announcement on that shortly, when we have finalised the details, having spoken to and listened to the sector.

I am very sympathetic to the argument that my hon. Friend has made in the past about properties that are not eligible for right to buy and, indeed, about some councils and housing associations that are making it more difficult. I would like to work with him to take action on that. We need to ensure that the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, takes housing seriously. As I have

said before, we will never be able to meet our housing targets and ambitions as a country unless London pulls its weight, and I am afraid that at the moment we have a Mayor whose ambitions are way below what we should all be expecting at every level of the market. As long as he continues in place, which I hope is not for very much longer, the Mayor needs to get building in London.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has just been talking about the delivery of homes for social rent, but I would like to ask him about the impact of two of his Government's policies on the delivery of homes for social rent. The first is yesterday's changes to the Public Works Loan Board when it comes to the delivery of homes for social rent by local housing companies. The second is the First Homes policy, which, because it is delivered through section 106 as it is currently designed, is likely to lead to a reduction in the production of homes for social rent by local councils. What is his response?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady will know as a follower of Treasury matters that what we announced yesterday in the Budget with reform of the Public Works Loan Board makes it cheaper for councils to borrow to invest in housing and regeneration. I hope that she will support the changes that we made. The changes we are making to the PWLB will make it harder for councils to waste money on speculative investments outside their boundaries and get highly indebted and make it easier to spend money on things that really matter. We have lifted the housing revenue account borrowing cap, and many councils across the country are responding to that and building council houses at a pace that we have not seen for many years, as was reflected in the statistics I gave earlier. We built more council houses last year than we have done for many years, and I hope that her local council in Oxford will do the same, if that is what she wishes.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. It is absolutely right that we look afresh at the planning system, and I am so glad that he is doing just that. My right hon. Friend knows a great deal about the challenges that new build housing can create for existing communities as well as for owners. What more can he do to ensure that developers properly consider the rights and needs of local communities, as well as of the new build home owners, which are often impacted by their behaviours?

Robert Jenrick: Quality is extremely important, and we have seen evidence of poor-quality development in this country in recent years, including by some of the most prominent house builders. That needs to change, and if we are going to reform the planning system to make it easier to build, then house builders must respond in turn by ensuring that homes are well designed, safe and environmentally sustainable. My hon. Friend has seen examples of poor practice in Telford and has campaigned on that. We are placing the new homes ombudsman on a statutory footing, and that will ensure that anyone who purchased a home has a proper system for redress if the usual complaints mechanism of the house builder does not suffice. I hope that that will see a big change in the quality of output from house builders very rapidly.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The car valeting site in Tottenham Hale, the illegal waste tip in Hillingdon, the tip in Ealing that is inaccessible: what happens to these ungreen green-belt sites that could provide a million new homes close to London train stations? Any London MP knows that we desperately need such homes for people who may never be able to afford to buy.

Robert Jenrick: There are sites like that in all parts of the country. It requires good local councils and, perhaps in this case, the Mayor of London, to get involved and to help unlock the land for development. I appreciate that there can be complexities in many cases, not least with illegal waste sites, for example. We created a fund in the last Budget to tackle that—a £20 million fund that perhaps the hon. Lady would consider bidding into. We announced in this Budget a £400 million fund to unlock brownfield sites, and that will be available for ambitious Mayors and local councils across the country to bid into very shortly. I hope that she will take us up on that.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I welcome the wide-ranging initiatives in the statement, particularly the potential for four development corporations on the Oxford-Cambridge arc. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the pressures on public access to public services, particularly GPs, where there are significant increases in housing demand, especially in my constituency. Will those development corporations have specific accountability for filling gaps in access to public services? If not, what measures will he take to ensure that there is better co-ordination?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend understands this issue well and has represented two constituencies with very serious affordability issues, but where there is also a great opportunity to build housing. We need to ensure that that is done in a very sensitive way and that the infrastructure flows with the new housing. That is the objective of creating the development corporations, which will be partnerships between the local community and the Government, and we hope that this will be well planned, environmentally sustainable, good-quality, beautiful housing and that the services—GP surgeries, schools, roads, utilities—flow with the housing and meet the demands. I really hope that I can work with all those communities to ensure that they are great successes.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I welcome the £1 billion cladding fund that was announced yesterday. It is a start, but as the Secretary of State knows, the devil is in the detail. May I encourage him to set up a contact group with representatives of leaseholders, freeholders, managing agents, fire services, local authorities, mortgage companies and his officials, perhaps chaired by the Housing Minister, to work through that detail so that it does not take another two and a half years for all the unsafe cladding to be removed?

Robert Jenrick: I welcome the work my right hon. Friend the Housing Minister has done on this issue, and I will take that away. We want to work progressively with all the stakeholders. We have built an effective operation on ACM above 18 metres in recent months. We have named contacts for all the buildings, and all, bar a very small number, now have plans to remediate.

[Robert Jenrick]

By opening the fund's scope much more widely to other dangerous materials above 18 metres, we will have to put in place the same procedures for those materials to understand exactly where the buildings are, to understand who are the right people to work with us and to make sure that work is tendered for and that workers get on site as quickly as possible. That will be a very complex piece of work. At the moment, it can take up to six months to get workers on site to do ACM remediation, and some projects can take up to two years to complete. I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge, but I am keen to work with anybody who is interested to make sure it begins as quickly as possible.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A sense of place informs our personal and communal sense of worth. As one of those who served on the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, I welcome this statement and, in particular, the Secretary of State's commitment to a fast track for beauty. In considering these matters, will he also look at sprawl and out-of-town and edge-of-town developments, both in retail and housing? If we can revitalise and rejuvenate our town centres, it will refresh the spirit of our people.

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend is heavily involved in the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, and I commend its superb report to anyone interested in these issues. One point it raises, which we will now be taking forward, is the need to mitigate the urban sprawl and the damage to the countryside we have seen over the past 50 or 60 years and more.

The answer to that is gentle density in urban areas, building upwards where appropriate—perhaps where there are existing clusters of high-rise buildings—and, building gently where building upwards is not appropriate. There are plenty of examples in the report of where that can be done in an attractive way that local communities could support. We need to ensure more homes are built in our town centres and around our high streets. The high streets and town centres fund that we have created through the £3.6 billion towns fund provides funding to many parts of the country to do exactly that.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I look forward to the forthcoming building safety Bill. As the Secretary of State knows, homebuyers in my constituency have had some very poor experiences of safety issues in their new homes, but can he explain how the Bill will bring about not just tighter regulation but culture change in the industry, upskilling of the workforce and adequate resources for enforcement and local authorities?

Robert Jenrick: All those things need to happen. We are undergoing the greatest change in our building safety regime in most of our lifetimes. That will take time and will require a significant change in the culture of the industry. The new regime, which is now being established in shadow form and will be legislated for later this year, will place new duties on those involved in the construction industry and on those responsible for looking after buildings once they have been built.

An individual or entity will be criminally responsible for safety, from the moment construction begins, throughout a building's occupation, many years into the future.

That will be managed through our building safety regulator, which will sit within the Health and Safety Executive. The HSE has a lot of experience in this field and has seen significant changes and improvements in safety in other fields, such as oil and gas, in our lifetime.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): To keep families together and strengthen our communities in Guildford and Cranleigh, it is vital that we can ensure we have the right homes in the right place at the right price. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to make it easier for people to get on the housing ladder in their local area?

Robert Jenrick: Part of the answer is building more homes in the places where they are most in demand. That will be at the heart of the reforms we will bring forward, and my hon. Friend represents an area that is in great demand. Some of the freedoms that we are encouraging—to build upwards gently and to reimagine town centres and high streets—will ensure that more homes are built sensitively in places such as Guildford, but we are also bringing forward a fleet of policies to help home ownership. One of them is our First Homes policy, which will enable local first-time buyers in her area to get a 30% discount on their first home. We are also looking at long-term fixed-rate mortgages, so that it is much cheaper and more certain when taking out first mortgages. Of course, the Help to Buy scheme and our existing home ownership schemes have helped more than 600,000 first-time buyers on to the housing ladder since 2010.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right to acknowledge the anxiety for leaseholders living in blocks with unsafe cladding. Will he confirm that it is his intention that no leaseholder should have to pay for the replacement of cladding on their block? How long does he think it will take before all the unsafe cladding on residential buildings around the country above 18 metres has been replaced?

Robert Jenrick: We will publish shortly the exact details of the new scheme, but it is our intention that it will be available for both the private and social sectors and that this will encompass all unsafe materials above 18 metres for what are commonly considered high-rise buildings. I would like it to include those buildings that are just below 18 metres, because there are some buildings where there has been a gaming of the system by some developers, such as the building in Bolton, for example, that was 17.8 metres. There will be a small degree of flexibility to resolve that issue, and this should enable no leaseholder to be trapped in their building. The funding should be available for all who require it, and, as I say, in the social sector, it will be available to the relatively small number, but an important number, of housing associations and councils that do not have the resources available to do the work themselves.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to say that under the planning system there should be a presumption not to build on green fields or on floodplains and that there should also be environmental sustainability. Does he therefore share my concerns that the west of Ifield Homes England development represents none of those criteria?

Robert Jenrick: I am aware of my hon. Friend's opposition to those proposals and I am happy to continue to work with him to ensure that Homes England answers his questions and refines the schemes as much as possible to try to meet the concerns of the local community. I hope more broadly that the announcement I have made today of a review of how the planning system interacts with floodplains and the increased risk of flooding that we are seeing in many parts of the country will be good news to those parts of the country that have seen floods in the last few weeks, and that we can bring forward changes in the coming months.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The money allocated in the Budget for cladding removal applies only to buildings over 18 metres, and the Government guidelines issued in January say:

"We strongly advise building owners to consider the risks of any external wall system...irrespective of the height of the building". Consequently, any leaseholder in a low-rise building is struggling to get approvals to sell, to get a bigger share of the property or to remortgage. What are the Government going to do about that? Those leaseholders are currently marooned.

Robert Jenrick: The fund that we have announced this week is for high-rise buildings, and that was on the advice of our expert panel and Dame Judith Hackitt, who has advised the Government for some time and is helping to set up the new building safety regulator. The expert advice is that height is the main factor in determining safety, but it is not the only factor, and that is why earlier in the year I set in train work on what other factors we should be taking into consideration. It is none the less the most important factor as far as we are guided by advice. For buildings below 18 metres, which will not be eligible for the fund, we will continue working with lenders and insurers to get the market working faster. The new form that has been created in partnership between the Government and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors appears to be working in some cases, but not in all, and we need to make sure that that happens faster.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Inexplicably, the Mayor of Greater Manchester has delayed the publication of the spatial framework to build on local green-belt land until after the mayoral election in May. In the meantime, what can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State do to stop speculative applications on the green belt, such as that in Bredbury Parkway in my constituency?

Robert Jenrick: I am very aware of my hon. Friend's opposition to this plan and that of many of his colleagues—I would say Conservative colleagues, but it is not even exclusively Conservative colleagues. Indeed, I believe the shadow Secretary of State is opposed to Andy Burnham's plan. It is clearly not proving popular in my hon. Friend's part of Greater Manchester. We will have to see what happens in the mayoral elections, but I am sure my hon. Friend will be campaigning strongly to protect the wishes of local people in his community.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The announcement on the new cladding fund is welcome, but it remains to be seen whether it will be sufficient to cover all the issues that have been talked about today.

I have a specific question about the detail. Leaseholders are paying an awful lot of money for waking watches at the moment. Will that be reimbursed as part of this fund?

Robert Jenrick: The fund will operate like the 18-metre ACM fund, in that it will be available only for the costs of the remediation works themselves, not for any service charge fees that might be incurred in the interim. We want to see this work done as quickly as possible, because I am very conscious of the fact that those waking watches are causing meaningful costs to people. There are cases where people are finding it extremely difficult to meet those costs.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's words on the presumption of brownfield development. Will he give me an assurance that councils such as Aylesbury Vale District Council in my constituency, which are high in the league table for new build housing, at significant loss to our countryside, will not be pressured, so long as we bring forward all the brownfield developments in Buckinghamshire?

Robert Jenrick: We want to support and reward the many councils across the country that are making often difficult decisions to allocate land, aggressively build out brownfield sites, re-imagine town centres and, above all, meet the local housing need of their communities. We want to encourage those that are failing to meet the housing needs of their communities to take such a lead, because it is not fair that people are not able to live and bring up their families in their own communities. That causes housing pressure to be pushed out to other areas, perhaps such as the one my hon. Friend represents, forcing the building of even more homes and putting even more pressure on local services and the countryside in some parts of the country, particularly in the south-east.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Building can go ahead if action is taken to address potential flooding risks: more retention ponds or reservoirs to keep water on adjoining lands; and the planting of willow trees—the willow absorbs moisture and water, and can be cropped and harvested. That will involve a concerted partnership between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to preserve the environment. Will that be done? Will we have a good, sensible, intensive planning strategy now, for the future?

Robert Jenrick: Absolutely. The Environment Secretary and I will be working closely together as we see what further steps might be needed in the planning framework to ensure that homes are built in the right places. The planning system today seeks to do that, but clearly we have seen examples in recent weeks and months where it has not succeeded, so some change may be required now, particularly as the flood risk facing some parts of the country appears to be more regular and more acute than we have ever known it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly his comments about wanting more people to live in safer, greener, beautiful areas—I am sure we would all welcome that. Some people are fortunate enough to live in such areas already, and they will be concerned about over-development.

[*Martin Vickers*]

Will he assure me that they will be fully consulted? One route is a local plan, which he referred to, but many councils struggle to meet the deadlines. Will he assure me that help will be available to councils to meet those deadlines?

Robert Jenrick: Yes, there will be. We want to find a better plan-making process. Plans are taking too long and we would like not only the time taken to produce them to be reduced significantly, but for people's views to be genuinely taken into consideration. We are also, through our new digital agenda, seeing whether there are ways in which that can be done in a much more modern, 21st-century manner, on people's smartphones, so that their views can be taken into consideration.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that even more needs to be done to ensure that developers are accountable and that local communities are empowered even more to be centrally involved in the decisions made in their area? Will he be willing to meet me to discuss the Westferry Printworks development application, which he approved on 14 January?

Robert Jenrick: I or the Housing Minister would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that matter. I believe it is subject to a judicial review, so it may not be possible, but I am happy to consult my colleagues in the Department to see whether it is appropriate for me to meet her at the moment.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that one reason why the number of completions quite often does not meet the number of consents is that there is a problem in getting utilities to sites. He is absolutely right to point out that much has changed since 1947, including the way we build houses and the developments in modular building. Will his planning review specifically look at those two issues? That would allow us to meet the desire of the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) to align completions and consents.

Robert Jenrick: Absolutely. A lot of important work has been done on utilities, not least by the National Infrastructure Commission, and I would like to take that forward. On the broader challenge relating to modern methods of construction, that will absolutely be at the heart of not just the planning work we are going to do but our broader housing strategy. There is a huge opportunity for us as a country to lead the world in new construction technology and to build good-quality homes at pace. I really want us to take that forward.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): To discourage the needless urban sprawl on our green belt, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to encourage councils to unlock unused brownfield sites first and to work with SME builders, rather than moving toward huge green-belt release and working with large developers?

Robert Jenrick: We absolutely want to have a brownfield-first policy—that is at the heart of everything that we are trying to do in this policy area. It is why we

have created the brownfield fund, which is available to those councils that really want to seize this opportunity to unlock those parcels of land. It is also driving our interest in some of the planning freedoms, such as the ability for a small builder or an entrepreneur to use the new permitted development rights that I have announced this week to purchase a disused office building with the knowledge and certainty that he or she can knock that down and turn it into good-quality housing as quickly as possible. We do not want to see the needless ruination of the countryside—we all want to see it preserved for future generations—but we have to balance that with ensuring that homes are available for the next generation in those parts of the country where people really want to live.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I heard what the Secretary of State said about the importance of completing local plans. Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council is working together with our friends and neighbours in Stoke-on-Trent on a joint local plan. Will the Secretary of State assure me and them that as we get Britain building homes, the Government will also invest in infrastructure such as the schools, roads, public transport and GP services that are needed to support new developments?

Robert Jenrick: I am pleased to hear that Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent are working closely together—I am not surprised now that both are represented exclusively by Conservative MPs for the first time. We absolutely want to ensure more investment in infrastructure. As we set out in our manifesto, the infrastructure should flow first. We need well-planned, modern communities, which is why we have invested through the housing infrastructure fund. We will be succeeding that with a new, larger and longer-term single housing infrastructure fund, which will ensure that at least £10 billion is available for local areas to plan for the future and ensure that the roads, GP surgeries, utilities and hospitals are there to meet people's demands.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that local authorities such as Blackpool include adequate provisions for the environment in their local plans?

Robert Jenrick: That is already a requirement and we are going to do work to see whether further action can be taken. The future homes standard, the final details of which we will announce shortly, will mean that from 2025 no new home is built in this country unless it has very high levels of energy efficiency and sustainability—at least a 75% reduction in CO₂ emissions. If a council is in the process of making a plan, or will be soon, it will need to plan for all homes to be meeting that standard, or higher, in the years ahead.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Town centres such as Warrington's can thrive again if we focus on regeneration before we use the green belt. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to make sure that that is a reality?

Robert Jenrick: With our £3.6 billion towns fund, the Government are setting out to do exactly that: to help local communities to come together and to work with the

business community to harness private sector investment, unlock pieces of land and get more homes built in town centres. There are great examples throughout the country of councils planning significant numbers of new homes in the town centre. For example, the other day I was in Loughborough, a relatively small town that now has a plan for 1,000 extra homes to be built, some above shops and some on brownfield sites. That is exactly what needs to happen in every town centre in the country to get footfall and create new, vibrant life in town centres.

Veterans' Mental Health

12.14 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): It is with deep regret that I can confirm that an incident occurred at Camp Taji in Iraq last night in which a service person from the Royal Army Medical Corps has died. The service person's family have been informed, and requested a period of privacy before further details are released. It is a timely reminder of the ongoing and extraordinary commitment of the men and women of our armed forces. It was a cowardly and retrograde attack, and there will be no hiding place as we hunt down those responsible and bring them to justice. The thoughts and sympathies of the Prime Minister, the Government and the whole House are with the family and friends of the service person at this sad time.

Mr Speaker, following an internal review commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, I wish to make a statement about serving and former members of the armed forces ending their own lives. Speaking publicly about suicide requires a balance between risking similar episodes and ensuring that I follow through on the Prime Minister's intent to ensure that every serving or former member of the armed forces knows exactly where to turn in times of acute need. I am very aware of how it feels to be a member of a service family, particularly a spouse or relative of someone who feels that they have nowhere to turn or that Ministers are indifferent to the situation. It is this that has led me to make this statement to the House.

Suicide is almost never due to a single factor, and some reasons are impossible to identify. However, the facts on suicide in the armed forces remain broadly consistent. Current data shows that someone is significantly less likely to take their own life if they are in the armed forces—the rate is around eight in 100,000, compared with around 17 in 100,000 in the equivalent male population in the United Kingdom—but we are not complacent, and I accept that Governments have not acted fast enough to update our data and understanding of military suicide.

I am aware that we are currently experiencing a higher incidence of suicide in a cohort who served at a specific time in Afghanistan. Some people want to make suicide about numbers, but suicide is not a number. One is too many, and in my view any suicide is an individual tragedy—yes, for that person and of course for their family, but also for the military as an institution. I must, however, challenge a false narrative that veteran suicide is an epidemic, or that professional clinical services are not there. They are there. Such comments risk harming others by wrongly fuelling a perception that help is not there when it is. I therefore wish to outline to the House what I am doing about it.

I am committed to providing better support for individuals in mental distress and to learning why suicide happens and what more can be done to stop an individual reaching the decision to end their life. I meet with families, widows and experts to understand when, or if, we could or should have intervened in those crucial weeks and months before an individual took their own life—even if sometimes the answer is tragically nothing. Alongside that work, we are aiming to reduce suicide

[Johnny Mercer]

risk through tackling stigma, through education, and by providing access to mental and physical health support. Armed forces personnel now undergo “through life” psychological resilience training, enabling them to recognise and manage mental ill health in themselves and their colleagues. This actively encourages help-seeking at an early stage.

Data is key to understanding what more needs to happen. The Ministry of Defence tracks all suicides for serving personnel and annually publishes data on coroner-confirmed suicides. It tells us that we are seeing more deaths in recent years, but the number is still well below that observed in the 1990s. Unlike in the 1990s, this is not predominantly an untrained young Army male issue, but predominantly a male issue, and in older age groups, which reflects the trends in wider UK society.

A 2018 review saw the implementation of new suicide prevention measures across defence, and a defence suicide registry will capture information related to in-service suicide across the services.

The Office for Veterans' Affairs is funding the next stage of a long-term study of nearly 30,000 veterans who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Started in 2003 and led by the world's leading experts at King's College, this provides data that ensures better Government policy decisions about veterans. The Ministry of Defence and the Department of Health and Social Care together will fund Manchester University to examine, over the past five years, the 12 months leading up to veterans' taking their own lives.

A new veteran mortality study will show the incidence of suicide, alongside other causes of death, among veterans who served since 2001. I am expanding this study so that it provides, for the first time, a near real-time surveillance capability, ensuring that we can respond quickly to any new cluster of events. The first report will be published later this year.

More importantly, a shift is under way in the provision of veterans' mental health support—help is out there. For many years, I and others have called for this nation to realise her responsibilities towards those who have served. That strategic change is happening.

It is the NHS in England and the devolved Administrations who deliver veterans' healthcare. Over the years, our service charities have shouldered much of this, underpinned by the generosity of the public. This is changing and I commend the NHS on its efforts to provide services, including those bespoke for veterans, some of which the NHS commissions the charity sector to provide. It has transformed its provision for the armed forces. A clear clinical pathway exists for veterans' mental health services in England, with the transition, intervention and liaison service and the complex treatment service. I have worked recently with the NHS and ministerial colleagues to accelerate the introduction of a new high-intensity service for those in most acute need, following the challenges faced by Combat Stress.

These services mean that the state is now leading the way in supporting our veterans, though a range of partnerships, including with the third sector and others. The help is there, and we all need to be better at encouraging our family, friends and colleagues to seek it.

Veterans will have experiences, training, friendships, highs and lows like no other profession. Some may feel far from those times, challenged by the reality of resuming civilian life after intensive and unique experiences. I am ensuring that the help is there to make that transition successfully.

I care and this Government care, with record investment reinforced by yesterday's Budget's additional funding for veterans' mental health. A strategic shift is taking place, from reliance on the third sector to the state finally realising her responsibilities, ensuring that this country is the best place to be a veteran and everyone knows where to get help. This Prime Minister will accept nothing less. Having shared those battlefields with you, I have staked my professional reputation on it. But it requires everyone to play a role—to speak out, to reach out, to look after yourselves and each other. And never, ever give up. I commend this statement to the House.

12.23 pm

Mr Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the advance copy of his statement.

First, I would like to take a moment to also express our sincere condolences to the loved ones of the service person from the Royal Army Medical Corps who so tragically died at Camp Taji in Iraq last night, and with the loved ones of Private Joseph Berry, who died last week due to a non-battle injury in Afghanistan. Our thoughts and sympathies are with them today.

We know that most service personnel transition successfully back to civilian life. However, there are some who struggle and need our continued support. I welcome the Minister's statement, but nevertheless there is still much more that needs to be done.

We know that some veterans who struggle ultimately, and tragically, end up taking their own lives. Indeed, there are reports that 14 former and current serving personnel have committed suicide in the past two months alone, many of them having served in Afghanistan.

The Minister has raised the point about data collection for serving personnel. However, we do not know the full scale of this crisis for veterans, because unlike our major allies, such as Canada, New Zealand and the US, coroners in the UK do not record veterans' suicides. This lack of data makes it extremely difficult to know the full scale of the problem, but it also makes it difficult to provide better, more targeted interventions. I and others, including the former head of the armed forces and several military charities, have raised that issue before. Will the Minister update the House on what action is being taken by the MOD and the Ministry of Justice to improve the situation of recording veterans' suicides?

The Minister's statement also raised the huge issue of stigma around mental health. I appreciate that he is working to improve the situation, but some reports suggest that approximately 60% of military personnel who experience mental health problems do not seek help. The Minister mentions “through life” psychological resilience training, but it is important to ensure that the MOD continues to work with our civilian services to support our personnel once they have left the forces. Indeed, armed forces charities have found that it can take four years on average before Iraq and Afghanistan veterans seek help for mental health issues. Despite this,

the MOD follow-up period for writing to veterans is only one year after discharge. Will the Minister update us on the steps being taken to expand and improve transition support for veterans post-service?

Finally, I closely followed the Chancellor's Budget speech yesterday and was disappointed to find out that only £10 million extra was going to veterans' mental health services, through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. That is 0.007% of the NHS budget—a minuscule amount. What extra funding will the Minister be seeking for veterans' mental health in this autumn's comprehensive spending review, to ensure that veterans' mental health is treated on an equal platform to physical health?

Our armed forces work hard to keep us safe so that we can live our lives to the full without fear. Day in, day out, they do things that cross the line into the remarkable. It is only just, fair and right that we have veterans' mental health care provision worthy of these men and women.

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising clear and pertinent points in this fight to understand this issue. I will cover them in turn.

We are in conversation with the coroner service about coroner data. The hon. Gentleman will understand that suicide is a very complex and difficult issue. When it comes to data, Governments of all colours over the years have started from a very low point. That is why some of the earliest funds of the Office for Veterans' Affairs have gone into gathering the data—so that we can lead the way with evidence-based, research-based, genuine solutions to provide outcomes to our servicemen and women. A number of studies are under way. I mentioned the cohort study and our “through life” study of three quarters of a million veterans. Conversations are ongoing with the coroner service and I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with an update.

I believe that this place has made serious progress on stigma. When I first came here in 2015 and talked about the issue, we were in a very different place with mental health. Sterling work has been done by other people and I believe we are beginning to win the battle on stigma. The critical ground now is not stigma but the need to ensure that when people have the courage to come forward, the services and provision are there to meet their needs. I am fully focused on that.

On resilience training, the military now is a fundamentally different experience from five or 10 years ago. Op Smart and other service applications are doing brilliant work. We take the issue very seriously. Mental fitness and mental wellbeing are embedded in training, in phase 1 and throughout a person's career. Indeed, we are looking to launch an enhanced programme later this year, with the Royal Foundation.

There is a challenge in tracing people who have left the forces, as we do not have a veterans' administration like our colleagues in the United States, and nor would I seek to create one. But there is work that we can do. Three months ago, I tasked the Department to come up with options for tracing individuals as they go back into civilian life. There are mechanisms through which to do this already, such as writing to people to remind them of their reserve service. I am looking to couple that with a requirement for a GP appointment or similar—even if people feel well and do not want to go—so that we can get a better handle on outcomes.

I warmly welcome the commitment in yesterday's Budget to funding for mental health. That funding is going to a specific area, but in no way is that the total amount going into veterans' health. I have asked the Department to do a study outlining what we are actually doing. We are investing more than £200 million in veterans' mental health over the next 10 years, but I accept that it can be hard to see where some of this stuff goes and what we are doing with it, which is why I have tasked the Department with making clear what we are spending where. It is not fair on the professionals who are working so hard in this arena day to day for politicians to try to score points on money when there is a whole load of money going into this project, but I accept that we need to do better to get that message out there. The shadow Minister makes a fair point. This is a challenge for the Department, but we will meet it. I look forward to meetings with him in due course. This is not a party political issue. We have to meet this challenge and, under this Prime Minister, we will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I intend to get everybody in who was here at the beginning of the statement.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): With the Minister's own strong record on the subject, I am sure that he will agree that the misapplication of human rights law to the battlefield, rather than the law of armed conflict, is a cause of immense stress and mental distress to the veteran population who have taken part in campaigns and fear being dragged through the courts. When will the Government be bringing forward the promised legislation—I have in mind the promise made on Armistice Day last year, during the election campaign—to stop the repeated reinvestigation of veterans in the absence of any compelling new evidence?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his continued doggedness on this issue. I can confirm that I will be introducing a Bill on Wednesday next week that meets our manifesto commitment on this issue. The Prime Minister has made it absolutely clear that the days of lawyers running amok in our services and our veterans community, trying to rewrite history in order to make money, are over. Through a series of measures starting next Wednesday when I will introduce the Bill, this Government are going to go to war on lawfare, and we will ensure that those who serve are protected when they come home by those who should be protecting them.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank the Minister for the advance copy and the tenor of his statement. This is a vital but distressing topic that is altogether rather shameful on us all.

Like the Minister, I have met individuals who have suffered. My old Scottish parliamentary seat contained an Army personnel treatment centre that dealt with not physical injuries, but psychological ones. The people treated there were overwhelmingly young men who were being prepared for discharge because of the experiences they had endured in the conflicts to which the Minister has referred. I can appreciate that the Army has difficulty in dealing with these issues because they often manifest years down the line. It could take three months, three years or 30 years for people to experience effects, but sadly we know that they do. Indeed, the Minister is making this very statement because these issues sadly result in the tragedies that we have seen.

[Kenny MacAskill]

There is a responsibility—if not for the Army, most certainly for the state—to address this issue. It cannot simply be left to the third sector and worthy charities, no matter how valiant their efforts are; we are required to do this collectively. In that regard, may I ask the Minister specifically about the war disablement pension? The Department for Work and Pensions currently counts the pension as income in employment and support allowance applications. It is hardly a king's ransom for people taking the king's shilling and, indeed, suffering for their country. Will the Minister and his colleagues ensure that this modest compensation—made for suffering sustained in the line of duty—does not count against people? It seems to me the very least that we can do.

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Gentleman is right. The war disablement pension is listed, in line with all other pensions, as a source of income against universal credit, but it is different in different cases—for example, payments made to widows and so on. There are aspects that do not count against benefit claimants. We are trying to achieve the right balance of fairness across the country, but this is something that I look at on an ongoing basis and I would be more than happy to have a conversation about it with the hon. Gentleman offline.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend and, indeed, all Governments for all they have done in this area. When I came back from a very heavy tour in Bosnia in 1993, I had an interview with a psychiatrist. He said to me, "How do you feel?" I said, "Fine." He said, "Thanks," and left. Things have changed. There is £10 million of extra funding going into the covenant specifically for mental health. May I pitch again to my very good friend the Minister on behalf of PTSD Resolution, which has never, ever taken a penny from the Government, but which does such sterling work?

Johnny Mercer: My hon. and gallant Friend is a long-term and passionate advocate of PTSD Resolution, which does good work. In the framework of veterans' mental health, I will be bringing forward a programme in April that I will launch with Simon Stevens, the director of NHS England. My hon. Friend will see that that programme includes a clear role for charities of whatever size to bid to run some of the specialist services that PTSD Resolution and others do so well. The offering to our people is changing and I encourage my hon. Friend, PTSD Resolution and others to work together. We can meet this challenge if we work together and focus on outcomes, as I know both he and PTSD Resolution want to do.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Like the Minister, I have met several veterans who suffer from PTSD, most notably about 18 months ago when I met soldier N, who was like a coiled spring; I could sense the tension in his body and face about the trauma he had been through. Will the Minister support my call to provide homes for these heroes to give them that first step back into our civilian society and to ensure that we have in place the wraparound service—with mental health and other provisions—to enable them through this difficult time?

Johnny Mercer: I am not going to comment on individual cases because some are very difficult. The aspiration is absolutely there to provide a wraparound service. I am not sure that providing a house for individuals when they leave service is necessarily the nirvana that people think it is. The single biggest factor that will improve veterans' life chances is having a job, and we can do more in that area. I am more than happy to have a conversation with the hon. Member about this issue.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his evident personal commitment to the mental health of veterans and members of the armed forces. This is a very big change and we very much appreciate it. I also thank the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the contribution he is making through the Budget and the £10 million he has allocated for this purpose.

Will the Minister expand a little on what he said about his efforts to

"accelerate the introduction of a...high-intensity service for those in most acute need, following the challenges faced by Combat Stress"?

I am a vice-president of Combat Stress. For all the efforts of Combat Stress to change its organisation to a hub-and-spoke model, which is being supported by charities such as the Royal British Legion, the anxiety is that the withdrawal of a large chunk of NHS funding—we are grateful for the new contract that has been granted, but it is a very much smaller one—will mean that there will be veterans who slip through the cracks. Some 1,500 or so veterans will now be entirely dependent on going through their GP and into the veterans services provided by the NHS, and there is a deep anxiety that people will not get the treatment they need, although we very much applaud the efforts of the NHS to improve what it offers to veterans.

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend and pay tribute to Combat Stress for the work that it does. For many years—over 100 years—mental health in this country was not taken seriously, and almost alone Combat Stress held a candle for some of our most injured service people. There is no doubt that veterans' care is changing. Although £10 million on its own looks like a small contribution, we are actually putting over £200 million into veterans' mental health over the next 10 years. There is a very clear, defined and important role for people such as those at Combat Stress, who have a specialist, important contribution to make in the area of complex PTSD and things like that. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about this further offline, but there should be no misunderstanding at this stage. Combat Stress is going through a change, but we must all change to adapt to the challenge that is in front of us. Combat Stress has a special place in this nation's heart and a full and important role to play in future.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that there should be more initiatives like the veterans' hub in Wigan? This is a dedicated building, supported by the MOD and Wigan Council, that has a one-stop shop providing access to employment, healthcare and a range of charities so that veterans and their families can get the help they need when they need it.

Johnny Mercer: These veterans' hubs up and down the country are exactly what we are looking to promote more widely. Someone in Wigan who has one of these services has an advantage, because people are already of that way of thinking in bringing the services together and trying to treat the challenges that veterans have, not as individual problems but as something requiring a whole solution. One of the key tasks of the Office for Veterans' Affairs is making sure that best practice is rolled out across the country so that the experience of being a veteran is the same in Plymouth, Wigan and Manchester and so that we meet the commitment that I have made, and the Prime Minister has made, to this House that this will be the best country in the world in which to be an armed forces veteran.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend that the ability to speedily find a high-skilled, high-quality job after leaving the forces is essential to help veterans to transition back into civilian life, and for their mental health. What progress has he made in increasing the numbers of veterans who have transitioned successfully into civilian employment?

Johnny Mercer: Two weeks ago, we had our figures out from the Career Transition Partnership, which does a lot of this work for us. Ninety-two per cent. of people who come out of the services go into education or employment. We have very good figures, rising year on year, on this, but it is not a case of self-congratulation. We have to work ever harder with that small cohort, who come out often with concomitant challenges around mental health or their domestic situation, and make sure that there is no reason why any individual who comes out of the military who is not medically discharged cannot go straight into employment. Being in the military is one of the best things that a young person in this country can do: it gives them skills and capabilities that they will not get anywhere else. I am absolutely committed to making sure that everybody who leaves without a medical discharge finds employment.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on holding a debate on this important issue yesterday. I attended that debate, and I thank the Minister for doing so. I also thank him for his willingness to work on this issue on a cross-party basis. With lots of talk about strategy, funding and intent, what practical steps is the Minister's Department taking to work across Departments and with the devolved Administrations to deliver the critical support, which several Members have referenced, that veterans with mental health issues require?

Johnny Mercer: This is the first Government ever to set up a body, the Office for Veterans' Affairs, whose key mission is to do that. It will pull together a lot of the great work that goes on in the veterans space, whether in the NHS or in the Department for Work and Pensions, where we have seen good schemes roll out this week. I am acutely aware that nobody "owns" veterans. Nobody "owns" veterans' mental health. It is a duty of this nation to get this right, cross-party and cross-departmentally, and I am absolutely committed that that is exactly what the Office for Veterans' Affairs is going to do.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I am proud that our party has enshrined the armed forces covenant in law, highlighting the importance that we place on our armed forces. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that local authorities sign up to the covenant so that they can support people with their housing and local services needs?

Johnny Mercer: The armed forces covenant is an important piece of work that has brought us on a long way, but it is clear to me that we need to strengthen it. In the Queen's Speech, this Government committed to enshrining the armed forces covenant in law so that no individual, or their family, can be disadvantaged because of their service. We are going to bring that in during this Parliament, and it will strengthen the armed forces covenant further. I sincerely hope that there is not a single local authority in this country that has not signed up to it.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I concur with the Minister's original statement and look forward to the roll-out of the military covenant in Northern Ireland, but I do take issue with his answer to the former Chair of the Defence Committee. In doing so, I challenge the narrative of vexatious claims being made against veterans, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland. It undermines the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, which has the ability to weed out such claims; I do not even believe that examples have been cited. Can I urge the Minister to reflect on what may well be an unintended consequence of the road he is going down? Tens of thousands of people served with great honour and distinction in Northern Ireland, upholding the rule of law. If we end up putting in place some sort of measure to give unnecessary protection and warp the rule of law, that may end up de-legitimising and undermining the integrity of their service, which they are rightly very proud of.

Johnny Mercer: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I tread with the utmost care when it comes to dealing with the very bloody, very difficult and very emotional scenarios surrounding historical prosecutions. There is absolutely no Minister or individual in my position, from the Prime Minister downwards, who would ever accept that those who serve in uniform commit crimes and we do not hold them to account. Under my watch, that will never happen. But we are going to ensure that the balance and fairness in this process are restored so that those who have served their country and done nothing wrong can retire from their military service in peace. It is a challenge, but this Government are not going to run from that. We are going to meet that challenge. The hon. Gentleman will know of the many, many servicemen and women and veterans, and their families, who have been dragged through a totally unacceptable process for many years. This process is about fairness and about justice, not only for them but for people in Afghanistan, Iraq and Northern Ireland. I urge him to work with us in the weeks ahead as we tread carefully down this path.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement on this challenging but vital issue. May I invite him to praise the work of the Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre in Newcastle-under-Lyme, which I am meeting tomorrow? Community

[Aaron Bell]

centres such as that are an invaluable source of support to our veterans, both the recently retired and those who served many decades ago. I am sure it would give him a very warm welcome if and when his diary allows.

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I cherish any opportunity to get away from London—I was going to say this place, but that is too much—and I would be delighted to come on a visit and see that good work. There is some wonderful practice going on across the country, and I am absolutely determined to champion it.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I very much welcome all the work that my hon. Friend is doing in this field. Given what he said about strengthening the armed forces covenant, what steps is he taking to encourage universities to sign up to the covenant, so that our veterans do not face barriers when they apply for education?

Johnny Mercer: I want to be clear with my hon. Friend: there is no reason why any organisation in this country that takes public money cannot sign up to the armed forces covenant. There is no reason why somebody who has served or their family should suffer any disadvantage because of their service. Where that is happening, I urge people to get in touch with me. We are legislating to ensure that that cannot be the case, to put the power of the armed forces covenant into individuals' hands and to make it really mean something.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement.

BILL PRESENTED

GENDER-BASED PRICING (PROHIBITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Wera Hobhouse, Munira Wilson, Jess Phillips, Caroline Nokes, Mrs Maria Miller and Hannah Bardell, presented a Bill to prohibit the differential pricing of products and services that are substantially similar other than being intended for, or marketed to, a particular gender; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 105).

Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 11 March).

Question again proposed,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2020-21.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

12.50 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): As we face the coronavirus crisis, it is vital that we demonstrate to the people of our country that we are meeting it head-on and that we will defeat it—and we will. As I have said elsewhere, this is no time for partisan political knockabout or, for that matter, publicity stunts. We have lives to save, so we must all work together. We will work with the Government and parties across the House to protect our people and to contribute to the worldwide effort to overcome the outbreak of this virus.

We welcome the Government's package of measures announced yesterday. We must ensure, though, that alongside the medical and scientific strategy to contain, mitigate and halt the spread of the virus, the economic strategy is equally comprehensive. We agree with the Government that the NHS must receive whatever resources it needs. I pay tribute to and thank our NHS staff, who, as always, are rising to this challenge with their usual professionalism and dedication. We acknowledge that they are doing so at a time when they are already under extreme pressures, but we offer them our thanks.

The other key service that we need to support in this emergency is social care. It is unclear from Government statements so far what additional support is being provided to social care. Social care is already in crisis in this country. Before this virus outbreak, 1.5 million people were not receiving the care they need. There are more than 120,000 staff vacancies, and many of the private providers have been on the financial edge for some time. The majority of those who receive social care are older, disabled and vulnerable people—the very people who are most at risk from coronavirus infection. We have an £8 billion funding gap in social care budgets as the result of 10 years of austerity. Providers and local authorities are already stretched to breaking point in many areas, so we need to know how much additional support is being provided specifically for social care and what contingency plans are in place if individual providers are unable to cope. Like our support with regard to NHS funding, the Government will have our support to bring forward the resources, whatever it takes.

A large section of our care workforce is now under threat from the Government's recently announced immigration policy. Some Members may have seen the GMB union calculation that the Government's immigration policy will cost the care sector up to 500,000 staff. Without foreign careworkers, our care system would collapse. The message to the Home Secretary is clear: do not put our social care system at risk. Pragmatism must override ideology and policy at this stage.

Social care in this country largely falls on the shoulders of family members, and in our culture it is still usually the older women in our families. The pension age for many of those women was increased without proper consultation or notification. They were effectively robbed of many years of their pension, and this Government—despite all the Prime Minister’s promises before the election—have refused to compensate them. I met the WASPI women last week, and it is no wonder they are still angry. We may well look at what support can be given to individual carers within families as they cope with this crisis.

If any good is to come out of this developing tragedy, it must be the lessons we learn from it. It is overwhelmingly clear now that no Government can inflict a decade of cuts and austerity on our public services, such as the NHS and care services, without impacting on their resilience in a time of crisis. Ten years of cuts and a failure to invest in services mean that we are extremely ill-prepared for dealing with this type of large-scale health risk to our community.

We know that the NHS is already under pressure—intense pressure—as a result of underfunding and understaffing. Some 17,000 beds have been cut. Bed occupancy levels were at 94% last week, and critical care bed occupancy was at 80%—those are the beds we rely upon in episodes like coronavirus. The NHS is short of 100,000 staff, including more than 40,000 nurses and thousands of doctors. We have to recognise that the NHS needs to be put on a longer-term stable footing, with secure financial backing for the long term. Just as we have over the coronavirus outbreak, we must listen to the clinicians and the experts when it comes to what is needed. It should not take a crisis to secure for the NHS the resources it needs.

I turn to support for individuals and businesses. We welcome many of the Government’s measures set out by the Chancellor yesterday. The Budget stated that statutory sick pay will be paid from the first day of sickness absence and that people will be compensated for self-isolation, but we need more clarity. The Government guidance appears to exclude workers on zero-hours contracts, part-time workers and people earning below the lower earnings limit of £118 per week, saying that they are ineligible for statutory sick pay and are advised to make a claim for universal credit. Can we be absolutely clear who will be covered by statutory sick pay and who will not?

Sick pay is currently set at the low rate of £94.25 a week—that is about £18 a day. Average pre-tax earnings are £511 per week in nominal terms. Without lifting statutory sick pay, the financially secure will err on the side of caution and self-isolate, and all but the most financially secure will be asked to take a significant pay cut in order to self-isolate. That leaves people inevitably choosing between health and hardship.

For those being directed by Government to universal credit, I ask: what, if anything, has been done to reduce the five-week delay in receiving universal credit and to ensure the staffing resources in the Department for Work and Pensions to cope with the volume of demand? The suggestion is that these low-paid workers apply for universal credit, which then becomes a loan. That will push many low-paid workers into debt, which will cause significant hardship for some.

The Chancellor announced yesterday a £500 million fund for councils to administer. Can the Secretary of State clarify how much that means for each local authority and how it will be distributed? Will hard-stretched local authorities receive support for delivering that scheme? Councils are also being asked to administer £2.2 billion of funding to support businesses in meeting their ongoing business costs. Can we be clear about what resourcing councils will be given as they are asked to take on these responsibilities, after 10 years—to be frank, as a result of the cuts that have taken place—of local authorities often being hollowed out of the staffing resources they need?

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making some powerful points. Does he agree with me that the announcement of the £500 million fund is a recognition, belatedly, by the Government that we do need something to do the job that the social fund, funded by the Government, used to do?

John McDonnell: That is an extremely important point. For those of us who remember the social fund, it was a resource that many of our constituents fell back on in times of need. It did give them the support they needed, and in many ways it was administered relatively well. It got resources to the people with needs, and it did so with minimal costs.

The Government urgently need to provide the certainty that the public deserve on all these matters. Our worry is that, because this package does not at the moment appear to be comprehensive, it ultimately will not make us all safer, and it may put people at risk, as especially those in low-income groups may have to make the very difficult choice, as I have said, between health and hardship.

Although it has been reported that there has been some communication between Finance Ministers internationally, it is certainly not clear whether it is of the scale or depth of co-ordination in, for example, the crisis in 2007-08. As a result, whatever statements have been made have not had the effect of steadying markets or reassuring people more generally that, basically, there is an internationally agreed strategy to address the economic consequences of this emergency.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the co-ordinated action that has taken place between the Treasury and the Bank of England could now be used as a model to show our international friends and partners how to do it, so that we can build on what we have already done?

John McDonnell: That is an extremely valid point. The co-ordination between the Bank of England and the Treasury is an example of what could be followed elsewhere, and it is being followed in some areas. However, the issue for me is that we can develop a United Kingdom strategy or an individual country strategy, but we are dealing with a virus that respects no borders. It is a global contagion now—a pandemic—so there needs to be international co-operation. What demonstrated the lack of international co-operation was the Fed cutting rates one week and the Bank of England cutting rates the following week, and the Fed cut had no impact whatsoever.

Bim Afolami: I agree with much of what the right hon. Gentleman says, but does that not show—because this is such a new phenomenon and such a new difficulty, and every country is struggling to find a policy response to it—that we may not have used the right tools? What the Treasury, the Bank of England and all our international partners are now having to do is to figure out what the right tools are, and we have to work together to try to figure that out.

John McDonnell: The hon. Gentleman makes exactly the right point. Not everybody supported the cut in interest rates, but the most important statement from the Bank of England was about the mechanisms with regard to the banks and lending and about making sure that liquidity continues.

The point I am making is that, when we are dealing with what is in effect a global crisis, individual solutions in individual countries are not as effective as global co-ordination. I will give an example. Whatever criticisms people may have had of Gordon Brown's individual policies during the banking crisis—I was here then, and actually I was giving a running commentary from the Back Benches, which perhaps at times was not welcome—no one can question the international leadership that he showed. There was a focus on and determination in bringing people together, and he brought to this crisis a mechanism by which, through the different international bodies, world leaders met and agreed a global strategy. Whatever people think of the outcome or about the merits or demerits of quantitative easing and so on, it did send out a message, and the markets eventually stabilised. I regret that we have not seen such a political and diplomatic leadership commitment or, indeed, such managerial ability from the Prime Minister or the Chancellor as yet.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Before my right hon. Friend moves on from his point about a co-ordinated international response, one of the things put in place at that time, about which there has been a lack of discussion this time, is what to do for those countries that have very basic healthcare systems. This virus respects no borders. Is there not a need for co-ordinated international action to get help to countries where testing and treatment may be much more rudimentary than they are here?

John McDonnell: To give the Government their due, the Chancellor did announce a £150 million contribution to the IMF, so there is an element of financial involvement and engagement. However, it requires the co-ordination of policy to ensure that those resources are directed effectively and successfully to tackle the very issue that my right hon. Friend raised. I hope that will be a model for the future when other global issues have to be confronted. As in the past—and this has happened under various Governments and political leaders—the UK should now be playing a critical role in mobilising the international bodies we have, in particular the UN, to agree a global response to deal not just with the current wave of this pandemic, but with the possibility of subsequent waves.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is right about the need for collaboration, and he is also right about needing alacrity and the response to a dynamic set of circumstances

requiring leadership. Can the Commonwealth play an active role here? He talked about an international body, and it is of course a body in which we play a pivotal part, and that would very much be in tune with what he has proposed.

John McDonnell: I fully concur with the right hon. Gentleman. The various international vehicles that we could mobilise are available to us, and we just need to do it now. It needs to be done at a senior level, in a way that sends out a message of determination across the globe to people and families, but also to the markets. We need to ensure that this medical crisis does not create the long-term recession that some are predicting as a result of its global implications. I will now move on from the coronavirus.

In addition to the coronavirus, we face other emergencies, and we must not lose sight of the two other crises that we face. One is the crisis in our public services—it is a social emergency—with the levels of poverty and inequality in our society. The other is of course the existential threat of climate change. I have to say that yesterday's Budget failed to address the social emergency. We have discussed it on the Floor of this House before, but this social emergency sees 4.5 million of our children living in poverty, with 70% of those children living in households where an adult is in work. We have—I do not know how else to describe it—a crisis of in-work poverty that perhaps we have not seen for generations in this country.

I have to say that there was nothing in the Budget to relieve the hardships inflicted on our community by universal credit, the bedroom tax and, especially for disabled people, the brutality of the work capability assessments undertaken against them. In fact, the Government's own table accompanying the Budget shows that the bottom 10% fare the worst as a result of tax decisions made in this Budget and the last spending round, which cannot be right. It cannot be right. It states that the bulk of the benefits are flowing to higher paid households. Yesterday, some people were saying that this could have been a Labour Budget, but whoever said that was not looking hard enough at who wins and who loses in it. I believe that not one family will be lifted out of in-work poverty because of yesterday's announcements. Yesterday, we again heard the Government's aspiration to get the national living wage to two thirds of median earnings, but that is not a real living wage; it is an aspiration for four or five years' time. Some may also have seen the small print, which says, "if economic conditions allow".

Worryingly, there is nothing of any substance in the Budget to tackle the long-term crises in our public services. Let us take the justice system, for example. In prisons there has been

"a sharp rise in deaths, violence, self-harm"

and suicides, which can all be

"linked to cuts".

That is not my statement; it comes from the Institute for Government. The House of Commons Justice Committee has pointed to a £1.2 billion gap in justice funding, so the small sums in this Budget, such as £175 million for prison maintenance, just will not cut it. Not one prison officer will be safer on the landings because of this Budget, yet in some of our prisons, those people put their lives at risk on a daily basis.

On domestic violence, according to Women's Aid, 10 domestic abuse victims are turned away from women's refuges every day because of a lack of space. This Budget needed to commit £173 million to ensure that no survivor is turned away. It has not done that, and without that funding, the measures in the Domestic Abuse Bill simply cannot be delivered. Not one women's refuge can feel assured that it will get the funding it needs from this Budget.

The National Education Union said that class sizes are rising, subjects are being dropped and inadequate pay is making the education staffing crisis worse, but there will be few teachers from whom the pressure will be lifted as a result of this Budget.

On housing, the sums earmarked for rough sleeping are totally inadequate, and we know that at least £1 billion is needed to reverse cuts in homelessness services. Yesterday, the Chancellor said that he would end homelessness, but we heard that from the Prime Minister who, when he was Mayor of London, said that rough sleeping would be ended in London by the 2012 Olympics. Rough sleeping doubled during the Prime Minister's second term as Mayor.

It goes on: not one library will be reopened as a result of yesterday's Budget. Not one youth centre will reopen; not one Sure Start centre.

Bim Afolami: Forgive me if I have misunderstood the right hon. Gentleman, but I think that £13 million is going into community libraries across the country, and that will make a big difference. Will he address that point?

John McDonnell: I just say to the hon. Gentleman that that sum is minuscule by comparison with the cuts that have gone on. This will not be some immense revitalisation of our library services—far from it. Indeed, a lot of that will be swallowed up by the deficits that local authorities have developed by trying to maintain their existing services. I doubt there will be any new libraries; this might perhaps allow some existing libraries to keep their heads above water, but even that is difficult to envisage.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I take my right hon. Friend back to the issue of domestic abuse? We all welcome the abolition of the tampon tax, which was championed by the former Member for Dewsbury, Paula Sherriff, but the funding raised from that—£393 million—was put towards services combating violence against women and girls. Does my right hon. Friend have any indication of how that gap in funding will be met for those vital services?

John McDonnell: We have had no indication about that, but I am pleased that my hon. Friend raised the issue, and perhaps we will get a response from the Government in due course. I congratulate her and Paula Sherriff. That long campaign paid off, which shows what tenacity can do, even in this House.

Let us get this Budget into context. The Institute for Fiscal Studies stated that £54 billion of day-to-day spending was needed, outside health and social care, to return to levels of per head expenditure in 2010. Not only does the Budget not meet that target, it goes nowhere near it. Why have the Government not gone further?

People need to understand what Conservatism is in this country, and what it means. For me, it means that the Conservative party will say or do anything it can to gain and retain power—anything except shift real power and wealth to working people. Just look at what the Government did yesterday on taxation, by choosing to keep entrepreneurs' relief largely intact. That is a tax relief for 5,000 individuals who make an average of £350,000 each. There was a U-turn on the tax for foreign buyers of UK property. The surcharge is reducing from 3% to 2%, which reduces the amount of money earmarked—what for? For rough sleeping. So much for "the people's priorities".

This social emergency has been created by a fundamental failure of economic policy. It was interesting to hear the Chancellor, and others, tell us time and again how this country's economic fundamentals are currently so sound. We warned them that austerity would damage the economy, and 10 years later, the verdict is clear. The statistics speak for themselves. Yesterday, the Office for National Statistics reported that prior to the coronavirus outbreak, growth in the three months to January was 0.0%. Manufacturing output was down by 1.2% over the same period, because of what the ONS described as "widespread weakness". Productivity growth over the last 10 years has been at a dismal 0.3% average, and on pay growth, the slowest economic recovery for a century has been described by the chief economist at the Bank of England as a "pay disaster".

In the Budget, there is a 0.4% downgrade for gross domestic product this year, even before calculating the impact of coronavirus. We have the weakest official growth outlook on record, according to the Resolution Foundation, with pay growth weakening in every year of the forecast—an outlook that will hit every household by £600 a year. Of course the Conservatives have failed to tackle in this Budget any long-standing challenges at the heart of our tax system, such as how we treat capital alongside income fairly, how local councils can have stable funding, or how we rationalise the long list of tax reliefs that provide opportunities for tax avoidance and evasion.

The Tories have not scrambled together this Budget because good economic performance made it possible. Yes, they have plagiarised some of Labour's ideas, from rewriting the Green Book to bringing some of the railways back into public ownership, but that was only because they were forced to do that as a result of their own economic failures.

This week's Budget shows that Tory tendency again, this time on infrastructure. A gimmicky grab-bag of projects was announced, while yet again the Government put off publishing the national infrastructure strategy. Even those announcements are disappointing. There is no commitment to deliver funding for the full Northern Powerhouse Rail project, and four fifths of the £500 million investment in electric vehicle charging infrastructure is a reannouncement from 2017. The pothole fund is a repeat of a policy that was announced at least twice by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and will be enough to repair about a quarter of the potholes.

There is an overall infrastructure pledge that goes only halfway to filling up the £192 billion infrastructure hole that the Tories created by underinvesting between 2010 and 2020. Again, the Tories have given us very little detail on who will build this infrastructure and

[John McDonnell]

who gains from this investment. On broadband, for example, their £5 billion investment will be a subsidy to private providers such as Virgin. There is no sense in this Budget that the Tories have any understanding of the skills investment that is needed to ensure that infrastructure can be delivered by those most in need of upgrading their skills and of being able to have a decent standard of living as a result.

Let us not forget the third emergency we are facing today. Future generations will never forgive this Government for their failure to address climate change in this Budget. Infrastructure investment, if properly planned, could have been an opportunity to shift the tracks on which this economy runs towards a zero-carbon future. The Government have missed that opportunity. The Institute for Public Policy Research's environmental justice commission said that £33 billion a year in green investment was needed for the Government to achieve only their weak target of net zero emissions by 2050. The Chancellor has fallen woefully short of that target. Instead, the Chancellor has opted for £27 billion to be spent roads, which currently contribute 90% of the UK's transport emissions. They have committed less than one fifth of that to buses and cycling. Fuel duty is still frozen, with no effective assistance to encourage the shift from cars dependent on fossil fuel to less polluting cars and public transport. There is no new support for renewable energy sources such as wind and solar. In the year when we host COP26, this Budget will be seen as a betrayal of future generations.

What are the lessons we must learn from this Budget? It should not take a medical crisis before a Government wake up to funding the NHS adequately. It should not take a collapse in the economy and the threat of recession to force a Government to invest. It should not take our children going on strike to force a Government to take climate change seriously. Our community has experienced 10 years of immense suffering under austerity for nothing—for the pursuit of ideology; a political and economic experiment that has failed. This Budget should have been the most significant since the second world war. It should have been a turning point. As time has allowed scrutiny of this Budget in the past 18 hours or so, it has become clear that it has failed. It does not come close to reversing the damage of the past 10 years of austerity.

I give this final warning to the Government and to all of us. If we sow the seeds of disappointment and disillusionment, it could stir up a form of politics that none of us wishes our country to experience. We need the Government to recognise that they have a responsibility to bring forward—it may now be in autumn—a Budget that tackles our social emergency, our crisis in public services, the levels of poverty and inequality in our society and the existential threat of climate change. The Opposition will do everything we can to ensure that the Government listen and bring that Budget forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There is a lot of interest in this debate. After the two Front Benchers, contributors should be looking towards seven minutes for their contributions. I will show a little latitude for maiden speeches, but I am afraid that cannot last forever.

1.24 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I thank the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for his opening remarks. I think we can all agree that we need to demonstrate a unity of purpose across the whole House, particularly at this time. As I go through my remarks, I will address some of the points he raised, but I will just say this in candour and with the hand of friendship. When I entered the House in 2010, he had already been here for a number of years. In 2010, the economy was absolutely on its knees. *[Interruption.]* We had the highest, biggest deficit in peacetime at over 10% of GDP. When George Osborne delivered an emergency Budget, there were siren voices on the Labour Benches—I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman was one of them—who said that as a result of those policies we would lose 1 million jobs and the economy would be decimated. That is not what has happened. Ten years on, we have record levels of employment and we are able to make the investments the Chancellor set out yesterday precisely because we took the right decisions in terms of fixing the public finances.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State not prepared to concede that, within a year of that emergency Budget, George Osborne actually had to reverse many of the capital cuts he had made, because of the damage he was doing to the economy?

Alok Sharma: I do not have to look back. I can look at the present, which is record levels of employment. As I go through my speech, I will highlight some of the Government's other achievements.

Let me talk a little bit about the Budget. The Budget the Chancellor set out yesterday delivers security today and lays the foundation for prosperity tomorrow. The right hon. Gentleman said that all commentators were somehow against the Budget. That is not the case, as he knows full well. The Federation of Small Businesses called it a "pro-small business Budget". The CBI said:

"It's a bold Budget at scale...which will help people and business through tough times."

The British Chambers of Commerce said:

"There's much to welcome in this Budget for business communities across the UK."

This is, of course, a Budget delivered in challenging times. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for acknowledging that point and for supporting many of the measures the Chancellor put forward yesterday. I know that many people are concerned about the impact on investment, cash flow and the future of their businesses as a result of covid-19. The Government, as the House knows, announced a £12 billion package for public services, individuals and businesses whose finances are being affected. Support for businesses includes a £1 billion coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, delivered by the British Business Bank, which is already supporting over £7.2 billion of finance to over 93,000 SMEs.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that there was nothing in the Budget to support our aviation industry? Indeed, air passenger duty was increased as a result of yesterday's Budget. Many airlines face difficulty. A number have

sadly gone out of business in recent weeks and other household names may well go out of business as a result of covid-19. Will he put in a request for air passenger duty to be waived for six months? Otherwise we could see a number of British airline brands go under as a result. They are deeply suffering.

Alok Sharma: I will talk about the discussions I have had with business groups and business representatives, including those from the aviation sector. The Chancellor was very clear yesterday that this is a start. We will keep the situation under constant review and where support is required, we will look to see what we are able to provide.

Returning to the business interruption loan scheme, this is a temporary scheme that will help small businesses to access much-needed finance. Yesterday, the Chancellor also announced £2.2 billion of support for about 700,000 businesses that are in receipt of small business rate relief or rural business rate relief. We want to ensure that every single eligible business gets their £3,000 at the earliest opportunity. We will work with local authorities to make sure that that happens. We will also refund businesses with fewer than 250 employees that pay qualifying statutory sick pay to people who are absent from work due to self-isolating for up to two weeks. We are providing vital tax relief, temporarily abolishing business rates for retailers whose premises have a rateable value of less than £51,000 and expanding the discount to include leisure and hospitality businesses. From creating jobs to supporting communities, small businesses are absolutely the backbone of our economy and this Government will always stand by them.

Yesterday, my Ministry colleagues and I heard from the Bank of England's chief economist, who stressed the vital action that the Bank is taking to help banks to provide additional credit to businesses. Banks must absolutely be part of the solution and we are already seeing signs of that. Earlier this week, NatWest and Lloyds launched funds of £5 billion and £2 billion respectively for small and medium-sized enterprises directly affected by the impact of covid-19. NatWest also pledged to defer customers' mortgage and loan repayments for three months. I want to see more lenders stepping forward and supporting our businesses through these challenging times.

As Business Secretary, I regularly speak to the business community, and in the light of covid-19, I have ramped up that engagement. Last night, I spoke with business groups and trade associations, including those from the aviation sector, to discuss the measures in the Budget and to reassure them of the Government's commitment to support them. As I said, we will keep our response under review as the situation develops, but let me be very clear: this Government will always be on the side of business, entrepreneurs and innovators, because they pay the taxes that fund our brilliant public services.

Although I started my remarks by discussing our short-term measures to fight covid-19, it is worth reflecting what Conservatives in government have achieved with the economy since 2010—I know that the shadow Chancellor will want to hear this. Employment is at a record high. The unemployment rate is at its lowest since the 1970s. A record number of women and a record number of people from ethnic minority backgrounds are in work. Over 1 million more people with health

conditions and disabilities are in work now than five years ago, and youth unemployment has almost halved since 2010. Employment is higher in every nation and region of the United Kingdom than in 2010.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the acid test of how productive an economy is and how well it is doing is its ability to attract investment from global investors who could deploy capital anywhere in the world? In that context, does he agree that it is a sign of success that the United Kingdom attracts more direct investment than France and Germany combined?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. He has had a very successful business career and knows all about attracting inward investment, and he is absolutely right: the UK has been, and will continue to be, a beacon under this Government for foreign inward investment.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned 2010. I had a look back at the Red Book from 2010, which warned that if nothing had been done and the previous Government's policies had carried on, then by 2014-15, we would get debt still rising up to 74.4% of GDP. What actually happened was that in 2014-15, debt carried on rising up to over 80% of GDP. Was the Chancellor not right yesterday to have completely repudiated previous Tory policy?

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have a huge amount of respect for him—we have had very good discussions in other roles that I have had. He will know that in 2010, when the Conservatives took over in government, we were on the brink—the economic precipice—and I do not think that, in private, he would disagree with that. We also had a record deficit, and that is now down to less than 2%. The shadow Chancellor talked about the impact on real people. What I am laying out is the precise impact that the Government's policies have had on real people by improving their employment prospects and their earnings.

Stephen Timms: The absolute imperative was to eradicate the deficit by 2015. Today, the right hon. Gentleman is boasting that it is down to 2% five years after that.

Alok Sharma: I am a modest man. I do not like to boast—I just like to state facts, and the fact is that we have record levels of employment in our country.

Let us talk about what has happened for businesses. Since 2010, we have seen corporation tax come down by 9% to be the lowest in the G20. Business registrations are up by over 60%, with nearly 150,000 more firms registered in 2010. Wages growth has been outpacing inflation for 23 consecutive months. The UK is in the top 10 countries in the World Bank's ranking for ease of doing business and in the top five of the global innovation index. [*Interruption.*] I do not know—maybe the shadow Chancellor finds that funny, but I do not. I think it is something that we should be very proud of in this country.

I certainly am delighted to be part of the most business-friendly Government ever, and of course, we want to go even further. We are extending the British

[Alok Sharma]

Business Bank's start-up loan scheme for a further year, supporting up to 10,000 loans. We are providing another £200 million for life sciences and more funding for growth hubs. In short, we are on the way to making the United Kingdom the best place in the world to start and grow a business.

Of course, the best businesses need the best ideas. Research and development drives up productivity, which leads to high-value, high-wage employment and an increase in exports. That is why I am delighted, as I know Government Members are, that we are committing to spend £22 billion a year on research and development by 2024-25. This is the fastest and largest increase in Government R&D spend ever and there is a multiplier effect, for every pound of public R&D spend delivers around £7 of economic benefit for the country as a whole.

Britain is home to four of the world's top 10 universities. We are a world-leading nation when it comes to winning Nobel prizes. The UK has produced around 14% of the world's most impactful research. UK researchers and businesses are cutting carbon emissions, curing genetic diseases and pushing the frontiers of artificial intelligence. Ours is a country that gave the world penicillin, the steam railway and the worldwide web, and we are turbo-charging this tradition of invention and discovery by establishing a brand-new research funding agency, letting researchers pursue high-risk, high-reward projects. We are betting big on Britain's pioneers and problem solvers as they seek to transform every aspect of our lives, from the journeys we make to the medicines we take.

We have already seen how public R&D funding can create centres of excellence right across the United Kingdom. In Coventry, the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre will soon be developing new ways of scaling up factory production for electric vehicles. In Manchester, the Graphene Engineering Innovation Centre is helping to make cutting-edge composites for affordable electric vehicles. In Harwell near Oxford, our Satellite Applications Catapult is working on applications to remove space debris from orbit. In Scotland, we are backing a world first medicines manufacturing innovation centre, which will help new drugs to reach patients faster. In Northern Ireland, our Digital Catapult is providing mentoring and advice to help cyber-security firms to scale up and succeed. In Wales, we are backing the first compound semiconductor cluster anywhere in the world—a technology that could underpin everything from wearable health sensors to autonomous vehicles in the years ahead.

I am determined that as the UK forges a path as a science superpower, we use that opportunity to level up centres of excellence across our whole country. As part of that, my Department, with the Treasury, is committing to creating a northern campus, but I want to be clear that levelling up and having staff across the country has always been part of my Department's agenda. Some 84% of its partner organisations are already based outside London, while BEIS itself already has sites across the UK, including in Aberdeen, Birmingham and Cardiff.

In the coming years, we will need to make the most of ideas, innovations and solutions from each and every corner of our United Kingdom. The shadow Chancellor will agree that nowhere is that more true than in tackling

climate change. Part of my Department's mission is to deliver clean energy and to lead on the path to net zero emissions by 2050. Since 2010, as a result of the actions we have taken, the United Kingdom has cut its carbon dioxide emissions by around 30%. Driven by investment in renewables, 99% of the UK's solar photovoltaic capacity has been deployed since 2010. Today, the UK has more installed offshore wind capacity than any other country in the world.

Our contracts for difference auctions have helped to reduce the price of offshore wind by two thirds in the last five years. The UK already has more than 460,000 jobs in the low-carbon sector spread right across our country. From Siemens in Hull to MHI Vestas on the Isle of Wight, we have seen hundreds of new jobs making turbine blades, and last year Ørsted launched the world's largest offshore wind operations and maintenance facility in Grimsby.

In yesterday's Budget, the Chancellor announced that he would more than double R&D spend in the energy innovation programme. The Budget backed nuclear fusion to develop and build the world's first commercially viable fusion power plant by 2040. It backed low-emission vehicles, including with funds to support the roll-out of a fast charging network for electric vehicles, and it will fund a new heat network scheme and put £800 million behind two or more carbon capture and storage clusters, one by the mid-2020s and a second by 2030. [Interruption.] I hear the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) chuntering, if I may call it that—I do not mean to be rude—from a sedentary position. I hope he will appreciate that carbon capture and storage will have to be part of the mix going forward, which is why we are investing almost £1 billion in it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Humber is one of the areas that have been put forward for the carbon capture pilot. As the Humber is the highest emitter of carbon in the United Kingdom, we believe that we should be the first to enjoy some of that £800 million. I wonder if the Secretary of State might want to back the Humber in that proposal.

Alok Sharma: In the spirit of bipartisan friendship, I would be very happy to sit down and talk with the hon. Member about her proposals. I make no promises at that Dispatch Box, but, as I hope colleagues will know across the House, I am always happy to talk to colleagues and get their input.

Thanks to the industries I discussed earlier, we aim to have up to 2 million green jobs in our economy by 2030. The UK economy has grown by 75% since 1990. At the same time, we have cut emissions by 43%. We have demonstrated that green growth is possible. We have the opportunity to turn climate change into a green growth opportunity for the global economy. As the shadow Chancellor noted, this November, COP26, the UN climate conference, which will be the biggest summit ever organised by the UK, will take place here. Whether globally we live in the south or the north, the east or the west, we share one life-giving but fragile planet. All our futures are indeed intrinsically linked. COP26 can be where the world comes together to ramp up momentum towards a zero carbon economy. It can send out a message of ambition and hope that decarbonisation is the future, with huge opportunities for those who are willing to act now.

In conclusion, the Budget delivers for our businesses, innovators and entrepreneurs. It is a Budget to power pioneers and problem solvers right across our country. We are a one nation Government committed to levelling up investment, growth and opportunity across the whole of our United Kingdom, and I commend the Budget to the House.

1.45 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This is a Budget in two parts: the urgent response required on covid-19 and the other actions the Chancellor proposes. While the SNP supports many of the actions to mitigate that and to support the NHS and business through the measures announced, they come in the context of a decade of austerity—of cuts to budgets and services and of pain for many of our constituents. The latter part of the Budget does not do nearly enough to resolve the many concerns we have about the UK economy. Indeed, in the wider context of Brexit, there are many challenges yet to be dealt with. The Chancellor has kicked a range of significant policies and changes into the long grass of the comprehensive spending review to buy Dominic Cummings more time to come up with some ideas.

In terms of what was announced on covid-19, we need to know exactly how these measures will translate into Barnett consequentials. The Scottish Government stand ready to take further actions. The First Minister confirmed earlier that Barnett consequentials on non-domestic rates will be passed on in full, but we need to know the precise numbers from the UK Government and we need to know that soon, because without that it is incredibly difficult. Our business rates regime is already more generous than the UK business rates regime, but we need to know those figures, so that the Scottish Government can put those actions in place.

I support what has been talked about in terms of support from banks and lenders. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) wrote proactively to the banks to ask them to do that and I was glad that some have taken that up. I am glad also that there will be support from HMRC in terms of time to pay and other measures. I have had experience in my own constituency of HMRC being a wee bit too quick to move to close businesses down, so we welcome anything that can be done to reassure businesses, particularly those already in difficulty, that they will not be pushed out of business by these actions at this very vulnerable time.

The timing of the Budget further reveals the UK Government's careless attitude to Scotland because the Scottish budget process has had to be carried out blindfold. The Scottish Government and our Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, had to make their best guess going into the Scottish budget negotiations, which passed last week. It is wholly unacceptable that Scottish local authorities, which had a legal deadline of yesterday to set their budgets and council tax, had to do so without knowing precisely how much they would have to spend. Now that it has come, we find that Scotland's budget next year will be lower in real terms than when the Tories first came to power. These proposals do nothing to redress the cumulative cuts or the short-changing of city and region deals, or to make available a proportionate share of the DUP's bungs or the money owed to our police and fire and rescue services.

The Chancellor talked of change in his Budget yesterday and it is certainly change that we need. Economic growth in the UK is flat as a pancake. Yesterday's ONS figures show that the UK's economy has not grown at all in the last three months, while growth has been downgraded for three of the next four years, and that is before we even begin to account for coronavirus. The OBR suggests in its documents that a recession this year is quite possible, if the spread of coronavirus causes widespread economic disruption. Given how other countries are dealing with it just now, it is hard to disagree with that sentiment.

The Chancellor has made clear his intention to spend his way out of this crisis, which is very interesting. We have been told for years that there is no money, yet yesterday Sunak the Hedgefund sprang up, having found a magic bunch of gold rings. On these Benches, the SNP will not argue that the UK Government need to loosen their purse strings, but I am concerned that in practice it is simply not enough and not focused enough to counteract the last 10 years of austerity, which has ravaged our communities. It is a curious situation to find a Conservative Government, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, in the position of setting out "the largest sustained fiscal loosening since the pre-election Budget of March 1992"

and on course to add

"£125 billion (4.6 per cent of GDP) to public sector net debt by 2024-25."

Interest rates are low at the moment, but this leaves the Government very vulnerable to future rises in the years ahead.

The UK's resilience has been weakened under sustained Tory cuts. Wages have barely grown in the last decade. The welfare state safety nets have been torn to shreds. Public services have struggled through chronic underinvestment and asset stripping, and some parts of the UK that have still not fully recovered from the 2008 financial crisis are ill-equipped to cope with a further recession. Coronavirus has the potential to have a lasting impact. I welcome the Chancellor's commitment to fighting the virus. All of us on the SNP Benches are keen to do whatever we can to facilitate joint working between the Scottish and UK Governments. I make these comments in the spirit of providing the appropriate scrutiny to allow the Government to control the spread of disease. For the Chancellor's policies to work in the way that he intends, he needs to expand the number of workers entitled to statutory sick pay. As things stand, people need to be qualified workers earning more than £94.25 a week. That rules out the 300,000 people on zero-hours contracts, who are likely to be most at risk of not taking adequate time off work.

For those who are eligible for sick pay, the Budget has done nothing to bring the UK in line with other OECD nations. People will still be expected to survive on less than £100 a week. As my colleague the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) highlighted yesterday, the contrast with what people are entitled to in other countries is stark. The Chancellor himself struggled to answer on the radio this morning whether that would be enough for him to live on, so we should not expect our constituents to live on it either. It will certainly not be enough for many people who find themselves suddenly unable to go out to work. Research by the Resolution Foundation shows that many workers

[Alison Thewliss]

face losing between 70% and 74% of their primary income. It is saying that this is a huge living standards shock.

The Chancellor has made temporary changes to the benefit regime to encourage those not eligible for sick pay to self-isolate, which is the right thing to do. However, I am concerned that the five-week wait for universal credit will still apply, potentially making the change functionally useless for that purpose. Claiming universal credit could also have the knock-on effect of making claimants lose entitlement to legacy benefits, such as tax credits. The minimum income floor is being removed temporarily, but that is cold comfort to someone stuck on UC permanently because they have already lost their entitlement to tax credits.

I am raising these issues today because my fundamental concern is that the UK benefit system is so broken and inadequate that people would rather go to work ill than try to negotiate it and risk pushing their families into poverty. I hope the Secretary of State will take on these comments seriously and reflect on how the UK Government strategy can be improved to effectively control the outbreak—he will know about that as a former Department for Work and Pensions Minister.

I also take this opportunity to raise the prospect of working across Governments to provide Scotland-specific solutions. My own constituency this week has already seen the cancellation of a 3,000-person conference. That means hotel stays cancelled and a knock-on effect on the Glasgow economy from people not eating out, using taxis or spending their money in shops locally. Bringing people to Scotland for business and pleasure is extremely valuable in both urban and rural areas. Coronavirus could have a devastating effect on many people's livelihoods.

The Chancellor has full control over VAT powers. It would be possible to provide VAT relief for the hospitality sector, if he was minded to do so. We need to ensure that businesses are supported as much as possible and that plans are in place, post virus, to provide further expansionary measures. I understand that the UK currently has the second highest VAT rate for hotel accommodation in the EU, so it certainly makes some economic sense to drop the rate and support our tourism sector.

Coronavirus is certainly a factor in putting the UK's economy in a perilous position, but we should be under no illusions: the conditions for a major recession were in place long before the virus began. The Prime Minister's choice language on business has been well publicised, but the reality is that the UK has been an investment waste ground under the Tory party for some time. Firms have been holding off on investment since the Brexit vote in 2016 until they can be provided with some certainty about the future. The OBR said in its analysis that it would have expected investment to increase by 20% by now, but it remains stagnant. The chilling effect of trade barriers and a lingering threat of a no-deal cliff edge are unlikely to change that uncertainty, with the OBR factoring that into the next five years of its forecast and predicting that two thirds of the hit to productivity due to Brexit is still to hit. As the Red Book itself proclaims,

"The UK's level of productivity has been lower than that of other advanced economies since the 1960s",

and is

"20% lower than other major advanced economies such as the US, France and Germany".

In Scotland, productivity has been on the rise since the SNP took office, growing at 0.9% a year, compared to 0.4% for the rest of the UK. We are already moving ahead in areas such as skills and developing the young workforce, tertiary education and attracting foreign direct investment. We have the highest proportion of employees—83%—paid at or above the real living wage, not this pretentious living wage, which embeds state-endorsed age discrimination. Universities are also collaborating to contribute to productivity, which is put at threat by ending Horizon 2020 funding and the collaboration and innovation that we have through the EU. I also ask about the future of Erasmus+, which brings so many people to this country and sends our people out into the world to experience the value that that can bring to their education, which they can bring back for productivity here in this country. We can do so much more with the full levers of a normal European nation state.

The Chancellor said yesterday that this is a Budget that "gets things done", but with vital issues such as the shared prosperity fund being punted into the long grass, we still do not know exactly how he intends to get things done. European funding has been a steady source over many decades, with funds invested in our communities, building infrastructure and changing the lives of our people, yet we still do not know what will replace it. A vague paragraph on page 83 of the Red Book just will not cut it. We will not accept one penny less of the European funding that we had in the new shared prosperity fund.

There is a line in the Red Book that says:

"Funding will be realigned to match domestic priorities".

I ask: whose domestic priorities? The Prime Minister's? A man who thinks that we can build a bridge—or perhaps a tunnel, if we ask the Secretary of State for Scotland—through a 300-metre deep trench filled with dumped munitions? Or, rather, those of the democratically elected Government of Scotland, in partnership with Scottish local government? I certainly know who I would trust, and it is definitely not the blonde bombshell of Brexit.

Carbon capture and storage is another project marched off to the comprehensive spending review, with the potential of maybe a project, maybe by the middle of this decade, or maybe the end, maybe on two sites, and maybe with a fund of £800 million. This is absolute nonsense and does nothing for the people of the north-east of Scotland, who were led to believe in the run-up to the independence referendum that they would receive £1 billion for a plant at Peterhead, before David Cameron promptly pulled the plug when Scotland voted no.

This Government's commitments to achieving net zero remain to be seen, with a meagre £10 million for policy development towards net zero, but £27 billion being spent on roads, and tinkering round the edges of challenges such as domestic heating and making our homes climate ready, rather than incentivising investment by cutting VAT on products for repairs and improvements to aid energy efficiency. We are coming up to COP26, as the Minister said. We need big ideas and we need the money behind them, because if this work is truly to be a success, we need to see a transformation, and that is not what this Budget promises.

For my constituents and for people across Scotland, this has been a tale of two Governments. The Scottish Government have been consistently the grown-ups in the room, with a clear policy direction. They have launched the national performance framework, receiving international acclaim for the inclusive growth strategy. They have prioritised tackling inequality at the same time as growing the economy. They have taken an evidence-based approach to developing policies and, against the backdrop of austerity, have still managed to take bold action to provide investment in innovation through projects such as the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and the Scottish National Investment Bank. Innovation supported by universities means that Glasgow builds more satellites than any city outside the United States. That does not happen by accident. The Scottish Government have reached out across nations to build relationships and pursue an internationalist, open and welcoming Scotland.

By contrast, the UK Government have brought a new era of political and economic isolation to Scotland. For all the bluster of getting Brexit done, it is still nowhere near a done deal. We still do not know exactly what the future relationship will look like. We still do not know what European funding will be replaced with, but we do know that the absolute best-case scenario, where we get a basic trade deal, could remove £9 billion from Scotland's economy, and that is without taking into account the effects of reduced migration. Scotland has an ageing population and areas that have historically been concerned more with emigration than immigration. Our economy has benefited from inward migration in a multitude of ways, from food to culture, and not least the vast economic benefits that immigrants have brought to Scotland in choosing us as their home.

I cannot stress enough how devastating the UK Government's new migration scheme stands to be for certain sectors in Scotland. The forecasts in the OBR's book estimate a loss of HMRC income and national insurance rising to £1.5 billion in 2024-25 as a result of those changes. It is a political choice for this UK Government to insist on a unified immigration system, when other countries successfully run differentiated systems. It is not an economic choice; it is a political choice, and one that does not serve Scotland's best interests.

The Chancellor has also missed a huge opportunity to redress some of the injustices that austerity has already brought upon us. He failed to scrap the two-child limit and the brutal rape clause, on which I have one small correction for the Labour Front Bench team, who said to the Prime Minister that the rape clause affected 200 women; actually, it affected 510 women—510 women had to fill in a form to prove they were raped, so that they could get entitlement to tax credits. Failing to scrap the two-child limit and the brutal rape clause—this Budget gets it done. Failing to restore the value lost from the benefits freeze of the last four years—this Budget gets it done. Failing to improve the prospects for a lost generation of children who have grown up in Tory austerity Britain—this Budget gets it done. What is done to people by this Tory Government causes so much distress to so many. What do the Government have in their Red Book about this? They have £2.5 million dedicated to research how best to support vulnerable children. Well, I would suggest that they stop making those children so vulnerable in the first place by their own policies.

Five years, three elections and several Chancellors ago, I stood for election to this place for the first time, on a manifesto advocating the scrapping of the tampon tax. The SNP was the only mainstream party in that election to call for such a policy. I am very proud of how the agenda has changed since I stood in the Committee that considered the Finance Bill and nervously talked about periods in front of a bunch of very senior and crusty Members of the House. The claim has been made that Brexit has delivered this move, but I would contend that it has been a movement of many people across these islands, of brilliant former colleagues such as Paula Sherriff, and of allies around the world. I wonder, Mr Deputy Speaker, if there were more women rather than men around those tables of power, whether we might have gotten rid of the tampon tax a very long time ago. There is yet to be a female Chancellor, and that is telling.

Moves have been made in Scotland for the totally free provision of sanitary products for women and girls, and this is great news not just from a financial perspective but because it goes a long way towards lifting the stigma of periods and menstrual health. It would be remiss of me not to mention also that the tampon tax fund goes towards funding services that prevent violence against women and girls. The Women's Budget Group estimates that those services need at least £393 million per year to carry out their very important work. So will the Government now provide a source of funding to make up that shortfall?

I want to talk briefly about a couple of other measures in the Red Book. I am glad to see the alcohol review, because the current alcohol taxation system frankly makes absolutely no sense at all. If we look at the graphs for those different alcohol taxes, we see that there is no logic to them at all.

I am glad to see £14 million more for Companies House, but I want to know whether the Government intend to make Companies House a relevant body for anti-money laundering regulations. If they do not do that, they will be chucking more money away and leaving the door wide open to money laundering and false registering.

There seems to be money proposed in the form of VAT relief to S4C, which I do not begrudge the Welsh media at all, but where is the equivalent relief for MG Alba, which also needs that support?

This is not a Government who make things happen; they are a Government who things happen to. In the three and a bit years since the Brexit vote, they have lurched through reshuffles, leadership battles, meaningless buzzwords and constitutional shambles. They promise change and prosperity like jam tomorrow, but they deliver very little. Yesterday's Budget laid bare that, when the Tories want to turn on the taps, spending can flow like a river bursting its banks. The OBR suggests that there is so much infrastructure money gushing through that the UK Government are actually going to struggle to spend it.

Austerity has been cruel, damaging and entirely unnecessary. Scotland did not vote for austerity. Scotland did not vote for Brexit. Scotland did not vote for this Prime Minister, the Chancellor or Dominic Cummings. We reserve the right to have another vote, in which we can vote to put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands for all our people.

2.3 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is, I think, a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who sits with me on the Treasury Select Committee, which has eight women members out of 11. I think I did detect one thing that she welcomed in the Budget, which was the end of the tampon tax. I was glad to hear one thing that she welcomed.

The Budget was delivered in truly exceptional circumstances, in the context of a coronavirus outbreak. As we sit here today, the US stock market opened down at its limit again and had to close for the second time this week. This is truly a difficult and challenging economic environment for the Chancellor as he delivers his Budget. I am sure that all colleagues were impressed with the way in which our new Chancellor delivered the Budget. He did so with the confidence that looked as though he had been working all his life to deliver it, whereas he had been in post for only four weeks. It was a remarkable performance that got an exceptional Budget done in exceptional times. It delivered on so many of the promises in our manifesto—promises that the British people voted for last December.

I have heard a number of people this afternoon reference the unprecedented nature of the coronavirus, and I think everyone has welcomed the measures that were taken in the Budget. They all reflect the fact that this is a temporary situation; we know that it will come to an end, but we do not know when. The measures were also timely, and they were very targeted at those who will be most adversely affected. I think there was a collective agreement in yesterday's speeches and today's that the measures were necessary and welcome. They also come against a backdrop that continues to be very distorted in certain fundamental ways in terms of the global economy and in terms of our own economy. It is quite remarkable that this week—on Monday—the two-year bond in the UK switched to a negative interest rate for the first time. Before I came into politics, I was a portfolio manager for over two decades, and I never saw anything like this. What is happening on the markets is really quite unprecedented.

Similarly, since the financial crisis, when the Bank of England implemented quantitative easing and added Government bonds to its own balance sheet, it has not been able to unwind those holdings. It has actually had to increase them over the past decade, holding now some £425 billion-worth of bonds. There are some really fundamental and long-standing distortions on the Government's own balance sheet. Twelve years on from the financial crisis, the Government still, on behalf of taxpayers, hold shares in RBS. I know that the Red Book says that the Government are planning to reduce those holdings by 2024, but I note that since January the value of those holdings has fallen by half. I would love to hear from the Minister what the plans are for the RBS shares.

There was also a lot in the Budget statement about the long-term plans for levelling up the British economy, and a lot that we can welcome across the House in terms of long-term infrastructure spending. We all recognise—certainly on the Government Benches—that Governments have no money of their own. They have only the money that they can borrow or the money that they can take in taxation from a productive economy. The growth in public spending that is in this Budget is

much faster than the overall growth that is projected in the economy. Government Members all recognise that this is an exceptional response to exceptional circumstances, but we cannot carry on doing that. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies said today,

“Obviously, that is not sustainable for any prolonged length of time.”

Effectively, what the Chancellor did in the Budget was to say that the money that is going to be invested in the long-term plan—that levelling up, that infrastructure investment—is going to generate a greater rate of return for the economy than the OBR assumes in its forecasts. I can see that in my constituency, where I am campaigning for the redoubling of the Cotswold line, for example. There is a proposal on the table for nine miles of Cotswold line to be redoubled. That has a business case of a 4:1 ratio, so it is clearly something that would be really positive for the local economy. The Secretary of State spoke in his opening remarks about the research and development spending that is in the Budget, and he mentioned that there is a 7:1 ratio for spending on research and development. I can see it in terms of the spending for flood defences that is in the Budget. How valuable that will be for the communities in West Worcestershire that I hope will benefit from it. The same can be said for investment in superfast fibre and improving rural mobile phone signals. This money should receive a greater rate of return in economic growth than is currently forecast by the OBR.

I have three quick questions in the minute left to me. First, on the £22 billion of public R&D investment and the £800 million specifically for an advanced research projects agency, will it link with what we are doing on defence research budgets through the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory and taking some of those inventions to market through the Ploughshare scheme? What is the vision for those investments? In what sectors will they likely be invested, and how will we measure success over time? Secondly, are we extending the maturity of our debt and taking advantage of these low interest rates? Thirdly, as I mentioned before, what is the plan for RBS?

Finally, I recognise the exceptional conditions in which this Budget was delivered.

2.10 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin).

This Budget is the Government's attempt to make a turn in the road. Gone are the logic, the rhetoric and the assumptions that have driven UK spending policy for the past decade. If nothing else, it is testament to the Conservative party's capacity for reinvention and its hunger for power. For the avoidance of doubt, that is not an insult.

In truth, the Chancellor had little choice but to change course, because the backdrop to the Budget was a flat economy and an anaemic forecast for future growth—that is even before the impact of the coronavirus. Growth estimates are down this year to just a little over 1%, and to around 7% over the next five years. Growth that weak is not levelling up but levelling down. Such weak economic growth leaves the Government no alternative but to fund their spending plans largely by borrowing money in a way that the Conservative party has for years derided as irresponsible and reckless.

Add to that the impact of the Brexit path the Government have chosen, which is the defining decision that now dare not speak its name. If the line has gone out from No. 10 not to talk about it, the OBR did not get the memo because it is there in black and white. The OBR estimates a potential loss of 4% of GDP over the next 15 years—lost output, lost income and lost tax revenue.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy claims this is the most business-friendly Government ever. In truth, this is the first Government in living memory to relegate economic prosperity to behind issues of sovereignty. That is not a claim from me; it is a policy set out by the Prime Minister and his chief Brexit negotiator.

In more ways than one, this Budget is just starting to fill a hole the Government have dug for themselves. If low interest rates allow them to borrow for investment, it was also true some years ago when they derided such suggestions. Of course, new investment in infrastructure is welcome and long overdue, certainly in places like the Black Country. We have too many derelict factory buildings, too much unused development land and too much unremediated land, all of it standing as a physical reminder of the lack of investment over the Tory years, but simply calling themselves a new Government cannot disguise the fact that they are amending an investment shortage that they decided on in the first place. As I said, they are just starting to fill a hole they dug themselves.

Carbon capture and storage has been announced and abandoned almost as many times as the A303 project at Stonehenge, but neither has been announced quite so often as the potholes fund—the Albert Hall should have been well and truly filled by now with those announcements.

We have heard a lot of this before, and it could and should have started years ago, but it would be complacent of my party to rest on those criticisms alone because this is a shift in fiscal strategy—there is no doubt about that—and responding to it will require more than reaching for the same slogans as before. There has been much talk in recent months about what constitutes a good Opposition. The first step is to oppose the Government and Conservative party we actually have in front of us, rather than the ones we wish were in front of us. When our opponent has adapted, we have to adapt, too. That is something we must do.

Infrastructure investment is definitely needed, but addressing regional inequality is about people and their life chances. Where they were born, where they live and what kind of family they come from, those things should not limit people's opportunities and chances to make the most of their life.

Alongside the bricks and mortar, we need a deep-seated effort to tackle educational inequality; good quality, affordable childcare to make sure parents can take up jobs; an early-years effort to tackle the appalling development gap that afflicts some children, even by the time they start school; second-chance skill training to equip people for a new labour market and to give them the tools they need to reach their full potential; and the support for social mobility needed to break through the charmed circles that still characterise too many of the professions and too many of the best jobs in this country. If there really is to be levelling up, it is about a lot more than tarmac and concrete; it is about people's lives and the chances they have.

We are still in the early stages of the coronavirus response, and no one can be sure about its health and economic impacts. There is broad cross-party support for the measures announced by the Chancellor yesterday, although we will continue to press for there being no penalty for those who choose to do the right thing, whether they are self-employed, on a non-permanent contract or anything else of that nature.

That takes us so far, but this is a global pandemic and is now being defined as such. Where is the global leadership in tackling this? Where is the co-ordinated economic response? Where is the concerted effort from world leaders to act together to face a virus that respects no borders? It is hard to escape the conclusion that, had this virus erupted a decade ago, there would have been a will to have a much more international response. With this generation of leaders, with nationalism on the rise and with international institutions and actions having been so disparaged and derided, that will has so far not been there.

It is not too late. We could lead in calling for that effort. If we do not, we will have to hope that the retreat into national responses does not cost us dearly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I ask for the usual courtesies for maiden speeches, of which we have three this afternoon.

I call Sally-Ann Hart to make her maiden speech.

2.17 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to give my maiden speech, which is something I have just got to get done.

I thank the residents of Hastings and Rye for putting their faith in me and the Conservative party by electing me as their representative in Parliament. It is an honour to represent them all, and I pledge to work hard and to serve them all.

Beautiful Hastings and Rye is a gem of a constituency that has a huge amount to offer residents, visitors and tourists alike. We own history. We have an abundance of natural attractions found in our beautiful beaches and glorious countryside. We have a wealth of historic towns, buildings and gardens, and we have world-renowned festivals—including our piano festival—art galleries, vineyards and attractions such as the Source skatepark, the biggest in Europe. We are proud to have hosted the world crazy golf championship since 2003. We have amazing communities of churches and volunteers, which reach out to help our most vulnerable and in need.

We have one of the oldest beach-launched fishing fleets in the country, dating back more than a thousand years, which must be preserved and, more importantly, allowed to flourish as we leave the EU. Regaining control of our waters will re-establish and strengthen the heart and soul of Hastings and Rye and all our fishing communities from John O'Groats to Land's End.

Tourism plays a significant role in the local economy, supporting nearly 30% of local jobs. The local councils work hard together with local businesses and community groups to be innovative in boosting the tourist, arts and

[Sally-Ann Hart]

culture offer. There is huge potential for growth, and as we leave the European Union, the Government must continue to focus on initiatives and measures that will maximise tourism's contribution, not only for Hastings and Rye's rural coastal economy, but for the UK as a whole.

We have a number of successful manufacturing businesses, particularly in the vacuum engineering and defence sector. Economic growth outside the tourism sector must be a priority, as the constituency continues to suffer from poverty. Hastings is failing to thrive, despite significant sums of money being invested. The constituency may be in the affluent south-east, but it is one of the most deprived in the country.

Yesterday, the Chancellor praised a Scot, John Logie Baird, for inventing the television, which he did—in Hastings, the birthplace of television. That sense of creativity, innovation and dynamism has never left the town. There is so much talent waiting to be unleashed, but there is a lack of investment, confidence, aspiration and hope—something that I am determined to change. We must develop opportunities for all to excel. As such, I was proud to stand on a manifesto commitment to level up.

When it comes to education, skills and qualifications, we are in the bottom five of the most unqualified, unskilled populations. We have a duty to improve the quality and breadth of education. Education is fundamental in unlocking the potential of Hastings and Rye, to support and encourage economic growth. Continued investment in primary school education is necessary to give our children the best start in life. Secondary education is not just about academics. We need to offer the best technical and vocational training to improve the chance and quality of employment for more of our young people, making them nationally and globally competitive.

We also need to provide better education and support for people with special educational needs and disabilities to enable them to access work experience and employment and to be properly paid for the jobs they do. Giving them the support they need must not be something their families have to fight for; it must be a given.

Family, however comprised, is the single most important influence in a child's life. I say that as a wife of 27 years—I thank my lovely husband for coming to support me today—and as a mother of three adult children. All children thrive in loving, secure families, but some families need help, support and extra resources and we have to focus on early intervention and prevention. We have not placed enough value on the role of family life and I am determined that that will change.

Looking back at the maiden speeches of my last four predecessors in Hastings and Rye, I saw that they all highlight the necessity of improvements to the A21, known locally as the “snail trail” from London to Hastings, as an essential prerequisite to economic development in the constituency. Although I welcome the Chancellor's announcement on investment in our roads, I am standing here nearly 50 years later, making the same point as my predecessors: to have any chance of levelling up opportunities in Hastings and Rye or of unleashing the potential of our residents and businesses, this Government need to invest in the A21 and in the local rail and bus transport infrastructure. A good

transport infrastructure platform combined with a skilled local population will encourage existing businesses to grow and new businesses to start up, boosting economic growth in Hastings and Rye and combating poverty. As such, I will be raising this point at every possible opportunity until a solution is found.

I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Amber Rudd. Amber was elected in 2010 and built a reputation locally for being a hard-working MP. She secured improvements to rail times and progress on electrification. She is particularly proud of her ARSE—the Amber Rudd seaside express, the first ever almost-direct Hastings to London commuter train. She also secured the link road and investment in infrastructure and skills to help local people into work and better paid careers.

I am Geordie born, with Scots and a touch of Northern Irish blood coursing through my veins, representing the East Sussex constituency that I am proud to call my home and where I have raised my family. As such, I hope this blend can be the best of British. Our Union is precious, our one nation. Our freedom and independence come from our departure from the EU. This is our time; let us grab the opportunities together and make this kingdom united and our Britain great.

2.25 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on a confident and optimistic maiden speech. She certainly has very big shoes to fill, but from what we have just heard I feel confident that she will do a fantastic job of representing her constituents. I had the pleasure of spending new year in Hastings and Rye a couple of years ago, and I now regret that I did not hitch a ride on the Amber Rudd seaside express. I could recognise in everything the hon. Lady said what a fantastic place it is, and they are lucky to have a fantastic new MP. I was particularly pleased to hear the hon. Lady refer to children with special educational needs, because they need everybody to give them the voice that they otherwise would not have. I look forward very much to the hon. Lady's future contributions to debates in this Chamber.

I will move on to the matter at hand. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) was right to focus on the social crisis we face in this country. In that light, I would like to take a moment to consider the impact of the Budget on people with mental ill health. This Government regularly talk about helping this group of highly vulnerable people, without following up on their words.

Although it is right that the Chancellor has focused this week on tackling the immediate threat of coronavirus, the measures he has put in place are necessarily temporary. Many people with mental ill health face long-term challenges that temporary measures will not alleviate. The Government are speeding up the payment of benefits, including statutory sick pay, to people unable to work because of coronavirus, and that is the right thing to do, but for thousands of people with mental health problems, the benefits system pushes them further away from work. The roll-out of universal credit, ignoring the major failings during the pilot stages, has pushed many people with mental ill health into poverty and deeper mental health crises. A five-week wait for the first payment, and insensitive assessments, to put it mildly,

in which people who are mentally vulnerable are forced to recount in detail examples of trauma and even attempted suicide, can easily worsen their health conditions and make them less capable of work. There is nothing in this Budget to tackle any of the root causes of that.

After years of NHS underfunding, mental health campaigners including Mind and Young Minds have been calling for greater levels of investment, but there was no mention in the Budget of investing in the wellbeing of NHS staff who are leaving in droves because of unimaginable stress and workloads. And there was no mention of investment in the crumbling and unsafe facilities people with mental health problems have to use. Indeed, two thirds of mental health trusts estimate that they need between £50 million and £150 million extra in capital investment over the coming years. How much longer can we go on putting people with mental ill health in mixed-sex wards that leave patients at risk of sexual assault, or leaving patients who are at risk of suicide where they cannot be properly supervised because the facilities are inappropriate?

In December 2018, Professor Sir Simon Wessely completed his independent review of the Mental Health Act 1983 and made recommendations for improving that legislation and the services that follow on from it. Fifteen months later, there has still been no response from the Government to that important review, despite a string of Ministers championing the review from the Dispatch Box. While we wait for a formal response, we also wait for the funding to match, but we heard nothing at all about any of that in the Budget. The Government must not forget people with mental ill health. They should be investing in staff recruitment and training, high-quality facilities and the support people need to live the independent, fulfilling lives that they all deserve to lead.

I would like to take a moment to look at the continuing inappropriate use of violent restraint against patients with mental ill health. This House unanimously passed my private Member's Bill, Seni's law, in November 2018. The Bill establishes a new system aimed at reducing the use of restraint and eliminating deaths in mental health custody of the kind experienced by Seni Lewis and far too many others. Seni's law won unanimous support, in all parts of the House, yet 16 months later the Government have still not announced a commencement date, despite originally promising that we would have it within six months of the legislation being enacted.

To people with mental ill health, it looks like the Government just do not consider them a priority. I am aware that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), who is responsible for mental health, is self-isolating with coronavirus, and I wish her a speedy recovery, as I am sure we all do, but that does not excuse the months of dither and delay that have held up the important provisions of this Act coming into force. I hope that the first thing she will do when she has recovered and is back at her desk is give us a commencement date for Seni's law. It will not even cost the Chancellor a penny to do it.

This Budget is a missed opportunity for people with mental ill health. The Government keep saying that mental health is a priority, but the funding does not follow the rhetoric. I hope the Chancellor will reflect on serious omission in the Budget and work with his colleagues

across government to make mental health services, and the people who rely on them, the priority they need and deserve to be.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am very pleased to call Andy Carter to make his maiden speech.

2.32 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): We are, I think, drawing to the end of maiden speech season. Over the past few weeks, I have heard, and seen, many hon. Friends give very moving speeches, speaking with incredible passion for their constituencies. Indeed, I have learned much about the lives and places across these isles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), who talked so warmly about her constituency.

I wish to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Faisal Rashid, who represented Warrington South for only a short period, arriving in this place in 2017. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, Faisal made history in Warrington by becoming the borough's first Muslim mayor, and I thank him for the work he did to forge relationships between different communities in Warrington.

I am the third Member of Parliament since 2010 for Warrington South, and, if I may, I would also like to pay a brief tribute to David Mowat, who represented the area for seven years from 2010. David was an excellent constituency MP who did many things in this place to change the lives of Warringtonians. I really saw that when I was campaigning. During the election, I was knocking on people's doors and they told me that they would like to vote for him. Fortunately, I was able to convince them that it was me they needed to vote for. David was also a very effective Health Minister, and I thank him for the advice and guidance he has offered. I also wish to express my thanks to the Warrington Conservative Association for all its support in getting me to this place.

Having thanked my political predecessors, I want to show my love and appreciation to my family for giving me the space and opportunity to turn a political interest into a fully-fledged obsession: to my wife Aggie, who keeps me grounded with questions as challenging as any I hear on the doorstep; to my son Harry, who this season gave me permission to miss the occasional Saturday morning under-12 Appleton boys football match so that I could go knocking on doors; and to my mum and my brother Richard—thank you for your love and support. By the way, I checked this morning and the Appleton FC U12 Pythons are at the top of their league. They are having a pretty impressive season and promotion beckons, and I thank the parent coaches for the work they do to support the boys and girls at Appleton football club.

I may not have been born there but I am really proud to say that Warrington is my hometown. We are at the very centre of the north-west, both geographically and economically. When I am describing where my constituency is, I say, "Well it is in the golden triangle of the M6, M60 and M56 motorways, equidistant between Manchester and Liverpool, on the route of the west coast main line." We hope it will be on the route of the new Northern

[Andy Carter]

Powerhouse Rail line. Warrington Bank Quay station would be a fantastic hub for rail in the north-west—something that I look forward to discussing with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), in the coming weeks.

It is not just roads and rail in Warrington—we have got water, too. We are on the banks of the Mersey and crossed by the country's first canal, the Bridgewater, and we have the engineering miracle that is the Manchester ship canal. Anyone who lives in Stockton Heath, Walton or Latchford will tell you how gracefully, and slowly, a fully-loaded cargo ship passes through the swing bridges, as traffic comes to a halt and we all gaze at the ocean-bound vessel as it moves through the town centre, a good 20 miles from the sea.

We are incredibly lucky to have lovely Cheshire villages: Grappenhall, with its stone cobbled streets, and the original Cheshire cat carved into the stone on St Wilfrid's church tower; and tranquil Lymm Dam, home of “The Bongs”—wooded banks, in Cheshire dialect—a favourite for dog walkers and nature lovers. We have our famous golden gates, recently given a new lease of life and looking splendid in front of the town hall. We have Great Sankey and Penketh, once part of Lancashire, to the west of the town, with the latter home to the dominating, but soon to be demolished, Fiddlers Ferry power station.

One thing people notice when they step off the train at Warrington Bank Quay is a smell; for 136 years, Warrington has been home to washing powder. We have produced the powder that keeps the country's clothes clean. Soap-making history dates back to the 1750s, when Joseph Crossfield and Son opened a small works. Sadly, that is coming to an end, as Unilever has just announced the closure of its plant, bringing an end to manufacturing in the town, and I offer my thoughts and support to the 123 people who, this week, have found out that they are losing their jobs.

That said, Warrington South is seeing tremendous renewal. It is an area that has changed, in some cases beyond all recognition, with new homes built. We have Chapelford, a new urban village, which was once RAF Burtonwood. We have business parks such as Lingley Mere, home to big employers who are making the most of our fantastic location. For some, the prospect of too much change is a genuine concern, and I share the view of many of my constituents on the need to maintain the green space while taking every opportunity to regenerate areas of our town centre.

I have had a few weeks to think about what I might like to mention in my maiden speech, and being able to take this opportunity to do so during the Budget debate gives me great scope to talk about the role that small business plays in our economy and the impact that some of the decisions the Chancellor made yesterday will have on families in my constituency and across the country. Before I do that, I want to briefly mention an area in which I have been involved and that I hope I can champion here, too.

The UK needs advanced technical skills at all levels if we are to prosper in the 21st century. We need a workforce that can develop new products, stretch and reuse existing resources and meet the challenges of the future. Through creativity and innovation, investing in our schools and

developing better links with employers, we need to generate the skills for the future. That must be part of our thinking.

Let me turn to the Budget. As someone who was, until recently, running a small family business, many of the announcements made yesterday resonated with me greatly. My constituency has some of the highest levels of new start-ups anywhere in the UK—successful businessmen and women who are willing to go it alone, working to support not only their own family but the families of their employees.

Small and medium-sized enterprises account for three fifths of all employment and around half of turnover in the UK private sector, so getting the landscape right is vital. Increasing the business rate retail discount to 100% for the next year, and its expansion to the leisure and hospitality sectors, will benefit our town centres.

For many self-employed homeworkers, the delivery of the next generation of broadband cannot come soon enough. I welcome the record £5 billion funding commitment to support gigabit-capable broadband.

I conclude by mentioning an area that is on the fringes of Warrington but offers much employment to my constituents: Daresbury science park, which has developed into a brilliantly innovative campus with an incredibly bright future. As the Secretary of State said earlier, the Budget promises more investment into high-risk and high-reward science. At Daresbury, they are pioneering big-data analytics and artificial intelligence, with the potential to create a further 9,000 jobs over the next 15 years. I am particularly pleased to see the additional £400 million promised for the forthcoming year for research, infrastructure and equipment.

I urge Ministers to look at the golden triangle of Warrington as a place to invest. When Warrington wins, we all triumph. When our nation climbs, as it will with this Budget, we all soar.

2.40 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and to congratulate him on a warm and confident maiden speech. I welcome his generous tribute to Faisal Rashid, not only for his brief period in the House but his work as mayor and local councillor before that. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the potential of Daresbury science park in particular. The House will look forward to hearing much more from him in the years ahead.

The *Financial Times* pointed out this morning that yesterday marked the end of the Tory promise to eliminate the deficit. For a large part of the past decade, ending the deficit appeared to be the Tories' *raison d'être*, but we cannot blame the current Chancellor for concluding yesterday that his Tory predecessors' policies on the deficit had comprehensively failed and that the result has been, to quote the Chancellor yesterday,

“a decade-long slowdown in productivity.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 282.]

In what was a remarkable phrase, the Chancellor told us yesterday that his was a plan to “fund...our future prosperity.” I have never heard any Chancellor previously claim that we could spend our way to prosperity, but that is precisely what many Conservative Members used to accuse Labour Members of believing. It is now

apparently official Tory policy. Repudiating past Tory policy is no bad thing, though, and I wish to welcome a number of the measures in the policy area of the Work and Pensions Committee, which I chair.

I warmly welcome the wider availability of statutory sick pay; the faster access to employment and support allowance; and the £500 million hardship fund for disbursement by local authorities, which recognises, as I suggested in my intervention earlier during the excellent speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the need for central Government funding to replicate what the old social fund used to do until it was abolished by the coalition.

I welcome the changes on universal credit. The suspension of the minimum income floor means that self-employed people whose income takes a hit will get at least some extra help from universal credit. The truth is, though, that the minimum income floor should not be there, and there is a strong case for making its suspension permanent.

I also welcome the reduction in the maximum rate of repayment of advances and the longer period of repayment, although those measures will take effect only from October next year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) said, the Budget did not address the fundamental problems with universal credit. Research by the Trussell Trust has found that people on universal credit are two and a half times more likely to need help from a food bank than people in otherwise similar circumstances who are still on the legacy benefits. That remarkable statistic underlines the scale of the problems that universal credit is causing.

Even more startling is the article this month in *The Lancet*. I do hope that Ministers will weigh very carefully the dry academic prose in that article, which concludes that up to the end of 2018

“An additional 63,674 unemployed people will have experienced levels of psychological distress that are clinically significant due to the introduction of Universal Credit”.

It goes on to suggest that over one third of them “might reach the diagnostic threshold for depression.”

About one quarter of those ultimately expected to be on universal credit are on it at the moment. The Government say that the rest will be on it by the end of 2024. The Office for Budget Responsibility yesterday expressed its traditional and well-founded scepticism about that timetable and suggested it is likely to take two years longer than the Department for Work and Pensions says. Given that the harm being caused by universal credit is so well documented, I do not think it is viable for the Government simply to press on.

What is it about universal credit that is causing such hardship? I think it is the delay—never before a feature of the social security system—of five weeks between applying for benefit and being entitled to payment. That is why the Select Committee has made it the subject of our first major inquiry. We want to work closely and constructively with Ministers and the Department to identify workable and affordable solutions to what is, incontrovertibly, a very serious problem.

I want to make one final point. One of yesterday’s Budget’s few revenue-raising measures was the increase in the immigration health surcharge. One might think that this is about increasing the charge to tourists

coming to the UK to take advantage of the NHS, but it is not. It is a major burden being imposed on a large number of modestly paid working families, a large number of them in my constituency, and I cannot see how it can be justified. These are families who are settled in the UK, often with children who have been born in the UK, and who are on the 10-year pathway to indefinite leave. They are given leave to remain for two and a half years at a time. They are paying their taxes, like everybody else who uses public services, but every two and a half years they have to pay thousands, on top of their taxes, in visa charges, and now they will have to pay even more through this immigration health surcharge. They have already paid tax and national insurance. How can these swingeing additional charges be justified?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is a great pleasure to call, to make his maiden speech, Mr James Grundy.

2.47 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to speak in this Budget debate, and I do so as the first Conservative MP representing Leigh since 1880—140 years ago. The last Conservative representing Leigh to speak in a Budget debate was Richard Assheton Cross, who was Benjamin Disraeli’s Home Secretary. I cannot promise to match during my time here his impressive achievements—or indeed his impressive beard.

To speak of a more recent incumbent, it is only right that I pay tribute to my predecessor, Jo Platt. I think I might have made history by being the first person to apologise to a defeated opponent in a victory speech, because Jo is genuinely lovely. I have known Jo since she was elected to Wigan Council in 2012, for the Astley Mosley Common ward, and I cannot ever recall a bad word passing between us. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing her well.

I should also like to pay tribute to Andy Burnham, who did so much to help the families of the victims of Hillsborough. He also, much to his credit, spoke generously about the role the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), played in resolving that matter.

Leigh is a proud northern town with a strong local identity, rooted originally in coalmining and textile manufacturing. Indeed, my own family worked in those mills and mines several generations ago, and I am proud to say so. Though the mines and mills are long gone, the proud identity remains, and it is my firm belief that we can again become a prosperous and wealthy town if this Government invest in and deliver for the north. And I believe they will—I intend to make sure of it.

I welcome the creation of the £4.2 billion local public transport fund, and I particularly welcome the commitment to improve transport links between Liverpool and Manchester, as my constituency lies almost exactly halfway between those two great cities. It is long overdue. On that note, I do hope that funding can be found to reconnect Leigh to the national rail network, with a new station at Kenyon Junction—the first railway junction to be constructed in the world. Furthermore, the good people of Golborne would dearly like to see their station reopened.

[James Grundy]

I welcome the commitment to spend £700 million on new strategic road schemes, and hope that money can be found to complete the Atherleigh Way bypass to ease the terrible congestion affecting the whole constituency, but in particular the town of Atherton and my home village of Lowton, where at Lane Head the poor air quality can at times reach levels worse than parts of central London. As the Prime Minister might say, we need to get bypass done.

I welcome the proposals to push for the development of brownfield sites. For too long, Wigan Council has sought to develop precious greenfield sites in the teeth of opposition from local residents. It is time to regenerate our town centres, and I think that the Chancellor's decision to exempt businesses with a rateable value of £51,000 or less from business rates will be a massive boost towards reaching that objective. There is much more that needs to be done to bring Leigh town centre up to scratch, but this will be of great assistance.

Leigh is the town that invented the spinning jenny, helping to kick-start the industrial revolution. When people go shopping at Leigh market or go to the pub to celebrate the victories of the greatest rugby league team in the borough of Wigan—Leigh Centurions—they should be able to do so in a town centre they can be as proud of as any other in the north. I appreciate that I may have upset several Opposition Members with that comment, particularly the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue). She may be willing to intercede on behalf of a team that begins with a “W”, but I remind her that, while it is indeed an excellent team, Warrington does not lie within the confines of the borough.

When the Chancellor eventually visits for a drink to celebrate a victory by Leigh Centurions—made all the sweeter by the freeze on beer, wine and spirit duties—I do hope that he might visit via Tyldesley, which I hope, in years to come, will be the location of a line connecting Leigh to the excellent Metrolink system, which in due course would be a natural upgrade to the existing guided busway. While in Tyldesley, I hope that the Chancellor will visit neighbouring Astley, home to the Lancashire mining museum, which features the last standing pithead in all of Lancashire. I am sure that he agrees that such places are a vital part of our cultural heritage and must be preserved.

And now, I shall ask the Chancellor not to spend money on something: the Golborne spur of HS2, which affects thousands of people in my constituency, including my own family. As the Secretary of State said, it would cost between £2 billion and £3 billion, while delivering very little for that amount of money. There we go, I have just saved the taxpayer between £2 billion and £3 billion—not bad for my first speech.

I suppose I had better bring my speech to an end, for as I have set out my perfectly reasonable list of demands I have noticed the Treasury team turning an increasingly ashen hue. I reassure them that I am not an unreasonable individual. I do not expect everything I have asked for—not at once, anyway. To quote a former Chancellor, I have a “long-term economic plan” for my constituency of Leigh.

People across my constituency welcomed the Chancellor's Budget yesterday. Let it be the first step towards restoring prosperity to towns such as Leigh, and delivering on the

promises we made to those who voted for us—many for the first time in their lives. May the votes they have lent to us be treated with a lasting legacy—a legacy worthy of the name.

2.54 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow a north-west colleague, the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy), who has given an excellent maiden speech; I hope his constituents enjoyed it as much as I did. I am also very pleased that we heard from another north-west colleague, the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). It is always a pleasure to hear from more women in the House, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on her speech.

Yesterday's borrow-and-spend Budget represents, as others have noticed, a major change in direction for this Conservative Government, but an understandable one against a worrying backdrop of the Brexit impact highlighted in the OBR's “Economic and fiscal outlook”, which acknowledges the reduction in business investment since 2016, the reduction in output of 2% and trade barriers that will continue to have an adverse effect throughout the forecast period and beyond. Of course, as the Chancellor himself noted yesterday, there is also the impact of coronavirus, for which he has rightly allocated an initial £5 billion emergency pot. That additional funding is absolutely vital for the NHS and social care services to cope with the pandemic, but funding will not, of course, mean that we can recruit the additional staff we need overnight.

I query, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the sense of the immigration health surcharge, which will affect workers in the NHS and social care sectors, including those who have been here for many years with leave to remain. I am surprised and concerned, too, that we still have no detail on public health budgets, which will be vital for local authorities to carry out their role in protecting the public.

I do of course welcome the hardship fund of £500 million for local authorities, which I note is intended largely for council tax relief, but local authorities will also need to fund support for the voluntary and community sector organisations in their communities, as they will be charged with meeting more need through the crisis. They will need to support local welfare schemes, as other colleagues have noted. That will also include, I suspect, a much greater drain on food banks.

I want to say something about the announcements in the Budget in relation to skills. The capital budget announcement is welcome, but it is still set at less than half the level in the Budget of 2010. We need much more information on the national skills fund, because there are still significant problems and gaps in reaching those who should benefit most from adult skills funding. The number of intermediate-level apprenticeships in Greater Manchester has more than halved since 2015-16, and that clearly has the biggest impact on those residents who are furthest from the labour market. We need to ensure that this new funding pot secures access to level 2 apprenticeships and to other routes. I suggest that the way in which the unused apprenticeship levy disappears back into the Treasury pot needs to be addressed.

It would be extremely helpful to us in Greater Manchester if those levy moneys were returned to the city region for us to make further investment in adult skills.

There is still no information about the national retraining scheme for adults looking to retrain. We have had two years of consultation on this already, and it is disappointing that, while the Red Book acknowledges the importance of a cultural change in relation to adult retraining, there are still no specifics before the House.

As others have noted, we are also still waiting for detail on the replacement for the shared prosperity fund, which is worth £59 million per annum to Greater Manchester, is of vital importance in supporting deprived communities and individuals and supports some excellent work, including in the not-for-profit sector through organisations such as the St Antony's Centre in my community.

While the funding announcements in relation to skills are welcome, I would like to urge greater devolution overall of adult skills funding to Greater Manchester, building on the £92 million adult education budget that has already been devolved to us.

I share with other colleagues disappointment in relation to the announcements that affect family budgets—or the lack of announcements, particularly following a long legacy of social security freezes and cuts. As we heard, the Treasury's own distributional analysis shows that those in the eighth and ninth income deciles are gaining most from tax and benefits changes, while the lowest income decile loses in cash terms.

I am really disappointed to see no action on the two-child policy, the five-week wait, aligning local housing allowance with market rents, lifting the benefit cap and increasing payments for children through child benefit. For all the fanfare around universal credit over the last 10 years, our social security system remains punitive, complex and as mean as it has ever been. As our economy faces particularly choppy times, investment in family incomes should be a priority.

I also want to press the Government on the need for much greater ambition on climate change. There was very little that was new or radical in the announcements yesterday, and I hope we will see much greater ambition when the comprehensive spending review is presented later this year.

I conclude by repeating a plea that I have made again and again in recent months for details on when the funding for the clean bus and clean freight funds for Greater Manchester will be provided. We desperately need that funding to bring in measures that will enable us to replace our dirty buses and support small businesses to replace the freight fleet that will otherwise damage our climate plans. I hope the Economic Secretary to the Treasury will pursue that with his colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Transport. We desperately need that funding. It is holding us back in Greater Manchester, and I hope that this is the last time I have to ask.

3 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Budgets must take account of immediate circumstances, but they must also address the pattern of trends that shape our economy and fashion our society. Given what we know now, few will argue with the

Chancellor's bold action, in an attempt to stabilise an economy rocked with the uncertainty of the coronavirus. His comprehensive, generous and tailored stimulus, totalling £30 billion, will strengthen the safety net that our welfare system needs and bolster our precious health service. Businesses, too, will receive the support they need to get through these difficult times. The instability and uncertainty that fear spawns are bound to create an economic shock, and it is right that the Chancellor has responded to it.

The Chancellor's commitment to support workers, including the self-employed and those on zero-hours contracts, is welcome and virtuous, and I want to say a bit more about that later. The creation of a hardship fund, coupled with his pledge to refund statutory sick pay for small firms, will enable ordinary businesses to prevail and flourish in the face of this uncertainty. This pragmatic, sensible and ambitious Budget should embolden us, confident that, as he said, he will take whatever steps necessary to guarantee our national interest and the common good.

This is a time, by nature, for leadership and unity, for let there be no doubt that there will be foreign powers who can—and, because they can, will—leverage instability caused by the virus to their own advantage. As the President of the United States has made clear, it is pivotal to examine further the behaviour of the Chinese state—whom the western economies are not only affected by but, to some degree, dependent upon—regarding their transparency throughout this crisis. The Chancellor is right: this Budget provides security and lays the foundations for prosperity in the future.

While it is laudable to be responsive, beyond the immediate circumstances we face, we must address some of the suffocating facts in our society. There is too much societal emphasis in our time on the immediate and the trivial—at worst, the facile and the brutal. By happy contrast, it is good to see a Budget that is holistic, measured, serious and sustainable. First and foremost, it is strategic. One of the problems in democratic polities is that Governments are, by the nature of the five-year terms they serve, often tempted to do things that deliver a short-term payback and thereby neglect those things that are strategic and infrastructural. That cannot be said of this Government and this Budget—rather, the opposite: the Government have taken a long-term strategic view, and that is certainly to be welcomed.

The investment in road and rail is, of course, welcome. It builds on the road investment strategy, which I was happy to launch when I was Minister for Transport. It is vital because the connectivity of our country is the lifeblood of local economies as the way that people get to work and the way they move goods are critical.

It is also important to note that the Chancellor is investing in skills, as the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, although there are question marks about intermediate level skills. I would simply amplify the remarks she made. There are also issues about the effect of the apprenticeship levy and its unintended consequences. However, the investment in skills, through the extra support for further education, will allow us to build a workforce fit for the future.

A lot is said about capital, but too little is said about human capital. Unless we invest in the human infrastructure necessary to deliver those ambitious plans, they will not work. We need people to engineer, to design, to project

[*Sir John Hayes*]

manage and to deliver those big infrastructure projects, and further education and skills lie at the heart of all that.

Research and development funding is also welcome. However, I have three words of warning about research and investment for the Financial Secretary, which I know he will address with his usual diligence when he sums up. The first is that risky development is all very well, but what we actually want is bold investment that is mindful of risk. Secondly, we need to avoid the bureaucracy that is often associated with Government funding. Finally, that kind of investment also has to be long term, because the sort of projects that innovate require people to commit to them—and, by the way, to be attracted to the relevant science and innovation—over an extended period. So long-term funding, funding that is tailored and measured and funding that is not bound up with bureaucracy all become critical.

Furthermore, we have to address the issue of job insecurity and the character of the employment we are creating. It is really important to grasp that societal solidarity is framed by people having a sense of self-worth that comes from having a sense of purpose. It is not enough just to have jobs; we have to have jobs that are meaningful. We have to believe again in the nobility of labour. We have to understand that people's wellbeing is in part fuelled by their sense that they are making a difference over the long term by employing their skills in a virtuous purpose. That may sound rather like an emulation of the sentiments of William Morris, but I make no apologies for emulating that great man because I have reservations about the gig economy and some of the job insecurity to which it has given rise.

Finally, let me say a word about globalisation. A few years ago, it was heralded as a great virtue, but now the support we have given for small business could and can be the beginning of a reappraisal of what really matters in the economy. I believe it is the particular and the local—shorter supply chains and facing up to the downsides of globalisation—that lies at the heart of protecting the national interest and delivering the common good. That is precisely what this Budget begins and what the Government should do.

3.8 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It has been a great pleasure to hear the maiden speeches of three new hon. Members this afternoon, and particularly to hear about Appleton. I grew up in Cheshire and I know Appleton very well, so it brought back some very nice memories. I wish all those new hon. Members the very best with their parliamentary careers.

It is absolutely right that the tone of the debate this afternoon has been to accept that this Budget has been hijacked by the coronavirus and the need for action to be taken. I want to commend the Government for the financial support they are putting in, with the £12 billion to provide support for public services, businesses and individuals whose finances will be affected, and the £5 billion for the NHS and other public services. I think that that is absolutely right, as is the extension of statutory sick pay. However, I hope that, in the emergency legislation that will be brought before the House in the next few days and weeks, we will see something for the people who are not covered by statutory sick pay.

The NHS will be under huge pressures in the coming weeks and months. While it is very welcome to see this additional emergency funding going in, this will shine a light on capacity in the NHS after many years of not being funded as adequately as we would like. I pay tribute to the wonderful staff of the NHS, who are working around the clock to treat patients and contain the disease.

Social care was not mentioned in the Budget—it remained untouched—and like my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, I remain concerned about the ability of that sector to cope with coronavirus. I was also concerned that local authority funding was untouched by the Budget. By 2022, local authorities will have lost 60p in every pound due to cuts, and cuts to the public health budget will also come home to roost. No allocations have been made to public health directors for the coming financial year, which starts in just a few weeks. The Treasury has made no assessment of the impact of this Budget on women, and it is down to organisations such as the Women's Budget Group to tell us that 14% of workers will not benefit from the increase to the national insurance threshold, and 60% of those are women, because they are in the lowest paid jobs.

Earlier I mentioned the tampon tax. When the Minister responds to the debate, will he say something about where the estimated £393 million a year, which was raised from the tampon tax, will be found to continue funding projects that combat violence against women and girls? Levelling up does not just mean cash injections into threadbare public services, or an infrastructure revolution; it also means a system of social security that will protect women and their families, and lift them out of poverty. That is particularly important after the recent Marmot review, which showed that for the first time, life expectancy for women in the most disadvantaged communities is going down. Working families in Hull have been hit hard by the benefits freeze, the two-child limit for child tax credits and the baked-in five-week wait for universal credit, but there was no announcement in the Budget to support families who are struggling to make ends meet.

Let me mention some of the announcements that were made about Hull and the Humber. I and six of my Humber colleagues wrote to the Chancellor a fortnight ago, to ask him to invest in building the first fully deployed carbon capture and storage cluster in the UK, in our most carbon-intensive region. I was pleased that the Secretary of State has agreed to meet me, because I think the Humber has a compelling case to be one of two pilots for that scheme. I am pleased that the Government have decided not to introduce the rise in vehicle excise duty for new motorhomes. The caravan and motorhome sector is a big employer for local businesses in the region, and such a step would have caused it major problems.

On transport, I am all for the Chancellor's plans for levelling up and investing in the north, but in the Budget I heard reference only to the railway line between Manchester and Leeds, and not to the larger plan for a northern powerhouse rail link between Liverpool and Hull. I hope the Government will make further announcements about that. I was pleased with the additional funding for flooding and flood resilience, and I hope the Government will support the plan brought forward by the previous Member for Scunthorpe, which was to have the National Flood Resilience Centre based there.

I know that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has assured the new hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) that the Government are looking seriously at the funding bid that was submitted jointly by Humberside Fire and Rescue Service and the University of Hull, and in the light of what has happened in recent months, that would provide welcome resilience training to the whole United Kingdom.

Finally, the devolution deal for West Yorkshire was announced yesterday, with a mayoral combined authority from May 2021. With the South Yorkshire deal already done, the new deal means that the Yorkshire-wide devolution deal is dead. For the Humber, what happened yesterday in Committee Room 16 was probably more important, because it was sadly agreed that rather than having a Humber devolution deal, we are now going to move to a north-bank deal and a south-bank deal. From what was said yesterday—the Minister was there—I hope that we might be able to get to the point where we agree on a development corporation around the Humber, which is an economic entity and area that has the capacity to really power the northern powerhouse if we get agreement on both the north and south bank of the Humber. I hope that will come to fruition in any mayoral combined authority on the north and south bank.

3.15 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is an absolute privilege to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to speak. You are the first woman to Chair a Budget statement, which is fantastic. You may have heard that, way back in the long distant past, there was another woman who spoke during a Budget statement. The last woman who did so was Margaret Thatcher, who led for the Opposition way back in the 1970s. You are in good company.

What a fantastic Budget! I welcome it enormously. This was in many ways a pragmatic Budget, with the 25 basis points offered by the Bank of England for us to refinance ourselves and ensure that the debt works for the future.

The Budget was also in many ways designed for Tonbridge and west Kent. On flooding, it will make sure that the Medway is properly protected and that we can get the money into Leigh, East Peckham, Hildenborough and up around Penshurst and Edenbridge.

This was also a Budget that finally listened to me. I know this will surprise many in the House, but having asked three Chancellors for business rates to be reduced, third time lucky, we have got it. I am absolutely delighted that Tonbridge high street will see the benefits, as of course will Edenbridge and West Malling.

For those of us who have been driving around west Kent lately, the issue of potholes keeps coming up. Tyre makers may regret the announcement, but almost everyone else will celebrate it, so I thank the Government for focusing on potholes.

On further education, in the past we have had a bit of trouble locally with some further education colleges, so I am delighted that the investment into Hadlow and west Kent will really make a difference to people's lives. It is fantastic news and I welcome all of it.

One thing was very noticeable in the Budget: we are dealing with a global emergency that is very unpredictable. We do not know how the virus will affect us. We do not know the full effect it will have on every society

and community. It is therefore absolutely right that the Chancellor has pulled together a war chest of £30 billion and not said exactly where it is going to go, because we do not know. The right thing to do is to build up reserves and to prepare to deploy them when we need them. We are in the moment of the phony war. We do not know quite how things will emerge. I hope the Minister will take the message back to other Departments that, on equipping, we need to think in terms of a wartime analogy. We need to consider what urgent operational requirements to bring forward. What shortcuts should we take in normal procedure to ensure that we are as ready as we can be in our hospitals, homes and communities? What are the experimental technologies that we perhaps would not have rolled out this early, and now have no choice but to roll out? Where are the areas of investment which, if we make them now rather than waiting until they are fully tested, will actually save lives?

This is one of those moments where we remember stories like the boy who cried wolf. We remember that it is right to prevent panic and right to make sure that people think about what we are doing. It is right to follow the ordinary advice, but it is also right to remember that in the story there was a wolf and the wolf did eventually come. What we are preparing for, as we are seeing in Italy, China and around the world, is the reality of a human threat, predominantly to the lives, sadly, of many of the older members of our community. There is also a huge economic threat. However this plays out in our community, the concern and fear will have affected investment decisions in our community, in our country and around the world, so the reserves that the Chancellor has wisely built up will be needed in some way in the months and, sadly, probably even years to come.

That means working together, and here I just want to pick up a point on globalisation that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) touched on. Globalisation has, in many ways, been a fantastic success. It has seen us prosper and trade around the world. It has seen liberty and opportunity spread across the globe, but not all globalisation has been good. Some globalisation has brought practices, ideas and concepts that fundamentally threaten the liberties that have enabled people—these islands—to prosper and shape the world around us. Sadly, we are now seeing some of that through the competitive practices that we are enabling, allowing or tolerating some companies to bring into our markets. Here, of course, I am referring to some companies in our telecoms market.

I urge the Government, with all respect, to think again about the decisions that they are taking, when those may not actually enable competition, but close it down, and when they may not enable communication and prosperity, but in the long term, reverse it. These are really hard and expensive decisions but we must look at how we do it, because power in our community starts from the bottom. That is why the decision to invest in devolution was so important. I look forward to devo-Kent. Kent is one of the oldest kingdoms of our country—at the time when Scotland was the kingdom of Fife and others, Kent was a kingdom in her own right.

I look forward to power coming back to the people, to devolution going to the whole United Kingdom and to our Government looking hard at globalisation and the competitive practices that are being brought to

[Tom Tugendhat]

these islands, remembering that there is no point in taking back control from Brussels only to hand it over to Beijing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. After the next speaker, I will reduce the time limit to six minutes.

3.22 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate all Members who made their maiden speeches today, but particularly the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy) on his generous tribute to his predecessor. He has been an assiduous local councillor and I am sure that he will bring that experience to his new role.

I am pleased that statutory sick pay will be extended to all employees from day one, although I need more detail about what will happen to people who are not eligible for statutory sick pay. We need to remember that there will be a big drop in income for many people and that their outgoings will still be the same. If we combine that with the fact that substantial numbers of people have savings of less than £100, it begins to become a pretty big issue, and it will certainly increase the need for debt advice.

The crisis also brings into focus the need to look at why people are not saving. In many cases, this will be because of a negative income, but in others, it may be the lack of an affordable, easily accessed and flexible product available to those on a low or fluctuating income and with a poor credit history. I would really like some more information on the no-interest loan scheme, which was suggested last year as a way to help people on the lowest incomes. It is disappointing that that was not detailed in the Budget.

I also want to know what is being done to ensure that there is sufficient free debt advice both in the long term and the short term. People have to be helped not to take short-term action because of a crisis that has a negative long-term effect. I am thinking particularly of individual voluntary arrangements, which have increased, mostly for young people. We have to have debt solutions that are tailored to the individual, not what is profitable for the company.

Have the Government looked at implementing the breathing space scheme earlier? More money is being given for implementation, but people need forbearance now from all creditors if they are affected. I know that some banks are looking at a mortgage break, but what help is there for renters, particularly private renters? Could the situation of those imprisoned in high-interest mortgages due to the failure of Northern Rock be urgently reviewed?

I would also like to see key performance indicators addressed so that local authorities are rewarded for sustaining long-term affordable repayment plans with council tax payers who get into difficulty, instead of prioritising in-year collections, which lead to the use of bailiffs, which in many cases exacerbates the situation. More people may be forced to claim universal credit for the first time. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) that the five-week wait should go. It is no use giving people a loan and

pushing them further into debt. Pushing people who are already struggling into further debt is incredibly unhelpful. The stress it adds to individuals already concerned about the health of their families and themselves is incalculable.

I would also like to see more detail on the hardship fund to be given to local authorities. How will it be distributed, what are the guidelines, and how much local discretion will there be? It is surely time to reinvigorate the local welfare provision. One in seven councils no longer operate such schemes, which are relied upon by the most vulnerable when they experience sudden financial shocks—and it has to be monetary help. Many councils just point people in the direction of advice, but when someone needs to buy a washing machine or a new bed, or simply new school shoes, advice is not much use.

This might be a tangential issue, but I would like more detail of what the Treasury is doing to guarantee access to cash. There should be a strategy for long-term access to cash that looks at the current trends and that involves the banks, the card issuers and the note machine operators and, crucially, is linked to the high street strategy. In my constituency, we have lost 16% of our free-to-use ATMs. There are 900 ATMs in the borough of Kensington. The average across the country is approximately 50. This is not sustainable and does not help struggling high streets. We need to make sure cash is available and that cash machines are free.

It is good news that the Access to All scheme will receive more cash. Perhaps at last Hindley station, the most used station on the Manchester line and the best kept, will be successful in its bid. I also welcome the fact that the Chancellor has axed the reading tax, but I hope this can be extended to audiobooks, which are a lifeline to people who have impaired vision.

Despite the big announcements regarding infrastructure, connectivity and levelling up, it is disappointing that the housing infrastructure bid to open up brownfield land in my constituency failed. Without this, any new housing will severely impact on gridlocked roads. I will continue to maintain that there should be no development before infrastructure.

I will conclude by mentioning a couple of omissions. While the Chancellor is looking at helping the vulnerable, perhaps he should meet the 1950s-born women to understand the effect of the pension changes on their lives. I recently met a woman working three jobs, all low paid, to make ends meet after the death of her husband and a delay in receiving her pension. She is in poor health and works with elderly and vulnerable people. Catching coronavirus would push her over the edge, both financially and mentally. We also need to look at how social care is funded. It is deeply unfair to make councils split any allocation between their two biggest priorities of supporting the elderly and supporting children.

In short, the Budget attempts to plug holes caused by 10 years of austerity. Let us remember that interest rates have been at an historic low for all of that period. I hope there will be a review of the strategy now to ensure that more individuals and families do not become financially vulnerable and to provide more help to those who do.

3.29 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is helpful to break this Budget down into three separate Budgets: the coronavirus emergency Budget, the current expenditure Budget and the strategic investment Budget.

On the first of those Budgets, for me the test is: did the Chancellor announce a sufficient range of measures and investment? He started, quite rightly, by saying that the NHS will get all the money it deserves and needs, and that was on top of confirming in the Budget the commitments that the Government have already made about providing finance to the NHS and his later statement in the Budget suggesting additional funding for the NHS. “NHS, NHS, NHS” was a core message of this Budget, and I am sure it will be a core message of all Conservative Budgets over the next four or five years.

In addition, the Chancellor announced much needed support for our small businesses. I am delighted, having last week gone with the Federation of Small Businesses to meet a couple of businesses—including those at the Number One King Street café in Potton, who said, “We need help with our rates”—that the Chancellor focused on getting money directly into the hands of small businesses. Yes, we need banks to assist—it is right to do that—but one of the lessons from 2007 and 2008 was that we cannot rely on the banks alone to support the economy. My first challenge and question to my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is: will he make sure, over the next few weeks and months, that he looks at all the arteries in the financial system that can get money directly into the hands of our small businesses? In particular, will he look at one omission in the rates relief, which is that childminders and nurseries were not included in the list? Childminder nurseries, such as the one in my constituency run by Debbie Moliterno, need that relief because of the pressure of the coronavirus on our economy.

The second Budget is the current expenditure Budget, where one of the messages is: are we working in a way that is prudent? The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that there will be £12 billion of headroom in the current Budget. I am more conservative; I think there is too much uncertainty around. There were some taxation increases mentioned in the Budget, but we have to understand that there may well need to be additional taxes later this year. My point to my right hon. Friend is that we need in that effort to do all we can to support the wealth-creating part of our economy, which is the small businesses and entrepreneurs we have, who face certain issues.

As my right hon. Friend knows, next week we will have a debate on the loan charge. I met constituents affected by that last week. We also have issues with IR35, where the HMRC is acting according to the reverse of Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s principle of taxation, by getting as much hissing out of the goose for the lowest possible tax imaginable. Eighteen years of collective failure by HMRC—please, Financial Secretary, do not be the fall guy for HMRC’s blatantly poor execution of this policy on treating entrepreneurs.

The third part of the Budget is the strategic investment Budget. Hidden away in that is this Government’s ambition for raising the wages and incomes of the poorest paid workers. This Government should be proud of their record over the last few years in raising the living wage and raising wages for the poorest workers in our community. When the last Labour Government were in office, we were 17th in the OECD for the ratio of our minimum wage to median earnings. In 2018-19, we were ninth, and the Chancellor has indicated that we have further to go. This ambition is not matched by any other major economy in the OECD, and it is right for that to be part of the strategic ambitions of our Government.

However, we also need to recognise—I say this to my fiscally conservative colleagues—that this is a time for investment. Some other speakers have mentioned that it is unusual for us to have a debt-to-GDP ratio of 80%. That is true if the perspective is the last 20 or 30 years, but if we look back over these 20 years and the 100 years of the past century, from 1917 to 1966 this country managed and maintained a debt-to-GDP ratio of 80% or above. Therefore, although it is unusual in the near-term context, and in the lives of nearly all hon. Members here today, in the broader context it is something with the right principle and purposes, and something that even fiscally conservative Members of Parliament such as myself can sustain.

We need that because this is the first Budget since we left the European Union. We need to ensure that our scale of ambition meets the opportunities for our nation. We need to ensure that we get rid of all the obstacles in the way of the Government’s policies, to take hold of the opportunities that we have, so that this country can really generate momentum in the direction of change. That is important.

My final point to my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary, in terms of how the return on investment will be judged, is that he should not get hooked on a single objective such as the increase in productivity rate for this country. We have other significant challenges. We have not only the challenge of productivity; we have the challenge of meeting the carbon ambitions of our economy. We are facing radical changes in the fundamental basis of our economy and the fundamental basis of our trade, so to tie ourselves to a single point of accountability would be incorrect.

3.35 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I congratulate all new hon. Members on their excellent maiden speeches.

This Budget is clearly set against the backdrop of the coronavirus crisis that we are facing, and I agree with the Chancellor on one thing. It is absolutely right that we work together across all nations on these islands to stop the spread of this virus. I hope that the Treasury will clarify how it intends to work with the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, on the details of the funding being made available for the response to coronavirus. However, on many other counts, this Budget has missed the mark for my constituents, and I will give some examples of where much more action is needed.

For the past decade, my constituents have seen the local banking services disappear one by one—RBS in Burnside gone, RBS in Blantyre gone, TSB, Clydesdale and RBS in Cambuslang gone. My constituents are paying the price for capricious and faceless commercial decision making, and for too long the big banks have been allowed to cut local services to the bone. Although digital payments and mobile apps are growing in usage and popularity, that should not come at the expense of elderly and vulnerable constituents’ ability to rely on face-to-face banking services and ATMs to manage their money. This is starkly illustrated by a shocking figure that Scots forked out more than £10 million on cash machine charges last year.

I urge the Chancellor to fully recognise the real financial hardships that come when the last bank in town shuts its doors and the free-to-use cash machines disappear.

[Margaret Ferrier]

I hope that he will consider supporting my cash machines Bill, which aims to end the practice once and for all of charging people for the privilege of accessing their own money. I will acknowledge the commitment in the Red Book on new legislation for access to cash, but there is not a lot of detail on exactly what aspects of cash use the new legislation will cover. I press Ministers to expand on the timescales for the introduction of this legislation, as it is vital for constituents and businesses who rely on cash for day-to-day transactions.

I would also stress that we need more than protection of access to cash. We need a raft of legislation to ensure that the banks deliver a minimum level of service for my constituents and for the constituents of many hon. Members across this House who have witnessed a decline in community banking.

I also want to refer to another measure that could level down opportunity for my constituents. The shows and fairgrounds industry makes a major contribution to the lifeblood of my constituency, yet it has faced significant financial pressures in recent years in providing entertainment to adults and children alike. The Showmen's Guild of Great Britain has highlighted to me that the planned increase in fuel duty on red diesel will put many of their members out of business, with some reporting that it could increase their overheads by as much as £24,000 per annum. I stress that I am strongly supportive of measures that tackle the climate emergency, and it is right that we take the necessary steps to switch to cleaner forms of transport, but showpeople are less able to absorb the significant increase in fuel duty compared with other big businesses that use red diesel, and currently there are no alternative cleaner fuels that could wholly replace red diesel for the power-generating equipment for fairground rides.

Most fairgrounds sites in the UK do not have the same electric charging point infrastructure for their vehicles compared with their European counterparts. In its submission to the Government's recent call for evidence on this issue, the Showmen's Guild stated that their members reported using between 150 litres per month and 1,500 litres per fortnight of red diesel to run fairground attractions. We must ensure that the show can go on. I am urging Ministers to listen to the voices of showpeople in my constituency and across the UK and extend the exemption on the increase in fuel duty on red diesel to the fairground and shows industry.

I turn to another industry that deserves the necessary support to level up Scotland's economy. Thanks to the actions of our Scottish Government, the Clydebridge steelworks in Cambuslang was saved from closure, protecting a vital industry for my constituents. The Chancellor has committed to a big round of infrastructure projects, for which steel will be an essential component, yet he has missed the opportunity to create a competitive environment for the rejuvenation of the steel industry. In its response to the Budget, UK Steel highlighted the UK Government's failure to deliver just £50 million to reduce electricity prices, which would give steelworks in Scotland a much-needed boost.

Over the long term, this Budget does not get things done for Rutherglen and Hamilton West. My constituents want a different approach from the failure of austerity

and the insularity of Brexit. They want a brighter, better future, and I will do everything in my power to secure their democratic right to choose their own future for their country.

3.40 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I start by congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Leigh (James Grundy) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter) on their maiden speeches. I already knew them to be good colleagues, but they have shown this afternoon what great advocates they will be for their constituents.

I will talk about the innovation aspects of this Budget, because there is a lot to welcome. The UK has a proud record of scientific and technological innovation, and the Budget alludes to various facts to back that up, such as being the country with the second largest number of Nobel laureates.

World-class science is happening across my constituency of Wantage and Didcot, so I welcome the Government's commitment to 0.8% of GDP being put to research and development, and it is particularly welcome that that places us above countries such as the US, China and Japan as a proportion of GDP.

The Budget has a £180 million commitment for a new Natural History Museum centre at the Harwell campus. The Natural History Museum is not in my constituency, but it is a well-known and well-loved institution with 80 million specimens and 5 million visitors a year. I imagine that many hon. Members are among its regular visitors, and my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) has the privilege of having it in her constituency. If the museum ever wants to move, it can get me through the parliamentary switchboard.

The Harwell campus in my constituency is less well known, but it has £2 billion-worth of laboratories and 6,000 people working there from over 250 organisations. It does world-leading research in areas like space, energy and life sciences. It is less well known, partly because people cannot visit it in the same way as the Natural History Museum, but also because of its history. The UK did its atomic energy research there from the 1940s onwards, so it literally was not on the map at that time. Angus Horner, the entrepreneurial guy who runs the campus, has been working to get it on the map and is doing a great job.

The commitment to a new storage and research facility will move about 40% of the Natural History Museum's collection to the Harwell campus, along with some of the scientists, so it can work on some of the biggest challenges we face today, such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity and emerging illnesses and diseases. The principle of Harwell is that if we bring people together on the same campus, they can work out the solutions to coming and developing problems.

The announcement is hugely welcome because it will help the UK to punch above its weight again in these areas, and it will have a number of other positive knock-on effects. For example, one problem with the Natural History Museum's buildings is that the museum currently has to use galleries as storage facilities. Moving some of those items to Harwell will open up more of the galleries so that visitors, from here and elsewhere, can see more of the museum.

I also hope that it will play a key role in inspiring young people in Wantage, Didcot and beyond to get interested in science and be the scientists of the future. In that regard, it will show the benefit of Harwell to the constituency, to our country and to the global science and policy community. I very much welcome the Government's commitment and feel sure that the return on this investment in future years will be considerable.

3.45 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The announcement in the Budget of additional funds for the NHS is to be welcomed and will provide a much needed boost to the delivery of healthcare services across the country. However, I am concerned that the Government have not got to grips with the reality of what is happening to healthcare services and health outcomes on the ground.

The record of the Government on healthcare is not a good one. Last week, we heard how improvements to life expectancy have stalled for the first time in 100 years and that health inequalities have grown. This added to a long list of indicators that suggest that all is not well with our NHS and, perhaps more importantly, the health of the nation. It is a sad fact that investment seems to be made available only when the Government are reacting to a crisis—often of their own making, I have to add. If the Government are serious about improving the health of the nation, they need not only to deal with the day-to-day challenges that the NHS is facing and will face in the short-to-medium term: they need a whole-of-government approach that includes taking into account the role of the welfare system, local government and education. Indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that, when local government was made responsible for public health, it was to recognise the role of different Government bodies in delivering health outcomes.

To continue on the Government's current trajectory is to continue to lurch from one healthcare crisis to another. This is simply not sustainable, and a whole-of-government approach must be adopted if we are truly to reverse the declines that we have seen over the past few years, particularly among poorer households.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the very serious issue of health inequalities is intimately linked to inequalities across so many other aspects of life, such as in education and housing?

Colleen Fletcher: It is about all those things coming together, and about trying to understand what health inequalities actually mean. Some years ago, during a conversation when I was a councillor on Coventry City Council, it was described to me as being about what someone sees when they open the curtains in the morning or open the door and go out. Do they see a wonderful park, or do they see a brick wall with graffiti on it? That is also what health inequalities are about.

In Coventry, there are some excellent examples of local agencies working together to improve health outcomes, and this is continuing to develop through the Coventry and Warwickshire sustainability and transformation partnership. I hope that the Government provide the support and resources needed to embed best practice. However, given the underfunding of these health services, we need to deal with the major short-term risks to our local health economy.

One of the biggest challenges is dealing with the vast numbers of people who attend A&E at University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire. To tackle that problem, I have worked closely with a number of health colleagues locally to develop plans to deliver a second walk-in centre situated in the hospital grounds. By providing a new walk-in centre, A&E staff could divert many patients with minor conditions to that new service, while ensuring that the specialist care and support that A&E provides is given to those who truly need it.

I hope that this Budget will provide funding for that proposal and I hope that the Government recognise the need for a more co-ordinated approach to ensure that we can continue to improve healthcare outcomes across all income levels and groups now and long into the future.

3.49 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): It was a pleasure to listen to the three maiden speeches given by my new colleagues this afternoon. I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and for Leigh (James Grundy) will be assiduous in joining my efforts to get investment into the north-west region, while my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) was fluent in articulating many of the challenges faced by seaside communities such as my own.

Over the past few weeks, I have spoken to many of the hoteliers, landlords and shop owners who are the backbone of my local economy in Blackpool. Many of these traders are deeply concerned about the potential impacts that coronavirus may have on their business. The tourism industry in Blackpool relies on a successful season. With the season due to begin shortly, the current uncertainty and possible impact of coronavirus could not have come at a worse time.

The measures announced yesterday will go a long way towards addressing the fears and concerns of many of my local small businesses. The 100% business rate relief for guesthouses and businesses in the leisure sector will provide breathing space for those traders who rely on a successful summer period and who struggle to keep their businesses afloat if the tourism industry is badly affected. To say that the announcement was greeted by a collective sigh of relief in Blackpool is an understatement.

I welcome the introduction of the £5,000 rates discount for pubs and the additional £2.2 billion support package for local authorities to assist those businesses that currently pay little or no business rates. The £3,000 grant that that will provide to hundreds of businesses in Blackpool is most welcome. For some, it will be the difference between surviving for another few years and closing altogether. I urge the Treasury and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to work with local authorities so that they are in a position to distribute the funding as soon as possible. It is an unprecedented package of support for small businesses, and I commend the Treasury for putting it before the House.

Many of my constituents rely on seasonal work and are understandably apprehensive about taking time off during the holiday season. The measures in the Budget on statutory sick pay, and to make it easier for those who are not entitled to claim sick pay to claim universal credit, will assist many of my constituents. The measures

[*Scott Benton*]

announced will support the most vulnerable, who cannot always afford to take time off work when sick, and also help to contain the spread of the virus by ensuring that people follow the official medical advice, in the knowledge that they will not be financially worse off by doing so.

Under successive Prime Ministers, the Government have made assisting the least financially well-off an absolute priority, and I am delighted that the Budget continues in that vein. An increase in the national insurance threshold to £9,500 will give 31 million people an average tax cut of £100 per year, while the above-inflation increase that takes the national living wage up to £8.71 will benefit thousands of my hard-working constituents. The freeze on fuel duty over the past decade has helped working families to save around £1,200 compared with Labour's spending plans. For many, the family car is a necessity, not a luxury, and continuing to freeze the duty will help millions of hard-pressed families with the cost of living.

I congratulate the Chancellor of the Exchequer on a fantastic Budget that delivers on many of our manifesto commitments. The British people are rightly concerned about the impact that coronavirus may have on their lives. Not only has the Chancellor reassured many people with his comprehensive package of support for those individuals and businesses who may be affected, but he has provided welcome support for hard-working families and has laid the foundation for future prosperity and economic growth. This is an optimistic Budget that looks ahead to the fantastic future we have outside European Union. I am pleased to support it.

3.54 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I want to begin by acknowledging the Chancellor's response to the international crisis we now face. I welcome his measures to support business in these difficult times. It is the right thing to do and remarkably similar to the steps taken by Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling when we faced another crisis, in 2008. It was right then and it is right now. The only difference is that I am prepared to acknowledge that, while my opponents have spent the past 10 years condemning the action Gordon Brown took.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), I welcome the Chancellor's decision to remove the minimum income floor for self-employed people attempting to access universal credit, but surely that is tantamount to admitting that the existing floor is an unfair barrier to the self-employed. I hope we will hear more about the impact of this change and why it should only be a temporary measure. The Chancellor should also lift the five-week wait for universal credit, if he really wants to help people.

As I have said, I welcome the temporary support for business, but what we really need is long-term reform of business rates. The review announced by the Chancellor must complete its work urgently. Business rates are stifling small stores and innovation on our high streets. They are a key part of the problems faced by too many small businesses.

I hope that the Chancellor will carefully monitor the impact of his reduction in entrepreneurs' relief. The last thing we need to do at a time when we are experiencing

a significant restructuring of our economy is to take measures that discourage start-ups, entrepreneurs and innovation.

I appreciate that the pension tax relief taper has been prompted by the shortage of doctors and the hours that doctors are willing to work because of tax bills, but this is an expensive giveaway that will disproportionately help those with the highest salaries and biggest pension pots—not just doctors—at the very time when the people who really need our help with pensions are the young and the very poorly paid.

The Chancellor presents his red diesel provision as a green measure, while simultaneously announcing a huge road-building programme. None the less, he has announced a delay and has gone out of his way to placate the National Farmers Union—a special interest group. I simply remind him of the other sectors this will affect. Pumps all over the country are currently in action, pumping out floodwater, and most of them run on red diesel. Our construction industry, which most certainly does not need any further cost pressures, particularly if the Chancellor is to realise his infrastructure ambitions, makes extensive use of red diesel, as do fairgrounds. I am with the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier): I am sure the Chancellor does not want to go down in history as the man who did for the fairground ride.

I welcome the announcement of additional resources for the British Business Bank, but I wonder whether £200 million is really enough to support such a key sector as UK life sciences. None the less, I am anxious to get details of how we can secure part of that resource for the Birmingham life sciences park so that we can expand the pioneering life sciences work taking place in Birmingham and the west midlands.

I welcome the borrowing, at a time of low interest rates, to finance the infrastructure plans, but I have to say that I am amused at how a Tory Chancellor can say it with a straight face after the years of unnecessary cuts. Implicit in the comments made yesterday by the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) was the question: how is the Chancellor going to pay for this? We know he is going to borrow, but he cannot rely on low interest rates forever. If he is going to change the fiscal rules that were in the Tory manifesto only three months ago, we have a right to ask what the Tory economic plan is now.

I welcome the small capital sum for further education, but in the west midlands we have two problems: an existing skills gap, which is a constraint on growth; and far too big a pool of unskilled labour, which can only grow with the shakeout from the fourth industrial revolution. We need a step change in our approach to reskilling and lifelong learning. Remember—adult skills expenditure was cut by 40%, so what we need is not rhetoric, but something that is going to make a real difference. My constituency has unemployment rates that are double the national average, so a change in our approach to lifelong learning is every bit as important for levelling up in my constituency as the offer of an infrastructure project.

4 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): May I congratulate all my hon. Friends who have made such excellent maiden speeches in this debate? I also

wish to draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which relates to my former employment, before I joined this House.

This is an excellent Budget both for business and for my constituents in Arundel and South Downs. I commend my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's delivery yesterday, but, more importantly, this is a Budget that will stand the test of time. Before the immediate events of the last week or so, this was an economy whose businesses had wind in their sails, straining at their moorings with a new captain at the helm—a Secretary of State who has personal roots that stretch beyond these shores, into the sort of overseas markets that represent an outsized opportunity to create growth and employment for generations to come. This is important; the only way we can truly level up the whole United Kingdom is with an enterprise and export-led renaissance. It is only business that creates the real jobs, opportunities and wealth that will make our school and university leavers of the future look askance at the idea of ever leaving our great northern cities to move south.

Our natural advantages as a location to start, grow and run a business are immense: a world-class legal system with a strong respect for the rule of law; our position between the Asian and American time zones; a flexible and educated workforce; and, of course, English as our own, but increasingly the world's, language. This Budget sits alongside a world replete with opportunities.

In that context, I warmly welcome the proposal to increase the business rates discount to 100%, and to expand it to the leisure and hospitality sectors. But may I encourage the Chancellor to go just a little bit further? My constituent, Positive Images Design, is a world-leading supplier to the exhibition sector—which, as we might expect in the wake of the cancellation of events across the globe, is among the very hardest hit. As things stand, this sector and this thriving business in West Chiltington in my constituency would not benefit from the same relief, which I cannot believe was the intention. If it would help, I would be pleased to meet the relevant Minister and give him more details of the case.

I welcome the growing, wide recognition that the current structure of business rates is a burden, particularly for small enterprises. These rates tax businesses before they have had the chance to make the first £1 of revenue and unduly penalise those who remain anchored in their local communities, such as the high streets in the small towns of Arundel, Hurstpierpoint, Storrington and Petworth in my constituency. The measures announced in the Budget go a very long way to relieving the burden for the smallest businesses. I welcome the Chancellor's commitment to a fundamental review and encourage the Business Secretary to be a strong and passionate voice for business in that review—as, indeed, shall I.

While we are on the subject of tax, I am on the record as having said that with the UK being such an attractive place to do business, we should be competitive but have the self-confidence not to compete on having the lowest rate of tax. I fully support the Chancellor's proposal to maintain the rate of corporation tax at its current level of 19% rather than reduce it further. Indeed, I would go further on a future occasion and support an increase back to £1 in every £5 of profit as part of a fiscally neutral rebalancing of the business rates burden.

Business needs people and people need homes, so I particularly welcome the Chancellor's announcement of a £400 million brownfield housing fund and the renewed focus on creating more homes from the millions of acres of real brownfield land across the UK. This has to be the right way to proceed. We need the right homes in the right places and for those homes to be sustainable. Absolutely the wrong way to proceed would be some of the unsustainable, large-scale housing development that is currently being advocated for my constituency and is blighting the lives and peace of mind of my constituents. Proposals such as those made by Mayfield Market Towns or at Buck Barn despoil some of our last remaining precious countryside, put native species at risk of extinction and are fundamentally unsustainable due to the lack of supporting roads, rail, healthcare and social infrastructure. Local neighbourhood plans, democratically supported by residents, already contain provision for the sort of organic, sustainable housing growth that we need. Out of the EU, with a points-based immigration scheme, and with an ageing, if not actually shrinking, population, the types and locations of the dwellings our society will need in future are very different from those being proposed today.

This is a Budget for business, for growth, and for Britain. It seizes the opportunity and it gets it done. I believe we are at the start of a new renaissance of British businesses seizing and leading in all of the sectors that will define the economic winners of the future.

4.6 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Of course the big topic of this Budget had to be the coronavirus. We are facing the gravest health crisis in a century, and the Government have no greater responsibility at this time than to plan their response. I am aware that at this very moment we could be standing on the edge of an escalation in our response to this crisis. I am conscious that some people think that even to address other topics at this time might be seen as an indulgence, so I welcome yesterday's news that the Government have immediate and effective plans to re-fund the response to the coronavirus. I particularly welcome the news that statutory sick pay will be available to help people who would not otherwise be eligible. Supporting people who are required to self-isolate during this crisis is as essential to dealing with the social impacts of the virus as the additional funding available to the NHS will be to dealing with the health impacts.

However, while a short-term injection of funds to address the immediate crisis might be an appropriate response to the coronavirus, the Chancellor appears to have extended this approach to the whole of his Budget. It was a litany of short-term emergency measures. His speech yesterday left a whole wasteland of ungrasped nettles. If this Conservative Government, at the beginning of a five-year Parliament with a majority of 80, cannot bring themselves to make some tough choices to re-programme our economy to meet the challenges of climate change, and to reset the course of this nation's economic journey as we leave the European Union, when on earth will they?

The impact of business rates on town centre businesses is a matter of enormous concern in my constituency. We are seeing increasing numbers of empty shops and shopping parades across Richmond and Kingston. Town-centre shops are not on a level playing field with online

[Sarah Olney]

retailers, who are taking increasing market share with goods that are routinely sold at below cost price. Bricks-and-mortar retailers are further disadvantaged by having to pay punitive business rates calculated on the value of property that they operate out of, with no regard to their turnover. Major reform of business rates to maintain our town centres at the heart of our communities is long overdue and has been called for on many occasions by Members from all parts of this House. In our 2019 manifesto, the Liberal Democrats called for a landlord tax to be paid by those who receive the proceeds from the underlying value of the property. This would relieve small businesses of the burden of taxation altogether. It is precisely the kind of radical reform that is urgently required to save our town centres. There was much press speculation that the Chancellor might announce a measure of that kind in the Budget. It is therefore a huge disappointment to find that he has once again ducked the issue.

While the scrapping of business rates for the coming year to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus is surely welcome, it does nothing to resolve the long-term problem. The bills will return again in 2021, when businesses will face not only the after-effects of the coronavirus but the expiry of the transition period in our exit from the European Union. A short-term crisis measure does nothing to help businesses plan for the long-term or to build up resilience for the mixture of unexpected and self-inflicted shocks to the economy. I welcome news of a review of business rates and look forward to hearing its outcome, but it is disappointing that more was not done to grasp this opportunity now.

I have read the forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility, and I note that its economic outlook is informed by the assumption that the UK will make an orderly transition to a new trading arrangement with the European Union. Its forecast under those conditions is for a 4% downturn in GDP over 15 years. I was therefore surprised to hear so little mention of Brexit in the Chancellor's speech. I know that the Prime Minister's éminence grise has banned the use of the word, but to have so little reference to the major economic upheaval of our time in the first Budget after our departure from the European Union is nothing short of astonishing.

I am more sceptical than most about the Conservative Government's promises of a bright new rainbow-filled future, but I nevertheless thought that there would be some opportunity that they would wish to take advantage of. We have thrown off the shackles; we are free to determine our own future—and we are going to stop charging VAT on tampons! Grateful as I am—and I am sure I speak for the rest of the female population—to save on average about £1 every year on the cost of my sanitary protection, I am somewhat surprised to find that this is the limit of the Government's plans for our post-Brexit future. Is that really it? If I sound incredulous, it is partly because legislation to cut VAT on sanitary products was agreed by the European Parliament in 2018 and would have come into effect in 2022.

I accept that negotiations are ongoing, but I would be grateful if the Government gave the House an update at the earliest opportunity of their plans for the talks next week in the light of the coronavirus and an estimate of how that will affect their plans to conclude the negotiations

for the new free trade deal by the end of the year. I repeat the call that the Liberal Democrats have previously made: the negotiations should be halted and an extension to the transition period agreed, to account for the time that will surely be lost over the spring and into the summer in the efforts to manage the virus.

The OBR report references the fact that the major boost to Government income from this Budget is the reversal of the planned cut to corporation tax that was due to be implemented this year. The Liberal Democrats called for that reversal in their 2019 manifesto, and I am pleased to see that the Chancellor took up our suggestion. While we would not wish to see taxes on business set at a punitive or discouraging level, we believe that businesses should pay their fair share towards an equal society.

For the self-employed, the biggest missed opportunity of this Budget was the failure to address the enormous issues presented by the planned implementation of the IR35 legislation in the private sector. An uplift in the minimum income level for class 4 national insurance contributions is no consolation to those who face losing their livelihoods as organisations refuse to take on contractors or source their contracts from overseas, to avoid the unnecessary burden that the legislation will impose. It is not too late to halt the implementation and conduct a thorough review of the costs and benefits of this legislation.

For all of us, the largest nettle that goes ungrasped is our response to the climate emergency. The Chancellor announced funding for many new road schemes across the country but little for mitigating measures to reduce carbon emissions. The plans announced for carbon capture and storage are pitifully inadequate, and not enough is being done to invest in electrical vehicle charging infrastructure.

It is a particular shame that the issue of carbon emissions from domestic homes was not addressed, as the barrier to real change on that is the lack of funding. If we are to meet the Government's net zero target by 2050, we need to start a comprehensive programme of retrofitting insulation to domestic homes and to install more efficient forms of domestic heating. Such a move would have a beneficial impact on domestic energy bills everywhere and, in particular, would alleviate fuel poverty in many homes. I want to reiterate the Liberal Democrats' support for the Government in dealing with the coronavirus challenge in the months to come—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady can finish her sentence.

Sarah Olney: Thank you. I appreciate that I have gone over my time, but I have waited a long time to speak.

In applying a crisis response to our longer-term issues, the Government are leaving a field of ungrasped nettles that will come back to sting us all when we are able, as we hope, to continue life as normal.

Madam Deputy Speaker: For the sake of clarity, all the Deputy Speakers have been very lenient with Members making maiden speeches. That leniency does not extend to others.

4.14 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I welcome this Budget, particularly the fiscal stance adopted by the Chancellor and the Treasury. It is a well-targeted fiscal stimulus for productive capacity in the British economy and for dealing with the demand and supply difficulties we have with coronavirus, and I welcome it. In particular, as I said in intervening during the shadow Chancellor's speech, I welcome the careful co-ordination between the Bank of England and the Treasury. That should be happening across the world and other countries should follow this Government's lead.

There has been significantly increased investment in this Budget. Many people are saying, "Gosh, we're spending all this money—where has it come from?" It is a very clever Budget, in my judgment, because it is less profligate than it appears. Yes, borrowing has increased, but if we look at where the money comes from and at the debt interest payments that the Government will make over the next few years in servicing the debt, we see that the debt interest to revenue ratio is dropping from 4:1 to 3:1. We are leaving corporation tax at 19%, and that will also give the Government more money in the years to come. More importantly than any of that, our growth is holding up—it is one of the highest in the OECD—because of the careful management of the economy under this Government over the last few years. This is a prudent Budget, with prudent investment for the future.

This Budget deals with three big challenges: it starts to deal with our historical challenges; it deals with our present challenge of coronavirus; and it starts to deal with our future challenges. On our historical challenges, I was reading—it is not common, always, in this House—Lord Hennessy's book "Winds of Change". In that book on the early 1960s, which I urge all Members to read, he quotes a Cabinet paper written by Harold Macmillan in December 1962. In it, the former Prime Minister said that the two biggest challenges for the British economy were productivity and the regional imbalance between north and south. I mention that because these are very difficult, long-term problems that this Government are determined to tackle, and I welcome the measures in this Budget to do so.

Those measures include, in the modern day—the Government did not do this in quite the same way in the '60s—our investment in R&D, with the fastest growth that this country has ever seen, and our investment in infrastructure, which has already been well trailed by many Members. In particular—this has not been much talked about—there is our skills fund. Investing in human capital is just as important, if not more important, than investing in physical capital, and that is what this Budget does.

Those are our historical challenges—now on to the present challenges. Our most immediate present challenge is obviously the coronavirus pandemic. The Government have stood entirely behind this country, and they are leading the country through what is obviously a very difficult time. It is important for the House to appreciate how significant economically the coronavirus really could be. It means everything from reduced goods imports from China and reduced spending by Chinese visitors to other countries to damage to supply chains outside China and disruption to demand not just in the United Kingdom but in our other trading partners—whether

Europe, the west, Asia, Africa and across the world. The impact of coronavirus economically could be quite significant, and this Government, with the big bold bazooka that the Treasury has wielded—I am sure I read that somewhere—have shown their absolute determination to make sure that this country is in the best possible position.

We also have future challenges that this Budget starts to deal with, particularly on business rates. The measures we have taken on business rates are partly temporary to deal with the immediate difficulties for small and medium-sized businesses in the retail sector. However, the review that we are going to have to complete by the end of this year is really the best opportunity this House and this country have had for a very long time finally to reform what I believe to be one of the worst taxes in our tax system. We have a chance to do that now, and we should grasp this nettle. If we can achieve that, I think that retailers, and indeed businesses all across this country, will thank us for generations.

An American psychologist called Joseph Luft invented the phrase that was popularised by Donald Rumsfeld during the Iraq war, when he spoke of "known knowns", "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns". In politics we often deal with known knowns, and known unknowns, but at the moment, with coronavirus and the difficulties across the globe, we are dealing with unknown unknowns. I am confident that the Budget sets us in the right place to deal with those as best we can.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid I must reduce the time limit to five minutes.

4.20 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Listening to this debate, I am struck by the contrast from when I, like many other Members, campaigned to be elected to this place and was told that there is no such thing as a magic money tree. I now find out, in my first Budget, that in fact there is—absolutely remarkable.

The Budget was clearly funded in large part by a cancelled reduction to corporation tax, and by an unprecedented upswing in planned borrowing. I welcome the response to the coronavirus epidemic, which is measured and timely. My plea is for the UK Government to continue to work closely with the Scottish Government and to make clear the specifics of the funding that will come through, so that those Governments continue to work together in the best way.

It is one thing to respond to a big exogenous shock such as coronavirus; it is quite another to mitigate a self-inflicted wound such as Brexit. In the report by the Office for Budget Responsibility, I found figures that we would not normally expect to find on the side of a bus. Page 27 states that trade with the EU is estimated to be 15% lower after 10 years, with productivity down by 4%. Further to that, a free trade agreement would reduce Scottish GDP by 6% by 2030 and by 8.5% in the case of no deal.

The UK Government say they are prepared to leave without a deal, but as the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) pointed out, the OBR's outlook is predicated on the assumption that the UK will move in an orderly fashion to a new trading arrangement with the EU. Page 30 of the Treasury Red Book states

[Richard Thomson]

that the comprehensive spending review baseline scenario is that the UK will exit the implementation period without a future relationship being agreed, and no financial or fiscal provision has been made anywhere to seek to deal with that. Therefore, OBR forecasts depend on a deal that the CSR is about to discount. More significantly, those two documents make it clear that the UK Government can either have their Budget and fiscal rules, or they can have their threat to walk away from negotiations, but they simply cannot have both.

I welcome the £800 million commitment to carbon capture, usage and storage, but I note that it is spread over four projects. In the second round of carbon capture and storage, which was pulled by the previous Government, the total was larger at £1 billion, but for fewer projects. We need clarity, and the Government must push on with this, because there is no route to net zero emissions that does not involve CCUS.

Similarly, for an oil and gas sector deal, we must decarbonise the extraction process. There is a proposal to connect Shetland to the main electricity grid on mainland Scotland, and if we did that, it would become possible to electrify the oil extraction processes west of Shetland and reduce emissions. That would allow for renewables to connect to the grid. There are a range of regulatory and technical stumbling blocks, but it is the sort of project that cries out for inclusion in an oil and gas sector deal, alongside promotion of the hydrogen economy, subsea, and decommissioning.

For me, the most worrying aspect of this Budget is the utterly insipid growth rate that has been forecast. After years of austerity, GDP growth has been reduced to 1.1%, which is 0.4% lower than was forecast last March. Even with an unprecedented level of borrowing, and the splurge we are about to see, the OBR is only able to estimate that GDP growth will be 0.5% higher than it would otherwise have been. That is a dismal and damning figure.

This Budget stands and falls on page 29 of the OBR report, and it is on that that I will conclude my remarks. Page 29 makes it clear that fiscal loosening and its effectiveness depends entirely on the mix of projects shown. I am not sure that we have a bazooka; we have more of a blunderbuss, with a similar lack of focus and worry about where things land. If in that stimulus we end up with more proposals like the bridge to Northern Ireland, then heaven help us, we will not see the impact there should be for that level of investment. That is the hallmark of the Budget: a lack of coherence and a lack of detail. With veiled threats to bypass the devolution settlement through the shared prosperity fund, there is a lack of respect, a lack of investment in social improvement and a lack of compassion that is rapidly becoming the hallmark of this Government. That will not go unnoticed.

4.25 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): At Prime Minister's questions, I called on the Prime Minister to deliver investment for skills and infrastructure in the west midlands. The Chancellor certainly delivered. There is investment in transport, with hundreds of millions of pounds for better bus and train services in the west midlands and £54 million to fix potholes. That investment

will support our excellent Conservative Mayor Andy Street's transport plan to transform local public transport into a comprehensive system serving the whole west midlands county. There is investment in housing, with the new £400 million brownfield housing fund, to build the houses we need without threatening our precious green spaces, and £9.5 billion for the affordable homes programme to help to prevent homelessness. There is also investment in skills, through the £3 billion skills fund, to help to gain the skills people need for highly paid jobs and to ensure our firms can have the workforce they need to compete.

Coronavirus poses an immediate economic challenge. I welcome the impressive package the Chancellor announced, as well as making sure that the NHS has all the resources it needs to deal with the consequences. The 12-month business rate holiday for firms in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors with a rateable value of under £51,000 will for many make the difference between getting through this outbreak or going under. It will save jobs in the constituencies of every Member of this House. Larger businesses in those sectors also face massive challenges: sharp falls in business linked to the outbreak come on top of higher costs from spiralling business rates and pose an existential threat.

In the medium term, perhaps the most significant part of yesterday's Budget is the fundamental review of business rates at a time when so many town centres are being squeezed. It makes little sense to base local business taxation on notional land values that assume high streets carry a premium. A system of taxation created in the 1960s and based on property taxes introduced by the first Queen Elizabeth is not fit for the needs and characteristics of the 21st century. In the meantime, I hope Treasury Ministers will consider extending support to larger operators in the hospitality sector, who, because they employ large numbers of people in a labour-intensive industry and by their nature need large properties to accommodate guests, fall outside most of the support measures announced yesterday. They will, however, be hit harder than anybody by any lockdown or other restrictions on tourism.

An important part of our local economies are our local pubs. I have spoken many times about the economic, social and cultural contributions of community pubs and British brewing. Ministers have heard that many more times than most, so I will not repeat all that now, but I thank the Chancellor for his generous mention yesterday and even more for the generous support he announced. Increasing the business rate discount for pubs with a rateable value of under £100,000 by 400% to £5,000 is great news. Cancelling the inflationary rise that was due on beer duty, the third freeze in a row, means that beer will be 11 pence per pint less expensive than it would have been had those three rises gone ahead.

The Chancellor also announced a review of the duty system, which is only possible now because we have got Brexit done and will be taking back control at the end of this year. I hope the Treasury will consider how a post-Brexit duty system could better support our community pubs, rather than those who pile the beer high to sell it cheap in our supermarkets or off-licences. Perhaps we could have a system like the one in Australia, where beer sold in large containers such as casks or kegs pay about a third less duty than beer sold in bottles

and cans, which are more typically bought from supermarkets. Such a move would help to protect our remaining pubs, secure the jobs that they sustain and encourage people to drink sociably in well regulated, licensed premises rather than drinking alone at home, or elsewhere, where fewer safeguards exist.

Yesterday's Budget addressed both the immediate challenges of a health crisis, with the coronavirus outbreak, and the longer-term needs of building a framework that will encourage growth and build prosperity in all our communities. That is certainly something to which we should all be able to raise a glass.

4.29 pm

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), and I share his commitments to and support for the revision of how we do business rates. However, my constituents will be concerned about all sorts of things in the Budget, so I will try to pull apart a few things in the time I have available.

Of course, we welcome the Chancellor's commitment to making provision for covid-19 and for businesses, and I thank him for the relief of business rates. My constituents who work in the NHS are only frustrated that it takes a crisis for the Chancellor to say the important words that he will let the NHS have "whatever it needs". I urge him to make that a motto for the future, because the NHS should genuinely always have what it needs.

My constituents will be concerned about school funding, and of course, I welcome any cash increase in that, but that is against the backdrop of sustained cuts over the last 10 years. There has been a lost generation of children and young people whose education has been damaged by having large classes or subjects cut, and particularly those with special educational needs. There was barely anything on social care, either for adults or children. Children with special educational needs and disabilities have paid a price for austerity, and that can never be recovered. Parents tell me of their sadness at what has been lost in delayed assessments and missing support.

On the creative industries, as we leave the EU, this country could have chosen to negotiate to stay in Creative Europe. Thirteen European states that are not members of the EU are in fact members of Creative Europe. This is about not just money, but the economic benefits of the non-cash elements of Creative Europe for our fantastic creative industries. That is missing, unfortunately, from the aims for negotiation with the EU, but the Chancellor could have made up for it. The cultural investment fund is welcome, but it is in no way an adequate replacement for the networking, exposure and sharing of our creative industries, and that is a lost decade to come.

On Brexit mitigation, there is the ridiculous but now trademark and rather dreary slogan about getting it done, which I am absolutely sure Ministers must know is complete rubbish, because we are still in negotiation about the future relationship, and that is massive. My constituents told me for much of the last three years about the consequences for them of this now rapid drift away from the original promise by the original Brexit Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), that we would get the "exact same benefits" in the future relationship. That aim has disappeared, never mind the reality. I am sure that we

all really knew—and I am absolutely certain that the right hon. Gentleman knew—that this was going to be nonsense, and so it has proved. We have now seen successive Brexit Secretaries of State and two Prime Ministers downgrade that "exact same benefits" to a "best-in-class" trade deal, and now to a very slim volume of negotiating aims, with mean-spirited language about our nearest neighbours—in sharp contrast to rather thicker volume about the negotiating aims of the US.

We are now hurtling towards what I have to name as a no-deal Brexit, with all the tariff and non-tariff barriers that that will bring. That will hurt the exporters and importers in my constituency. We could choose to stick to our previous commitment as a country to some form of regulatory alignment and some form of level playing field, but without that, it is not surprising that we look likely to make any deal with the European Union virtually impossible.

Finally, and most importantly, I turn to climate change. The Committee on Climate Change—not me, the Committee—said that the best they could say about the Budget was that it was a "realistic start" but it was not close to what is really needed. The Chancellor kept saying that the Government were going to meet their environmental obligations, but environmental groups do not agree. The Government's advisory group does not agree. I do not agree. My constituents definitely do not agree. This is an existential threat. It is a matter of urgency—it is an emergency. I salute the Chancellor for taking the coronavirus emergency seriously and I just want him to do the same, with the same level of urgency, with the climate change emergency.

In conclusion, this Budget fails to address my constituents' concerns. While it contains many good things, especially on covid-19, it does not undo the economic and social damage of the past 10 years or the cuts to public services, and it fails to treat the climate emergency as an emergency. It is a Brexit Budget. The Chancellor used to be seen as the coming man, but I fear that he is now just seen as Cummings' man, with an agenda of deregulation, downgrading of public services and shrinking of the state. The Chancellor has a family, and one day they will ask him what he did about climate change, and I hope that he will be able, before the COP climate change conference this autumn, to tell them exactly what he did to protect the climate.

4.35 pm

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): Let me begin by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) for his excellent first Budget yesterday. He set out an ambitious economic agenda that backs business and innovation and invests in hospitals, schools and police, and I welcome the freezing of beer and fuel duty. It is a Budget that benefits everyone in Britain by levelling up the economy and delivering on our ambitious manifesto commitments to spread opportunity across every community. I agree with the many other hon. Members who welcome the Chancellor's increased support for businesses in the light of the current coronavirus pandemic, and I also welcome the Government's extra support at this difficult time.

To return to the economy in general, my constituents in Stafford have seen at first hand the economic advantages of having a Conservative Government. It is estimated that someone working full time on the minimum wage

[*Theo Clarke*]

in the west midlands is over £5,200 better off than when Labour was in power a decade ago, which represents a real improvement in the lives of ordinary people. As a former entrepreneur who set up and sold my own small business prior to entering Parliament, I understand the importance of job creation, and we must continue to back wealth creators. Nationally, it is the Conservatives who have put employment at a record high, and I welcome the more than 3 million new jobs created since 2010. Over the past decade, the British economy has grown faster than those of France, Italy and Japan. I was particularly pleased that the Office for National Statistics recently announced that employment in the west midlands has risen by 0.7%—the highest employment rate across the whole country.

With its rich history of shoemaking to its role as a thriving engineering centre, my constituency of Stafford has long been a key region for British manufacturers. We have an ambitious local plan to increase tech start-ups in the region to create a “silicon Staffordshire”. A great example of that is the local employer Risual, which is one of the UK’s leading technology firms. I recently visited the company, and I congratulate it on its excellent work in championing apprenticeships and ensuring that local students have access to quality jobs. It is a great example of an internet business helping to create real jobs on the ground. I also recently met the local Staffordshire chamber of commerce and our excellent Mayor of Birmingham Andy Street, and I agree with both that a skilled workforce is vital to securing our economic future. That is one of the reasons why I am such a big champion of apprenticeships, and I am pleased that the Government are continuing to promote them and T-levels. It is important that we continue to strive to plug any local skills gap.

Last Friday, I visited Stafford College, which has been rated outstanding by Ofsted, and met some of the students and apprentices who form part of our future workforce, learning about their specialist training with local employers across Staffordshire. I was therefore pleased to hear in the Budget that the Chancellor has committed an additional £3 billion to a skills fund to help ensure that young people are gaining the skills they need to get well-paid jobs. I look forward to working with employers to ensure that the west midlands continues to create a record number of jobs to be filled by local people. Young people are the future of our country, and it is vital that they are being trained to become employees with transferable skills who can contribute to the economy.

Stafford is open for business and the people of Stafford have always believed in getting stuff done, which I am sure our Chancellor will appreciate. My constituency also has General Electric, which employs 1,700 people and is a great example of a multinational company providing high-quality jobs for my constituents while also playing a major exporting role for the UK.

Finally, I would like to congratulate MOD Stafford in my constituency and pay a huge debt of gratitude to all our armed forces personnel for the vital contribution they make in serving our country. I was particularly pleased that the Chancellor announced yesterday that we will now have a national insurance holiday for employers of veterans in their first year of civilian employment, a much-needed step in encouraging companies

to employ ex-servicemen and women. I encourage the Government to continue to maximise employment levels for those who have served in our armed forces.

4.40 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): We have had some excellent speeches today. I do not have time to reference them all, but I pay particular tribute to the three Members who gave maiden speeches today. We heard first from the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart). I was very impressed to hear that her constituency has the biggest skate park in Europe. Then we heard from the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), a fellow neighbour along the Manchester ship canal. I share his excitement about Daresbury science park; I have been there numerous times and know the fantastic work that it is doing. Finally, we heard the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy), who talked of his proud northern roots and stated that Leigh was a proud northern town. That is a sentiment that I certainly share. All three speeches were very passionate, and it was very clear that those Members will be passionate advocates for their communities over the coming years. I wish them the very best of times in this House.

We live in precarious times. The three crises we face, coronavirus, the social emergency and the climate emergency, demanded a brave Budget—a bold Budget—to tackle them head-on. It was welcome to see action to help businesses encountering cash-flow problems, zero rates for businesses that qualify for the retail discount, the loans available for those affected by the virus and the 14-day statutory sick pay rebate for small firms. Those measures will help, but there remain gaping holes in the Government’s response to the virus. Statutory sick pay is £94 a week, which is not enough for many people to live on and pay the bills. People who fall ill will be forced to choose between hardship on the one hand and risking their health and those of their colleagues on the other. What of those not eligible to receive sick pay—the insecure workers created by a decade of Tory rule? For them, the choice is even starker. While extra funding for the NHS is welcome, we cannot overturn a decade of cuts and capacity shortages overnight with a quick cash injection.

On the social emergency, we live in a society in which life expectancy is actually falling for the poorest. We have rampant regional inequality, hunger in schools and public services pushed to breaking point by a policy that even the Chancellor now admits was a political choice all along—the choice of austerity. Is it not telling that this Budget was silent on social care and universal credit? Is it not telling that it backed away from the tax rises on the wealthiest floated by his predecessor, and that while the biggest firms will benefit from his spending plans, there will be little if any plans for truly redistributive spending that would benefit our society from the bottom up? The Government’s own analysis shows that the tax and benefit changes, excluding public service spending, make richer households better off and cut earnings for the poorest. As the Women’s Budget Group has stated, “We may have more roads and fewer potholes as a result of this budget, but the prospects for investing in social care and tackling child poverty remain bleak.”

Turning to the emergency that will define our generation and those to come, the climate emergency, I would like to list those things on which this Budget was silent.

On solar power, wind power and tidal power, there was nothing. On the Tory manifesto pledge to support hydrogen production—nothing. On the Tory manifesto pledge to spend £9.2 billion on energy efficiency and cut household bills—nothing. On the Tory manifesto pledge to support a gigafactory for electric vehicle batteries—nothing. On reducing emissions from agriculture—nothing. On making public transport more affordable—nothing. And on measures to support workers and communities to transition away from carbon-intensive industries—nothing.

That is quite a list, but if we look at what the Budget does contain, the picture gets even bleaker. The Chancellor boasts of the biggest ever investment in roads and motorways, but Madam Deputy Speaker, I have spoken with scores of climate strikers and let me tell you that not a single one asked for a new motorway. So how does the Chancellor expect to square that with the UK's emissions targets? It is not likely to come through action on petrol and diesel cars, because we are stuck with a 2040 phase-out date, and it is not likely to come through support for electric vehicles, because the Chancellor announced only an additional £140 million for the plug-in car grants. Assuming that the grant stays at £3,500, that is enough for only 40,000 cars, compared with the 2.5 million that are sold every year. So what else have we got? There is a commitment to fund carbon capture and storage by loading the costs on to consumer bills—perhaps the most regressive funding mechanism available.

There is a commitment to delivering a more than 600% increase in current tree planting rates in England. That sounds impressive—until we realise that the increase is only so large because tree planting has collapsed in England under this Government. When we look at the actual commitment in detail—35,000 hectares over five years—we realise that it is five times lower than the UK-wide rate recommended by the Government's own official advisers.

Then there is a commitment to consult on measures to support renewable heat. There is a commitment to consult on green gas. There is a commitment to publish a review—sorry, two reviews—on the cost and benefits of reaching net zero. I do not think I am alone in this House in saying that consultations and reviews are not quite what we had in mind when we declared a climate and environment emergency last year.

Public calls for a climate Budget have never been louder, but what does that mean in practice? There are three key tests. First, is the Budget adequate? Does it take its lead from science rather than political expediency, cutting emissions at the rate necessary to avoid dangerous heating? Secondly, is the Budget aspirational? Will it create hundreds of thousands of good green jobs, positioning the UK as a world leader in the green industrial revolution, bringing huge wealth to all regions and nations? Finally, is the Budget fair? Does it spread the costs of dealing with the climate emergency in a way that is progressive and just, at home and internationally?

This Budget does not meet any of these tests, so I conclude in sadness and anger that the Chancellor has blown the biggest opportunity for national renewal since the post-war era and betrayed current and future generations.

4.47 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Madam Deputy Speaker, or may I say Chairman of Ways and Means? What a delight it is to see you in the Chair. It is an epochal moment—the beginning of a new decade, a new Government and a new Chairman of Ways and Means. How delightful is that?

I very much support what the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) said about the quality of the maiden speeches in this debate. We have greatly enjoyed them. I was struck by the crazy golf. I was struck by the Amber seaside express, but what came through all the speeches—not just that from my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) but also those from my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and for Leigh (James Grundy)—was the tremendous sense of pride that they exhibited. They had pride in their community, pride in their history and pride in their own achievements in coming to this House. They also, I thought, showed a wonderful fair-mindedness about predecessors of both political parties and I very much associate myself with that spirit. I congratulate them on that.

I salute the men and women of the Treasury and HMRC who made this Budget possible. In fact, they did not just make one Budget possible; they made two Budgets possible, including the one that never got delivered. Their expertise, dedication, good humour and sheer hard work is something that I think everyone in this House should be aware of and thank them for.

I also pay tribute to my fellow Ministers for their contributions to the Budget and pay tribute especially to the Chancellor for a new Budget from nothing in weeks; a vast array of measures, including measures not taken up; and a fully integrated cross-Government response to a national crisis of coronavirus, but which also lays the foundations for decades of higher investment in infrastructure. That, to me, speaks of a parliamentarian of enormous ability, mastery of detail, warmth and humanity, for which I salute him. A new Budget, leadership on coronavirus and new energy and direction on infrastructure—I hope my colleagues will agree that he got them done.

This Budget has been well received and well supported by many groups across the business sector. Today's debate has been on business and innovation, and it is good to see the CBI acclaim it as

“a bold Budget at scale...which will help people and business through tough times.”

The Federation of Small Businesses calls it an

“excellent pro-small business budget”.

And the British Chambers of Commerce says:

“Much to welcome for UK business communities”.

How important is that?

I am particularly pleased that Make UK, or the Engineering Employers Federation as it used to be known, says:

“Today's measures to boost R&D will be applauded by industry and will help the UK lead in the technologies”—

including, of course, the green technologies—

“of the future.”

[*Jesse Norman*]

The shadow Chancellor began his remarks by saying this is not a time for partisan politics and, of course, I agree. I was therefore slightly surprised when his first move was to descend into partisan politics, and I am sad that the shadow Business Secretary has done the same.

I am struck that one particular measure in the Budget has not received the attention that it perhaps should have done. Paragraph 2.77 on page 76 addresses the support we are giving to assist in opening up and reviewing private finance initiative projects across the public sector. We know that PFI has been a disaster for this country, and it was overwhelmingly initiated and carried out by the Labour party in the hospital sector. The idea that the NHS, in which virtually every PFI project was conceived and executed under a Labour Government, should be a topic of the Labour party's criticism is astonishing. [*Interruption.*] I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

PFI costs this country £10 billion a year, and any steps we can take to remove that burden on current expenditure—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but as I understand it, the shadow Business Secretary was intimately involved in PFI. I wonder whether, in her seven years in that area, she looked at the PFI project in Hereford, on which I had to run a process that saved £5 million for the taxpayer and greatly improved the delivery of hospital care to my constituents.

The fact of the matter is that this Government and their predecessors have had to deal with the terrible crisis of 2008, even now, and I remind the House that the tragedy—[*Interruption.*] Those are desperate attempts by the Opposition Front Bench team to put me off.

The fact of the matter is that the banking sector in this country was at 20 times its capital leverage in 1960, at 20 times its capital leverage in 1970, at 20 times its capital leverage in 1980, at 20 times its capital leverage in 1990 and at 20 times its capital leverage in 2000. Between 2000 and 2007, that 20 times went up to 50 times—in seven years. No further explanation need be given for why, when the crisis struck, it had a catastrophic effect, an effect that we are still seeking to remedy.

The United Kingdom has entered a new decade and a new era in which our prosperity as a nation will be shaped by the dynamism of our economy, the ingenuity of our entrepreneurs and the success of British businesses of all kinds. Yesterday's Budget is emblematic of the sense of purpose and energy that defines this Government as we seek to chart a bold new path for this country in the global economy to ensure that we remain a competitive place to do business; that we deliver the infrastructure and investment necessary to spread jobs, growth and opportunity across this country; and that we build on our historical strengths, referenced on many occasions in this debate, in science, technology and innovation to position ourselves at the forefront of the industries of the future. Thanks to the decisions we have made, we are building on firm foundations. We have kept corporation tax at 19%, the lowest in the G20, so that businesses have more freedom to invest in their own priorities. We have cut business rates—referenced in speeches on several occasions and rightly so—for more than half a million of the smallest firms, which pay nothing at all as a result.

We are delivering £20 billion of patient capital action—

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: There have been so many interventions and I simply cannot cover all the speeches if I take an intervention now. I know that the hon. Lady will excuse me. We gave the party opposite the chance to intervene.

We are delivering a £20 billion patient capital action plan to unlock private financing in high-growth innovative companies, and we have established a regulatory system that strikes the balance between responsibility and opportunity to allow us to embrace the most exciting ideas in technology.

Let me touch on many of the important speeches that have been made today. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) raised the question of Barnett consequential, and if she looks at page 49 of the Red Book, she will find them in paragraph 1.159.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) raised the question of human capital. I know that he will be thrilled that we have a £2.5 billion skills fund—

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I will not give way, for the reasons I have already described. I can continue to waste the hon. Lady's time and the House's time responding to these interventions, but we need to press on.

I am sure that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East will also enjoy the investment we have made in further education colleges—more than £1.5 billion for further education capex over the next few years.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) asked where the revenue from the tampon tax would go. The tampon tax fund supports women's charities, as she knows, and I am happy to tell her that the revenue will go to that. The competition for the next round of funds will be launched by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport shortly for the 2019-20 VAT receipts.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) rightly stressed the importance of long-term investment and as little bureaucracy as possible in making capital investment, and how right he was.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) asked us to reach for wartime analogies in fighting coronavirus. He will have seen that the Chancellor made it perfectly clear that we are prepared to do whatever it takes to assist the British people in dealing with this temporary crisis. We will continue to do that.

The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) asked about free debt advice. I think she knows that the Government are investing an initial £12.5 million in HMRC in 2020-21 to begin implementing the breathing space initiative. Those in problem debt will be able to get 60 days' breathing space, including from HMRC, while they engage with debt advice, and I think that is a very important contribution.

What a delight it is to see my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) back in this Chamber. He rightly celebrates the small business focus of the Budget and asks us to consider business rates in relation to nurseries, and other petitions have

been made in relation to that, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith). Let me remind my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire that most nurseries will pay no rates if their rateable value is under £12,000 because of the small business rate relief. They will now also get a £3,000 coronavirus cash grant, of course, if they are in receipt of small business rate relief. There should be some bounce already in there, but of course we continue to reflect on business rates. We have a business rates review coming up, and he and my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs would be welcome to contribute to that.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised the question of red diesel. As she will know, there is a consultation associated with the changes we are making and she is welcome to support it and to make a petition to it if she wishes.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) raised a range of questions, some of which I have already touched on, such as business rates. He asked whether we would be monitoring the impact of the reduction in entrepreneurs' relief. Let me tell him that of course we will. The problem with entrepreneurs' relief is that it is not very well targeted on entrepreneurship. We wish to support entrepreneurship, small business growth and rapid innovation, and that is what we are seeking to do.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) raised the question of green packages and rightly stressed the tough choices involved in a Budget. Let me refer her to the national infrastructure strategy. We already have a green package in this Budget. It is quite wide-ranging, but we intend to do more on it. What will not be true of us is what was true of Lord Prescott when he was in this place, when he said, "The Labour party supports the green belt and we intend to build on it." We will not be doing that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) raised the question of the "Winds of Change" and gave us a historical dimension. I celebrate that, and I celebrate Lord Hennessy in his wisdom, because he is truly an ornament to the House of Lords.

Let me close by saying that this is a Budget for this country as a whole. It will make our economy and our country stronger still.

5 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered. That the debate be resumed on Monday 16 March.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments and National Insurance Funds Payments) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.—(*Eddie Hughes.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Tax Credits, Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.—(*Eddie Hughes.*)

Question agreed to.

Community Housing

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

5 pm

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to lead this Adjournment debate, the subject of which is support for community housing—a phrase that comes from the 2019 Conservative manifesto, on which my Conservative colleagues and I fought the recent general election. The manifesto, perhaps for lack of space, conflates two of my life-favourite themes: first, giving people in local communities more real say over the housing that is to be built in their areas; and secondly, self-build housing. On the latter, I declare two interests: first, because what is now known as the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015 started life as my private Member's Bill; and secondly, because I am an ambassador for the Right to Build Task Force.

Under the heading “Community housing and self-build”—which I should emphasise for the sake of clarity are by no means entirely the same thing, although there is often an overlap—the Conservative manifesto helpfully states, on page 31:

“We will support community housing by helping people who want to build their own homes find plots of land and access the Help to Buy scheme.”

I could hold at least three separate Adjournment debates purely based on that one sentence—first, because there is a great deal to say about community housing and the very successful community housing fund; secondly, because there is also a great deal to say about helping people who want to build their own homes, either as individuals or as members of groups; and thirdly, because there is a great deal to say about the fact that the Help to Buy scheme unfairly and inadvertently excluded custom and self-build from its scope. Although that omission was acknowledged and recognised by the Government in 2014, it did not lead to any action being taken until the 2019 manifesto commitment, so in fact there has been an extended period of unfair competition from state-led intervention, subsidised by our tax-paying constituents, which effectively has operated against self-builders and in favour of large house builders, thus limiting supply and choice while reducing overall quality, sustainability and innovation.

However, I do not want to talk about that—first, because my right hon. Friend the Minister knows that I am a “glass half full” kind of guy, and there is much that is positive to talk about; and secondly, because my conversations with Ministers have convinced me that they are seized of that particular problem in relation to Help to Buy, which I hope will in due course be called “Help to Build”, and genuinely want to find a solution that works for self-builders rather than discriminates against them. In the limited time available, I will concentrate just on the first part of the sentence—namely, support for community housing.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I was the person who invented neighbourhood plans. I have a local plan in my home constituency for a town that has some land that it wishes to develop, but it is having enormous problems with the community land trust model in trying to do so. Does my hon. Friend think that that is typical of the problems of the community land trust route, or does he have a solution?

Mr Bacon: I recommend that my hon. Friend talk to the National Community Land Trust Network, because the truth is that there are lots of different solutions that work in different environments. He will have heard, as I did, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government say earlier that the great idea of neighbourhood plans does not work if it is then overridden by developers who take no account of what local communities have said they want. It undermines the credibility of the whole neighbourhood plan process. In my hon. Friend's particular case, I suggest that he talk to Tom Chance and Catherine Harrington at the National Community Land Trust Network, to see if there is a way forward, particularly if my right hon. Friend the Minister does what I hope he will do, which is relaunch the community housing fund so that the funding continues to be available, preferably on a long-term basis.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that community land trusts offer potentially a large part of the answer to the housing shortage in this country—uniquely among new developments, they frequently have considerable support from local communities—and that, although this Budget was overwhelmingly brilliant, it is disappointing that the community housing fund was not extended to meet the enormous demand for community land trusts?

Mr Bacon: I agree with everything my hon. Friend says. I draw attention to an utterly apposite quote on the front page of “Community Builders”, a book by the Demos think-tank. I happened to attend the launch several years ago. It says:

“Giving communities more power over local housing developments can help to get more homes built”.

Various arguments are made against community housing and alternative ways of doing things. I want to stress something and make sure that the Minister is aware of it by the end of this debate, so I might as well say it now. We know very well that the Treasury's infrastructure targets are based on what housing can be delivered. I was in a meeting with the Transport Secretary the other day and, like many of us lobbying for our areas, I have been in various meetings with Ministers over the past few weeks. The clear indication given is that if a proposal brings more housing, it is more likely that a Member's constituency will get the bypass it needs or that its major road will be dualled, and so on. My point to the Minister is this. If he and his colleagues want extra housing to be accepted, greater density than might otherwise be achieved, a system that is against sprawl and in favour of the most efficient use of land, including brownfield, and if they want something that is more environmentally sustainable and green, rather than just greenwash, all that, not just some of it, is made easier if we involve the community.

I talked to the Secretary of State earlier today. He mentioned a view that he believes may be held by some in the Treasury—it was not his view—that community housing may not represent good value for money. I will tell you what definitely does not represent value for money, Mr Deputy Speaker, and that is having a parcel of land handed from pillar to post, from one public sector body to another, sometimes for generations.

When he was Mayor of London, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) said, “Let's cut this Gordian knot and

make something happen.” The thing that happened was the scheme on the site of old St Clement’s Hospital in Mile End, which he had celebrated and opened as Mayor of London. It was the fact that it was community scheme that helped drive it forward. That is much better value for money. In an environment where we are talking about rewriting the Green Book in a more sensible way, we should be thinking much more laterally and broadly about how different approaches can deliver better, faster and greener outcomes that are in every sense better for the community, our nation and people, and also better value for money. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Devises (Danny Kruger) for helping me raise that point.

As my hon. Friend alluded to, the Budget did not announce that the community housing fund will continue, although I am sure something will happen in due course. It is worth saying, for the benefit of the House, that the most common form of community-led housing, although it is not the only one, is via a community land trust, which is a legal entity that acquires land through purchase by the community, perhaps through a parish council, another local authority or a gift, and then oversees the development of affordable housing to buy or to rent. The housing remains affordable in perpetuity, while the land value is in effect removed from the equation because the land is held by the community land trust, which is a not-for-profit group that acts as the long-term steward.

Frankly, the community housing fund has been a tremendous success story for this Government. It was originally launched by George Osborne in his March 2016 Budget. The story of what happened next is important, particularly in terms of ensuring value for money. Over that summer, the community housing sector, led by the National Community Land Trust Network, worked up a detailed plan for how the money should be spent, although I regret to say that the Treasury initially decided, at the end of 2016, that the money should be handed to local authorities, which is in effect what happened—in two tranches totalling £148 million. This is a very important point to bear in mind if the Secretary of State or his ministerial colleagues want to discuss the question of value for money with the Treasury, because the Treasury may sometimes suggest that the community housing approach is not necessarily the best value-for-money approach. What actually happened was that the councils, having been given the money in a very non-ring-fenced way, spent it in the way that councils usually do. The Community Land Trust Network then did the obvious thing of talking to the councils about ensuring that the money was spent in the best possible way for community housing projects—and some of it was, which is good news, although, inevitably, not as much as might otherwise have been the case.

In November 2017, our right hon. Friend the present Business Secretary—who was in his place on the Front Bench not a few minutes ago—was Housing Minister, and he addressed the National Community Land Trust Network at its annual conference, announcing a rather more targeted scheme, and it is that scheme that has been such a huge success. In just 18 months, the pipeline in Homes England’s system has grown to more than 10,000 homes; that is actual projects that are good to go. Independent analysis by Sheffield Hallam University has found that 859 communities are bringing projects forward and that the community housing fund has

increased the potential pipeline from just under 6,000 homes—when I and some of my colleagues met the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), in 2017 to push the idea of announcing and getting on with the community housing fund—to over 23,000 homes today. That is staggering growth and it is down to the community housing fund.

The research estimates the total funding need for projects outside London over the next five years to be about £260 million. That includes £57 million of revenue funding and £172 million in capital funding via Homes England. The Government may ask why so much of the money that was available was underspent when the bids closed in December 2019. The answer is very simple: it was not open for long enough. Eighteen months is too short a time, even for the very best of housing developers, and in many cases, community groups are, by definition, starting from scratch. They need longer to establish themselves and to develop projects using the revenue component of the fund. Since the fund opened in July 2018, Homes England has received 379 bids, and it is estimated that that would require double the revenue that was in the fund at the point of closure. It is absolutely clear that that part of the fund was a smash hit, but not enough projects, in 18 months, had reached the point where they could bid for the capital element. It makes sense to have a much longer, stable community housing fund over the life of a Parliament.

Communities in every corner of England are playing their part in tackling the housing crisis in this way. We heard the Secretary of State mention First Homes earlier today. Communities are pioneering First Homes. In Cornwall, a community land trust has built 252 homes over 10 years, sold at a discount to make them affordable to local people. Thanks to the community housing fund, there are now plans for another 209. Many colleagues have campaigned to make these schemes happen, including the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), and my hon. Friends the Members for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory). Indeed, the predecessor of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, Sarah Newton—whose loss to this House is much lamented by many—was one of the campaigners who originally suggested to George Osborne the idea of using the additional tax receipts from higher taxation of second homes to fund more community housing.

Communities are pioneering new approaches to affordability. In York, a group called YorSpace has planning permission to build 19 homes and a common house. It is developing a tenure called mutual home ownership, which lets members build up equity in their homes through monthly payments. It has raised £400,000 through a community share issue—local investment by local people—but it needs the community housing fund to provide capital grants.

Communities are building better and building beautiful. Some of us attended the launch of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, chaired by the excellent Nicholas Boys Smith and the much lamented late Roger Scruton. Marmalade Lane and New Ground are two co-housing communities featured in the new “National Design Guide”, and both have won numerous awards.

[Mr Richard Bacon]

They were featured in the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's report. Communities are pioneering new methods of construction. In Brighton, a self-build co-operative called Bunker is on site as we speak, building its first two homes for families on modest incomes. It is one of many community groups using off-site manufacturing and other construction innovations that the Government want to encourage.

I could go on—there are many other examples. I will give just one in particular. Communities are working with landowners on projects that no one else would build. In Taunton, Somerset Co-op community land trust got started by converting a disused building into flats for young homeless people, and then went on to develop eight new affordable homes. It had been developing a bid with Homes England to take forward a new 30-home development in partnership with a local landowner, but the community housing fund closed just at the point when it was ready to apply.

The Minister may be familiar with the Oakfield scheme in Swindon, the headquarters of Nationwide Building Society. I recommend that he visit the scheme when he gets the chance. As he will be aware, Nationwide is a mutual building society, not a profit maximiser, and, like many building societies, it is going back to its roots in thinking about how it can do more to solve the housing crisis. This is an interesting scheme because although it is in some senses conventional—that is, it is not a community land trust scheme—Nationwide held a statutory consultation process where it really, seriously took account of what the community wanted for a development on a derelict brownfield site that no other house builder would touch. It now has a beautiful scheme coming forward that lots of local people are supporting. The total number of statutory objections it had in the consultation phase for the planning was zero.

I urge the Minister to reflect on the fact that one of the big problems that not just this Government but every Government have faced is getting people to accept the idea of more housing. I have been on platforms with people taking part in election debates with their political opponents where they have talked about extra housing being a sad price that has to be paid. We have somehow forgotten that the idea of development is cognate with developing—it is supposed to be a good word. We have managed to turn “development” into a bad word. The only way we turn it into a good word again, and therefore get it to be more widely welcomed, is to have good development. It is not an add-on. It is not a small piece on the side that we can perhaps think about at some point in the future if we have time—it is part of recasting how we do housing in this country.

We should not expect that people will get it right all the time. Upstairs a few moments ago, I was reading David Vise's book about Google, where he talks about the fact that we treat Google a bit like a university. We try lots of stuff, and some of it is going to fail. I am not advocating failure—I am advocating success, but the way we get success is by experimentation and learning. By having lots of small, early cheap failures, we are more likely to have success. This applies across Government projects, but it is true in housing, as in many other areas. The great thing about housing is that we have learnt a

great deal already, so there are fewer opportunities to make mistakes if we bother to learn those lessons and take more opportunities to get it right.

The housing White Paper, “Fixing our broken housing market”, of which I have a copy here, came out three years ago, in February 2017. It has been the Government's view for three years that we have a broken housing market and that we need to fix it. We have had a lot of position papers; we have had every think-tank under the sun coming out with policy statements; and we have had some movement, but we have not had quick enough movement in changing the way in which we do things.

Yesterday, like my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes, I was very pleased, in supporting the Budget, to hear the Chancellor say that there was going to be £12.2 billion extra for affordable housing. I thought personally that the shadow Chancellor was a little churlish in calling it “only” £12.2 billion—I would say that it is quite a reasonable start.

The £12.2 billion that the Chancellor announced yesterday is a five-year programme. The community housing fund was originally slated as a £300 million programme over five years—£60 million per year. The point is that if all that money had been spent—and it has not been yet, for the reasons we have discussed—£300 million is still only 12.45% of the £12.2 billion that the Government are planning to spend on affordable housing. The central burden of “Fixing our broken housing market” is that just doing the same again and again will not solve the problem. We have to start doing things differently. We have to start thinking differently. Community housing, supported through the community housing fund, is a very important part of that.

I was addressing a community housing conference in Surrey only a few weeks ago. I like to refresh my presentation, so that I say things that are interesting to me each time, and there is a chance they might be interesting to the audience. I put up a slide that talked about the well-known national organisation Grandmothers Against All Development, with a question mark after it. The audience looked rather blank, and I said, “I made that up actually.” I have yet to meet—and I do not think I ever will—the grandmother whose daughter has just had her second baby and wants her daughter's family not to have somewhere decent to live. All we have to do is bottle that thought and create the wiring under the bonnet to turn it into reality, and we have gone a long way to solving the problem.

The central problem we face with housing is that most people feel that they have no voice. Most people feel that they have no say over what gets built, where it gets built, what it looks like or how it performs in terms of thermal performance. If the Minister really wants green housing, the best thing he can do is involve local people, because I have yet to meet the person who would not prefer to have a house that costs nothing to heat. We have known for many years how to build a house that costs basically nothing to heat—£100 to £150 a year for heat and hot water—and yet we do not routinely do it.

I heard the Secretary of State say in a statement a few weeks ago that the volume house builders would have to ensure they met the quality standards, otherwise they would no longer be eligible for Help to Buy. I found myself thinking: if they did not meet those standards, how can they have been eligible for all these years,

basically producing small, expensive, poor-quality, environmentally unfriendly dwellings that most people would prefer not to buy?

Believe it or not—I can demonstrate it with evidence, which I am happy to share with the Minister—there are more people in this country who want to build their own homes than people who want to buy new ones. Only 33% of people in this country would prefer to buy a new home. Two thirds of people would prefer not to, and 61% of people in this country would like at some point the chance to build their own home. We have to take the energy that is there and turn it into something real, and we need radical changes in how we do things to make that happen.

Rod Hackney, who was the adviser to the Prince of Wales and is a renowned architect, once said:

“It is a dangerous thing to underestimate human potential and the energy which can be generated when people are given the opportunity to help themselves.”

That is what we have to make happen.

5.22 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): My hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), as he has just demonstrated, is an energetic and vociferous champion of those who want to take matters into their own hands—people and communities who want to take the initiative and provide for their own housing needs. He just said that he could bottle his thoughts. In fact, I think he has just uncorked quite a few of them, and we are all grateful to him for doing that. As the founder of the all-party parliamentary group on self-build, custom and community house building and place-making, he has successfully driven this cause forward in this place and elsewhere over many years, and I thank him for bringing this important topic back to the Floor of the House.

In the time that I have, I will say, on behalf of the Government, that the community-led housing movement comprises a broad coalition of community land trusts, housing co-operatives and other organisations set up by local people with the specific purpose of providing good-quality, affordable housing for themselves and their wider communities. With Government support, those organisations are working to deliver housing in every corner of our country.

We want to do more to foster that kind of self-determination, self-empowerment and can-do attitude. We recognise that the community-led housing sector offers significant potential to help meet housing need across England. Crucially, the support and close involvement of local communities enables land to be brought forward for development that is not likely to be made available, or of any interest, to mainstream, speculative developers. Rather than competing with the mainstream house builders, the sector is increasing the overall supply of housing while diversifying the market and increasing resilience in the house building industry.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): But quantity needs to be matched by quality and design, and beautiful houses should be the entitlement of all communities and all types of Britons. I know the Minister is committed to that, because he is an aesthete like me, but what are the Government going to do to guarantee it?

Christopher Pincher: My right hon. Friend is an aficionado of beauty. I know he served with distinction on the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, and we look forward to bringing forward many of that commission’s proposals.

As I was saying, we recognise that community-led housing offers a wide range of benefits beyond just meeting housing needs. It supports the SME sector, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk made clear, and it helps drive up standards of design and energy efficiency, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) mentioned. It sets a benchmark for high-quality new housing that enhances the built environment and creates a strong sense of place. It embraces modern methods of construction, and it helps sustain local communities and local economies, allowing young people to stay in the areas in which they grew up.

The Government recognise that there is huge potential for growth in community-led housing here in the United Kingdom. That is why we announced the community housing fund, making £60 million per annum available over four years to kickstart and drive the growth of the sector. In 2018, a dedicated grant-funding programme was launched by Homes England, the Government’s housing delivery agency. We have also made available £38 million to the Greater London Authority to support the sector in London. Capital grants have been available to schemes that have reached the point where they can start building.

This growth has been particularly rapid since the community housing fund delivery programme was launched in 2018, with 135 CLTs either being formed or becoming legally incorporated. We have provided a £6 million grant to Community Led Homes, a consortium of the leading stakeholders, to train an England-wide team of advisers who can help guide community groups through the often daunting and complicated process of taking a house building project forward. The advisers will help build and facilitate the market for community-led housing in the years to come.

As my hon. Friend has said, the Homes England programme was closed to new applicants towards the end of last year. That is because, as for most Government programmes, funding for the community housing fund is not available to the Department beyond the end of the current financial year, although different constraints apply to the GLA, where the funding remains available until 2022-23. I completely understand his frustrations, and let me say to him that I am very sympathetic to the points he has made. I look forward to having further conversations with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer as we approach the conclusion of the main estimates and, beyond that and for future years, the comprehensive spending review.

Mr Richard Bacon: I fully understand the need for the Government to respect the CSR process. Does the Minister think there is an opportunity to provide limited bridge funding, just for the sake of continuity, between now and July, when the CSR takes effect, so that many of the schemes that are just on the wrong side of the line do not collapse and the enthusiasm does not evaporate?

Christopher Pincher: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. However, he will know that I am not going to make sudden announcements in an Adjournment debate. Let us wait until we have the main estimates, which will be revised and agreed shortly.

In conclusion, let me say to my hon. Friend that the Government believe such debates are important for the sake of building more houses—better and more beautiful

houses—for our constituents. He is a great exponent of this industry and sector, and I look forward to further conversations with him.

5.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 March 2020

[MS KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

Freedom of Religion or Belief

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief.

I put on record my thanks to all the hon. Members who are here today, as well as to the Minister—who I spoke to yesterday, and has spoken to me before—for their interest in the vital right of freedom of religion or belief. That right is close to my heart, and I am sure it is close to the heart of all those who are present. Many other Members would have liked to have been here, but we took this date when it was offered to us on short notice, and that unfortunately meant a clash in the diary of many other right hon. and hon. Members who wished to be here. Those of us who are present will carry the flag and speak out. I declare an interest: I have the privilege to chair both the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief and the all-party parliamentary group for the Pakistani minorities.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for having granted this important debate. I initially applied for this debate back at the end of October so that it would coincide with international freedom of religion or belief day, but it had to be postponed due to the general election, so I thank the Committee for having persevered and found time for it today. Unfortunately, the problems we were to discuss back in November have not gone away, and in some cases they have gotten even worse.

For example, in January, I had the privilege of attending the launch of Open Doors' "World Watch List" report, which highlights the persecution faced by Christians around the world. That report paints a grim picture of a worsening situation for Christians, with 260 million—an increase of 15 million since 2019—living in countries where there is a risk of high, very high or extreme levels of persecution. The report cites many other concerning statistics, such as 5,500 churches shut down in China over the past year, and at least 1,445 physical attacks and death threats against Christians in India during 2019.

That terrible state of affairs is why I welcome the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's commitment to supporting persecuted Christians. I put on record my thanks to the Minister and his Department, as well as previous Ministers, for that commitment. I also thank the Minister; the special envoy for freedom of religion and belief, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti); and the FORB team for all they are doing to improve the situation. Many of us recognise that the Government have given that commitment, and we all welcome their generosity, commitment and time. Can the Minister update us on that work?

Will the Minister also inform hon. Members about the progress being made in implementing the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's report? In particular, I would

like to know what progress has been made to improve training on FORB, and to make that training mandatory for Government officials working in countries with high levels of FORB violations. After all, how can we say sincerely that we care about freedom of religion or belief, that we recognise the tremendous suffering that people are experiencing because of denial of that freedom, and that we understand that FORB violations can cause and exacerbate conflict, but then turn around and say that we still do not know whether it is important enough to have mandatory training? We need to know that that mandatory training is in place and is having an impact. I urge the Minister to ensure that this training and the other helpful recommendations made in the Bishop of Truro's report are implemented for the benefit of persecuted Christians the world over.

I will first speak about one particular case. This debate is about freedom of religion or belief, so I will talk about a number of faiths across the world, but I will begin with Christians, specifically Christians in Nigeria. Earlier today, I had the opportunity to meet some people from the International Organization for Peace Building and Social Justice, including Pastor Ayo and his private secretary, a fellow called John Candia. They gave me some details and information about what is happening in Nigeria. I pray; I am a committed Christian, and I have deep Christian beliefs, which focus my attention and my life on where we go. However, I also believe that as a Christian I have a duty and a love for all people of all religions in this world, and with that in mind I will speak up for each and every one of them.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about Nigeria, where, as he will remember, I am the Prime Minister's trade envoy. I wonder whether he is clear—quite frankly, I am not—on the distinction between the persecution of Christians for their Christianity and the persecution of people for other reasons, such as climate change impacts? In Nigeria, for example, the things that are happening with the Fulani herdsmen could quite easily be associated with climate change, rather than Christianity.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We spoke about this beforehand; he and I participate in many debates in this House, and often come forward with the same ideas, thoughts and deliberations. Yes, what is happening in Nigeria is perhaps a wee bit uncertain. The conflict involving the Fulani herdsmen, they would say, is to do with land and climate change. However, with respect to the hon. Gentleman, there are indications that there are more attacks on Christians than on anyone else. That does not lessen what is happening, but it indicates to me that there are many attacks on Christians across the whole of Nigeria.

To mention just a few of those attacks, there were five major attacks against Nigerian Christians in Kaduna state between January and November 2019, resulting in an estimated 500 deaths. There were at least another five attacks in Bassa and Riyom local government areas, as well as many attacks in Taraba state. Boko Haram remains in power around the Chad border region, including parts of Borno state. Some 1,000 Christians have been slaughtered in north-eastern Nigeria since January 2019,

[*Jim Shannon*]

in addition to the over 6,000 deaths since 2015. I will talk about some of those attacks to illustrate how horrific they are.

Veronica, 35, from Dogon Noma recounted some of the awful attacks inflicted on her family. Her home was attacked by Fulani militia, and only she and three others survived; 13 of her friends and family were killed. Naomi, 54, from Karamai lost limbs in a brutal attack on her home, in which her elderly and fragile father was shot in his bed. In Ta'aziya's village, almost 50 people were killed and only two homes were not burnt down. Pastors and leaders have said:

"Boko Haram might launch an attack at any time...this morning at 4am, they arrived with bombs. They focus their attacks on Christians."

Whatever the other reasons may be, that is clearly what they are about.

"They kill farmers. They destroy our homes and churches. They kidnap and rape women. Some women are forced to marry Muslims. Boko Haram also attack Government properties and the police. No one can go beyond five kilometres from town."

I want to ask five questions of the Minister, if I can. First, in the light of the Nigerian Government's admission that Christians are being targeted in northern Nigeria, will the British Government move a UN resolution to send in peacekeeping forces to protect vulnerable communities and citizens in Nigeria? Secondly, will the UK renew its offer to assist in the search and rescue of Leah Sharibu, an ISIS captive for two years now, and others abducted and enslaved in Nigeria? Alongside Baroness Cox from the other place, my colleague the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and others, I had the pleasure of meeting Leah Sharibu's mother Rebecca and her friend Gloria in this House, so I know how important this is for her.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for having pushed for this debate, and for all the fantastic work he has done on religious freedom in his time in Parliament. When I as the special envoy met Rebecca Sharibu, Leah's mother, we as the Government made it very clear to our Nigerian counterparts that everything that can be done to ensure Leah's safe release should be done. We will continue to make that clear, as I did when we met with other members of the International Religious Freedom Alliance to say that, working with our Nigerian counterparts and across the globe, the United Kingdom will do everything it can to ensure Leah is released.

Jim Shannon: I am deeply indebted to the hon. Gentleman for his work. This is not a self-congratulation society, but I greatly appreciate what he does and the role that he plays, and the energy, interest and commitment that he shows. We are pleased that he is in place and we hope that there will be a fruitful conclusion to his endeavours and those of the Government.

My next question is, will the UK Government focus more or most of its international development aid on Nigeria to assist the victims and protect the vulnerable from Nigeria's insecurity crisis? Will they use a large percentage of their aid budget to Nigeria to provide more direct assistance to internally displaced persons who live in poor conditions and to enhance security

provision for vulnerable communities and people, including the Christian communities in the north-east and middle belt where they have been particularly targeted, by the Nigerian Government's own admission?

Finally, given the Prime Minister's call for increased post-Brexit trade and investments in Nigeria, in which the Prime Minister's trade envoy, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), will be interested, what security advice and warnings are the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade offering to British investors? Those are all important issues.

In my role as chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, I campaign on behalf of all who are persecuted, not just Christians, because I am a Christian and I believe that my God loves everyone. That is why I, and all hon. Members present, believe that it is our duty to speak out not only for those of Christian faith, but for people of any faith and of course, just as important, those who do not profess a faith at all. That is why I now turn to the persecution that other groups, including the non-religious, are facing around the world.

Atheists, agnostics and other non-religious people often face extreme violations of FORB. Indeed, in Saudi Arabia, that great ally of the United Kingdom—questions were asked about that relationship in the Chamber today—atheism is considered a criminal offence, punishable by death. In the eyes of the Saudi Government, therefore, many British people, including some in this House, are the worst criminals and not deserving of life.

According to "The Freedom of Thought Report" published by the International Humanist and Ethical Union,

"even on the most conservative estimates, there are untold millions of de facto humanists, atheists and otherwise religiously unaffiliated people living in countries where they face discrimination or outright persecution, both in society and at the hands of the state. In the most extreme cases, the non-religious are told that...to promote humanist values...is a kind of criminal attack on culture." Again, that is simply unacceptable.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I praise the hon. Gentleman for his dogged determination in bringing debates on this subject to the House and pursuing these issues. Does he agree that the media abroad and in the UK sometimes fuel the violence against and harassment of people of faith and, as he mentioned, people without faith by misrepresenting who they are and what they think? That can have as much of an effect on people as, for instance, state violence.

Jim Shannon: Yes, I think the media have a lot to answer for, on not just this but many subjects. They influence opinion and focus attention unfairly.

Of course, it is not only the non-religious who are suffering. Just under two weeks ago, on 1 March, the Independent Tribunal into Forced Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of Conscience in China, chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC, released its full judgment. Its interim judgment, released in 2018, declared that forced organ harvesting from religious prisoners of conscience was taking place. The final judgment confirms that view and declares:

"Forced organ harvesting has been committed for years throughout China on a significant scale and that Falun Gong practitioners have been one—and probably the main—source of organ supply.

The concerted persecution and medical testing of the Uyghurs is more recent and it may be that evidence of forced organ harvesting of this group may emerge in due course.”

After yesterday’s Westminster Hall debate on that very issue, I am aware that it is emerging. The judgment continues:

“The Tribunal has had no evidence that the significant infrastructure associated with China’s transplantation industry has been dismantled”, which is disappointing,

“and absent a satisfactory explanation as to the source of readily available organs concludes that forced organ harvesting continues till today.”

I have a nephew back home who had to wait five or six years for a kidney transplant. I understand that the wait it is partly about age and getting older, but it is also about availability. Someone could go to China almost any day, any week, and receive an organ. How can that happen? Even though it is a bigger nation, this poses a question.

Thousands of miles away in Westminster, it is sometimes hard to appreciate the horror of that statement—forced organ harvesting on a commercial scale. It is hard not to wonder how anyone could treat their fellow humans so cruelly. I also wonder how many more will suffer that fate before the UK Government—my Government—take action. I wonder how long the Government will refuse to acknowledge the evidence, which includes admissions from doctors in leading Chinese transplant hospitals. I wonder how history will remember those who ignored what Lord Alton of Liverpool described as a practice comparable with

“the worst atrocities committed in conflicts of the 20th century’, including the gassing of Jews by the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge massacres in Cambodia”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 2 March 2020; Vol. 802, c. 390.*]

The Government say that the World Health Organisation has found China’s transplant system to be legitimate. I find that incredible. That is a system in which it takes two to three weeks to get an organ donation, compared with two to three years in the UK. If the system is legitimate, it is the envy of the world and it is a matter of the utmost priority that the NHS should learn from China to save British lives. If it is legitimate, it is an absolute dereliction of responsibility by the UK Government that they have not done everything in their power to understand how China’s system works, so we can replicate its efficiency in the UK.

Indeed, last year, 34 parliamentarians from both Houses wrote a letter to the WHO director general to request that information, but despite chasing it several times with his office, the WHO did not respond. Surely, if the Chinese system is legitimate, the WHO should be begging the Chinese Government to share their medical marvel with the world, but we all know the real reason that organ transplants are available. The Government are not doing that, and the evidence tells us why.

Beyond Falun Gong practitioners, Uighur Muslims are also suffering in China, as we discussed in yesterday’s debate with the same Minister present. I spoke then as well—in this room, probably from this seat—about China’s treatment of its Uighur population. We learned that “hundreds of thousands”, in fact probably between 1 million and 3 million, are imprisoned in China and that many have experienced acts of torture.

Muslims are not just being persecuted in China, however. Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar have suffered what has been described by the United Nations as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.

The Rohingya were stripped of their citizenship in 1982 and suffered systematic persecution by Buddhist nationalists. That culminated in a brutal military offensive in August 2017 that killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands more, who were forced into neighbouring Bangladesh. We thank Bangladesh for stepping up and reaching out.

In a worrying parallel, at the end of July 2018, in Assam, the Indian Government effectively stripped 4 million people, mostly Muslims, of their citizenship, and branded them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh amid an atmosphere of rising Hindu nationalism. Muslims in India also claim that they are being persecuted by the Citizenship (Amendment) Act passed by the Indian Parliament in December, which provides a fast track to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from India’s neighbours. Protests erupted across India in response to the law, which is seen by many as discriminatory against Muslims.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the work he has done over many years. On what is happening in India, does he agree that it is disappointing, given that we talk about India being the world’s biggest democracy, that it seems to be going downhill with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the Kashmir issue? I find it shocking that Prime Minister Modi has said to the public that that was only a trailer, so the main film is to yet be seen. How is that acceptable? Should our Government not do more?

Jim Shannon: The Government should. Next week I will present a request to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate specifically on India. The hon. Gentleman, and other hon. Members who have signed that request, will have an opportunity to debate the issue, in Westminster Hall I suspect. I mention that, as I have tried to mention a lot of other things. I agree with him and I thank him for the intervention.

Sectarian violence has caused dozens of deaths, the destruction of religious buildings and physical altercations in the Indian Parliament—even the Parliament has not been above the verbal and physical abuse of people. That conflict and instability illustrate the point that hon. Members have made repeatedly in such debates, which is that FORB violations can cause and exacerbate conflict between communities and must be addressed before they explode into violence.

In 2018, the APPG for FORB wrote that, “Violence and discrimination, combined with arbitrary exclusion from legal institutions, could cause significant grievances among non-Hindus in India, which may lead to domestic conflict and violence.” Unfortunately, that has proven to be the case. It is for that reason that Departments such as the Department for International Development must invest greater resources in promoting freedom of religion or belief to prevent conflict, rather than responding to crises only once violence has already erupted, when it is too late.

Similarly, it is vital that the Government recognise how the potential for societal instability and conflict caused by human rights violations can harm economic

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prosperity and limit hopes for long-term, prosperous trading relationships with countries such as India, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) referred to. We have a relationship that we wish to build on, but they have to address the issue of human rights. Will the Minister assure hon. Members that FORB violations will be discussed in the Government's trade negotiations with relevant countries? Will he assure us that provisions to protect human rights will be included in any such deals?

It is particularly important to address FORB violations quickly whenever they emerge because conflicts can spread and violence between Hindus and Muslims in India can have knock-on effects in Pakistan, where non-Muslim minorities such as Hindus and Christians face severe persecution.

If I am spared, I will be visiting Pakistan with Lord Alton from the other place over the Easter period. Just yesterday I had the privilege of meeting a delegation from Pakistan who described how blasphemy laws are being misused there to persecute religious minorities, and how young women and girls from those communities are being taken from their homes. According to the National Commission for Justice and Peace, the Pakistani authorities prosecuted 1,170 blasphemy cases between 1987 and 2012, with scores of new cases being brought every year.

Rehman Chishti: On the abuse of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan, as envoy I appointed Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, the former Bishop of Rochester and also a bishop in Pakistan, to the advisory panel. His specific task was to look at how administrative changes can be made to address the abuse of the blasphemy laws. Blasphemy laws are often used against Muslims themselves over land disputes and other economic issues, as well as against minorities. I have specifically asked him to look at administrative changes, so that the abuse of those laws can be stopped. No one should be subject to these laws for practising their freedom of religion or belief.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful intervention. I subscribe to those views as well. He is correct; the blasphemy laws are used maliciously against people. One case that everyone would be aware of is that of Asia Bibi. We were in Pakistan in September 2018 and had an opportunity to meet two of the three judges who were to make the decision on Asia Bibi. We were clear what we were doing when we went there. We were not going to tell the Pakistani Government that they should change everything; we were going to say, "This does not work, because people are maliciously using the law against others for their own reasons." Our meetings with the judges who were deliberating on Asia Bibi were very helpful and supportive of the case. We were sworn to secrecy and were not able to say that until the case was heard in court, and Asia Bibi was released. I know that there was an appeal after that. Now she is free and living in Canada.

Afzal Khan: I also recently visited Pakistan. First, I found it encouraging how assertive and helpful the judiciary are being. Secondly, the current Government seem to be moving in the right direction of protecting minorities, particularly in what they have been doing in

terms of the Sikh community—opening up the gurdwara and so on—which is welcome. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his knowledge and his participation today, which is most helpful.

We need to see some other changes in Pakistan, particularly around the 5% of jobs that are set aside for Christians. Christians need to have the opportunity of educational advantage, training and opportunity, so that they can apply for jobs other than those that are on offer at the minute—cleaning the streets and cleaning the latrines. Christians deserve the same opportunities as everyone else. I know that 5% of jobs are set aside. Let us have the same opportunity for jobs, whether that is as nurses, doctors, teachers or whatever.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a powerful and well-informed speech. Sometimes what in some cases can look like religious discrimination is very close to racial discrimination, and sometimes religious differences are used as an excuse for racism, just as sometimes racial differences are used as an excuse for religious persecution. Does he agree that religious persecution and racism are often close relatives?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. They are intertwined and wrapped around each other, and sometimes the situation is used in that way.

No precise figures are available, but Pakistani non-governmental organisations such as the Movement for Solidarity and Peace have estimated that each year around 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls in Pakistan are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and forcibly married or sold into prostitution.

I discussed that and other issues during my trip to Pakistan in October 2018. I travelled in a delegation with two other British parliamentarians, the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and Lord Alton from the other place. We spent five days in the wonderful country of Pakistan, having very productive meetings with Government officials, as well as several human rights NGOs. We also met representatives of various minority rights organisations and had the opportunity to visit some Christian communities, including in slum residences in Islamabad.

One thing that left a lasting impression on me and on the whole delegation was visiting those slums and the houses that people live in, and the people who were volunteers. One lady in particular was teaching children, from about five to 16, the rudimentary elements of education. If Christians have the opportunity to educate themselves, they have the opportunity to apply for the jobs. We need that issue to move forward and we will take that up as we go on.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the hon. Gentleman and the delegation for their report, "Religions Minorities of Pakistan: report of a parliamentary visit". As the Prime Minister's special envoy, I met the Pakistani high commissioner and asked him to meet the parliamentarians to go through the findings in the report, so that they can work together to address the key issues facing people of

all faiths and none, of being able to practise their faith in line with article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. He is happy to do that.

Jim Shannon: I am also very happy to do that. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We will make sure that report is available to colleagues if they have not seen it.

I hope to travel again to Pakistan in April to discuss our report with colleagues there, so we can see how we can work together to protect minorities in Pakistan. It would be very much appreciated if the Minister supported that trip and set an example by implementing the recommendations for the British Government that are set out in the report that the hon. Gentleman just referred to.

Before I finish on Pakistan, one group I particularly want to mention is the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. There is a group from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland who invite me to their event in Omagh every year. I was there a short time ago and I was there a few years ago as well. I am very pleased to be invited, and I am very pleased to support them. They have freedom of religion or belief in Ireland, both north and south, but they are a persecuted Muslim group. This is the only religious community to be explicitly targeted by Pakistan's laws on grounds of faith. Perpetrators are given free rein to attack innocent Ahmadis in the knowledge that they will never face prosecution for their actions. Hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered and the targeted killing of Ahmadis continues with impunity. Ahmadis cannot call themselves Muslims and are denied the right to vote as Muslims. Ahmadis are openly declared as “deserving to be killed”—I will not try to wrap my Ulster Scots accent around the original words—in the Pakistani media and by religious clerics, with the state unable to stand up for Ahmadis and against the extremists.

Another community whose plight I want to highlight and who face comparable persecution are the Baha'is community of Iran. I speak about them all the time, as many in this House do. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Government of Iran have persecuted Iranian Baha'is, who comprise the country's largest non-Muslim religious minority, with more than 300,000 members, as a systematic policy of the state. Since Dr Hassan Rouhani assumed the presidency in August 2018, more than 283 Baha'is have been arrested, thousands have been blocked from access to higher education, and there have been at least 645 acts of economic oppression. In addition, more than 26,000 pieces of anti-Baha'i propaganda have been disseminated in the Iranian media.

In an even more alarming development, in the early months of 2020 the Iranian Government have moved to digitise national identity cards. The new identity system restricts applicants to select only one of four religions, according to the 1979 constitution—Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. Those belonging to other faiths are denied the ID cards. Why should that be? They are therefore deprived of the most basic civil services, such as applying for a loan or buying property, or just having a job or an education.

I have spoken a lot about different groups and now want to highlight the plight of the women of those groups, who are often particularly vulnerable due to the double persecution that they sometimes face, for their gender and their beliefs—for example, the poor young

Christian and Hindu girls in Pakistan who I mentioned. The stories of the Yazidi women, some of whom we have met, are horrendous. They suffered unspeakable atrocities at the hands of Daesh because they were of both the wrong gender and the wrong faith. It is of the utmost importance that we highlight the plight of those women, whose stories often go unreported, including the thousands of Muslim and Christian women who have been kidnapped by Boko Haram over the years.

In honour of International Women's Day on Sunday 8 March, I tabled an early-day motion on International Women's Day and freedom of religion or belief. The purpose of the EDM is threefold: first, to recognise the intersection between women's rights and the right to FORB, and to encourage the UK Government to develop targeted programming and aim for women who face double vulnerabilities as members of minority faith communities; secondly, to include religion as a factor of vulnerability in any assessment made in planning and programming; and thirdly, to ensure that sensitivity training related to the international right to freedom of religion or belief is integrated into gender-related and anti-discrimination programmes. I would welcome any information that the Minister can share about how the Government intend to address the specific vulnerabilities that women from minority faith or belief groups face, and I encourage hon. Members to add their name to the EDM if they have not already done so.

I thank hon. Members in advance for their contributions to this important debate, and I very much look forward to the Minister's response. I am confident that we will get a very good response. I thank hon. Members for making the time to come to the debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. I inform hon. Members that we will move on to the Front-Bench winding-up speeches, beginning with the Scottish National party spokesman, at 2.30 pm. Hon. Members should be guided by that. I call Bob Stewart.

2.2 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Thank you, Ms Buck. It is a pleasure to be here today. I have spoken about freedom of religion or belief before. Of course, any decent society believes that freedom of religion is a basic human right. The problem is that I have been to many places where it is not a basic human right.

From the Bishop of Truro's report, I know that 80% of persecution of people for religious reasons is against Christians. I am neutral now, however, because in Bosnia I saw Roman Catholics attacking Orthodox Christians and Muslims, Muslims attacking Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians attacking both other sides. What they carried out was often a crime against humanity—it was definitely ethnic cleansing—and it was sometimes genocide. The fact of the matter is that those terms are relative in a way. For the poor devils suffering, it does not matter what it is called: they are dying.

In my experience, I have seen far too many people dying for religion. It is not really about religion, but people often use it as an excuse. Unfortunately, when I was the UN commander in Bosnia, I came across many

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instances of various sides doing foul deeds to the others. However, there is a good reason—I will come to it later—to refer to what happened on 22 April 1993, when I was in a village called Ahmići. As the British UN commander, I was checking the village for bodies with my soldiers. We came to a house halfway down and could not find any bodies, because people had been killed and thrown into the houses. The houses had been torched and their roofs had fallen down, so we could not get through to the bodies.

In one house that we came to, a soldier said, “Over here, sir.” I was on the road through the village. First, I went to the front door. There was a man’s body, burned, and a boy’s body, burned. They had obviously been shot and then someone had thrown petrol or something over them. We knew they had been shot because we were standing on shell cases. Round the back, however, was worse. When I went into the cellar, I could not really see at first what was in front of me—I just could not believe it. Then my eyes focused and I recognised a head bent back, I suspect in agony. There were other bodies, burned. Then the smell came, because this had happened six days earlier. I could not believe it. My men and I rushed out. Some wept; others puked. We could not believe what we were seeing.

The reason I am telling this story is that I received an email this morning from a guy called Thomas Osorio, who was the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the time—27 years ago—and who I worked with on the ground. In the email, he tells me that the people whom I had found that day—they have been held in a morgue for 27 years because of a failure to identify them—have now been identified. I will repeat their names: Sabika Naser Ahmic, 30 years old; Husnije Zehnadina Ahmic, 28, who was presumably the mum; Arnaut Zedina Elvis Ahmic, eight; Naser Suhreta Ahmic, six; Naser Sejo Ahmic, three months. Theirs are the bodies I found in that cellar 27 years ago. They were Muslims and had been killed by Croats who were Roman Catholic and who used the excuse of people being Muslim to kill them. It was an excuse.

I have to say that I was in such shock afterwards that I did not really know what to do. After consultation with my second-in-command on the radio, I decided to run a press conference and broadcast it to the world by saying, “This is what I found. In my view, this is a crime against humanity.” Later I discovered that it was actually genocide. By definition, genocide is the deliberate act of clearing out a whole group of people. In this case, it was the Muslims in the village of Ahmići. Other houses were untouched. Guess what? In those houses lived Roman Catholics.

I did not really know what had happened, but my intelligence cell suggested that they had done a cordon-and-sweep operation. In other words, they had made a box around the village using soldiers with machine guns. From the bottom, in a straight line, they had systematically gone through each house. When they had driven people out of the houses, they either killed them there and then by throwing them into the houses, or they let them run into the machine guns.

I do not know how we could have stopped it. One of the questions I might ask the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is how the hell can we stop this sort of

thing happening. Our blathering on in Parliament is all very well, but what will the Foreign Office do about it? How will the Minister stop that? He is a very good friend of mine and is looking at me intently, but that question is impossible to answer. How do we do it?

Rehman Chishti: I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all that he has done over the years to bring people together and to stand up for rule of law. Regarding what the United Kingdom will do on the prevention of genocide, I refer him to one of the Bishop of Truro’s 22 recommendations, which I am taking forward. Recommendation 7 calls for the FCO to

“Ensure that there are mechanisms in place to facilitate an immediate response to atrocity crimes, including genocide, through activities such as setting up early warning mechanisms...diplomacy to help resolve disputes, and...support to help with upstream prevention work...and be willing to make public statements condemning such atrocities.”

The Government have accepted recommendation 7 of Bishop of Truro’s report. That is one of our long-term projects, because it is absolutely crucial that we get prevention right. As a Government, we are committed to doing so, and work on that has begun.

Bob Stewart: I am jolly pleased to hear it, but I want to see that happen on the ground. Trying to stop it is very, very difficult.

I know the reality of what happened in that village—I was not there but I had an eyewitness. A few days later, I was having dinner with a BBC journalist called Martin Bell, when a woman walked into my house and said, “You have got rooms in this house. I want you to put up some children in it.” I said, “You must be joking. I am the British UN commander. How the heck am I going to look after kids in my house?” She said, “Can I remind you of your mission, colonel? Your mission is to save lives. I’ve got some children here whose lives need saving. I hope you will understand that you have no choice.”

I went weak at the knees at that because she then turned to my two bodyguards—who, I have to say, were big sappy soldiers—and said, “Boys, you’ll look after a little girl aged six who needs a home, won’t you?” Of course, they said, “Yes, ma’am.” Many people in this room know that woman—particularly the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), for whom she has rather an attachment—because she is my wife, Claire. She was the International Committee of the Red Cross delegate for central Bosnia. She embarrassed me into taking a child—a six-year-old girl called Melissa Mekis—whom she said she would bring the next day. I did not believe that she would, but she bloody well did! She walked out of the prison camp where the girl was, holding her by the hand, and was stopped by the camp commandant, who said, “What do you think you’re doing?” She replied, “Get the hell out of my way. I am a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Do you make war on children? Is that your way of dealing with things?” The commandant moved aside.

Claire walked into my house with the kid, who was filthy as she had been in the camp for about 10 days. The two sappy soldiers took her away, boiled up a billycan of water, took her clothes off, bathed her, went to Save the Children nearby, got her some clothes, put a

little bed between their camp cots and looked after her. When Claire came two days later, to reunite Melissa Mekis with her family, the girl did not want to leave those boys.

Melissa told us what happened. Early one morning—I know that the time was 0500 because we heard this happening—soldiers came to her house in a box truck. Her parents told her to dress quickly and come downstairs. The soldiers grabbed Melissa, her mother, her father and her brother, and threw them all outside, where they killed the parents and shot the boy. Someone could not kill Melissa, so she ended up in a prison camp. When I was back in Bosnia last year, a boy came up to me—well, he is not a boy anymore, but middle-aged—and he said, “I was Melissa’s brother. Can I thank you and your soldiers? Your soldiers found me severely wounded nearby, picked me up, took me to a medical centre and saved my life.”

I do not really know where my speech is going because I have lost my script, but I will say one thing. I have given evidence about those events in four war crimes trials, after which four people were found guilty and did very long sentences. I care very much about freedom of religion. Who in this room does not? Of course we do. But what the heck can we do about it? The Prime Minister’s representative, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) is here, and we can all put lovely words on paper—I had lots of lovely words on paper when I was in Bosnia. I was aghast at what I saw. To this day, I still wonder what the heck we can do when people are determined to act in that way, because words will not stop it.

After the genocide in Ahmići, Claire and I buried more than 104 people in a mass grave—women, children and some babies. We did not know how to do that—I was never trained as an undertaker—but Claire came along and insisted that we took the bodies out of the bags. Did you know that people cannot be buried in plastic bags? I did not. All those bodies were taken out of the bags and buried. Those people were Muslim, but I also found Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians dead. I was technically neutral because I was attacked by all three sides, who shot the hell out of me. We have got to find a way to move quickly when we see signs of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity—it is difficult. Crimes against humanity quite quickly become genocide.

Colleagues, what a ramble. What a load of twaddle; how unstructured. Please, let us believe. Although we in this place at least shout about it, what I would really like is more action from the United Nations and other international bodies to send troops in to stop such things as soon as they start. That is what our soldiers did in 1992 and 1993. We took more than 2,500 men and women out of Srebrenica in April 1993, and their lives were saved. If we had not, most of them would have been dead two years later. Colleagues, I am sorry that this has been a ramble. Thank you.

2.18 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I really do not know how to follow that speech. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) may think that it was a ramble, but I think we have just had difficult privilege of hearing one of the great speeches in this place, for

which I thank him. I am a practising Roman Catholic, so it was not easy to listen to, because sadly my religion, like many others—as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will know only too well—is used by people who claim to be of the same faith to justify deeds that would never have been condoned by the one we call our saviour. I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate and thank both previous speakers for their speeches.

It saddens me greatly that this debate is necessary, but the sad fact is that persecution based on what people believe or do not believe is probably as big a problem now as it has ever been. How can that be? The world in so many ways is getting smaller, and it is much easier for us to understand what other people are about and to get to know the basis of so many beliefs and cultures. When that is happening, how can it be that almost every religious or faith group in the world is, somewhere, being persecuted, with people losing their lives because of what they believe, and that almost every faith group in the world participates in that persecution? I cannot begin to understand it.

We can look at the horror of Daesh murdering Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities with complete impunity; at the terror attacks such as the one on Easter Sunday last year in Sri Lanka, when people were murdered simply for celebrating the most important day of their religious year; at 1 million people in China being supposedly “re-educated”, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, to strip them of their cultural, religious and ethnic identity, just because they are Muslims; or at the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims. We can look at countless other atrocities. Individually, they might often not be important enough to get a mention on the UK news or in the newspapers but, collectively, they add up to an estimated 2 billion people possibly daily risking persecution and even their lives simply because of what they believe.

The hon. Member for Beckenham rightly said that freedom of religion and belief is a fundamental human right. International organisations have said for years that everyone has the right to believe or not believe what they believe to be right for them. There can be no let-up in international efforts to safeguard freedom of religion and to prevent the persecution of religious minorities anywhere. This principle was adopted in 1966:

“Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law”—

I was five when the world agreed to that, and I turn 60 later this year. But the world, having agreed to that, far too often seems to turn away, or decides to act far too late.

The Rabat plan of action launched by the United Nations in 2013 sets out the kinds of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that all nations should adopt, but as the hon. Member for Strangford so rightly said, having legislation in place is one thing; making it happen in reality is very different. The international community has the tools it needs to tackle religious persecution. It is up to Governments everywhere, working together, to use all the diplomatic, political and economic means at their disposal to ensure that no Government feel that they can ignore, condone or actively participate in religious persecution.

[Peter Grant]

I fully support much of what the hon. Gentleman said when he asked the Foreign and Commonwealth Office what it will do in trade deals and diplomatic relations to ensure that human rights and rights of religious freedom are always at the top of any agenda. Personally, I believe that there are some countries with which the United Kingdom has strong diplomatic and economic ties that we should simply isolate ourselves from, because their persecution of people has got to the stage where they are no longer the kind of country that we should be proud to have as a friend anymore.

The large-scale persecution of religious or racial minorities does not happen overnight. As with racism—a very close cousin of religious sectarianism, as the hon. Gentleman said—such persecution needs to be fostered over a longer period. It starts with verbal insults and racist or sectarian language, which is first ignored and tolerated, then actively promoted and celebrated by those in positions of power in the media or in politics. It grows through deliberate attempts to isolate a targeted group and to vilify anyone who speaks in their defence, denouncing them all—those being targeted and those who would stand alongside them—as somehow disloyal to the country of residence, a threat to national security, or even terrorists, simply because of the peaceful practice of their religion.

Once a country has allowed that attitude to become embedded, the next step forward is easy: the violence, the abductions and the wholesale sexual abuse of women and children become much easier. At the moment, we would all say that we in the United Kingdom are among the 17% of the population of the world who do not suffer from religious persecution—it is a shocking statistic that almost 85% of the world's population live in countries where one religious minority or another is actively persecuted—but if we took a hard, honest look at where the United Kingdom is now, we would see some worrying signs that the first steps in that process are happening. That does not mean we will see wholesale violence in the next week or so, but we have to be aware of what is happening on our streets and in our communities, and we have to be prepared to stop it.

For example—I am not taking sides on this one—did political processes come out with much credibility after the accusations and counter-accusations of antisemitism and Islamophobia over the past year or so? They have been such a feature of our political debate, but does anyone think that the political establishment came out well when a response to an accusation of antisemitism was a counter-accusation of Islamophobia? Instead, everyone should have said, “You know what? All of us have a problem with some kind of racial or religious bigotry within our organisations or our culture. Let's sit down to talk about how we can tackle it all together.” We have to recognise that a large percentage of the world's refugee population are refugees only because of religious persecution. The less we are able to prevent religious persecution, the greater the moral responsibility we have to take our share of the responsibility for looking after the refugees who inevitably come here.

This is a difficult topic to talk about—I seem to be pinching an awful lot of the hon. Gentleman's speech, because he said much of what I wanted to say, more eloquently—but I feel that it is important when we talk

about freedom of religious belief to acknowledge as an equal right the right to not believe. I have real concerns about what is happening in Vladimir Putin's Russia. He is trying to change the constitution so that believing in God becomes compulsory. As someone who believes in God, that worries me greatly, because a fundamental part of my faith is that that is my decision, and that I will answer for it when my time comes.

Sometimes, I have taken decisions that have surprised some of my close friends and family who thought that as a practising Catholic I might take a different decision on same-sex marriage, for example. However, following a faith that has a particular set of teachings on human sexuality gives me no right to pass laws to prevent someone else from, first, following a different faith or, secondly, having a different view of what is acceptable or not, or right or wrong, for them in their private or family life.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is the real problem not so much the religion itself but fundamentalism? When people get so absorbed in their religion that they can only interpret it literally, extremism and persecution take root.

Peter Grant: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point, whether that is a political or a religious view. I have to make a distinction between being fundamental or extreme and how firmly we believe something. Being fundamental or extreme can be an unwillingness to accept that other people are equally sincere and passionate about a completely contrary view. When it comes to being extreme and the steps that people take to promote a particular set of beliefs, it becomes a problem.

I do not speak from a position of great authority, but on the occasions when I have engaged actively in dialogue with someone whose behaviour was blatantly racist, sectarian or religiously intolerant, it is surprising how often, on getting down to it, such people are deeply insecure in their own religious or political beliefs. It is almost as if they had never stopped to think about what they believe, and cannot allow anyone to suggest anything different, rather than accept that someone might challenge them. They hide in a shell, to come out fighting. That might present itself as Christianity, but it is so mired in hatred and intolerance that I can see no connection with what is happening or, certainly, with the teachings of the version of Christianity that I seek to follow.

I will finish with one statistic that should concern us all. In 2018, the British social attitudes survey found that almost two thirds—63%—of people in the United Kingdom believed that religions bring more conflict than peace. In my religion, we worship one who has the title “Prince of Peace”; and the word “Islam” can translate as “peace”. Every religion that I have any knowledge of is founded on peace, on respect for human beings of all kinds and on living together in peace and harmony. In this collection of countries, we think freedom of religion and belief is established, but almost two thirds of the population think religion is the problem rather than the answer. I suggest that it is not only the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that needs to change the way it does things. Perhaps the Church establishments, including my own, have a job to do in persuading that 63% not necessarily to follow a particular religion, but at least to understand that any true religion is about making things better for the whole of humanity.

I have spoken for longer than I expected to, so I will sit down to allow other hon. Members to speak.

2.30 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who brings us these debates frequently, and more credit to him for doing so, because we need to air this issue regularly and ensure that fellow hon. Members are fully informed. It is a pleasure to follow the contribution of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant).

I have appeared as the Opposition spokesperson on a number of occasions. The hon. Member for Glenrothes said something important; he talked about peace and about how every world religion believes in peace. Amazingly, I am the shadow Minister for peace. I am not sure how long that will continue to be a position, but we need one in Government, so I would have somebody to shadow.

The hon. Member for Strangford made an excellent contribution, as he always does. He told us about the all-party parliamentary groups that he chairs: the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief and the APPG for the Pakistani minorities, which I did not know existed until this afternoon. He talked about the churches that have been shut down in China and the 2019 attacks on Christians in India, and he asked the Minister for progress on the Bishop of Truro's report; I will come on to that in a minute, and I am sure the Minister will want to respond to it in full.

We had a number of very appropriate interventions from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) and my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who made at least two interventions, as a fellow member of the shadow Foreign Office team. The Prime Minister's envoy for religious belief, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), made three, or perhaps four, excellent interventions.

Rehman Chishti: There was a question about progress on implementing the Truro review, which I lead on for the Prime Minister and the Government. When I came into post in September, those 22 different recommendations were divided into short-term, medium-term and long-term. Eleven of those recommendations, which I shared with Bishop Philip of Truro on Monday, have now been taken forward. Some of those are about ongoing data collection, but 11 of the 22 recommendations have now been, or are in the process of being, taken forward.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing us up to date on such an important issue. I will briefly mention the Bishop of Truro's report later, but obviously we all want to hear from the Minister, too.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the plight of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, and I will say a few words about that in a moment. Of the many contributions I have heard from him, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), whom I am honoured to call a friend, gave one of the most powerful I have heard. He talked about his first-hand experience of religious fanaticism and violence in Bosnia, and told us horrific stories of

death and destruction. This time he had the names of those people—I think he said he had just received them today.

Bob Stewart: I would like to place on the record that I have been invited to the funeral on 21 March, but the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has said no.

Fabian Hamilton: I hope the hon. Gentleman will find a way of getting there. He and his wife did outstanding work in Bosnia, saving so many lives. I thank him for detailing that information and for reminding us of the horrific murder on the basis of ostensible religious belief, which in fact has nothing whatsoever to do with true faith. I thank him for that and for the village of Ahmići.

In 2018 the US State Department issued a declaration stating:

“Among the range of universal, interdependent human rights, the freedom to follow one's conscience in matters of religion or belief is essential to human dignity and human flourishing”.

As we know, the United Kingdom is a signatory to the universal declaration of human rights, which protects freedom of religion or belief. The UK is party to the international covenant on civil and political rights. Article 9 of the European convention on human rights, which is part of the Human Rights Act 1998, protects freedom of religion or belief. But the number of countries that regulate religious symbols, literature or broadcasting has increased over the past 20 years. Religious persecution has increased globally every year since 2000.

In 2020, 260 million people—approximately 10% of all Christians in the world—were persecuted for their religious beliefs, which was an increase from 245 million in 2019, and approximately 215 million in 2018. According to Open Doors, 11 countries now fall in the “extreme” category for levels of persecution of Christians. That is up from just one country, North Korea, in 2014—just six years ago. The World Watch List estimates that last year 2,093 Christians were killed just for being Christian. Christian persecution is more prevalent in Muslim majority countries, especially those governed by some form of sharia law.

Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief have not diminished over the past 10 years. Indeed, conditions have continued. Many conflicts are rooted in or exacerbated by religious differences around the world. Violation of freedom of religion and belief is a truly global issue. Around 80% of the world's population live in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions or hostilities towards certain beliefs. Let me briefly detail some of those. We have mentioned Myanmar and the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims. There have been sporadic waves of violence against the Rohingya since 1978. The Rohingya are the world's most persecuted minority. Those Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar are not even considered one of that country's 135 ethnic groups. They have been denied citizenship in their country since 1982, and thus are effectively stateless. More than half the Rohingya population of Myanmar, a total of 1.2 million, have fled the country during the current wave of violence, mostly to Bangladesh.

Let me move on to China. Article 36 of the Chinese constitution states that Chinese citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief.”

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

It bans discrimination based on religion and forbids state organs or individuals from compelling citizens to believe or not in any particular faith. However, the state recognises only five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Taoism, Islam and Protestantism—interestingly, separated from Catholicism. The Chinese authorities tightly control religious activity in the majority Turkic-Uighur province of Xinjiang. Beijing has, as we have heard, allegedly incarcerated more than 1 million Uighurs in re-education camps. The state monitors what Tibetan Buddhists do, to quell dissent in what it regards as a province of mainland China.

Let me move on to Iran. The Iranian authorities continue to persecute the Baha'i minority, who number about 300,000. Iran's supreme leader issued a fatwa in 2013, calling on all Iranians to avoid dealings with the Baha'i, and labelled the group "deviant and misleading". In March 2014 a United Nations report said:

"Under the law, religious minorities, including recognised Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians also face discrimination in the judicial system, such as harsher punishments".

We know about Saudi Arabia's persecution of Shi'a Muslims. Shi'a often have little access to Government services, and state employment continues to be limited for them.

Let me deal finally with Pakistan. As has been mentioned, Pakistan is affected by the experience of chronic sectarian violence targeting Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Ahmadi Muslims and Hindus.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): I am an Ahmadi Muslim. I had hoped to make a speech in the debate, but for some reason the Speaker's Office did not furnish Ms Buck with my name.

Ahmadis are a peace-loving community whose motto is, "Love for all and hatred for none." At the core of Islam is a belief that if we wish to love and serve God, we must love and serve his creation. To that end, Ahmadis focus on humanitarian activities, such as providing healthcare, education and clean drinking water for those who need them. Ahmadis work to foster understanding between faith groups and support charities throughout the United Kingdom and, indeed, the world. Sadly, however, as both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, Ahmadis suffer vicious persecution around the world. The main source of fuel for that persecution is in Pakistan, but what happens in Pakistan does not stay in Pakistan.

I know that from my experience in the Yorkshire market town of Batley. In August 1985, when I was 11 years old, my parents organised an inter-faith meeting in the town hall. It was interrupted and disturbed when, according to West Yorkshire police, more than 1,000 extremists, led by Pakistani hate preachers funded by the Pakistani state, were bused in from around the country. The mob brutally attacked my English mother and my father, a dermatologist; my eldest brother and I; and a Welsh Ahmadi schoolteacher who was with us. My first cousin, a GP, was by chance driving through the market town that day. He saw the mob and saw his family and friends being attacked, so he stopped. He was recognised, pulled from his vehicle and savagely beaten up.

With the help of riot police, we somehow managed to find sanctuary in the local police station, which was adjacent to the town hall on the market square. Many fanatics continued to pour in, and they besieged the police station. The stand-off lasted hours. Finally, the police were able to secure our release from what was in essence a hostage situation by releasing the violent fanatics they had arrested for attacking us, the stallholders and police officers. Those peddlers of hate were released to allow us to go under armed escort to Pinderfields Hospital, where my father was still practising and my mother and grandmother had been nurses, to receive hospital treatment.

That targeted attack against my family in '85 was inspired by the President of Pakistan, Zia. He had sent his hate preachers to the United Kingdom that month, asking them to rid the UK of the cancer of Ahmadi. Our MP at the time—the Member for Batley and Spen, Elizabeth Peacock—spoke with the Home Secretary frequently, but nothing was done. From that moment in the '80s, Muslim extremists seemed to get a feeling that they had an exceptional status above the law in the United Kingdom, which began to pervade.

These things have consequences; like an infection, they jump over species. We saw that in what followed. On 7/7 we had attacks related to the West Yorkshire area, and in June 2016 we had the awful murder of Jo Cox.

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. I have allowed the hon. Gentleman some space because I recognise that there was an error on the speakers list. If he wants to conclude or ask a specific question with one sentence, I will permit him to do that, but interventions are not meant to be mini-speeches.

Imran Ahmad Khan: Does the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) agree that violent extremism jumps species and places, that it must be attacked and combated at home as well as abroad, and that one of its great roots is in places where there is a poverty of freedom of expression and confession?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, lengthy as it was. I appreciate that he did not have the chance to speak as he had hoped. I have had a long dealing with the Ahmadi Muslim community—as he knows, I represent a Leeds constituency—and we have had many debates in this place too. I thank him for informing the House of his personal experience, and I am delighted that we at last have a member of his community as a Member of Parliament. I would rather it was a Labour Member, but I am delighted that he is here at all, which is excellent.

Let me quickly finish the points I was going to make so the Minister can wind up the debate. The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, said in August 1947:

"We are all equal citizens of one State."

The experience of the hon. Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) shows that that is not the case. Of course we know the history of Asia Bibi, who was mentioned earlier. It is a great shame that the UK Government denied her asylum, although I am grateful to the Canadian Government for doing so. Ahmadi Muslims are denied citizenship rights in Pakistan and, as we heard at first hand, face persecution in other

majority Muslim countries such as Algeria, and of course in the UK in 2016, tragically, Asad Shah was stabbed to death in his Glasgow shop.

I will conclude by quoting Lord Ahmad, the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the other place. He said:

“The persecution of individuals based on their religion or belief remains of profound concern to the United Kingdom. The freedom to practise, change or share one’s faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a fundamental human right, and the UK Government are committed to defending this human right and promoting respect and tolerance between religious communities.”—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 5P.]

I am delighted that he said that, and the Opposition agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment. I wait to hear what the Minister has to say.

2.46 pm

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this incredibly important debate, and I commend him for his long-standing commitment to this issue. I also thank the other hon. Members present for their contributions.

I will try to respond to all the points that were raised, but first let me thank my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), and the hon. Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) in particular for his personal and touching short intervention regarding the Ahmadi community. I have witnessed at first hand the charity work the community does; I had the pleasure of visiting the Ahmadi mosque in south London, and the Ahmadi community came together in our hour of need during the floods in 2015 and 2016. I am extremely grateful for their support, as are the people of Tadcaster.

Let me start by reaffirming the Government’s unwavering commitment to freedom of religion or belief. The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) just reaffirmed the words of my colleague Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon. That commitment was further underlined by the Prime Minister’s appointment last year of my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham as his special envoy on this subject. I thank him for his contributions to the debate and for the hard work he puts into that important role; I know the Prime Minister and the whole Government are very appreciative. He succeeded Lord Ahmad, who ably held the role along with his ministerial duties at the FCO and continues to champion the subject in his role as Minister for human rights.

In addition to appointing an envoy, we have demonstrated our strong commitment to defending the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. In delivering on that commitment, we work closely with like-minded partners such as the United States, Canada and our European friends. By standing together and sending a unified message to those who fail to respect religious freedom, we become stronger agents of change.

We have used our influential voice at the UN, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe to raise awareness of the scale and severity of persecution. We have also built

strong and lasting relationships with non-governmental organisations, experts, faith leaders and academics, and with grassroots organisations and parliamentarians. That network of allies keeps us closely informed, acts as a critical friend and demonstrates the importance the UK attaches to respect between communities.

That ongoing conversation is important, but does it create the change we need? To evaluate the impact of our work, the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), commissioned an independent review of the scale of Christian persecution globally and the support the Foreign and Commonwealth Office offers to persecuted Christians and, indeed, all persecuted religious communities around the world. The review produced a set of challenging recommendations on what more the FCO could do to support people of all faiths and none in every part of the world. The Government accepted all the recommendations. As we have heard, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham is overseeing their implementation and reported back on progress to the Bishop of Truro a couple of days ago. My hon. Friend asked officials to categorise the recommendations into short, medium and long-term priorities. Under his oversight, 11 recommendations have been implemented or are on their way to being implemented.

To give an example, work is under way to ensure that British diplomats and officials in relevant roles receive enhanced religious literacy training, to help them understand the role that religion plays in many people’s lives and in the decisions they make. We are also working to establish the UK’s first autonomous global human rights sanctions regime, which will aim to deter individuals from committing serious human rights violations or abuses and to hold those who do accountable. Our commitment has also led us to agree to work towards tabling a UN Security Council resolution on the persecution of Christians and people of other faiths or beliefs in the middle east and north Africa region.

Overall, the UK is working harder than ever to support those who are persecuted on account of their religion or belief and this excellent debate highlights why our efforts are so badly—and sadly—needed. As we heard from various hon. Members, in Pakistan, the members of minority communities, including Christians and Ahmadi Muslims, are suffering terrible discrimination and abuse. We continue to urge the Government of Pakistan, both bilaterally and through our partners and international channels, to ensure that all citizens enjoy the full range of human rights as laid down in Pakistan’s own constitution and enshrined in international law.

In India, we are closely monitoring developments following the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, mentioned by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. We raised our concerns about the impact of that legislation with the Indian Government. The recent violence in Delhi is concerning, and we trust that the Indian Government will address the concerns of residents of all faiths. We continue to engage with India at all levels, including union and state Government.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Leeds North East, rightly raised the situation in China. We are deeply concerned about the persecution of minorities, and particularly of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. We have repeatedly raised our concerns, including in a statement by my colleague Lord Ahmad at the last UN

[*Nigel Adams*]

General Assembly and at the most recent Human Rights Council. We had an opportunity yesterday to debate the plight of Uighur Muslims in this Chamber.

In Nigeria, where I know my hon. Friend the Member for Henley has great experience as one of our envoys, we are encouraging the Government to do more to reduce conflict. Last month, the FCO hosted a conference on fostering social cohesion, which looked at the complex drivers of conflict in Nigeria. We began to identify solutions that meet the needs of all communities.

In Iran, which again was raised by the Opposition spokesman, we remain deeply concerned about the treatment of minorities, including the Baha'i community. We continue to take action within the international community to press Iran to improve its poor record on human rights. We did so most recently this month at the UN Human Rights Council.

I will take this opportunity to respond to right hon. and hon. Members' contributions. The hon. Member for Strangford asked about progress on the Truro review recommendations. We have heard about some of that from my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham. We have accepted the 22 recommendations and work is ongoing to ensure that we implement them. We are committed to implementing the recommendations in full.

The hon. Member for Strangford also asked about progress on the recommendation to ensure that mandatory religious literacy training is available to staff. We are working to ensure that such training is available to all staff and, indeed, across Government. He also asked about tabling a UN resolution to send peacekeeping forces to Nigeria. As he knows, for more than a decade, Islamic insurgents including Boko Haram—Islamic State in West Africa—have caused immense suffering to the Muslim and Christian populations. We have made clear to authorities at the highest levels in Nigeria the importance of protecting civilians and we regularly raise our concerns about the increasing violence.

The hon. Member asked about our efforts to rescue Leah Sharibu. We remain deeply concerned about her case and those of all individuals who have not returned home. We will continue to work with the Nigerian Government, non-governmental organisations and civil society to improve the security situation and human rights for all people in Nigeria.

The UK Government will continue to show global leadership in encouraging all states to uphold international human rights obligations and in holding human rights abusers to account. As the Prime Minister announced in his Greenwich speech on 3 February, the UK will also be a global champion for free trade, which is a force for good that underpins stable, open and prosperous global economies.

The hon. Member asked whether we would provide direct aid to vulnerable communities in Nigeria. We are working closely with the Department for International Development—in fact, all FCO Ministers are also DFID Ministers—on freedom of religion or belief. Humanitarian assistance is provided on the basis of need, irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity, and we work to ensure that aid reaches the most vulnerable, including those from religious minorities.

The hon. Member asked how we are helping women from minority faith groups, who suffer from double persecution. We acknowledge the double vulnerability facing women from minority religious communities. Our human rights policy work considers the intersectionality of human rights, and the UK defends the full range of human rights as set out in the universal declaration of human rights.

I turn to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). He described his speech as a ramble and as twaddle; I could not disagree more. He described what he witnessed and had to deal with alongside his men and his wife Claire, whom I know. He believes she is the bravest person he has ever met. His was one of the most moving and passionate speeches heard in this place, based on true personal experience. I take this opportunity to thank my hon. and gallant Friend for sharing his experience of the brutal attacks on religion that he witnessed. I also thank him for his outstanding service to his country and the international community. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) was absolutely right to raise, in his calm and rational way, a number of important points, including the fact that freedom of religion or belief is the choice of the individual, not a view that should be imposed by the state. He brought the Chamber together with his point that true religion is based on making things better for humanity.

The Chamber will be aware that Christians and other minorities have suffered terribly through the conflict in Syria, particularly at the hands of Daesh. We are working for a political settlement that protects the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity.

I will conclude to give a minute to the hon. Member for Strangford. While taking action to tackle religious intolerance abroad, we must recognise that it is not just a foreign problem or one that blights countries suffering conflict. It also happens here in the west, where we have seen attacks and antisemitic graffiti. In New York, five people were stabbed as they celebrated Hanukkah. Those attacks show that no country is immune to intolerance and hate.

I assure the House that the Government will continue to be a long-standing champion of human rights and freedoms. We have a duty to promote and defend our values of equality, inclusion and respect, and we will stand up for minority communities around the world and defend the right of freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I thank in particular the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). It comes as no surprise to me that he is a compassionate person. I also thank the shadow Minister, and the Minister for his positive response.

I finish with a Scripture text. Psalm 118: 13-14 says:

"I was pushed back so hard I was falling, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation."

Today was a chance for this House to shine; a voice for the voiceless.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No.10(6)).

Self-defence Training in Schools

3 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those not staying for the next debate please be courteous enough to leave quickly and quietly? We are going to hear from the House's kung fu, mixed martial arts and krav maga specialist, Mr James Gray, whom I invite to move the motion.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered self-defence training in schools

I will start by talking about allied matters to do with the tragic murder in May last year of my constituent Ellie Gould, and by giving some background to the case. The primary purpose of the debate is to call for greater teaching on self-defence in schools, but the reason Ellie Gould's friends and relations are calling for that is worthy of explanation.

On 3 May last year, 17-year-old Thomas Griffiths brutally stabbed and murdered his ex-girlfriend in a frenzied and horrific attack in Calne, in my constituency. Nothing could be worse for Ellie's parents, Matt and Carole, than to lose their dear daughter, nor for a wide group of schoolfriends from Hardenhuish School in Chippenham than to lose their dear friend. That it happened in that particularly brutal way is absolutely heartbreaking, and I am sure the whole House will join me in offering Ellie's family and friends our heartfelt sympathy on their loss.

Despite the terrible tragedy of Ellie's death, the family are determined to try to find ways of making something positive come out of it. They have been active in seeking routes by which they can achieve that, to try to help in some small way to prevent a similarly awful thing from happening again.

The family firmly believe that the sentence passed on Thomas Griffiths should have been a strong deterrent to others. They were deeply disappointed by the 12 and half years handed down, which they and I view as being woefully inadequate. They sought to persuade the Attorney General to appeal against its leniency, and the Home Secretary at the time was most generous with her time, meeting the Goulds and sympathising with their call for tougher sentencing. She said it was clear that the punishment must fit the crime. In this case it most certainly does not.

Most recently, the Lord Chancellor met the Goulds to discuss the case, especially the question of sentencing, but despite that the Attorney General refused to accept that the sentence was too lenient, largely because at the time of the murder Griffiths was only 17, albeit nearly 18. Had he been 18, he would almost certainly have gone to prison for 25 years. Because he was a month short of that age, he was given only 12 and a half years. The Goulds argue—and the Lord Chancellor recently rather agreed—that there must be some way of bringing in a sliding scale of sentencing, so if someone is just under the age of 18, the courts can take account of that and provide a heavier sentence than they would give to a juvenile. I hope that in memory of the tragic death of Ellie Gould the Lord Chancellor will consider that matter further—I believe he is doing so—and that the Wessex area Crown prosecutor will agree to a meeting that we have requested for the family in the near future.

We have been active with the Home Secretary and the Victims' Commissioner on several aspects of the way the case was handled. The Goulds have nothing but the highest praise for Wiltshire police, who handled the case with great sensitivity throughout. We are concerned about the parole terms for so-called young offenders and the possibility that Griffiths will be released before the end of his inadequate 12 and a half year sentence, simply because he was under 18 at the time of the crime. That entirely flies in the face of the judge's remarks at the trial that he would serve the full 12 and half years. We are concerned that the final three years will be served in an open prison. We also spotted a flaw in the parole terms for the release of murderers, noting that there is nothing to prevent them from changing their name by deed poll while they are in prison. While Thomas Griffiths will not be welcome in Calne or anywhere nearby, if he were to turn up with the name John Smith it would be much harder to track him or to know he was there.

You have been kind, Mr Hollobone, to allow me set out these matters, as they are largely for the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor, rather than for the Minister. None the less, I hope that setting out the case has re-emphasised the reason for having this debate about education matters.

Ellie Gould's close school friends, Ellie Welling, Harriet Adams and Tilda Offen, have been active in finding ways to commemorate Ellie's sad death in a positive way. They feel that Ellie, like other such victims, was ill-equipped to spot when a relationship had turned toxic, as occurred between Griffiths and Ellie herself. They feel that we could improve the understanding of relationships that go sour by improving the personal, citizenship, social and health education syllabus, so people could understand relationships as well as the broader issues considered in that subject. Without alarming them too much, students ought to be made aware that relationships can go wrong and that that can result in violence. They should be taught how to watch out for signs of a relationship going sour and be ready for any violence that might occur as a result.

We welcomed the letter from the Minister for School Standards in September, in which he told us that relationships education will be made compulsory in all secondary schools from later this year—perhaps the Minister will expand on that—and that that education would

“be designed to equip pupils for adult life and to be able to manage risk in a variety of situations... The Statutory Guidance explains how these new subjects will help address the underlying causes of crime, such as respect and building positive relationships, as well as appropriate ways of resolving conflict.”

That is exactly what we want—PCSHE education that equips young people for all the turbulence of modern life, where relationships can turn sour with terrible consequences. We hope that our little bit of lobbying on this subject may have helped the Department to move the Minister in the right direction. I look forward to hearing the Minister's reassurances about that later.

The tireless trio of Ellie's friends, supported by a wider friendship group in and around Hardenhuish School, Clane and Chippenham, have secondly come up with what seems to me to be an eminently sensible proposal, which if implemented in part or in full would be a further worthwhile memorial to Ellie Gould. They

[James Gray]

argue, and I agree, that young people are ill-equipped to deal with personal attacks of all sorts. Sadly those are becoming more common, whether they are low-level attacks in the playground, sexual approaches of one kind or another, physical attacks, bodily harm and even murder. Young people come across those types of attack all the time and sadly they are ill-equipped to deal with them.

For that reason Ellie Welling and her friends have developed a busy campaign to try to persuade the authorities, the Minister, the Department and schools that there should be compulsory teaching of self-defence in schools. They believe that if schools have to teach swimming or road safety, for example, then surely the basics of self-defence should be a prerequisite. If we turn out young students with a basic understanding of how to defend themselves on the street after they leave school, we will have made Britain a better place and society a great deal safer. We are talking about not advanced or complicated mechanisms for self-defence, but the basics with which a young person might fend off potential attackers.

Ellie Welling and her friends have been successful in getting significant media coverage for their campaign, which has resulted in a huge correspondence from around the nation, with all sorts of people and schools agreeing with them that they would like to do more about teaching self-defence. They have learned from countless letters that personal attacks are among the highest concerns of young people today, particularly when they get ready for university. They want the basic skills to be able to deal with these kinds of attack.

I recently had an unnerving experience when Ellie's friends arranged a one-day pilot course in a gym near Chippenham to demonstrate the self-defence techniques that might be taught. I am concerned to admit that, together with my stick, I was made to be one of the attackers. I lasted about 15 seconds before I was on the floor. They were very effective in dealing even with a big chap like me.

The training is basic. If an assailant grabs someone, they have to get him or her off, shout, make as much noise as possible, and get out of it. People have to shout and escape, but to escape they have to get rid of the assailant. The assailant might grab their arm, for example, or come from behind and put them in a neck-lock, or approach with a knife and threaten them—there are a variety of attacks. Young people need to understand the basics of how to get away from someone who is assaulting their person.

Such training is basic and pretty obvious, but terribly important. The fact that it is basic and obvious is the point of this debate. We are not asking for something very complicated or that will cost the state an enormous amount of money. Basic self-defence teaching can be done during physical training in the ordinary course of events in the school year. We do not want large amounts of money spent or complicated self-defence mechanisms taught. We want the basics. We simply want young people to leave school with an understanding of how they can conduct themselves in a dangerous world.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am very interested in the case that my hon. Friend makes. Does he see any role in this scenario for the simple personal

alarms with which Members of the House have been recently equipped? They are easy to operate and make a tremendous noise, which could well stave off an attacker.

James Gray: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely interesting suggestion. No doubt that could form part of it. It would of course involve spending money, but what we propose would be largely free of charge to the state and would merely involve a slight change in the curriculum. However, my right hon. Friend is right to think of a personal alarm, which is often a useful thing to have and perhaps might form part of how we take the agenda forward, so I am most grateful to him for his suggestion.

Incidentally, Mr Hollobone, it is a pleasure to sit under someone who shares the same birthday—7 November, should anyone want to know.

Dr Lewis: And largely the same views.

James Gray: It would be wrong if I impugned the Chair on any kind of view on any matter. He is here merely to keep order.

We argue for self-defence training because we believe a little basic training in schools might be sufficient to deter or prevent a range of lower level personal attacks. All we are talking about is five minutes a week in a PT class: low-level training, perhaps provided by outside professionals in the same way as music or sports teachers often come into school on a weekly basis and provide a basic level of training.

Inspired by Ellie's friends, I raised the matter with the Minister for School Standards by letter, and he responded on 3 February, saying perfectly reasonably:

"It is a matter for schools to decide whether to provide self-defence lessons for their pupils. Schools are free to organise and deliver a diverse and challenging PE curriculum that suits the needs of all their pupils. Schools are best placed to decide what is appropriate for their pupils and how to provide it."

Now, far be it from me to argue with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), who is a very old friend and a distinguished expert, but I feel that his answer was rather weak. If we believe that some degree of self-defence is a good thing for our students as they leave school and go out into the wider world, it is surely possible for the Minister, the Government, the community and society to encourage schools up and down the land to take up the idea without prescribing to schools and without laying it down in the curriculum. We are simply talking about individual headteachers and chairs of governors taking it up. We are not talking about prescribing it in the curriculum. We merely suggest that if we believe self-defence is a good thing, for heaven's sake let us find a way of making sure schools provide it.

I do not want the Department for Education to dictate what is taught in school. I believe in freedom for schools to decide, but the overwhelming response that we received following recent publicity on this matter should lead the Department to at least be relatively enthusiastic about providing basic self-defence tuition for our young people.

I welcome the Minister to her place and look forward to her response. We ask her to acknowledge the benefit that would be derived from universal or widespread teaching of basic self-defence techniques in schools

across England. If she were to encourage that, help to enable it, and increase discussion of it, even without prescription from on high, schools would explore ways of providing such tuition. All we want is a ministerial acknowledgement of the need for self-defence, a general acceptance that it could be done without a great increase in resources, and a much wider realisation of the good that it would do. I hope that the Minister and the House will agree with me that if we knew that the cohort of young people leaving our schools today had had some level of training in self-defence, alongside the range of measures that the Government are putting in place with regard to knife crime, that would make our streets and towns and cities safer places.

If the Minister gave us some encouragement that she generally favours increased self-defence tuition in schools, she would by that alone be making a little gesture in memory of Ellie Gould's tragic death.

3.15 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) on securing this important debate, on a topic that grew out of the most terrible tragedy, the death of Ellie Gould. Ellie's grandmother, Patricia Gould, is a constituent of mine who lives near Calne, and I have been in touch with her. I entirely associate myself with my hon. Friend's remarks about the sentencing regime that badly let down the family in this case. I hope that the Lord Chancellor will reconsider the sentencing guidelines so that we can see some change.

I strongly endorse the proposal that we should try and see how schools can do more to equip young people with the skills needed to defend themselves against physical attacks. I fully support the Government's focus on getting the basics right in education. We have seen a helpful correction over the past decade and a reminder of what education is really about. The primary purpose of schools is to equip children and young people with the academic ability that will be the foundation for their future life. That is what schools are for. However, that is not all that they are for and there is space in the curriculum to help them develop the wider life skills that they need to prosper. Alongside our relentless focus on academic standards, we should consider the skills that young people need for life, so we should think about the practical skills that they need outside of academic training or professional skills. They need to know how to live an adult life. That includes the focus on mental health and relationships that my hon. Friend mentioned.

I also think there is a role for equipping young people with the skills of de-escalation. There is so much conflict in our society, and I do not just mean physical attacks, which I will come to. Young people often encounter conflict. Naturally, they acquire the habits of managing that, but as adults we should equip them with those. There is a case to be made for thinking about organisations that work with young people, as with adults, to equip them with the skills to de-escalate conflict.

Most poignantly, and most importantly, we are here to discuss the skills of self-defence. I entirely endorse what my hon. Friend said. The programme need not be complex or expensive, and neither is it something that teachers should necessarily be responsible for providing. We should think about the role of community organisations

and the community itself in providing support. I am glad to hear that the Minister affirmed that what happens in a school is the responsibility of teachers, schools and governing bodies. It is not appropriate for the Government to mandate that directly. Nevertheless, if the Government were to associate themselves with the campaign and strongly encourage schools to listen to students and parents, who I am sure would endorse it, we would see schools taking up the invitation.

I entirely commend today's debate. I congratulate the young friends of Ellie Gould on their campaign and I would welcome the Minister's support for this agenda as a fitting legacy for Ellie's life.

3.19 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) on securing this important debate, particularly on behalf of the family of his constituent Ellie Gould, who was so horrifically murdered in such tragic circumstances. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), who always has interesting things to say about the role of communities in tackling some of the problems that we are looking at, which go deeper than the specifics of the case in question.

Perhaps I can also add my congratulations and tributes to Ellie Gould's schoolfriends. They took the initiative to launch a petition, which I understand has gathered more than 10,000 signatures so far. That is a considerable achievement and shows a determination on their part not to let their friend's murder simply be forgotten, but to use it to try to drive some positive change, as part of her legacy.

In particular they are calling for self-defence training in schools, through one or two PE lessons a year being devoted to that purpose. I share the view that it is best to encourage and not prescribe, but I think we all, on both sides of the Chamber, should encourage more teaching of self-defence to young people, because of the many threats they face. Those are not just physical; they face threats online as well, from new forms of cyber-bullying that can be damaging to a young person's health and wellbeing, and through associations that can also put them in severe physical danger. We should be doing more to educate young people about how to keep safe in every context, but I certainly see a place for physical self-defence training as a part of that. I urge the Government to look at whatever lessons can be learned from the murder of Ellie Gould and applied more widely to keep other young people safe in future.

It occurs to me that there is an interesting link between the issue that we are discussing and some of the forms of community-led social prescribing that I have seen in my constituency—I know that they are happening beyond it. People with expertise or experience come together in community spaces, such as community halls, or faith organisations, and give support, through volunteering, to other members of the community, so that it does not necessarily need to cost anything and if it costs something it is not much at all.

Plenty of people would be prepared to give their time to support young people to keep themselves safe, and to train them in the skills and expertise they would need to

[*Steve Reed*]

defend themselves in a difficult situation. It would be a positive move if the Government were to support some of that. In some cases there would be a funding requirement, and I have long regretted the scale of cuts in funding for voluntary and community organisations. However, I hope that, with the new focus on investment in the Budget this week, there may be an opportunity to look again at some of those decisions, and the way they have cut communities' capacity to self-organise and take action for themselves. I suspect, from what I have heard in the Chamber, that there would be support on both sides for such a move.

James Gray: The hon. Gentleman has reminded me of something that I meant to say, which is that of course the self-defence training need not necessarily happen in school. It could be schools getting together in a community. In many areas there would be schools that could combine for that. Alternatively, a Rotary club or voluntary organisations in the community could come together to provide such training. I am grateful for the suggestion.

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that comment. He made some important points earlier about prevention, on which we should perhaps focus for a moment. I certainly agree that we need better PSHE lessons. Giving young people a better understanding of what constitutes a healthy or an unhealthy relationship equips them to know when they need to back off—particularly when there is coercive or controlling behaviour, which is what normally precedes the kind of violence that Ellie Gould so tragically experienced.

I also think—I am not suggesting that what happened to Ellie is attributable to this—that there is an awful lot of unrecognised mental ill health in our communities, particularly among young people. That is driven partly by many of the stresses that they experience through online bullying, for instance, which we perhaps did not experience, but it is also driven by trauma in early childhood, and the withdrawal of some of the services that might have been available through family support or early intervention to support young people to cope with the trauma as they grow up, and not to allow it to grow into a mental health crisis, which can happen in many cases.

I say that because I think that very few children, if any, are born bad; circumstances turn them bad. We must then deal with the consequences of that, if we do not try to tackle the circumstances that cause the damage in the first place. There is a strong case for early intervention and support for families and young people, particularly when they have experienced trauma, to prevent them from later doing the horrific things that can lead to tragedy in far too many circumstances.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire talked about the need for a legacy from Ellie Gould, and it seems to me that perhaps the best thing we could contribute, on a cross-party basis, would be to make sure that what happened to her cannot happen to anyone else ever again. I take this opportunity to pay tribute again to her family and friends for the campaign that they have launched, and I look forward to a positive response from the Minister.

3.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) on securing the debate. Protecting children and young people from harm, including from violence and other forms of abuse, is always this Government's priority, so I thank him for raising the issue. I know that he has written to the Minister of State for School Standards to draw attention to the issue of self-defence classes in schools and has himself attended a class at Hardenhuish School.

I also want to give recognition and thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) who, as a Wiltshire MP, has taken the case very seriously. The school is in her constituency and I know that she has written to the Minister of State on the issue. I thank her and my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire for their work on it. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) for their comments this afternoon.

I want to express my deepest condolences to Ellie Gould's parents, Matt and Carole, on the loss of their daughter, and also to Ellie's many friends at Hardenhuish School in Chippenham. I am sure that everyone in this House shares my revulsion at the needless events of 3 May last year in which Ellie so tragically lost her life. I pay tribute to the work of Ellie's friends for their campaign, to the staff of Hardenhuish School for the work they have done to support pupils, and to Wiltshire police for their swift work in investigating the case and bringing the perpetrator to justice. I hear the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire raised about the sentence. The minimum age of criminal responsibility is 10 years old, and we believe that it is right for the court to start with a minimum term of 12 years for someone who is under 18 when they commit a murder. However, 12 years is the starting point and the court can increase the minimum term according to aggravating factors.

I listened carefully to the points that my hon. Friend and others made this afternoon. He asked for more teaching of basic self-defence in schools, or, indeed, for it to be compulsory. However, there are a number of additional things that schools can do that could be helpful.

There can never be an excuse for murder, and the murder of a child or young person is particularly abhorrent. We must all do everything we can to protect our young people. While we sadly cannot prevent all such cases, we can take and have been taking action to minimise the likelihood of their occurring. It is important that children and young people learn that violence is not the way to solve problems, and how to recognise the warning signs of a potentially violent situation, or of an abusive or violent relationship.

First and most importantly, schools can help to build the knowledge and skills that children need in order to have healthy relationships with their peers and others. They can do so through the effective teaching of relationships, sex and health education. Good-quality teaching of relationships, sex and health education will

be an important way to equip pupils with the knowledge to prevent, identify and address harmful behaviours from themselves and others. That is a vital part of self-defence, as it helps to reduce the risk of relationships' becoming violent or abusive.

From September this year, relationships education will become compulsory for all primary school pupils, and relationships and sex education will be compulsory for secondary school pupils. Health education will also be compulsory for pupils in state-funded schools. The compulsory new subjects will help to develop an ethos of respect for others and provide young people with the knowledge to make informed decisions, to assess risk and to try to avoid those dangerous situations. Through age-appropriate relationships education in primary school, pupils will be taught the concept of respect for oneself and respect for others, and to understand the differences between appropriate and inappropriate or unsafe physical contact—the first steps to teaching consent.

As well as physical safety, online safety is also important, as the hon. Member for Croydon North mentioned. We know that by the end of primary school, many children are already using the internet, and we must ensure that those principles of safety are extended to online safety and appropriate behaviour in a way that is relevant to pupils' lives. Relationships education will also help young people and children to understand how information and data are shared and used in all contexts—including, for example, the sharing of intimate pictures and the fact that, once sent, there is little or no control over how they may be used in the future.

The ability to form strong and healthy relationships with others depends on the nurturing of behaviours and positive personal attributes. The development of mutually respectful relationships in all contexts is an important aspect of a child's development. Relationships education also creates an opportunity to teach pupils about positive emotional and mental wellbeing, including how friendships can support it. Equally, if a relationship is making them feel unhappy or unsafe, pupils should know how to report concerns and how to seek advice from others if they need it, especially when they suspect or know that something is wrong.

In primary schools, age-appropriate relationships education will involve teaching pupils about what healthy relationships are and their importance, as well as how to develop mutually respectful relationships in all contexts. By the end of primary school, pupils will understand the importance of being treated with respect and showing respect. They will understand different forms of bullying and how to get help; they will have learned about the concept of privacy and its implications for children and adults. They will also know that it is not always right to keep a secret, if that relates to keeping themselves or others safe.

By secondary school, that will broaden to become age-appropriate relationships and sex education. The curriculum will include teaching about intimate relationships, sex, sexual health and sexuality, set firmly within the context of relationships. It will also cover contraception, sexually transmitted infections, developing intimate relationships and, crucially, how to resist pressure to have sex.

Pupils will learn what a positive, healthy relationship looks like, about consent, tools to help them when a relationship ends, and how and when consent could be

withdrawn, in a way that will help to keep them safe. They will also learn how to seek help if they are made to feel unsafe or threatened. The ability to recognise a risk, to assess that risk and respond to it in a way that keeps us safe is an essential life skill, and acquiring the knowledge and critical thinking skills that enable pupils to make informed decisions about relationships, sex and personal safety will be part of that curriculum.

Behaviour in schools is also important for safety. Schools must create positive environments, where pupils feel safe, are respectful of one another and are free from low-level disruption that stops them learning. All schools are required by law to have a behaviour policy that outlines measures to encourage positive behaviour and prevent bullying, which should be communicated to pupils, staff and parents.

Our respectful school communities tool helps schools to identify the various elements that will make up a positive whole-school approach. While there are schools across the country where behaviour is good, we know that some schools are looking for support in this area. That is why the Department is investing £10 million in the behaviour hubs programme.

Promoting mental health is also a priority because, in the normal course of events, people with good mental health will be much less likely to behave violently or to physically attack others. Schools can play a vital part in helping their pupils to have good mental health. The Government are prioritising transforming mental health services for children and young people, establishing new mental health support teams that work in or near schools and colleges to introduce or develop their approach to mental health and to deliver interventions for pupils and students with mild to moderate mental health needs.

We are incentivising all schools and colleges to identify and train a senior mental health lead. The new mental health support teams are in addition to the support already provided by schools and colleges, or by children and young people's mental health services funded by the NHS or local authorities. Support teams will be made up of newly-trained education mental health practitioners.

Peer-on-peer abuse can also be a concern. Teachers and other school staff have a key role to play if they become aware that one young person is sexually abusing or harassing another. We have published statutory safeguarding guidance, "Keeping Children Safe in Education", and detailed departmental advice on sexual violence and sexual harassment between children, to support schools and colleges in understanding what peer-on-peer abuse, especially child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment, looks like, how to prevent it, how to respond to it and how to support victims. Last month, we also launched a consultation to seek views about proposed changes to the "Keeping Children Safe in Education" principle, setting out the legal duties that schools and colleges must comply with, together with what schools and colleges should do to keep children safe.

The rise in serious violence, which many hon. Members have raised this afternoon, is a significant concern to the Government. Children and young people are increasingly at risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious violence. The number of homicide victims aged 16 to 24 increased by nearly a quarter between

[*Vicky Ford*]

March 2015 and March 2019. We know that the reasons for involvement in serious violence are extremely complex. That is why the Department for Education is working with the Prime Minister's crime and justice taskforce to tackle this serious issue.

Engagement in education is a strong protective factor for children who might otherwise be vulnerable to involvement in crime, and it is therefore vital that schools and colleges enable all children to achieve, to belong and to remain in education, working in partnership with children's social services and other agencies. Schools, alternative provision and colleges around the country are working with the police and health officials through violence reduction units in their areas to run interventions to tackle serious youth violence. I visited an alternative provision this morning in London, in Tower Hamlets, and I was deeply impressed by its work to support some of the most vulnerable young people. There are some really good examples of that across the country, and I would like to see more.

On the specifics of self-defence classes in schools, schools can already arrange self-defence classes for pupils, and many do. These arrangements should be appropriate for the pupils concerned and of good quality. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire rightly pointed out that what is appropriate for one school might not be appropriate for another. Schools must be able to choose activities and resources that are appropriate for their pupils, whether they are small rural schools or large, urban secondary schools, special schools or alternative provision schools. However, they should be able to recognise the individuals and organisations that can help to provide those classes.

My hon. Friend made the point that if the life-saving skills of swimming and road safety are required to be taught in schools, so self-defence should be. I understand his point, but the balance of risk is a bit different. We teach children to be safe on and around roads because every day they need to be able to cross roads or cycle in safety. Swimming and water safety is a requirement in physical education curricula of key stages 1 and 2 because it is important that, when children enter water, whether deliberately or accidentally, they have those basic survival skills. Those circumstances are quite different from a premeditated, deliberate and unexpected attack.

Dr Lewis: I have used the intervening period since my intervention to check on the price of rape and other attack alarms. From a well-known online megastore, one can get a pack of three of these extremely effective protective devices for less than £9. Does the Minister agree that, as a matter of routine, particularly where people are concerned about attacks in public places, such a modest investment is well worth making?

Vicky Ford: We should look at all ways in which to keep young people safe. I note that it is possible to get such an alarm as an app on one's phone. I will certainly look at my right hon. Friend's point.

I make clear that I have absolutely no objection to schools providing self-defence instruction if they think it is appropriate. I encourage headteachers to consider this provision, and to offer it if it is right for their students. However, factors that need to be taken into

account include the age and maturity of the pupils. It is incredibly important that they understand that they are being taught techniques that should only be used in an emergency, as a last resort, to free themselves from an attacker. Often, actually avoiding the attack is crucial.

It is vital that the instruction itself is conducted in a safe way, that the instructor holds appropriate qualifications from a sport's national governing body and that the instruction is not given in PE lessons, which I do not think is the right place for this within the curriculum. However, where instruction in self-defence is provided, it must be taught by suitably qualified instructors, and schools should be able to recognise those individuals and organisations that can help. For example, the Association for Physical Education has provided safety guidance, "Safe Practice: In Physical Education, School Sport and Physical Activity", to help protect teachers and pupils from potential risks, including in contact sports. Schools should also be able to recognise reputable individuals and organisations by checking that they have good safeguarding arrangements, qualified coaches and are compliant with sector guidance. There is guidance from the Association for Physical Education and Sport England, for example.

Reputable martial arts instructors are expected by their Sport England-recognised governing bodies to have adequate policies and procedures in place, including, but not limited to, appropriate coaching, first aid and safeguarding qualifications, and to have appropriate Disclosure and Barring Service checks in place. Given the inherent risk of personal injury in martial arts, they should also be appropriately insured. Sport England also produced a version of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's child protection in sport unit's "Standards for safeguarding and protecting children in sport", relating specifically to a safeguarding code in martial arts. At least 300 individual providers and organisations have already signed up to this and meet the requirements of the code. However, not all martial arts have a recognised national governing body, so not all of them conform to the standards required of a Sport England-recognised national governing body.

I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire for all he has done to raise the profile of this issue. Ellie's death was a tragedy, and a real reminder to us all of the dangers of violent relationships. It is vital that we all recognise that most important in relationships, sex and health education is the part on relationships, helping our children and young people to develop healthy relationships, to behave with mutual respect and to act, and have the tools to act, in that difficult situation when a relationship ends.

We will never know for certain whether a self-defence class would have saved Ellie. However, I know that, where self-defence is taught, it must be done safely and well. While we do not want to add it to the compulsory requirements on schools, we will work with the Association for Physical Education, Sport England and the sector to make sure that new, clear guidance is available to schools considering giving that self-defence instruction to pupils on how to make that provision safe and effective. We will look to develop that guidance this year, to sit alongside other work we are doing on supporting schools to offer a wider range of development activities to all their pupils.

3.48 pm

James Gray: This has been a useful debate. We have taken the whole topic forward, and we have remembered Ellie in an appropriate way. I thank all those who have taken part. My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) represents Ellie's grandmother, who I know had difficulties with victim support. There is work to be done in assisting her. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) is absolutely right about alarms; he made an extremely interesting and useful point. The hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) made some extremely helpful and useful points indeed.

The family and friends of Ellie Gould will be impressed by much of what the Minister had to say about the changes to PSHE education. They have campaigned hard for a move towards teaching understanding relationships and what to do when relationships go wrong. I think that many of the things that the Minister explained will come into the curriculum this September will be warmly welcomed by the family and those observing what is happening on this issue.

Equally, what the Minister said about protecting young people from online harm, verbal harm and physical harm, in the playground or elsewhere, or in later life,

was extremely useful. I perfectly well understand that the Government cannot lay down for schools what they will teach, when and how. Different schools in different places will teach different things. It is right that that should be a matter for headteachers and chairs of governors to decide. None the less, the fact that the Minister was able this afternoon to give a gentle nudge in the right direction, by encouraging schools to consider using the proper skills to teach young people how to defend themselves in later life, is an extremely useful contribution to the debate, and I am very grateful to her for it.

I think that this afternoon's debate has been a useful memorial to Ellie Gould. There is no purpose in any such death. None the less, the fact that we are able to try to advance the cause of preventing similar things from happening in the future is, I think, of itself a most worthwhile tribute to Ellie Gould.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered self-defence training in schools.

3.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 12 March 2020

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse Report on the Internet

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Today the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse has published its latest report, which can be found at www.iicsa.org.uk.

This report relates to its investigation into the role of the internet in facilitating child sexual abuse. I am thankful for the strength and courage of the victims and survivors who have shared their experiences to ensure the inquiry can deliver its vital work.

The Government will review this report and consider how to respond to its content in due course.

I would like to thank Professor Jay and her panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, expose what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

[HCWS156]

TRANSPORT

Smart Motorway Safety

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Following concerns about smart motorway safety, I asked my Department to review the evidence and, if needed, bring forward recommendations. Today I am publishing that work and taking the action necessary to ensure our roads are as safe as they can be.

Overall, what the evidence shows is that in most ways, smart motorways are as safe as, or safer than, the conventional ones. But not in every way. To ensure we are doing all we can do to improve safety, I am publishing a package of 18 measures. This will allow us to retain the benefits of smart motorways while addressing the concerns that have been identified.

Smart motorways have helped us cope with a 23% rise in traffic since 2000. They save motorists thousands of hours sitting in jams. They reduce the disruption and environmental destruction which would otherwise be needed to widen our busiest roads. Their growth, however, has not always been well explained, there is not uniformity, and concerns exist over safety.

As part of our work we listened to the families who have campaigned on this issue, and I want to pay tribute them. I am also grateful to colleagues and groups like the AA and RAC who have pursued this issue and helped us reach this outcome.

Alongside the report, and annexed to it, which will be published on gov.uk, therefore, I am launching an extended package of measures—an action plan—to raise the bar on smart motorway safety. It will include:

- abolishing the confusing “dynamic hard shoulder” smart motorways, where the hard shoulder operates only part-time and is a live running lane the rest of the time;

- substantially speeding up the deployment of “stopped vehicle detection” technology across the entire “all lane running” smart motorway network, so stopped vehicles can be detected

- and the lanes closed more quickly. Highways England is to accelerate its plans and install the technology within the next 36 months, setting a clear public timetable for the first time;

- faster attendance by more Highways England traffic officer patrols on smart motorways where the existing spacing between places to stop in an emergency is more than one mile, with the aim of reducing the attendance time from an average of 17 minutes to 10 minutes;

- reducing the distance between places to stop in an emergency to three quarters of a mile where feasible so that on future schemes motorists should typically reach one every 45 seconds at 60mph. The maximum spacing will be one mile;

- installing 10 additional emergency areas on the existing M25 smart motorways on the section of smart motorway with a higher rate of live lane stops and where places to stop in an emergency are furthest apart;

- considering a national programme to install more emergency areas where places to stop in an emergency are more than one mile apart;

- investigating M6 Bromford viaduct and the M1 at Luton, Sheffield and Wakefield where there is evidence of clusters of incidents. Where an intervention is considered likely to make a difference, we will look to make changes at these locations;

- making emergency areas more visible—all emergency areas will have a bright orange road surface, dotted lines on the surfacing showing where to stop, better and more frequent signs on approach and signs inside giving information on what to do in an emergency. These will be installed by the end of spring 2020;

- more traffic signs giving the distance to the next place to stop in an emergency, so you will almost always be able to see a sign. Typically, these will be between approximately 330 and 440 yards apart;

- more communication with drivers. We recognise that we could do more, therefore we are committing to an additional £5 million on national targeted communications campaigns to further increase awareness and understanding of smart motorways, how they work and how to use them confidently.

- displaying “report of obstruction” messages automatically on electronic signs, triggered by the stopped vehicle detection system, to warn drivers of a stopped vehicle ahead, this is currently being trialled on the M25 and then a further trial on the M3;

- places to stop in an emergency shown on your sat-nav by working with sat-nav providers to ensure the locations are shown on the screen, when needed;

- making it easier to call for help if broken down by working with car manufacturers to improve awareness of the use of the eCall “SOS” button in newer cars to call for help;

- we have changed the law to enable automatic detection of “red X” violations and enforcement using cameras and we will be expanding the upgrade of smart motorway cameras (HADECS) to identify more of those who currently ignore the “red X”. The penalty is three points on the driver’s licence and a £100 fine, or the driver can be referred to an awareness course;

- an update of the highway code to provide more guidance;

- closer working with the recovery industry on training and procedures;

- reviewing existing emergency areas where the width is less than the current 15-foot-wide standard. If feasible and appropriate we will widen to this standard; and

- a review of the use of red flashing lights to commence immediately. We have listened to the calls for recovery vehicles to be allowed to use red flashing lights. We will commence work immediately on a review.

My point on communication with drivers is important. Motorists could be better informed about this change in our motorways. Many do not know exactly what a

smart motorway is, and are not aware of when they are on one or not. We need to tackle the public perception of, and public confidence in, the safety of smart motorways as much as the reality.

By these measures we ensure safety is at the heart of our smart motorway programme and assure public confidence in the motorway network. We will continue

to monitor the data and work with campaigners to ensure that improvements are delivered.

A copy of the report has been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS155]

Petition

Thursday 12 March 2020

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

West Midlands rail freight interchange

The petition of residents of Gailey, Penkridge, Wheaton Aston, Bishops Wood, Stafford, and Staffordshire,

Declares that the current proposals to build the West Midlands Interchange at the A5 roundabout near Gailey will lead to mass congestion in the region, with over 18,000 extra vehicles occupying the A449 and A5, erode the identity of the small surrounding villages and have a devastating impact on the environment, with the development predicted to cause over 16 tonnes of added CO2 emissions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and Secretary of State for Transport to take all possible steps to reject these proposals and to ensure that the greenbelt is maintained for the benefit of future generations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Theo Clarke, *Official Report*, 26 February 2020; Vol. 672, c. 436.]

[P002560]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):

On the 27 November 2019, following a year-long public consultation and evidence gathering, the Planning Inspectorate provided the Department with the Examining Authority's Report of Findings and Conclusions and Recommendation to the Secretary of State, in respect of Four Ashes Limited application for a development consent order in relation to the proposed West Midlands Rail Freight Interchange.

The Examining Authority when conducting an examination into a proposed development will consider a number of planning issues, which will include amongst other things, impacts related to the local road network, local communities and the environment.

The deadline for a decision on this application was 27 February 2020. The West Midlands Rail Freight Interchange application remains with the Secretary of State for consideration and a new deadline will be announced in due course.

The Department acts in a quasi-judicial role in this decision and the proposal remains a live planning application. As such the Department is not able to comment on the merits of the case.

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**not later than
Thursday 19 March 2020**

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