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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 25 March 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Strengthening the Union

1. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the Union. [901663]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Douglas Ross): Before I respond to my hon. Friend's question, I would like, on behalf of myself, the Scottish Secretary and the Scotland Office, to express our gratitude and appreciation to everyone across Scotland and the United Kingdom who is helping to fight this virus. Under extraordinary pressure, our NHS is again demonstrating why we cherish it so dearly. So to our nurses, our doctors and all the staff at the frontline in the NHS right now, thank you. To the other emergency services, to carers and to teachers, thank you. To those providing childcare or working in our supermarkets, our farmers, and other food producers and processors, thank you. And to everyone who is following the Government advice to keep themselves safe and, in turn, saving lives, thank you. We are fighting a battle like never before, but it is a battle we will win, and win together. In these bleak times, I know our spirits will be lifted by the way we respond to this emergency as one. We will not let coronavirus define us; instead, let our legacy of this pandemic be one where our choices reflected our hopes rather than our fears.

This Government's No. 1 priority is to ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom are supported throughout the current crisis. It is evident how valuable the Union is to our collective ability to respond. I have regular engagement with the Scottish Government, and I am confident that through continued collaboration we will beat covid-19.

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer and for his thanks to all our NHS and key workers, and all our communities and volunteer groups, in Scotland and throughout our one nation, for all the work they are doing together to combat this virus.

Does my hon. Friend agree that leaving the EU has provided many opportunities for Scotland, including becoming an independent coastal state with control over its own fishing waters?

Douglas Ross: I do agree with my hon. Friend. For the first time in 40 years, we have the chance to control who manages our own waters. Before we get to that stage, however, we have to address the current crisis. In stakeholder discussions with the Scottish Seafood Association, the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, I have been listening to their concerns on behalf of the Government and responding to how we, as the UK Government, can address their needs and concerns at this time.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I very much associate myself with the Minister's comments commending our public services. I commend in particular our NHS staff in Scotland, who are performing a job that is second to none. They truly are heroes every day.

I want to take the Minister back to the original question about steps to strengthen the Union. For two and a half years, the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) served on the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill Committee, fighting against the Government's attempt to reduce the number of seats in this House from 650 to 600. I welcome their screeching U-turn on that, but will the Minister tell me if there are any plans to guarantee 59 seats in Scotland going forward?

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that yesterday's written statement by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), guarantees that the seats across the United Kingdom will remain at 650. I am sure his question has been heard by those in the Cabinet Office. I am in regular discussion with the Minister and we will be discussing that going forward.

Budget 2020: Scottish Block Grant

2. **Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effect of Budget 2020 on the Scottish Government's block grant. [901664]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I would like to start by endorsing the words of my fellow Minister.

I have regular discussions with the Chancellor, and all my Cabinet colleagues, on how the Government can help Scotland, and the rest of the UK, through these unprecedented challenges. That includes the extra £1.9 billion cash boost for Scotland, on top of that already announced in the Budget, bringing the covid-19 funding to nearly £2.7 billion for Scotland. That is on top of a raft of UK-wide measures, such as mortgage holidays and loan guarantees.

Robin Millar: The four nations approach to the response to covid-19 demonstrates again the strength of the Union. Does the Secretary of State agree that the bonds run so deep and the relationship is so strong that it cannot be summarised as a simple division of responsibilities or a simple transfer of funds?

Mr Jack: I absolutely agree. I would add that the British economy is the sixth strongest economy in the world, and it is that that is seeing us through these difficult times. We are sending funds to the devolved

nations with complete respect for the devolution settlement, and I am pleased that Scotland's two Governments are working very well together.

I would also like to put on record my support and appreciation for the military assistance of the Ministry of Defence, particularly at the weekend when a plane flew from RAF Brize Norton to Lerwick in Shetland to collect a man who needed to be put on a ventilator and take him to hospital in Aberdeen. It is a wonderful thing that we can all pull together in these difficult times. I am also grateful for the work of all those who are working tirelessly and selflessly to help the emergency services.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Quite rightly, our present time is gripped with, and all our energies are focused on, meeting the challenge of the covid-19 virus. Beyond that, however, important and urgent actions need to be taken on climate. For the United Kingdom to realise its world-leading ambition to be carbon neutral by 2050, will my right hon. Friend outline what steps the Government are taking to make sure every industry is playing its part, most notably the Scottish whisky sector?

Mr Jack: I think everyone in the House agrees about the climate challenge. In particular, on the Scotch whisky sector, we announced in the Budget £10 million of green funding to help distilleries, and coming to Glasgow in November, covid-19 willing, we will have COP26, which will be not only a showcase for Britain's commitment to climate change, but a wonderful opportunity for the world to come together, when hopefully we have defeated this terrible virus.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Can I associate myself with the comments of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and the Secretary of State? The shadow Scottish Secretary—my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), who is unable to be here today—and I pass on our sincere thanks to all those frontline service workers, our food producers and our shopworkers, who are facing unprecedented pressures to protect and look after the most vulnerable in society. Of course, we thank all those people who are staying at home and following both Scottish and UK Government advice, because staying at home really can save lives.

Coronavirus has shown that local services have been decimated by the Scottish Government, as they passed on to local councils four times the austerity that they have received. Does the Secretary of State agree that any additional budget resourcing should be passed to Scottish local councils to help to bolster local services that are already under pressure?

Mr Jack: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have given an extra £2.7 billion in funding for covid-19, over and above the Budget measures announced this year. The Budget measures brought, first, an extra £1.3 billion in the comprehensive spending review, and then another £640 million followed on from that. He is absolutely right, but I have to stress that that matter is for the Scottish Government under the devolution settlement.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I associate myself with the comments in support of our emergency services, but we also need to recognise that exceptional effort has been put in by our local government workforce. Any

additional funding to the Scottish Government is welcome, but in this current climate of unprecedented challenge, does the Secretary of State agree that more steps need to be taken, and will he continue to press Cabinet colleagues for additional support for self-employed workers and to move forward with the argument for a universal basic income?

Mr Jack: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. The self-employed and freelancers are still waiting to hear about a package for them. We have been encouraging the Treasury to push forward with that, and I hope that it will come very soon. Members of the Scottish Government have been doing the same—it is an effort across the devolved Administrations—and we need to find a solution. It is a complicated problem, because if someone is a self-employed van driver, they are probably doing very well on deliveries at the moment, but other self-employed people and freelancers are really struggling. We need to recognise that this has to be tailored to those in need.

Transport Connections: North-East England and Scotland

3. **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to improve transport connections between the north-east of England and Scotland. [901665]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Douglas Ross): The UK Government are committed to ambitious infrastructure improvements across the United Kingdom, as highlighted in the recent Budget announcement to improve connectivity and level up all parts of the United Kingdom. I reassure my hon. Friend that I have regular engagement with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity in the Scottish Government on this and other matters.

Mr Holden: The A68 is the third major road link between the north of England and Scotland. It runs through many constituencies, including Darlington, Sedgefield, Bishop Auckland and Hexham, as well as Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk on the Scottish side, going up to Midlothian. Given the importance of the road link and the fact that Transport for the North has recommended that it joins the major roads network, will the Minister raise the issue of the A68 with his colleagues at the Department for Transport to help the north-east and the Scottish borders to thrive after the coronavirus outbreak has finished?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the question, because the A68 is an extremely important road in the United Kingdom, running from Darlington and connecting to the A720 in Edinburgh, and therefore it is vital in strengthening the links between England and Scotland. As he asked, I would be delighted to discuss with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and Transport Scotland how we can improve this critical network in the United Kingdom.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Cross-border connections are vital to both the north-east of England and Scotland. I know that the letter from the Chancellor to the aviation industry will

have shocked and disappointed Newcastle airport just as much as it did Scottish airports, Scottish airlines and all the vital aviation support services in and around Scottish airports. What representations has the Scotland Office made to both the DFT and the Chancellor on the importance of support for this vital industry in Scotland?

Douglas Ross: Clearly, the airline industry and airports across Scotland are crucial hubs, and we need to continue to have them operating as much as possible during these troubling and exceptional times. The Secretary of State and I regularly attend Cobra meetings, which discuss a range of issues, along with the Secretary of State for Transport, so this has been raised as a UK-wide issue but with Scotland's input at the heart of the discussions as well.

Trade: Scotland and the Rest of the UK

4. **Jack Breerton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the value of trade between Scotland and the rest of the UK. [901668]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): Scottish exports to the rest of the UK increased in 2018 by £1.2 billion to £51.2 billion. The official Scottish Government figures show that more than 60% of all Scotland's trade is with England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. As a result, the rest of the UK continues to be Scotland's largest market for exports, accounting for three times the value of exports to EU countries.

Jack Breerton: When it comes to trade, does my right hon. Friend agree that in these challenging times, regions across the country, from my constituency of Stock-on-Trent South all the way to the Scottish highlands, are stronger and more secure working together as a strong Union?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I do agree with him. I emphasise that Scotland does more than three times the trade with England, Northern Ireland and Wales as it does with the EU27 countries.

First Minister: Meetings

5. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): When he plans to next meet the First Minister of Scotland. [901672]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I am committed to a constructive relationship with the First Minister of Scotland and other Scottish Government Ministers. Now is not the time to be planning face-to-face meetings; rather, we should be enhancing our virtual relationship and communications. The people of Scotland benefit the most when Scotland's two Governments work collaboratively, and that is essential in these difficult times.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Secretary of State discuss with the First Minister and the Foreign Secretary the plight of those of our constituents who are trapped abroad and feel badly let down? For some reason, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office seems to be struggling greatly with this. Perhaps it is time for other Government Departments to get involved and to help to ensure that our constituents can come home.

Mr Jack: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. I think we have all received in our parliamentary inboxes cases of people who are trapped abroad. Only yesterday, I heard about five or six cases of people in New Zealand and Australia, and I raised them with the Foreign Secretary. The Foreign Secretary has made a statement on the issue. We are hoping to bring people back and keep some airline hubs open—the Prime Minister of Singapore has kindly agreed to keep Singapore open for that purpose—and the Foreign Office is coming up with a plan. I encourage all British nationals to register with the high commission or the embassy in the country concerned and get their name on a list, ready for when we are able to organise flights.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On behalf of all of us in the Scottish National party, I endorse the comments made by the Under-Secretary of State in extending thanks to everyone who is helping us to get through this crisis. Many of the people in the NHS and the care sector, delivery drivers and people stacking supermarket shelves are European nationals, and it turns out that these are not low-skilled, poorly paid people; they are essential people who are helping us to get through the crisis. I hope the Secretary of State will reflect on that.

There are many in Scotland who came to our country seeking asylum and refuge, and many of them have medical expertise and other skills that could help their adopted communities get through the coronavirus crisis. Will the Secretary of State discuss with the First Minister and the Home Secretary how and when the right to work can be granted to asylum seekers who want to make a difference to our society, not just during this crisis but permanently?

Mr Jack: I think it is fair to say that that is a UK-wide issue. Normally, asylum seekers cannot work while their case is being considered; however, they can volunteer. NHS England announced a volunteering scheme yesterday, and I hope the Scottish Government will do the same.

Patrick Grady: I hope that anyone who volunteers under those schemes, whether or not they are seeking asylum, feels supported. Many asylum seekers are left destitute, without recourse to public funds. To be asking them to give their time and labour without recognition would not be appropriate.

On another matter, when the Secretary of State speaks with the First Minister, will they discuss the challenge faced by many of our distilleries, particularly craft distilleries, that are keen to switch production from products that we all enjoy consuming to products that could help the health sector—hand sanitiser and cleansing products? Many of them face duty payments in advance, which means that they literally cannot give this stuff away. Will he speak urgently to the Treasury and the Scottish Government about how we can help our distilleries rise to the challenge?

Mr Jack: Yes, and we have done so. We want Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to speed up the registration process for those companies, because the tax treatment of alcohol used in hand sanitiser is no different from

the tax treatment of alcohol used in the production of food, chemicals or many other things: as it is denatured, it is duty-free once the company is registered.

Oil and Gas Industry

6. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the Government's role in supporting the oil and gas industry. [901673]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Douglas Ross): I regularly discuss with the ministerial team from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy matters of importance to Scotland, including the significant support that the UK Government provide to the oil and gas industry. As I said earlier, I have been communicating with stakeholders across Scotland, one of which is Oil & Gas UK. I spoke to it last week to ensure that the industry is informed of current arrangements, and to ensure that the Government understand the impact of those arrangements on the industry and can support it wherever possible.

Bob Blackman: Clearly the future of the oil and gas industry in the North sea is of the utmost importance to the UK economy, and the industry will need a long-term view. What measures can my hon. Friend introduce to ensure that the industry is protected and enhanced as we move towards a carbon neutral future?

Douglas Ross: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend's assessment. It is crucial to continue to support the oil and gas industry in the transition to net zero. That is reflected in our manifesto commitment to working with the sector on a transformational sector deal. The oil and gas sector is already assessing what could form part of this deal through its "Roadmap 2035", which addresses how the industry can be part of the solution to the challenges that the transition to a net zero economy will bring.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I ask the Minister to speak with some urgency to Oil & Gas UK about the situation of offshore workers. In the last week or so, I have received representations from constituents who are offshore, who have had their crew change delayed and so have to work extra weeks. Some are concerned that going offshore may take them into an environment in which they are not properly protected. Can he assure us that while offshore workers may well be out of sight, they will not be out of mind?

Douglas Ross: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Offshore workers may be out of sight, but they are not out of mind for him as a constituency Member, for me as a Minister in the Scotland Office, or for the Secretary of State. This issue has been raised with me by others in the Aberdeen area. Last week, I discussed this and other matters with Oil & Gas UK, and we have a call later this week to discuss this further. I will reference the right hon. Gentleman's remarks to them, and will perhaps get back to him after that further discussion.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on what discussions he has had with the Business Secretary regarding the latter's role as president of COP26 in Glasgow? Does my hon. Friend believe that this vital conference will promote the UK as a world leader in tackling climate change, and that we must ensure that it goes ahead after coronavirus ends?

Douglas Ross: Understandably, all the efforts of this Government, and Governments around the world, are focused on tackling the coronavirus outbreak, but we look forward to welcoming leaders from around the globe—in November, hopefully—to discuss this emergency, and to hear the concerns and solutions of Governments across the world. Glasgow will be a hub for these discussions, not just in the 11 days of COP26 in November, but in the period leading up to it, and after it.

Covid-19: Economic Support

7. Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on co-ordinating support for people affected economically by covid-19. [901675]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The UK Government are working in lockstep with the devolved Administrations, the World Health Organisation and our international partners to keep the whole UK safe. The UK Government will continue to work closely with the devolved Administrations as the situation develops to ensure they have the funding needed to tackle the impacts of covid-19.

Wendy Chamberlain: I add my thanks to the people of Scotland for the effort they are making, particularly those who are already volunteering and providing vital services to those in their communities who are vulnerable.

In the past 24 hours, I have been contacted by several different local businesses in the self-catered accommodation industry. They thought they would be eligible for covid-19 grants for small and medium-sized businesses in retail, leisure and hospitality, but yesterday they discovered that they had explicitly been listed by the Scottish Government as not being eligible. Anyone who operates a chalet, a caravan or a B&B is eligible, but self-catering accommodation is specifically excluded, alongside ATM sites, jetties and pigeon lofts, among others.

If my constituents operated elsewhere in the UK, they would be supported. The message from them is clear: without these grants, the self-catering accommodation industry in Scotland is in peril. We cannot let this happen. I appreciate that this is a really difficult and challenging time for Governments, but will the Secretary of State make representations to the Scottish Government to reconsider their exclusions, in order to ensure consistency of support and the future of this industry?

Mr Speaker: We are asking questions, not making speeches.

Mr Jack: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that really important point. The self-catering industry, including self-catering cottages, is a massive issue for rural Scotland, and not just in her beautiful constituency but in my more beautiful constituency. An emergency package of measures will be announced next week. Our colleagues

in the Scottish Parliament are discussing that today. The Scotland Office has already raised the issue and we are very keen to see a support package for those rural businesses, particularly self-catering businesses and others, including caravan parks. If they only have residential caravan stayers, we want them all to be supported in whatever way necessary. As the Chancellor has said, we will do whatever it takes.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State further on support for freelancers, the self-employed and sole traders? Will he, the Chancellor and First Minister speak urgently, this week, to ensure that a package of measures is put in place for those groups that need support? I understand what the Secretary of State is saying about these things taking time, but people are deeply worried about their futures, including paying their mortgages and feeding their families.

Mr Jack: It was remiss of me not to welcome the hon. Gentleman to his role, albeit maybe a temporary one—a reshuffle is coming, so it may be a brief role. If he is invited back, that would be excellent news, obviously.

The answer is yes, absolutely: we have been discussing in ministerial meetings support for the self-employed and freelancers. We recognise that it is a very serious issue and the Government are giving it their full attention.

Chris Elmore: I thank the Secretary of State. There are 330,000 workers in Scotland who are categorised as self-employed. They need reassurance, quickly, from the UK Government. The Irish Government have announced a new flat-rate extra payment of €350 a week to those who are self-employed. I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that that would be a start while a full support package is put in place. The reality is that while the self-employed in Scotland or anywhere else in the UK have no guarantees to protect their income, they will continue to work, putting themselves and others at risk. I urge the Secretary of State, most sincerely, to press the Chancellor to ensure that a package is delivered, and quickly.

Mr Jack: As I said before, the Chancellor has been looking at many schemes across the European Union and around the world. It is absolutely about timing and I would hope that the Treasury will be making an announcement very soon.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): May I associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend and others recognising the health and emergency services and public services in general? I also note the volunteer and community groups that are active in Banff and Buchan and elsewhere in Scotland and around the United Kingdom.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's confirmation that the Scottish Government will receive at least £2.7 billion in new funding, following announcements made by the Chancellor during and after the Budget statement, to support people and businesses through the current crisis. What discussion has my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government to use that funding to support the rural and coastal economy in Scotland, particularly businesses in the food supply chain?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the rural economy in Scotland is in desperate need of support. The money will flow from the strength of the British economy—from the huge £350 billion of guaranteed loans for businesses and the £2.7 billion of extra funding that comes through the Barnett consequentials. Also, now that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in his place, I will mention that, on agriculture, the first tranche of the £160 million convergence funding, which he rectified in discussions with me when he first came into office, was paid to farmers in Scotland only last week. We are right behind the rural economy in Scotland. This Government will do what it takes to support the economy and get us through this.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister and the whole House join me in paying tribute to the former MP for Watford, Tristan Garel-Jones, who passed away yesterday?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but this is Scottish questions.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware that some companies are operating at the moment that should not be—they are defying the advice from the Prime Minister. Will the Secretary of State therefore raise this issue with colleagues in the UK Government to ensure that these companies still trading at the moment will have closure orders put on them and will face heavy fines if they continue trading from today onwards?

Mr Jack: As the Prime Minister and the First Minister of Scotland have said, it is essential businesses that must carry on trading. The Prime Minister is here and he will have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Speaker's Statement

12 pm

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make about the conduct of today's Prime Minister's Question Time. It is exceptional and I will run it until 1 pm. It will serve as an effective replacement for separate statements on the situation of coronavirus. I will allow the Leader of the Opposition two sets of questions—he will have a total of 12, which I expect to be taken in two sets of six. Similarly, I will allow the leader of the second largest party four questions, in two sets of two. I will also, exceptionally, call a further question from an Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson. In order to maximise participation, may I ask for short questions and short answers?

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901749] **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 March.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Suzanne Webb: First, I wish to pay tribute to the Prime Minister and his Ministers for navigating my constituents through these unprecedented times with their decisive action. I also pay tribute to my constituents and those working in the NHS for their truly heroic work. No one can afford to be complacent at this time, and I applaud my right hon. Friend's address to the nation on Monday, which reinforced the need for us to stay at home and protect our NHS in order to save lives. Will he assure me that the Government will ensure that people have the support they need in order to do that?

The Prime Minister: I fully echo my hon. Friend's tribute to our amazing NHS workers, and it is in order to protect them and help them that we are taking the extraordinary measures that this country is. I repeat my advice to the nation, which is to stay at home, protect our NHS and save lives.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for making the best arrangements possible today to ensure not only that as many Members as possible can ask questions, but that the Government are held to account, which is the function of Parliament.

Many more people will be mourning the loss of loved ones as a result of coronavirus this week. Our hearts go out to all of them and to those suffering from the disease at the present time. Across our country people are working day and night to keep us safe, fed and warm: our wonderful NHS staff; police; firefighters; prison and probation workers; teachers; civil servants; local government staff; and social care workers. All of them are showing the value of public service. They are the unsung heroes, keeping the transport system running, the post delivered, utilities running and our supermarkets properly stocked. I wish to give a special mention to one group who are usually ignored, forgotten and decried as "unskilled workers"—cleaners. All around the country, and in this building, they are doing their best to keep our places hygienic and safe.

Over the past few weeks, I have asked the Prime Minister many times what action is being taken to ensure that testing is being prioritised, and I have received assurances that everything that could be done was being done. Yet a leaked email shows that it was just three days ago that the Prime Minister wrote to UK research institutes to ask for help, saying that there were "no" testing machines "available to buy". Why was that not done weeks ago, if not months ago, when the Government were first warned about the threat of a global pandemic? What action is now being taken to get testing machines?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I could begin by pointing out that this is the right hon. Gentleman's last Prime Minister's questions, and it would be appropriate for me to pay tribute to him for his service to his party and, indeed, to the country over the last four years, in a very difficult job. We may not agree about everything, but no one can doubt his sincerity and his determination to build a better society. I pay particular tribute and thanks

to him and all his colleagues for their co-operation in the current emergency as far as possible across party lines.

I very much agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said about cleaners. They do an extraordinary job and they deserve all the protection and support that we can give them in this difficult time.

On testing, the right hon. Gentleman is quite right that testing is vital to our success in beating the coronavirus. As the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has explained many times, we are massively increasing our testing campaign, going up from 5,000 to 10,000 to 25,000 a day. In answer directly to the right hon. Gentleman's question, testing has been a priority of this Government ever since the crisis was obviously upon us—for weeks and weeks.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Prime Minister for his very kind remarks. I believe in a decent, socially just society. He was talking as though this was a sort of obituary—just to let him know: my voice will not be stilled, I will be around, I will be campaigning, I will be arguing and I will be demanding justice for the people of this country and, indeed, the rest of the world.

We can protect the health of us all only if we protect the health of our carers, yet the Sue Ryder charity, which provides care to people with neurological conditions, has said that its workforce is depleting daily as it has no access to tests. When will all social care staff have access to regular testing? They are very important and obviously very vulnerable in this crisis.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right. I do not want to repeat what I just said, except to say that social care staff, in common with NHS staff and, indeed, other public sector workers, need to be tested as fast as possible. The answer to his question is that we will do it as fast as possible.

Jeremy Corbyn: Obviously, if carers have to self-isolate because they suspect they have the disease and cannot get a test, their work is lost for a week and those who need care and support do not get it during that time.

There are reports that care-home workers are being turned away from supermarkets in relation to priority shopping and not being allowed to buy more than certain items that they desperately need to feed their residents. What is the Prime Minister's plan for making sure that care workers can get the vital food and supplies that they need for the people they are caring for?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman and the House can imagine, we have been in regular contact with all the retailers—all the supermarket chains. I had a conversation with all of them a couple of days ago, and they were absolutely determined to ensure that key workers do get time in supermarkets. If there is a particular problem, I will raise it with them again.

Jeremy Corbyn: I hope the Prime Minister will, because care workers are on the frontline looking after the most vulnerable people in our society. Keeping our care homes safe and well should be, and must be, an absolute priority.

The Prime Minister has been saying for quite a long time that NHS staff will get the equipment they need, yet the Health Care Supply Association—get that: the

Health Care Supply Association—has been forced to use Twitter to ask DIY shops to donate protective equipment to NHS staff. This is an appalling situation. When will NHS staff, social care staff and community nurses, and all other staff relating to healthcare, get the PPE equipment that they absolutely, desperately need?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue, which I know has been a concern. We had a long meeting on it this morning. I am assured that not only are the stocks now there but the Army is now distributing the supplies to all the NHS staff and all the hospitals that need it, and in the past 24 hours has distributed 7.5 million pieces of equipment.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is important that they get that equipment because, yesterday, 77% of NHS chiefs who responded to a survey said that the lack of staff testing and staff shortages were the two biggest areas of concern for them.

Last week, the Prime Minister stood in this Chamber at the Dispatch Box and said that he would

“protect private renters from eviction.”—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 995.]

He absolutely said that, yet some renters will be getting eviction notices as early as next week. The Prime Minister appears to have gone back on his word. Will he now, finally, absolutely ban evictions for six months in line with the renewal period of the emergency legislation, which is going through its parliamentary process at the moment?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about the need to protect renters, which is why I answered in the way that I did last week. We have actually gone further now, as he knows, by lifting up the local housing allowance to the 30th percentile of median rent, which will be very important for many people on low incomes across the country, but we are also, as he knows, making sure that no-fault evictions are no longer legal, and that is part of the Bill.

Jeremy Corbyn: Unfortunately, that is not the reality on the ground, as many of my colleagues will point out. Constituents are getting in touch with us, saying that they are being threatened with eviction now. They are in rent arrears because they cannot work during this shutdown over coronavirus. To be absolutely clear about this, will the Prime Minister make sure that it is legislated that nobody can be evicted from the private rented sector during the first six-month period of this emergency?

I will continue my questions shortly in the second part of this session, but I just want to ask this question of the Prime Minister. Many British people abroad feel a bit abandoned by their Government, with many fast running out of medicines, with the host countries in lockdown, with flights and accommodation being cancelled, and with insurance either about to expire or not covering the much-needed costs until they are able to return home. These British citizens have a right to turn to their own Government for help. Hour-long delays on phone calls are not acceptable. These people feel abandoned. Will the Prime Minister update the House, as the Foreign Secretary was asked to do yesterday, on what his

Government are doing to bring people home and to provide the emergency costs for the medical needs that many British residents abroad have at the present time?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman can take it that we are certainly doing everything we can to bring back British citizens from abroad. A huge operation is going on now to repatriate them, as he will have heard from both the Health Secretary and, indeed, the Foreign Secretary. We are also protecting renters in spite of what he says. We are doing everything that we can to protect our fantastic NHS. As a society and country, we are doing a quite extraordinary thing: for the first time in our history, to get through this crisis, we, as a country, are putting our arms around every single worker and every single employee in this country. It is a quite unprecedented step and he will be hearing more about that—[*Interruption.*] I know that there are concerns about the self-employed, but he will be hearing more in the next couple of days from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

The right hon. Gentleman said something the other day about how this country would come through this experience changed, and changed for the better. On that, he and I completely agree. We will get this country through this crisis with these exceptional steps, and I can tell him that we will do absolutely everything that it takes. We will do whatever it takes to get our country through this together. We will beat this virus together, but the most important advice that I can give him as he retires—[*Interruption.*] I am delighted to hear that he is not retiring. That will be warmly welcomed by his successor. The most important thing that we can all do is stay at home to protect our NHS and to save many thousands of lives.

Q2. [901750] **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his leadership and the leadership of his Cabinet at this incredibly difficult time and for the announced package of measures that will support millions of people and protect them from financial hardship. As he has just said, the Government's advice is clear: stay home to support the NHS and to protect lives. Will he help more people to make the right decision by giving an absolute assurance to the 5,000 self-employed people in Mansfield that he is seriously considering taking measures that will help them to do that?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for raising that matter. He is entirely right. As the right hon. Gentleman, the Leader of the Opposition, has just said, that is uppermost in people's minds. We have produced a quite incredible package to support the businesses and the workforce of this country. We do need to ensure that we protect the self-employed as well, and he will be hearing more about that in the next couple of days.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I must say, in response to the questions from the Leader of the Opposition, that we all need to do what we can to bring all our people home, and that needs to happen now.

The Prime Minister said that the UK is putting its arms around all our workers. I hope that that will become the case because, as of today, it is not. This

morning, the Resolution Foundation estimated that one in three people in self-employment—a total of 1.7 million workers—are now at risk of losing their income. In Scotland, that means that 320,000 self-employed people are deeply concerned about their jobs and the families they support. Last Friday, the Prime Minister and his Chancellor promised the self-employed that help was coming. Only yesterday, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury told them,

“we have not forgotten you—help is coming.”—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2020; Vol. 674, c. 207.]

These are the same promises that have been made for weeks now, yet they, and we, are still waiting. Can the Prime Minister explain why a package of support for the self-employed was not put in place before we announced the lockdown?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman will understand, we have done a huge amount already to strengthen the safety net for everybody in this country—not just those who are currently in employment—with a package so that they get 80% of their earnings up to £2,500 per month. This country has never done anything on that scale before. We have increased universal credit by £1,000 a year, as he knows. We have deferred income tax self-assessments for the self-employed until July, and are deferring VAT until the next quarter, as he knows. There is also access to Government-financed loans. But there are particular complexities of the self-employed that do need to be addressed; they are not all in the same position. All I can say is that we are working as fast as we possibly can to get the appropriate package of support for everybody in this country. That is what we are going to do, and we will get through this together.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister knows that we want to work with him on this, but there is frustration because we have gone into lockdown and workers are without income. This is an emergency. The truth is that the health and economic costs of this virus are deepening by the day. People deserve strong leadership, financial support and straight answers. As we stand here, these people are losing their incomes. Telling them to wait another day simply is not good enough.

In Norway and Denmark, wage support schemes have already been extended to cover the incomes of the self-employed. In Germany, there is a €50 billion programme to ensure that the self-employed do not go bankrupt. In Ireland, the self-employed are eligible for a special pandemic payment of €350 a week. The Scottish Government have written to the Chancellor, asking him to expand the job retention scheme that he announced last week to include the self-employed. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, when the Chancellor eventually does announce measures, there will be parity and equality of support between the already announced job retention scheme and the new scheme for the self-employed? They must not be left behind, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. I totally share his desire to get parity of support. I remind him that we have extended mortgage holidays, and are giving all sorts of help and interest-free loans to everybody across the whole country. There are particular difficulties with those who are not on PAYE schemes, as I think the whole House understands. We are bringing forward a

package to ensure that everybody gets the support they need. That is the way to get this country through this. But, if I may say so, the better we tackle the epidemic now—the more vigorously we are able to suppress the disease now—the faster we will come through it, and that means—[*Interruption.*] Yes, it certainly means testing, but it also means staying at home, protecting the NHS and thereby saving lives.

Q4. [901754] **Jane Stevenson** (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Wolverhampton has sadly already seen many cases of covid-19, and I am sure the Prime Minister would like to join me in thanking all the staff at New Cross Hospital in my constituency. Will he thank the many volunteers coming forward to help their neighbours in Wolverhampton, but also say to the few people who are trying to flout the advice to stay at home that their actions will cost lives?

The Prime Minister: I would indeed like to thank all the staff at New Cross Hospital in Wolverhampton for everything that they are doing, as I thank everybody in the NHS across the whole country. Just since yesterday, when we asked for volunteers to come forward, we have seen a huge number of people—170,000—asking to volunteer to do whatever they can to support, and tens of thousands of doctors and nurses are coming back to our fantastic NHS. I pay tribute to every one of them, some of whom, if I may say, are in this House of Commons.

Q3. [901752] **Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will understand that there is considerable concern about the situation at Northwick Park Hospital, which serves my constituents and many others, given the critical incident there last week and, tragically, that it has recorded one of the highest levels of deaths so far. Will he therefore tell the House when he expects the staff at the hospital to have access to the high-grade personal protection equipment they need, and, crucially, to testing equipment as and when they need it in order to keep them safe, to prevent the risk of cross-infection and to keep their loved ones safe?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of Northwick Park. It has had a consignment in the last few days, and we will keep those supplies coming.

Q6. [901756] **Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): There is no doubt that our nation and our world are under attack from an aggressive virus that intends to infect every one of us—sometimes with deadly consequences. It seems to me that in uncertain times we need clarity and leadership, and I want to commend the Prime Minister for the leadership and clarity that he has given in the messages coming from Government. We know them all very clearly: to protect the NHS and to save lives by staying at home.

Will the Prime Minister confirm that he will lift the measures imposed at the earliest possible opportunity, once he knows that our nation is safe?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. We keep those measures under constant review. The more the whole country is able to work together to conform with those stipulations, the faster we will get on top of this and the faster we will come out of it.

Q5. [901755] **Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): Through the Prime Minister, may I thank Ministers, particularly from the Department of Health and Social Care, who have been working very constructively with Members from across the House in these difficult times?

Those Ministers have asked us to report back difficult situations in our patches. In that light, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the Oaklands care home in my constituency has had a really difficult time lately. A 94-year-old resident developed the symptoms of coronavirus and requested a test. Ten days later, when the test finally happened, 14 of the 20 residents were exhibiting symptoms. Seven of the staff were off sick so that they could self-isolate—they were agency staff who had also been working in other care homes. None of the protective equipment requested had arrived.

Can the Prime Minister tell the House on what date the 80,000 care homes around Britain can expect tests to be carried out on the day symptoms emerge and on what date every single person working in those care homes will get the protective equipment they need?

The Prime Minister: On the test, as I said earlier, the answer is that we want to roll that out as soon as we possibly can. On the personal protective equipment, the answer is by the end of this week.

Q7. [901757] **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister assure me that he is in regular contact with supermarkets and food suppliers to ensure that goods are getting to the shelves, where they are needed? Will he join me in calling on people to take only what they need, not to stockpile and to stamp out the disgusting scourge of black market profiteering?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. The profiteering is something that we should be looking at from a legislative point of view in this House, as has happened before in this country. I can tell my hon. Friend that the supermarkets do have adequate supplies; as he knows, our supply chains are very good. We have relaxed delivery hours, but it is very important that in their shopping everybody acts reasonably and considerately of other people.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I would like to convey Plaid Cymru's thanks to the health workers, social care workers, teachers, cleaners and all those who are fighting this virus on the frontline. Today, an elderly constituent telephoned my office in dismay, as she and her husband are struggling to get food. Both are vulnerable and both are self-isolating according to Government advice. They have been told that the next available food delivery slot is 16 April. What support can the Government offer to ensure that vulnerable people in remote and rural areas such as Ceredigion are prioritised for food deliveries?

The Prime Minister: I am told that there is an army of local volunteers delivering food supplies, but if the hon. Gentleman wishes to communicate that case directly to us, we will take it up.

Q8. [901758] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share my concern that the contractors for HS2 Ltd are not following the very clear Government advice on coronavirus? This is not, to be clear, about the

rights and wrongs of HS2; it is about the safety of us all. My constituents have seen contractors blatantly fail to follow the rules about social distancing, and have observed them coughing over concerned residents, causing great distress. Should they stay at home to save lives?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear that everybody should work at home if they possibly can, and construction should only take place in a way that is in accordance with Public Health England and industry advice.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Charities, including those on the frontline of our national response to coronavirus—those working with the seriously ill, the elderly, the young, victims of domestic violence and providing food to the vulnerable—are in dire straits and face a £4.3 billion drop in income. Furloughing staff providing essential services to the vulnerable is, frankly, not an option. When will the Prime Minister come forward with an urgent package, as my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and 150 colleagues from eight parties across the House have been calling for, so that those charities can continue their life-saving work?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is absolutely right to pay tribute to the work of the voluntary sector and the charitable sector. They are crucial to our national response to this crisis, and my right hon. Friends the Culture Secretary and the Chancellor are looking at a package of measures to support charities as well.

Q9. [901759] **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister and all those on the frontline for their handling of this situation. I have raised with him previously the importance of reaching out to all the elderly and vulnerable who live alone, regardless of their health, so that no one is left behind. May I raise with him, as a former Foreign Secretary, the plight of the British Council? It is running out of money. It has had to cease its commercial activities and its reserves will be exhausted within weeks. Can he make funding available?

The Prime Minister: I came to love the British Council when I was doing the job that my hon. Friend refers to. We will continue to support it in any way that we can, and we are actively looking into what we can do.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When all of this is over, I think the Prime Minister will genuinely have earned himself a proper break on a paradise island, and in that regard I commend to him the paradise islands of Orkney and Shetland, where we have a fantastic tourism offer that has built up over many decades, but which has at its heart tour guides, craft businesses and small food and drink businesses, who are overwhelmingly self-employed. Will the Prime Minister give an assurance today to those self-employed people that, when the offer of help comes, they will not be in any worse a position that they would be if they were in employment?

The Prime Minister: I cannot in all candour promise the House that we will be able to get through this crisis without any kind of hardship at all, but I can tell the right hon. Gentleman—he and I have talked face to face

about the issue he raises—that we will do whatever we can to support the self-employed, just as we are putting our arms around every single employed person in this country. I well understand the point he makes. As for his generous invitation, he should be careful what he wishes for.

Q10. [901761] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): May I join colleagues from across the House in congratulating and thanking the Prime Minister for his strong leadership at this time, which has provided great reassurance to my constituents in Blackpool South? Will he continue to work with the voluntary sector and charity groups to ensure that vulnerable people continue to get the support they need from this Government during this challenging time?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. That is why we have given in the first instance another half a billion pounds to councils to look after the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. I thank my hon. Friend for his support.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Prime Minister will have heard my question to the Secretary of State for Scotland. There are companies defying his advice, which is for public health and to save lives. Can he tell the House and those watching what the consequences will be for businesses that are still operating today but should not be?

The Prime Minister: Where businesses are blatantly ignoring the instructions of the Government, they will face the consequences that have been well advertised.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I salute the tone of the Prime Minister's very difficult, sombre address to the nation on Monday night. I know that heroic efforts are happening to ramp up the amount of testing. Could he give us some idea of when we will be able to get back to routine testing in the community, as happens in Korea, Germany and other countries? Should we not now introduce weekly tests for NHS staff, so that we can remove their fear that they might be infecting their own patients?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the House that both on antibody testing and antigen testing, we are making huge progress. We are buying millions of antibody tests, which show whether or not someone has had the disease. On my right hon. Friend's point, which has been raised several times, about how soon we can get NHS staff and other public sector workers tested in advance to see whether they currently have the disease, the answer is: as soon as we possibly can.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Thousands of jobs in my constituency and nearly 1 million across the UK rely on the aviation industry for work, from pilots to baggage handlers, cabin crew, security staff and many more. The aviation industry is vital now and will be crucial when we come out of this dreadful coronavirus situation. The Chancellor and the Transport Secretary committed to a bespoke support package, but yesterday they wrote to industry to renege on that commitment. Can the Prime Minister tell the industry why the Government have washed their hands of it?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we have certainly not washed our hands of any sector of UK business or industry. We are in regular contact with the aviation sector and doing everything we can to help. Schemes such as Time to Pay and many other loan support schemes are already available to that sector and others, but I can assure him that there is other contact going on as we speak.

Mr Speaker: We will now start the second part of Prime Minister's questions, which will open with Jeremy Corbyn.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank you again, Mr Speaker, for making these arrangements today, so that more colleagues can come into the Chamber. It is a little odd, however, that we are having to have a double session of Prime Minister's Question Time to question the Prime Minister, when he himself should have volunteered to come here and make a statement at some length on the subject, rather than just doing it through press conferences and television addresses. This House is the place where the Government should be held to account.

Construction sites are still operating and still working on non-emergency work, despite the new rules. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said yesterday that sites will continue to stay open. We heard this morning on the radio a call from a self-employed construction worker who said that he had contracted coronavirus and was suffering from it—he knew he had got it—but he had no option other than to get on the London tube and go on to a site to work, putting himself at greater risk and putting all other passengers and all other workers on that site at risk. Why was he doing it? Because his site had not been closed down, and he had no other source of income to feed his family, so he is going to work, putting all of us more at risk as a result. Can the Prime Minister be absolutely clear and give unequivocal guidance now that non-emergency construction work should stop now?

The Prime Minister: Everybody should work at home unless they must go to work—unless they have no alternative and they cannot do that work from home. If a construction company is continuing with work, clearly it should do so in accordance with the guidance of Public Health England, and it has a duty of care to its employees. But overwhelmingly, what we are saying to the people of this country is that, unless you need to leave the house to take exercise, for medical reasons or to buy essential supplies, you should stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

Jeremy Corbyn: Obviously people should stay at home and protect others, but if they have no other source of income, then these very difficult, very personal choices are going to be made, and we are all put at greater risk as a result of it. The self-employed are having to choose whether they go to work or stay at home and face losing their entire livelihood, relying instead on an overstretched welfare system, which could pay as little as £94 per week. One self-employed person said that they need to pay for baby food, rent, council tax and insurance for the car they use for work, being “faced with a decision to feed your family and pay your bills, or stay at home and not get paid”. Why has it taken the Prime Minister so long to guarantee income for all self-employed workers? There are millions of them—our economy has changed.

The Prime Minister: We are making it absolutely clear to everybody in this country that they should stay at home and save lives, but when it comes to the self-employed and the particular pressures that the right hon. Gentleman raises, as I think I have now said several times in this Chamber in answer to other hon. Members, we are shortly bringing forward a package. I think that he would recognise that the steps that the Government have taken to provide support for workers, for employees in this country, are quite exceptional and unprecedented, and they were warmly welcomed, I may say, by the trade unions themselves.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am asking questions about the self-employed, those on zero-hours contracts and those with no recourse to public funds, who have no support. They are in a very difficult situation, and the Prime Minister should understand that many of our constituents—constituents of every Member of this House—lead a hand-to-mouth existence. A few days' pay lost is catastrophic for them.

Time and again, Government Ministers have told us that workers affected by the crisis could get help via universal credit. Last night, there were queues of over 110,000 people trying to get on to the Department for Work and Pensions system in order to register to apply for universal credit. Will the Prime Minister now put in extra resources and funding to boost DWP capacity and relax the often quite draconian requirements on people claiming, so that money gets where it is needed quickly—to those people who have got to feed the kids, got to pay the rent, got to survive somehow.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is perfectly right, and that is why we have increased the funding for universal credit so that it goes up by £1,000 a year. That will benefit 4 million of the most vulnerable households in the country. Overall, we are putting another £7 billion into the welfare system altogether. And, as I say, we will be bringing forward a package for the self-employed. What we are not doing—and this is fully in accordance with the scientific and medical advice—is closing down the whole UK economy, and he will understand the reasons for that.

Jeremy Corbyn: We are not asking for the entire UK economy to be closed down. We obviously want people to be safe, but clearly things have to go on. My question was about the DWP resources, which the Prime Minister did not answer. *[Interruption.]* Well, it was not an answer that was satisfactory to me. *[Interruption.]* One of his colleagues is claiming it was a yes. I will take that, so that means more staff now for the DWP quickly so we do not have 110,000 people waiting.

The Prime Minister *rose*—

Jeremy Corbyn: Hang on, I have not finished yet. My question, while he is about it—and this will give him time to think of the answer—

The Prime Minister: I'll give you time to think of a question.

Jeremy Corbyn: This is not a time for levity.

The statutory sick pay level is £94.25 a week, which the Health Secretary admitted he could not live on, and despite the Prime Minister promising he would ensure workers get the support they need, we still have not seen action on that. Unless we increase statutory sick pay and give protection and access to benefits for those on zero-hours contracts, the dangers we are all aware of—of people going into work or trying to work when they should not—are going to continue. We do need very urgent action on this.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: this is not a time for levity; it is time for serious action and a serious response to the crisis. That is what he is seeing from this Government, and that is why, from day one, we insisted that statutory sick pay should be payable from day one and that is why we have advanced universal credit. Just to repeat the answer I gave a moment ago, we have increased universal credit by £1,000 a year. That will benefit 4 million people in the poorest families in the country. I pay tribute, by the way, among the many fantastic workers in this country—not just in the NHS, in social care, and of course in the teaching profession—to those in the DWP itself. They are doing an incredible job. They are facing huge, huge new demands, and they are doing an outstanding job. And yes, we will support them, and that is why we are putting another £7 billion, as I said just now, into our welfare system.

Jeremy Corbyn: I do not want to appear totally negative, but it would be better if the whole place had been better staffed in the first place. But I will take it from what the Prime Minister said that there is going to be an increase in DWP staff in order that people can access universal credit more quickly.

It is right that Parliament be virtually closed today, and that the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers continue to deliver daily public information sessions. That is absolutely correct. However, I understand that it may be some time before the House meets again. There has to be scrutiny of what Governments do. That is what Parliament is for and what Oppositions exist for. I would therefore be grateful if the Prime Minister could indicate how, over the weeks until Parliament opens again, he will make himself open to some form of scrutiny—electronic or whatever it happens to be—so that Parliament can hold Government to account, given the levels of stress and concern of all the constituents we represent.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely correct. We have tried to handle this crisis by being as open and transparent as we possibly can be with all our working and all our thinking. I will work with you, Mr Speaker, if I may, on how we can ensure that Parliament is kept informed throughout the recess.

Jeremy Corbyn: All I can say to the Prime Minister is: please make sure you make yourself available for scrutiny by this House and everybody else, because we represent people who are desperately worried about their health and economic wellbeing. If you are living in a small flat and you are told to isolate, when you have a large family with a large number of children, the levels of stress are going to be huge. The levels of stress throughout our

society are huge. It is up to all of us to do what we can to reduce those levels of stress and bring this whole situation to a conclusion as quickly as we can. We need clarity, not confusion; we need delivery, not dither.

This crisis shows us how deeply we depend on each other. We will come through this as a society only through a huge collective effort. At a time of crisis, no one is an island, no one is self-made. The wellbeing of the wealthiest corporate chief executive officer depends on the outsourced worker cleaning their office. At times like this, we have to recognise the value of each other and the strength of a society that cares for each other and cares for all.

The Prime Minister: I really want to do nothing else except associate myself fully with the closing words of the Leader of the Opposition. What this country is doing now is utterly extraordinary. We are coming together as a nation in a way that I have not seen in my lifetime to help defeat a disease and to help save the lives of many, many thousands of our fellow citizens. We all understand that that will involve a sacrifice, but we are gladly making that sacrifice.

The most important point I can make to the House today is that that sacrifice is inevitable and necessary, but the more we follow the advice of the Government, the more strictly we obey the measures we have put in place, the swifter and more surely this country will come back from the current crisis and the better we will recover, so I repeat my message in case the right hon. Gentleman would like to hear it one more time: the best thing we can do is stay at home, protect our NHS and save many, many thousands of lives.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I echo my right hon. Friend's words.

London transport services have been severely curtailed. The journeys from my right hon. Friend's constituency into central London are around one every 15 minutes, as opposed to every five minutes. The result is trains packed with people who can potentially infect others. Clearly, some of those people are being selfish. What advice does my right hon. Friend have for his successor as Mayor of London for resolving the problem on London transport?

The Prime Minister: I understand very well the job that the current Mayor is doing. My view is that we should be able to run a better tube system at the moment and get more tubes on the line. I do not wish in any way to cast aspersions on what is going on at Transport for London because it is an outstanding organisation. We will give the Mayor every support we can to help him through what seems to me to be his current logistical difficulties.

Ian Blackford: As of Monday, more than 3,300 inquiries have been made in Scotland about NHS staff seeking to return to work to help us defeat coronavirus. Those people and all those already working tirelessly in our NHS are our heroes. Every last one of them, from consultants to cleaners, carers to nurses, drivers to maintenance workers, GPs to paramedics, are performing vital work to save the lives of others. When the crisis is over, we in this House will need to find some way to honour those amazing heroes, but there is one way that

the public can honour and support our NHS staff now: by staying at home. Staying at home and adhering to social distancing will save lives, protect our health and social care services and begin to flatten the curve. We can avoid unnecessary deaths, but only if we all act together. Does the Prime Minister agree that we owe it to everyone in our NHS and those willing to return for non-essential workers to stay at home?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the splendid way in which he expressed himself. That message deserves to be heard loud and clear across the UK.

Ian Blackford: I thank the Prime Minister for what he has just said.

Many Members will have had constituents contacting them in recent days about evictions. Will the Prime Minister join me in praising Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, Aileen Campbell, who has announced the Scottish Government's intention to use the emergency powers granted by the Coronavirus Bill to protect people from losing their homes? The Scottish Government's plans to impose a six-month ban on evictions from private and social rented accommodation are as welcome as they are necessary. Will the Prime Minister also join me in sending a message from this House that in such times, we need a truly loving and compassionate society? No one should face the threat of eviction at a time of national emergency. Will the Prime Minister send out that message today?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I want to repeat what we are doing—the sense and the thrust of it. It is not just putting £1 billion more into supporting the rented sector through local housing allowance, but stopping no-fault evictions. The difference is between three months and six months, but I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we will keep that protection under review.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I thank Broxbourne Borough Council, particularly the leader and the chief executive and all the staff for their brilliant work in co-ordinating aid and support across my borough. They are fantastic people, working with a range of heroes.

There is an army of black cab drivers in and around London, itching to get involved, like the Spitfires in 1940. If we need to get doctors and nurses safely across London, can we find a way of using those black cab drivers, not on the meter, but perhaps on a contracted basis?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a superb point. Indeed, it has already been raised in our considerations. Black cab drivers are a fantastic, unsung service and I believe that they can certainly rise to this challenge.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We have already heard about the huge increase in applications for universal credit, and whatever measures the Chancellor comes forward with to help the self-employed will take time to implement. What is the Government's plan to help people who have no job, no income and no savings, in

circumstances where they do not have any money at all to buy food? What will the Government do to make sure that no family goes hungry?

The Prime Minister: We have already increased universal credit, but what we are doing immediately to help to get cash to the poorest and neediest is to give an immediate grant of £500 million to local councils, and there will be more to come.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): This morning, I have been talking to the Solent Local Enterprise Partnership about its future plans for Waterlooville in my constituency. It is already planning for recovery after this pandemic. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is an opportunity to plan for the future, and to ensure that we can rebuild a strong economy and become more community-minded than ever before?

The Prime Minister: I do believe that this country will emerge better and stronger from this experience. I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that a great deal of thought is being given now to the lessons we need to learn from this crisis and how we can turn them to the advantage of the British people in the future.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister aware that people are being evicted now—this week—as a result of losing their income? That includes all the people who are being turfed out of low-cost hotels where they were being housed, either in their own right or by the local authority. Is he aware that all his emergency legislation will do is to defer evictions for two and a half months, storing up a problem further down the line? Can he tell us now what he is going to do to fulfil, in full, his Government's commitment that nobody will lose their home as a result of this crisis?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is totally right. The Bill will come into force, I believe, later today, or as soon as their lordships have finished with it. As I said in answer to the leader of the SNP, we will keep the three-month period—it is three months, not two and a half months—under review.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Like many colleagues, I represent a constituency that has many self-employed people. Farming, food and food production is very much made up of self-employed businesses. Can we be assured that bureaucracy and the difficulty of setting up a system will not stop help getting to the self-employed? It is essential that we cut through the bureaucracy and make it work.

The Prime Minister: That is indeed the issue. The difficulty is not devising the schemes—we can devise the schemes—but getting the cash to the people who need it in a timely way. Anybody who has worked on any of these projects will know that that is the real issue.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Some firms, such as Sports Direct and Wetherspoons, have shamed themselves by bullying their staff into work. Other businesses, such as events, sporting and conference companies in my constituency, are trying to do the right thing but are being let down by their insurance companies.

Will the Government give a clear direction now that no large events involving large numbers of people should take place at any time in the near future, and that insurance companies need to get their act together?

The Prime Minister: The instructions could not be clearer. The enforcement is there and it is going to be applied, and the message should go out not only to those companies but to the insurers.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister and his team for everything that they have done so far, and I associate myself with the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) about the need to support rural and coastal communities. With that in mind, what further support might we be able to expect regarding fishermen, who are sitting on the line?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He and I have seen the wonderful work that is done by the fishing community in his constituency. They will receive all sorts of benefits—not least our ability, in due time, to take back control of the plentiful resources off the UK coast.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Yesterday I spoke with a constituent who suffers from a debilitating rheumatic autoimmune disease, and symptoms of her condition are similar to those of coronavirus. She is concerned that she will not be included in the group of people who are to be shielded, even though she is clearly at risk, and she is concerned that she is going to end up needing emergency medical help because she takes different medications. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the Government are working with the devolved Administrations to ensure that shielding guidance is consistent across the UK?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed; we are trying to make shielding guidance as consistent as we possibly can, but in the hon. Lady's particular case, perhaps I could advise her to get in touch directly with us and we will make sure that she is included.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Nottinghamshire police is asking local employers to give paid leave to special constables to allow them to help during this crisis. Does the Prime Minister agree that every business should be playing its part and that all special constables should be able to report for duty?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed, and I should have added the police, specials and everybody who serves in our incredible police force for what they do. They should certainly be added to the roll of honour.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Tens of thousands of our constituents are stranded abroad. At the same time, thousands of planes and pilots are sitting idle. The Ministry of Defence has unparalleled experience in chartering planes and organising flights. What it needs, Prime Minister, is your instruction to do that, so when you go back to Downing Street, will you get on to the Ministry of Defence and tell it to get the airlift started and bring our people home?

The Prime Minister: Yes, not every country in the world necessarily welcomes a grey tailfin, as it were—*[Interruption]*—most of them do, I should say, but we are certainly commissioning charters right now, and there is a massive, massive repatriation effort going on.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): May I put on record the gratitude of my constituency for the leadership shown by the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary during this very difficult time for the whole country? Coronavirus is showing our NHS at its best, including the doctors, nurses and support staff in my North West Durham constituency, but it is also showing the strain in some parts of our NHS, including worn-out parts of the NHS estate. After the coronavirus pandemic outbreak has passed, will he and the Health Secretary work with me to look at delivering a new community hospital to replace the aged one at Shotley Bridge in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: The short answer to that question is yes. The long answer is that this Government are in no way undimmed in our ambition to continue with record investments in our NHS and build 40 new hospitals.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): To protect us all from coronavirus, we need to protect the most marginalised, and that includes asylum seekers, those whose asylum claims have been refused and all who are prohibited from accessing public funds by Home Office rules. Will the Prime Minister encourage the Home Office urgently to radically reform its policies so that everybody can access the support and accommodation they need to get through this crisis?

The Prime Minister: This country will look after all the most vulnerable in society in the way that we always have, and the groups that the hon. Gentleman mentions will certainly receive the Home Office funding that they need and deserve.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): The police will play a role in policing the social distancing guidelines outlined earlier this week. That will put extra pressure on limited police resources. My concern is that certain criminal elements might look to exploit this moment of national emergency to push their own insidious agenda. Will the Prime Minister promise my constituents and me that we will come down like a ton of bricks on such individuals?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed; the early signs are that criminal activity is not up—it is in fact down at the moment—but we will come down like a ton of bricks on anybody who seeks to exploit the situation.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The people of Newcastle are desperately trying to do the right thing, although my inbox tells me that they are angry, confused, running out of money, isolated and in some cases stranded. However, not all businesses are doing the right thing. I am particularly thinking of Mike Ashley forcing workers into empty Sports Direct shops. The Prime Minister has said that businesses should stand with their staff. What is his message to those who do not?

The Prime Minister: The advice—the instruction—to the gentleman in question, and indeed every business, is to follow what the Government have said: to obey the rules or to expect the consequences. That is the best way to look after not just their employees but their businesses as well.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's approach to devolution. Wales has two Governments, and his mature approach, and that of the Welsh Government, has meant that we have delivered fast legislation and efficient help, but any divergence on policy or communication causes anxiety for my constituents. The Secretary State for Health and Social Care has made an announcement on volunteering. Sadly, Welsh volunteers cannot take part in that scheme—we are cross-border—so will the Prime Minister get on the phone to the Welsh Government and say, "Let's work together"?

The Prime Minister: I must say that in general the four nations of our United Kingdom have been working very well together, but we will get on to the Welsh Government this afternoon on the issue that my hon. Friend addresses.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In Bristol, we are desperately trying to replace free school meals for children with home provision and other provision, but there have been real problems with the supply chain. How can we make sure that those providing those meals—including Andy Street at Feeding Bristol, to whom I pay tribute—can get hold of the food they need so that kids can get good, healthy food while they are at home?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady, who has given me the opportunity to say once again that our schools, our teachers and everybody who works in our schools, dealing with an incredibly difficult situation and looking after pupils who are children of key workers, are helping to keep our country going at a very difficult time. The administration of free school meals, supporting kids who need them, is an absolute top priority of ours. We are working on a voucher scheme at the moment.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Trying to summarise an MP's inbox right now is not easy, but mine includes "I'm self-employed, please help us," and, "Online delivery slots—which ones would they be?" I trust that the Prime Minister will deliver on the first, and we have covered it a lot today, but on the latter, given the demand, what can he realistically do?

The Prime Minister: We have changed the regulations so that supermarkets have a lot more freedom in their delivery hours, and obviously one of the things we want to do is ensure that we support people to help in what is at the moment an expanding sector of the employment market. We do not want to put up any barriers to online delivery at all.

Mr Speaker: I wish the Leader of the Opposition well following his final Question Time, and I say to the Prime Minister that he has the good wishes of everyone in making sure that the country gets through this.

Business of the House

1.1 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 20 April will include the following:

MONDAY 20 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 21 APRIL—Second reading of the Immigration and Social Security Co-Ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 22 APRIL—Second reading of the Finance Bill, followed by a motion relating to the membership of the Liaison Committee, followed by a motion relating to the membership of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

THURSDAY 23 APRIL—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 24 APRIL—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 27 April will include:

MONDAY 27 APRIL—Consideration in committee of the Finance Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 28 APRIL—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL—Opposition day (8th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party.

THURSDAY 30 APRIL—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 1 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

Hon. and right hon. Members will appreciate that I am announcing business as if this were business as usual. I am grateful to parliamentarians and parliamentary staff for coming together to support the completion of emergency legislation essential to fight covid-19, including the Contingencies Fund Bill that will allow expenditure of £260 billion on account. Once the Coronavirus Bill and Contingencies Fund Bill receive Royal Assent, and subject to the House's agreement, Parliament will rise for the Easter recess later today.

It is obviously important that Parliament is able to sit after the recess. Further discussions will therefore continue in Government, with the parliamentary authorities and with Members to ensure that Parliament operates safely for all those who work here. The legislature must be able to continue its vital democratic functions of conducting scrutiny, authorising spending and making laws, including the Finance Bill. Although my business statement is made with the aim of bringing the House back as normal on 21 April, we will continue to keep the situation under review in line with medical advice, and I will make further announcements about the plans for business when we return, as necessary.

1.4 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. Let me start by wishing Prince Charles a speedy recovery. I know that he has tested positive for coronavirus, and that our gracious sovereign is also in self-isolation. It was good

that Prince Charles was able to have a test. Many of our front-line staff do not have that test. The Prime Minister said earlier that he wants to protect the NHS. The staff need protecting and they deserve our gratitude, so will the Leader of the House do all that he can to ensure that tests are available for them?

The Leader of the House will know that Labour Front Benchers and those of the other Opposition parties are working constructively together, and I hope that will continue when we go into recess. Many of the fiscal measures have come through because our constituents, some of whom are absolutely desperate, have contacted us to ensure that we put their cases forward. I am slightly concerned about the Leader of the House's caveat on 21 April. I know he will do all that he can to ensure that Parliament returns on 21 April, and we know that we are able to operate, albeit with a skeleton staff.

May I ask him about voting, because that is another area that hon. Members have concerns about? I am sure that he would be the first to agree that we need to hold the Government to account. We found new ways of voting during the Brexit debate, and therefore I wonder whether negotiations could continue through the usual channels, because clearly voting arrangements must reflect the wishes of the House. I have raised with him the possibility of questions. We know that questions are not answered during recess—and in the light of your statement, Mr Speaker, there is no way that the civil service can cope with 60 questions at a time, and we do not ask for that—but given the unusual times, will the Leader of the House look at ways in which urgent questions can be answered, whether that is through questions or more MPs' hotlines?

May I ask the Leader of the House about the Boundary Commission report, which was published as a written statement yesterday and is to be decided by Order in Council? We both know that it is not for the gracious sovereign to be involved in a political decision, so will he ensure that any oral statement comes back to the House so that the House can decide on that?

I am tempted to say that I have received an email from the Leader of the Opposition, but I want to pay tribute to him and thank him for all his work, and particularly his family and his staff. They have worked very hard. My right hon. Friend must have done something right, because he has seen off two Prime Ministers.

Finally, I want to thank everyone here—the reduced staff who have enabled us to carry on working here and to carry on business—and I want to wish every single hon. and right hon. Member and their families well. I hope that they will be healthy and safe.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady rightly sends the House's good wishes to the Prince of Wales—God bless the Prince of Wales—and, indeed, to the Queen. We will come back on 21 April, which is, of course, Her Majesty's actual rather than official birthday, so let us hope that affairs are in a better state by then.

The right hon. Lady referred to tests, and I reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said earlier: there is an absolute determination to increase testing as fast as possible. That is of great importance, and it is being worked on.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

The Government are extremely grateful for the co-operation from Opposition parties. When Opposition parties co-operate with the Government, it is not always seen because what they achieve is done behind the scenes, but the Opposition parties have contributed considerably to the Coronavirus Bill and to ensuring its passage through the House. I thank them for a model way of working in very difficult times.

On the voting issue, Mr Speaker, you came up with proposals for how we would vote had we voted this week, which I think were sensible, but, yes, there is more work to be done and we will have to discuss working practices when we get back, depending on how affairs look on 21 April or shortly before. The right hon Lady referred to the written statement on the Boundary Commission. When we get back, there will be opportunities for normal scrutiny once we are back fully operational.

I am delighted to see that the Leader of the Opposition is back in his place, so I, too, may pay tribute to him. I perhaps have a particular admiration for him, which may surprise him—

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): It already has!

Mr Rees-Mogg: Indeed. When I was first elected to Parliament, there was a distinguished figure who sat at the far end of the Opposition Benches. He was in Parliament the whole time, he spoke regularly, and he was a very committed parliamentarian. Then he became leader of his party. As a new MP, I sat on the far side of my Benches, observing affairs, and although I do not have the right hon. Gentleman's level of ambition, I too ended up on the Front Bench. It seems that those corners are good ones to sit in.

But there is a principled point behind this. Those of us who sit in the far reaches of the House are often very independent minded. We have a great commitment to public service, which the right hon. Gentleman unquestionably has, and strong principles about how we think this country might be better governed. It is no surprise to anybody that the principles held by the right hon. Gentleman and by me are different, but we are both committed to ensuring the good government of this country. The model that he has shown of how a Back-Bench Member may make an enormous contribution over many years, and then lead his party with distinction, is one that should be remembered. Principles in politics are fundamental to how we do what we do, and how we achieve it. I pay a most sincere tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, and I note what he said to the Prime Minister earlier: this is not retirement; he is merely moving to a different part of the Front Bench in a few weeks. [Interruption.] I understand that that is what has been asked for—“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find.”

The right hon. Lady is right to pay tribute to all the people who have kept the House operating. They have done a terrific job. The security teams, the Doorkeepers, the cleaners—as the Leader of the Opposition said—and, of course, the Clerks, have worked marvellously well to ensure that we are operating, and flexibility is being shown to ensure that scrutiny may continue via Select Committees. Finally, the right hon. Lady wished everybody

good health. We always ask people how they are, as a normal courtesy wandering about our daily lives. At the moment, when we make that inquiry we really mean it, and I, too, wish everybody good health.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I expect to run this statement until about 1.30 pm.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I completely understand the need to send Parliament off for recess early, but huge questions are yet to be resolved, such as ensuring that all NHS and social care workers have access to the highest quality PPE that is consistent with international standards, or the massive increase in testing that we need, and have been promised. Like many other hon. Members, I have constituents who are stranded around the world in places such as Peru. I urge the Leader of the House to ensure that the Government live up to their promises on all those matters, keep our NHS and social care workers safe, and bring home those who are stranded abroad at this difficult time.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Those matters have, of course, also been raised with the Prime Minister, and in answer to a question from the shadow Leader of the House, we are liaising with other Departments to ensure hotlines for Members to call, which may speed up the process of holding the Government to account.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Scottish National party Members send their best wishes to the Duke of Rothesay, as he recovers from coronavirus.

I warmly welcome the decision that the House will adjourn for recess today. It is important that we set an example. We have been doing that in the way we sit in the Chamber, and it is now important that we return to our constituencies and, like everyone else, engage in social distancing, stay at home, and save lives. On behalf of SNP Members, especially the small number of us who have been here this week, I wish to extend our immense gratitude to all the House staff, including the Clerks, the security staff, the cleaners, and the catering staff. It has been a trying time for them all, and none of us would have been able to do our job without their support.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that any business listed for the week of 21 April must be extremely provisional. If Parliament is to be brought back when the crisis is continuing, that must be done in a way that respects whatever guidance is still in force regarding social distancing. As I said earlier in the week, it might be the case that anyone who comes to London from constituencies outside the metropolitan area will have to self-isolate when they go back to those constituencies, if the epicentre continues here, and we must bear those logistics in mind. I would be happy to share with him an absolutely first-class research briefing that the Library compiled about practices in other Parliaments elsewhere in the world and how they are dealing with this. We should thank the Library service for its work in these times.

I welcome the indication that there will be an opportunity to convene the Scottish Affairs and Liaison Committees and of an SNP Opposition day as soon as time realistically

allows. Finally, I echo the call of the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) about parliamentary questions. In particular, I wonder whether Members who tabled a named day question that would have been answered when the House was sitting—tomorrow, Friday, Monday or Tuesday—might still have those questions answered, and whether some provision will be thought about if we are into an extended period of closure beyond that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Duke of Rothesay and the Lord of the Isles will, I am sure, appreciate the good wishes from the SNP. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point on the guidance from the Library. That is very useful, and the Library is a wonderful resource that we have. As regards questions, it is important that the Government are held to account, and I can assure the House that we are looking at ways in which questions may be continued. My only caveat is that Ministers are exceptionally busy at the moment, and it is important that people are reasonable in what they ask for.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In these tough economic times for people, a number of our constituents will be tempted to take a payment holiday on their mortgage. Unfortunately, those holidays will not be paid holidays, but unpaid ones. The reality is that the interest on the mortgages will continue to accrue and will need to be paid when things return to normal.

The one area that does not seem to be offering any payment holidays whatsoever is our credit card companies, which are already charging exorbitant interest charges anyway, even though the Bank of England has slashed interest rates. Will my right hon. Friend arrange for the Treasury to do something about that to prevent many of our constituents falling into terrible debt from which they may take years, literally, to recover?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right that the usurious rates charged on credit cards can trap people into high levels of debt, as may the high overdraft fees and interest rates that have recently been introduced. It is a serious matter. I am sure that the banks are aware that the rest of the country is doing its best to help, and they will note that they received a lot of help in 2008. I am reminded of a parable about that, but time does not allow.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I appreciate, as we all do, that we should not be meeting physically in this place. It is not the right thing to do, and I accept the decision has been made that we should rise early for recess, but I am uncomfortable that, as a Member of Parliament receiving hundreds of emails all the time from constituents who are worried, as the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, about a whole raft of different things that are as yet unanswered by the Government, I will not have the opportunity to ask a question and receive an answer over the recess. In this modern age, when all of us are Zooming, left, right and centre, with our constituents—many people all at the same time is perfectly possible—surely it must be possible for us to fulfil our democratic function at this time of great crisis and to put questions to the Government and get answers.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will make the hotline numbers available for each Department as soon as we have them—we have most of them already. The other thing to remind right hon. and hon. Members of is that not every question to a Ministry needs to go through the parliamentary question process. Ministries will answer written and emailed inquiries as well. If right hon. and hon. Members have any difficulties getting replies, they should please contact my office, even during the recess, and I will do everything I can to facilitate speedy answers.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Leader of the House has suggested that we will have Second Reading of the immigration Bill on the first day back. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, there of course may be urgent questions or statements on that day about the coronavirus and subsequent updates. Those, however, are often time-limited. Will the Leader of the House consider us having a day, or two days, to discuss the many issues raised on both sides of the House in a general debate, or something similar, on coronavirus, with the Bill perhaps being dealt with later?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the message from the statement that I have made is that there is important and urgent business for Parliament to carry out, and that we need to be back to do that. That will of course include discussing the consequences and the continuation of action needed because of the coronavirus.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Dozens of constituents have contacted me because they have been stranded abroad. They feel abandoned and let down by the slow pace of Government action in bringing them home. Many are now fast running out of medicine. They are feeling stigmatised because as “foreigners” in a lockdown in those countries they are being accused of having imported the virus there. They are also being forced to go into civil hospitals where the conditions are so dire that if they did not have the virus beforehand, there is a high likelihood that they will contract it. Will the Leader of the House assure me that there will be a ministerial statement, or perhaps a debate, after the recess, so we can go into the detail of the actions taken by the Foreign Secretary and hold him to account, as constituency MPs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: When this crisis has ended, there will be many processes to look at what has happened, but I reiterate what the Prime Minister said not that long ago: the Government are making every possible effort to help people to get home. I took up with the Foreign Secretary the points made during my previous business statement. The Government are doing what they can in these difficult circumstances to help not only the hon. Gentleman's constituents but the country at large.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Mr Speaker, I hope that you will allow me to ask the Leader of the House the question that I would have asked the Prime Minister. In these times of an expanding NHS and rapidly emptying car parks, there is a great opportunity for our car park operators to do the country a national service by offering some of their places free for NHS staff. That includes station car parks, which are close to A&E hospitals. Although many of us are making good

[Richard Graham]

progress on that locally, it would be much easier if the Government could co-ordinate it, so that every car park operator in the country reached the same agreement during this temporary crisis.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I will ensure that it is passed on.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I understand the difficulties that we are in, but I have to disrupt the consensus: I do not think it is right for Parliament to go into recess early, and I am worried about how long it will be until we return. I hope that the Leader of the House will guarantee that we will return on the date in April when we are due to do so, because concerns remain about the lack of testing for NHS staff, the fact that we still do not have details on support for the self-employed, and the fact that the Health Secretary does not believe that he could live on statutory sick pay of £94 a week, even though that is what we expect people across the country to do. There are so many issues that we need to discuss, notwithstanding the fact that we have just given the Government unprecedented, concentrated power, unchecked until the House returns. Will the Leader of the House assure us that we will return, and that when we do Members who are not present will be able to participate electronically?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is of the greatest importance that Parliament sits to hold the Government to account. We are rising two and a half days early, in effect, and the business for next week was not urgent, but the hon. Gentleman's point is extremely well made and one with which I have a great deal of sympathy.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Leader of the House has spoken about hotlines that are available for MPs to use, but is he aware that more than 700,000 people are waiting in a queue for the Department for Work and Pensions to assess them for universal credit because they are being laid off due to the insecure nature of their work? Will he tell us the current waiting time for Members contacting the DWP on behalf of the huge number of constituents who are in desperate financial need?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I understand that there is about half an hour's waiting time for contacting the hotlines at the moment, but the DWP has faced the most enormous increase in volume of inquiries; every day, it is receiving many more than it normally receives in a week. The work that it is doing to help people is really remarkable and deserves praise rather than criticism.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I note what the Leader of the House says about accessing hotlines for Members of Parliament, but, with the greatest respect, it is not civil servants who should answer our questions, but Ministers. Given that it was possible last night for journalists to question the Health Secretary by video link, why is it not possible for us?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If hon. Members send emails to Ministers, Ministers routinely reply. We do hold Ministers to account by correspondence.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I share the concerns of others in the House about the inability to table questions over the recess, and more generally the reservations expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). I will give one example to illustrate those concerns. The excellent trade union Community has many members working in online retail. The Government have made the decision that they should continue to work, because they are a critical sector, yet it is not clear what protections and guidance on social distancing and its enforcement are available to employers and trade unions working in that sector. The ability to ask a question about that would hopefully get a clear answer from the Minister and enable the sector to move forward in a positive way.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman has now asked that question, and I will ensure that it is passed to the relevant Minister for answer.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I have to agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting): closing this place down early without putting in sufficient measures for online debate and questions is foolhardy at best. We have a system of named day questions, which already limits the number of questions we can ask, so that 60-question scenario cannot happen. Will the Leader of the House liaise with the parliamentary authorities so that named day questions can continue throughout the recess, so that at least we can have questions in public? Then the question is only asked once, rather than having numerous pieces of ministerial correspondence.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is no limit on non-named day questions; it is only on named day questions that a limit applies. Select Committees will be able to carry on their work and do so remotely, so scrutiny is being continued.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Leader of the Opposition was right to praise cleaners. My 90-year-old mother, Beryl, is a former cleaner, and when I took her to Cardiff city hall when I was first elected and showed her the grand marble hall, her reaction was to say, "Imagine having to clean this." We should all remember that in politics in every time. However, unlike in her day, many cleaners these days are self-employed. That is not by choice, and they are not very wealthy, unlike the kind of self-employed people the Chancellor was talking about yesterday. The Prime Minister said that within a couple of days we would have an answer. Does that mean that we will have an answer from the Government for self-employed people on Friday?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, may I wish the hon. Gentleman's mother good health at the age of 90? I hope that she is staying at home and following all the advice, although sometimes persuading mothers to do what they are advised to do is not easy. Cleaners are very important. The Prime Minister said that an announcement would come out soon, and I think he implied 48 hours, which would get us to Friday, so, reading into what the Prime Minister said, I think the hon. Gentleman's question answers itself.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Following up on the point made about answers to named day questions, I tabled a question last week on behalf of the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, asking what special provisions would be put in place to ensure that people would have priority

access to hospital and to testing. I was told on Monday that the Government would not be able to answer in the time available. Does that mean that I am not now going to get an answer until the end of April, or is there any way we can at least ensure that those questions are carried over?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I must confess I would have a certain sympathy with the Department of Health and Social Care at the moment for not answering questions with its normal efficiency. We as Members have to be reasonable in the matters of scrutiny that we are asking for. I suggest that the hon. Lady write to the Department on that question.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If construction workers cannot afford to stay at home they will go to work, and if the Prime Minister does not close construction sites they will stay open. Will the Leader of the House pass on to the Prime Minister that he must ensure that every construction worker, whether employed or self-employed, can afford to stay at home? Will he also pass on the message that construction sites absolutely must close?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This matter was raised during Prime Minister's questions. The advice from the Government is very clear. If people cannot work from home, but can work observing social distancing, which is being about six feet away each other—something that we are doing pretty well—it is safe to go to work. That is an important part of the Government's message: "Stay at home, but if you can't stay at home and you have to work away from home, then observe social distancing."

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am extremely concerned at the implications of closing Parliament early. The irony will be lost on no one: builders across the river in Battersea are going about their business as normal, with the sanction of the Government, yet the Government are closing down Parliament and stopping us scrutinising in the normal way. Normally in times of crisis, Parliament is recalled, not closed down. Considering that the Leader of the House is doing something so extraordinary, should he not also be announcing extraordinary new measures so that we can hold the Government to account remotely?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Parliament is not being closed down. The date for returning has been set for the same date as was always planned. The business that we had in front of us was not pressing: on Monday next week, we were to be discussing the relief of rates on public toilets. It was therefore reasonable to suspend those days, because they were not for essential business. However, we will come back on 21 April and we will deal with essential business. Members may continue to hold the Government to account by correspondence, and Select Committees will be able to carry out inquiries.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The rise of the House tonight means that we will not have questions to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport tomorrow, yet of all the questions that remain, there are two key digital ones. First, in terms of the provision of some kind of digital Parliament in case we cannot come together again, I urge the Leader of the House to work with the House authorities on that in an open-source way so that we can see the attempts being made and where they are going.

Secondly, and most importantly, social distancing must be accompanied by a digital coming together, yet our telecoms networks will be facing unprecedented demand. So far, all we have had is vague assurances from operators, which do not match my experience of designing and dimensioning networks, or my constituents' experience. I urge the Leader of the House to give some kind of digital access guarantee to everyone who is socially isolating and to work with the sector to make sure that happens.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I assure the hon. Lady that the Government and others will consider how Parliament can work differently, if we need to in April, and work out how that can be done. Whether the Chamber can be run on a digital basis is something that I would question, though with regard to her second point, she is absolutely right: there will be pressure on people who are supplying goods and services now suffering from excess demand. That is in the nature of what is currently happening, and there will be pressure on those businesses.

Points of Order

3.32 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am deeply saddened to share the news that my predecessor as MP for Watford, Lord Tristan Garel-Jones, passed away yesterday. His legacy in Watford is deeply cherished, as it is in this House. He was hugely respected across the constituency and, I am sure, by all Members and those in the Lords. His reputation is truly one that any MP should aspire to; I do on a daily basis. He will be deeply missed. My thoughts, and I am sure those of the whole House, are with his family at this difficult time. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to pay tribute.

Mr Speaker: Obviously a point of order is for the Chair, but it is quite right that we put that on the record. The thoughts of all Members of the House on all sides will come together. We give his family our most sincere thoughts and prayers at this time.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Liaison Committee has still not been set up because there were objections to the Leader of the House's proposal to create a new piece of prime ministerial patronage, putting someone in place as Chair rather than having them elected by the House. I wonder, Mr Speaker, whether there has been any indication that that motion could be brought back by the Leader of the House at any stage without the position of Chair being included.

Mr Speaker: Order. I might be able to help. The Liaison Committee Chair is not a matter for today. The Leader of the House may wish to clarify it and clear up any mess.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is clear that in business put down for 22 April, there will be a debate on the formation of the Liaison Committee and the Scottish Affairs Committee, two very important Committees.

Mr Speaker: So we do not need to worry about it today.

Opposition Day

[7TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Financial and Social Emergency Support Package

1.34 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the emergency financial and social package needed to support people, families and business through the covid-19 outbreak.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for accommodating the change that we wanted to make to the Order Paper today to make for a more efficient debate, and to ensure that Prime Minister's Question Time ran for the extra time that you gave it. In response to what the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) said, I join him in paying tribute to the life of Tristan Garel-Jones, whom I knew very well when he was a Conservative MP. He had an enormous knowledge of Latin America and central America, and spoke very fluent Spanish. He and I would often exchange pleasantries in Spanish in the Tea Room. I send my best regards to his family: "Siento la muerte de Señor Garel-Jones".

We are holding this debate amid a crisis unlike any other we have experienced in our lifetimes. I hope that the Leader of the House, whom I thank for the kind remarks he made about me, understands how important it is that, in this crisis, democracy is not closed down, but strengthened and enhanced. It is the job of Oppositions to hold the Government to account. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) for the kind remarks she made and for the work that she is doing in her role as shadow Leader of the House.

The coronavirus outbreak will have a lasting impact on our economy and our society. Life is never going to be the same again. The immediate task of the Opposition is to help to arrest the spread of the coronavirus and to support the public health efforts that are being made, while being constructively critical where necessary to ensure that there is an improved official response. I thank all hon. Members for the questions they put to the Leader of the House about how the House can continue to operate as it should, even during a recess.

The advice and instructions are crystal clear, so people know precisely what they should and should not do to limit or slow the spread of the virus, but there needs to be detailed guidance to employers and workers about which workplaces should close. Clear communication from the Government is vital for everybody's safety. The crisis exposes the vulnerabilities in our economy and our society. Underfunded public services, insecure work and a threadbare social security system all carry a heavy burden, which is usually hidden from public view, but has been thrust into a brutal light by a public health emergency.

The crisis also shows just how dependent we are on one another, and on the many ties of mutual aid woven together that make up the fabric of our society and our communities. We can come out of the crisis with that fabric strengthened if we value and support one another.

I pay tribute to all the fantastic people, many of them young people, who are volunteering now to help people going through stress and crisis. Indeed, I met a group last week who were leafleting in my constituency to ensure that everybody gets some help if they need it. Our first duty is to say to all of them: thank you.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although there are some excellent local initiatives, the announcement in the last two days of a national initiative is welcome? It would be great to have some co-ordination, however, to cut out any confusion about who should volunteer, when and where.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is right. There are lots of enthusiastic volunteers, which is great, but the initiatives need co-ordination and protection. We are dealing with assisting vulnerable people, so we have to be quite clear that the people who are volunteering are responsible and are doing it for all the right motives. All the volunteer groups that I have been in touch with and met are clear about that. They are well organised and responsible in the way that they are doing it, and I thank them for that. All those efforts will help us to overcome the crisis.

It is also necessary to say thank you to those delivering essential public services, especially our national health service staff on the frontline: the medical professionals, healthcare workers, auxiliary staff, administrators, ambulance drivers, paramedics—the whole team in every health facility. They are already very stretched in normal times; now, they are coming under unimaginable pressure and stress at the same time as being vulnerable themselves to contracting coronavirus. We should acknowledge that and say thank you.

We should also say thank you to those in our social care sector, who are so often unrecognised and ignored, and almost always badly paid. They are caring for the most vulnerable people in our society. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) explained earlier, the problem of contracting the virus in a home where people have not been tested only gets worse the longer we delay.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I completely agree with my right hon. Friend's approach and the fact that we should all give a socially distant hug to care workers, and to those in other parts of the economy with precarious employment and housing situations. Does he agree that, against the background of the biggest crisis we will ever know, we need a collective approach, and that policies such as nationalising the railways, providing economic stimulus to kick-start our economy, and free broadband do not look so outlandish after all?

Jeremy Corbyn: It was not so long ago that I was making lengthy speeches about those subjects, and I am quite prepared to hand a copy of our manifesto over to the Government. They are already being forced to implement a great deal of it because of the crisis and because of the deficiency in public services that we exposed during the election campaign.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a much more granular point, a care home owner has been in touch with me to say that he is increasingly short-staffed

because of infection among staff, yet he is aware of staff from overseas who have the qualifications but are unable to work because the Home Office has not moved quickly enough to allow him to give them jobs and to sort out the sponsorship requirements. Will my right hon. Friend encourage the Minister to get this issue looked at quickly by the Home Office? I will write to the Home Office, but it would be good to flag that now.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend makes a very strong point. Indeed, that has been raised by my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary and others on many occasions. It is absurd that we have highly skilled people in our society who are awaiting a letter from the Home Office before they are able to contribute to our society. We are talking care workers, doctors, social workers—all sorts of highly skilled people. They want to contribute to help us out, so I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and I strongly support the view that he is putting forward to the Home Secretary.

We should also take a moment to say thank you to civil servants in the Department of Health and Social Care and other Departments. They are putting in incredibly long hours. I talk to local government workers in my local authority who are working really hard to try to ensure that the community and society are safe.

We should thank teachers who are having to go into school to ensure that there are some facilities and teaching available for the children of essential care workers, as well as for children who have very special needs. Let us value them and the work they do, and thank the National Education Union and the other teaching unions for the work that they have put in to ensure that that takes place.

Let us also thank those who deliver stuff—delivery workers, delivery riders and delivery companies, and also our postal workers—for what they do. Our postal workers suspended their industrial action—their wholly justified industrial action, I might say—to ensure that essential deliveries can carry on throughout this crisis. We should say thank you to the Communication Workers Union and to those workers for all of that.

When we talk about key workers, it is not only those I have mentioned who keep society going. On Monday, the Minister for Crime and Policing, the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), said that

“when we emerge from the crisis...there will be a general reassessment of who is important in this country and what a ‘key worker’ means.”—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2020; Vol. 674, c. 15.]

He is absolutely right. We can all now see that jobs that are never celebrated are absolutely essential to keep our society going. Think of the refuse workers, the supermarket shelf stackers, the delivery drivers, the cleaners—those grades of work are often dismissed as low skilled. I ask the House: who are we least able to do without in a crisis—the refuse collector or the billionaire hedge fund manager? Who is actually doing more for our society at this very moment? Let us value people for the contribution that they make and respect the skill of the cleaner, the refuse worker, the postal delivery worker and all those others. Let us have respect for those who are part of the glue of our society. Right now, they need our help, and I hope that, as we look beyond this crisis, they will continue to get our respect, because people we respect should not be treated in the way they have been treated throughout the past decade of austerity.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

Right now, we must guarantee for our NHS staff the personal protective equipment that they are crying out for. There must be no excuses: get it there and deliver it for NHS staff, care staff and all the others. Doctors have said they have had to go along to Screwfix to buy face masks. They need visors, long gloves, surgical gowns and hand sanitisers—and they need them now. It is not as if this crisis happened yesterday; the coronavirus broke out in China some months ago and has spread rapidly across the whole world. One doctor was quoted as saying:

“I feel totally abandoned. We don’t have the protective equipment that we desperately need and our children are being treated like orphans and sent off to care camps.”

NHS staff are putting themselves on the line for the rest of us; we must not let them down for a moment longer. It is a matter of their safety and the safety of their patients. For the same reasons, let us test all our NHS staff for the virus as quickly as possible. It is an absolute requirement to accelerate testing throughout the population—“test, test, test”, as Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of the World Health Organisation, instructed us all to do quite some time ago. I pay tribute to him and the World Health Organisation for their steadfast and calm leadership during this crisis, and for pointing out that a world pandemic is going on and some countries are better able to cope with it than others.

As we look beyond this crisis, our NHS staff should be treated with respect, which means ensuring that the health service in which they work is well funded; bringing down their levels of stress, which are enormous; and ending the threat of the privatisation of their jobs and the outsourcing of services in NHS hospitals. Right now, can we ensure that our social care workers have the very best protective equipment that they need, and can we also have full testing for them? They also need financial security, an issue I raised at Prime Minister’s Question Time four weeks ago. A quarter of social care workers are on zero-hours contracts. Their job is, as we know, to travel from house to house, making contact with those often at the highest risk of death from this virus. They sometimes see 12 or more clients a day, spending time in their homes and potentially passing on the virus from one home to another and another. A lack of testing increases that danger all the time, so it is not just urgent, it is super urgent—like today, it has to be done. They need to be given the security to know that they can afford to stay off work if they have symptoms, yet none of them are included in the Chancellor’s scheme to pay 80% of wages. That must be addressed immediately. I pointed out in Prime Minister’s Question Time the situation for construction workers, and exactly the same applies to care workers.

As we look beyond the crisis, we need to learn the lesson and end the scandal of paying so little to those entrusted with the care of our loved ones. Let us end the disgrace of 1.4 million people being denied the social care that they need. Right now, the Government can give peace of mind to all self-employed and insecure workers with an income protection scheme equivalent to the one devised for employees. The Prime Minister said he would work on this very quickly, and it has to be done very, very quickly indeed; otherwise, we are all put at greater risk and danger.

Freelancers, workers on zero-hours contracts and those with no recourse to public funds still have no support. From cabbies to childminders, actors to plumbers, people are being told to do something absolutely extraordinary: to stop earning a living. Having made that demand, the Government—yes, the Government—have an awesome responsibility to ensure that these people do not fall immediately into hardship and that they are able to do what is necessary for public health.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there has to be a crackdown on some employers? Constituents have contacted me this morning to tell me that employers are insisting that people go to work and telling them that if they do not turn up, they will not get paid. Even businesses that are clearly not on the list of key industries have done this. Does he think the Government should crack down on employers that are putting their employees at risk?

Jeremy Corbyn: If employers are putting us all at risk by forcing people to work in a non-essential industry or company or non-essential work, they should be sanctioned, and those sanctions should include fines. They have to understand that they have a responsibility as well.

The Government should ensure the closure of any construction work that is not urgent or health and safety-related, just as Transport for London and the Scottish Government have already done—and remember, both have many major building projects going on at any one time.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Having worked in the construction industry for the past two decades, I appreciate how critical that industry is. Does my right hon. Friend agree that because of the Government’s mixed messages and the lack of support for the many workers in that industry who are self-employed, freelance, working as consultants or on zero-hours contracts, they are left in the unenviable position of having to get on the tube and go to work, because they have no other source of income? That is why the Government must step in, give a clear and concise message and support the self-employed workers in the construction industry.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend anticipates the point I was about to make. We have all seen the images this morning of construction workers packed on to the London tube and other trains all around the country, going on to site because it is the only way they can earn a living, and putting themselves and all of us at risk as a result. Action has to be taken now on this.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is there not also a responsibility on Government contractors? I am thinking of Atos, Adecco and those that have call centres, which are telling at-risk employees to attend their work. Is not that disgraceful, and should not the Government intervene?

Jeremy Corbyn: It is absolutely disgraceful and totally unnecessary. If someone feels they are at risk, the advice from the Department of Health is that they should self-isolate—and eventually get tested, but clearly the tests are not available immediately. If the employer then

forces that person to go into work, we all know what the consequences will be. There is a responsibility on employers as well in all this.

I hope that the Government will take action to close building sites, provide the workers with the necessary economic support and tell the companies that this should not be seen as an opportunity to cut their workers' wages by 20%; they are getting 80% from public funds and they should make up the rest with the profits they make on big construction projects. Many people on construction sites are, sadly, self-employed, which is a slightly different issue that I referred to earlier.

As we look beyond the crisis we should all give workers respect, with proper social security extending to the self-employed as well. We have to understand that we have a very different economy than we had 10, 20 or 30 years ago. A very large number of people are self-employed. They are making their contribution. They deserve respect, recognition and the necessary social security support: full rights for workers, including those in the gig economy.

We must raise statutory sick pay to European levels. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said, honestly, that he could not survive on £94 a week. I suspect that most Members would not want to survive on £94 a week and most probably could not survive on £94 a week, so how can we expect others to do so? We are saying that they have to survive on £94 a week and we cannot. It is up to us to say that in this crisis we have to increase it, so that people can have a survivable income. Looking beyond the crisis, no one should become poor just because they become ill. Many people have been shocked—I have spoken to self-employed people—to find just how low statutory sick pay is. They imagined statutory sick pay was something they could live on. They did not realise what it actually was. Even more shocking is that disabled people on employment and support allowance are expected to survive on £73 a week, as are those on jobseeker's allowance. Those figures are disgraceful. People cannot live on that sort of money, so they will be forced to take risks and therefore put us all at risk. For carers, it is even less money. Carers allowance is just £66 a week. That is simply unacceptable.

Right now, we have to give support and security to renters in the private rented sector. The Government promised 20 million of them a ban on evictions, but then broke their promise. Emergency legislation does not stop people losing their home due to coronavirus; it just gives them three months in which to pack their bags. This public health emergency will become a housing and homeless emergency if the Government do not change course now on the treatment of people in the private rented sector. All of us represent large numbers of people in the private rented sector, none more so than my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who I know represents a very large number.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a real problem that rents might increase straight after this crisis is over? Many mortgage companies are offering not a mortgage holiday but a payment deferral, which will be rolled into mortgage payments later on. Landlords

will likely pass that on to tenants and tenants will be evicted a month after this crisis is over. There needs to be control on rents expanding straight after this crisis finishes.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend understands the issue and represents his constituency extremely well. I know that a lot of his constituents are in that situation. We have to have better regulation of the private rented sector, with security of tenure and realistic rent levels. We also have to have the spirit of what was said, which was that there would be protection for people in the future. The danger, as he points out, is the opposite: it will just put costs up in a few months' time. Remember, if somebody has a mortgage and they rent privately, they will pass on the cost of the mortgage to the private renter. That is a problem he quite rightly emphasises.

Shelter estimates that 20,000 eviction proceedings are already in progress and will go ahead over the next three months unless the Government act to stop them.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. He is making a powerful speech. Just last week, the Prime Minister assured us that he was bringing forward legislation to protect private renters from eviction. Pauline, a 76-year-old in my constituency, received a letter two days later saying that she would be evicted on 13 May. She has been in that property for 13 years and has paid her rent every month on time. How on earth is she supposed to find another property if she is not even allowed out of the house?

Jeremy Corbyn: Exactly. How on earth can she go around looking at places if she is not allowed out of the house? It is absurd.

Labour's demands are very clear: ban evictions for six months and suspend rent for those affected by coronavirus. It is going to cost and it is the right thing to spend it on. It protects people in their housing. As we look beyond this crisis, let us give tenants greater rights and control exorbitant levels of rent. We need real solutions to the housing crisis, as the shadow Housing Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), has said on many occasions.

Let us end rough sleeping and homelessness once and for all. We are the fifth richest country in the world. It is not necessary—in fact, it is a national disgrace—that there are so many people sleeping rough in our society. Again, the coronavirus has shown just how vulnerable is the health of the most desperate and poorest people in our society. I want to pay tribute to the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, whose team have worked tirelessly to secure hotel accommodation for rough sleepers—well done Sadiq, and well done the team. They are aiming to get 3,000 hotel rooms for people who have been sleeping rough on the streets of London. I know that the Mayors of Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region and others are doing everything they can to do exactly the same. The Government can make a pledge today that anyone who was homeless before the pandemic will not be returning to the streets at the end of the pandemic. If we can house people in a crisis, we can keep them housed when it is over. Right now, we need to support all our public services as they face their greatest test.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern for that particular group of victims who are people with no recourse to public funds? They cannot work in a situation where so much of the economy has been closed down, and they have no legal rights to benefits of any kind—even the paltry level of benefits that the Government are talking about. They are not the only group, but these people face destitution. I raised that with the Home Secretary on Monday. We have still not heard anything about what the Government are going to do to protect people and their children who have no recourse to public funds

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention and for what she is doing about that. There are people with no recourse to public funds all over the country. Typically, they are people who are seeking asylum, their case is going endlessly through Home Office processes, and they are not getting help or an answer. Many groups are doing their best to help them. I pay tribute to the north London liberal synagogue for its monthly drop-in sessions and the support that it gives those people, and to many others, but it should not be down to charities to do it. We need to ensure that those people and their families are supported throughout this crisis. This is yet another lesson about the dislocation of our society and the way in which we treat people.

Every single person in this country can now see how important public services are, and looking beyond this crisis, they must never again be subjected to the damaging and counterproductive cuts that have taken place over the past 10 years. The hard truth is this: austerity has left us weaker in the face of this pandemic. We should not have gone into it with 94% of our NHS beds already full, with 100,000 NHS job vacancies or with a quarter of the number of ventilators per person that Germany has. Ventilators are our most precious resource in this crisis; we should not have begun with so few. We need more of them urgently, and we need the staff trained to use them urgently as well.

We all have a duty to do what we can for the collective good, to come together and to look out for each other—for our loved ones, our neighbours and our communities. But we also need collective public action to be led by the Government. That is the only power that can protect our people from the devastation that coronavirus could wreak on us.

This crisis demands new economic thinking. We cannot rely on the old ways of doing things. A major crisis we face as a society cannot and will not be solved by the market. Coronavirus, the climate emergency, huge levels of inequality, increasingly insecure patterns of work and the housing crisis can only be solved by people working together, not against each other.

The corporations and giant multinationals that wield so much power in our economy and appear to have the ears of the Prime Minister and presidents worldwide will always put private profit ahead of public good. Just look at the actions of Tim Martin, the chair of Wetherspoon—he told his staff, who are paid very little while he has raked in millions, to go and work in Tesco, instead of standing by them in their hour of need. Look at the attempts of Mike Ashley to keep his shops open, putting his staff at risk. The insatiable greed of those at the top is driving another crisis, one even more dangerous

as we look to the future: the climate emergency. Oil companies and fossil fuel extractors continue to damage and destroy our planet, our air and our wildlife, threatening the future of civilisation itself. We need to find the same urgency to deal with that threat as we now see working against coronavirus.

The coronavirus crisis will not be solved by those driven by private profit and share prices. It will be solved by the bravery of national health service workers and those who are on the frontline. It will be solved by communities coming together in all their diversity. It will be solved by the Government and public institutions taking bold action in the interests of the common good. The crisis shows what government can do; it shows what government could have always done. We have found the money to give more support to people in financial hardship. We have found the money to increase investment in our national health service. We have found the money to accommodate the homeless in hotels. If we can do it in a crisis, why could we not have done it in calmer times as well?

We are learning, through this crisis, the extent of the interdependence of each of us with each other. If my neighbour gets sick, I might get sick. If the lowest-paid worker in a company gets sick, it could even make the chief executive sick. If somebody on the other side of the world gets sick, as they did in Wuhan's province it makes us all sick. Indeed, the virus is now hitting Syria and the besieged Gaza strip. If the healthcare systems of Europe cannot cope, just imagine what it will be like for countries in the global south. Save the Children has warned of the

“perfect storm conditions for a human crisis of unimaginable dimensions.”

This virus knows no national boundaries, and neither should our capacity for compassion and care for our fellow human beings. The internationalism of the doctors from Cuba who have gone to fight the virus in Italy is inspirational, as is the action of the European Union, which has given €20 million to help tackle the crisis in Iran at the present time, despite the sanctions. It is a scandal that sanctions have prevented many Iranians from accessing vital medical supplies, putting each other at risk and, inevitably, putting all of us at risk. The old trade union slogan goes, “An injury to one is an injury to all, united we stand, divided we fall.”

People across our country know that. So many are showing such compassion in the face of adversity, as we see when we look at how people are coming together. Mutual aid groups have been springing up all over the country, with thousands of people organising to protect their communities. It is inspirational to see people who have never spoken to each other before suddenly getting together in this time of crisis and realising that they live in the same street and they need that help and support for each other. It is that spirit which will take us forward. There is no doubt that after this crisis our society and our economy will be, and will have to be, very, very different. We must learn the lessons from the crisis and ensure that our society is defined as a society by solidarity and compassion, rather than insecurity, fear and inequality.

2.8 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): It is a privilege to return to the Dispatch Box for the third time in two days, and I can only pay tribute to

your fortitude and resilience in being in the Chair for much of the time I have been at the Dispatch Box, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am opening this debate on behalf of the Government and I would like to pay tribute now to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), in case this is his last appearance at the Dispatch Box as Leader of the Opposition. May I also associate myself with the very warm comments that he and others have made about Tristan Garel-Jones, who was widely loved and admired across this House?

I thank the Opposition and the leadership of the other political parties for their constructive and supportive approach over the past few weeks, which is reflected across the House. Truly, these are extraordinary times. Our country has not faced a threat of this magnitude since the second world war. It is astonishing to think that it was just two weeks ago today that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered his first Budget, standing at this Dispatch Box. I can say from direct personal experience that the Chancellor, Her Majesty's Treasury and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs officials have worked around the clock before and since that time. Our single goal has been to do whatever it takes to support the British people at a time of crisis.

That Budget laid the foundations for a coherent, comprehensive and co-ordinated plan to limit, mitigate and address the impact of coronavirus, with a £12 billion package of support for public services, businesses and individuals. It was an unprecedented intervention by this or any recent Government, yet it has proved to be—and how—merely the first step. From the outset of the crisis, the Government have been clear that they are ready to do whatever it takes. Last week, we announced further support for businesses and individuals, including a £330 billion package of business loan guarantees. Only yesterday, I took through the House the Contingencies Fund Bill, which increased the cash-flow financing to Departments to £266 billion, pending the main estimates.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): There are reports that the announcement about the self-employed will be made on Thursday, when the House will not be sitting. Will the Minister guarantee that there will be some mechanism for us to question and prod the Government and get responses about the announcements that will be made when we are no longer here?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She will be aware, as we all are, of the issue relating to the self-employed. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor said that we will come forward with a package shortly. The House will rise by, I think, the common assent of all the political parties and in the knowledge that it is in the face of a crisis. When such a package is brought forward, there will be ample opportunity to debate and discuss it in the House when it returns. Before that, the Government will be held to account in the public square in the usual way, and Ministers are available for direct interrogation by any Member of Parliament who wishes to contact them.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the Minister arrange a Zoom call with all of us when that package is announced, so that we can be briefed and discuss it? I ask for a

simple yes or no—it would be really easy to do and it is secure enough, because we will be asking clear questions in public.

Jesse Norman: It is not in my power to say yes to that, I am afraid, but the request has been noted and, of course, I will pass it on.

I think I can speak for everyone in this House in wanting to put on record my thanks to all those across Government, in Parliament and in our public services who have made this astonishingly fast speed of reaction possible. The result has been an unparalleled package of measures that we have brought forward with great rapidity and resolve, and I pay tribute to them for that. I reassure the House that Ministers and officials continue to work day and night to consider how best to provide further support, including for the self-employed, which I will touch on later.

Ultimately, however, success in defeating this virus rests not with Ministers and officials in Whitehall, but on the actions of millions of individual people throughout the country. Our common aim must be to reduce the rate of infection and prevent the national health service from becoming overwhelmed. In that way, our doctors and nurses, and all those who support them, can focus on helping those in greatest need. Every man, woman and child can be a lifesaver by staying at home, only venturing out when strictly necessary for food, medicine and essential exercise, and even then staying at least two metres away from other people.

The Government are in no doubt of the scale of the challenge. The action that we must take collectively represents a profound, but temporary change to our way of life in this country. Indeed, it runs counter to human nature.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that, in order to be able to stay at home in the way he is describing, people need financial support? Will he respond to the shadow Home Secretary's earlier point that large numbers of people working legally in the UK have no recourse to public funds? At the moment, there is no support available to enable them to self-isolate in the way he is rightly advocating.

Jesse Norman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the question. Of course, if people are falling through the social safety net as it presently exists, we will stand ready to address that and support them. He will recall that when the Prime Minister was Mayor of London he called for an amnesty on illegal immigrants and others, so he has a wide and capacious interest in that area.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for allowing me to intervene. He will have heard about today's shocking and saddening terrorist attack on a Sikh gurdwara in Afghanistan. I am sure he will join me in expressing sincere condolences to the victims' families, many of whom live in the UK. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has mentioned those with no recourse to public funds. Does the Minister agree that it is also very important that the Home Office takes into account those minorities who are seeking asylum and that they are given adequate support during this time of crisis?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the question. I was not aware of the attack—I am afraid I have been focusing on our response to the coronavirus—but of course I share his concern and send our deep sympathy and condolences to the families of those involved. He has registered in this conversation in Parliament his point about the Home Office. We will, of course, provide support to them in the usual way in reaction to the coronavirus, as we would to any person living in this country.

Let me press on. As the Leader of the Opposition has rightly pointed out, the action of distancing one from another runs counter to human nature. We value our relationships with our friends and our family more than anything else. Communities thrive through social interaction. He rightly spoke of our interdependence, and this bears that out. Of course, businesses also rely on their physical as well as online connections to consumers in this country and overseas. When we think of people co-operating, let us not forget that business and, indeed, markets are often forms of human co-operation themselves. However difficult and painful this may be, at the present moment it is nevertheless essential. We must all play our part in this gigantic collective effort. Only through discipline, patience and community spirit can we turn the tide together. Now is the time for the country to come together behind this goal. As Burke said, the nation is a moral idea. It is the legitimacy of the nation that underwrites our capacity to intervene in people's lives, and it is only by believing in each other that we will succeed in doing so.

The response from across the United Kingdom has already been magnificent—from the thousands of former medical staff now returning to the frontline alongside student nurses who have opted to begin their NHS careers early, to the world-class engineering firms working with us to ramp up production of ventilators, to the men and women of our armed forces, both regular and reserves, stepping up once again to serve their country. Coming from Hereford, I cannot think of them without paying them a special tribute.

I also pay tribute, as the Leader of the Opposition has done, to the thousands of key workers—shop assistants, pharmacists, delivery drivers, cleaners, police, firefighters, teachers and many others—who are keeping essential services running at this critical time, and of course to the legions of volunteers who are mobilising to support the elderly and vulnerable in their community. I have myself signed up for the NHS volunteer programme—it was a very straightforward process—and I would encourage any Member of this House who feels so inclined to do the same thing.

The whole country is united in common cause. We are a nation and a people with strength in depth, yet this pandemic represents a deep shock to the global economy. In this country, many of the restrictions now in place go even beyond some of those seen in wartime. There is concern among business for the future, among people for their jobs and wages, and among all of us for our loved ones and our neighbours. We in Government recognise all those concerns.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am immensely grateful to the Minister for giving way. It is right that he talks about key workers, but over the last 24 to 48 hours my inbox has been overflowing with messages from

constituents who are being required to attend work, including people who work in home furnishings and as sales staff in call centres. I understand the need to be bipartisan in these times, but may I say very gently to the Minister and the Health Secretary that the messaging from the Government on this particular issue has, by and large, been pretty poor? We have a situation where, frankly, workers are being exploited and called into work when they do not need to be there.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for registering that point and putting it on the record. I will come to the question of communications, and perhaps I can include that point when I do.

As I have said, we stand ready to do whatever it takes to protect our society and economy. The first task has been to buttress our frontline public services. In the Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a package of support for the public sector—notably a £5 billion covid-19 response fund. Those investments will save lives here and now, and will also fund the research, diagnostic testing and surveillance that will bring the virus to heel over the longer term.

Meanwhile, the Government are working with the business community to bring our nation's scientific, industrial and commercial expertise to bear behind the public health effort. We are seeing examples of this “can do” attitude all the time, as red tape is slashed, timeframes are condensed, and the public and private sectors pull together as one. Let me give one example. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is fast-tracking applications to authorise the production and use of denatured alcohol. That means that Scottish distilleries and others can turn the ethanol that they have over to the production of alcohol-based hand sanitiser. The usual turnaround time for such requests is 45 days. Since the beginning of March, HMRC has cut that to five days. This has resulted in an additional 2.5 million litres of alcohol for sanitiser being authorised in the last three weeks. We have now gone even further; as announced on 23 March, licensed distillers and gin producers operating in excise warehouses may now use their stocks to produce hand sanitiser without HMRC approval, provided that it is made to World Health Organisation standards or the alcohol used is denatured to the prescribed formulations.

Here, as elsewhere, we see a common approach: decisive action as soon as we can take it; feedback, often from colleagues across Parliament; and improvements as we go. We now have excellent consolidated information on coronavirus available through a single link on gov.uk, and there is specific guidance for businesses from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on a new web page. I had a text message myself from the Government yesterday and the Prime Minister's broadcast was watched by 27 million people, so I think it is fair to say that the message is getting out there. We have even had Ministers leaving behind their red boxes in order to work online. We know that we must be in the grip of a national crisis when Ministers leave behind their red boxes.

Dr Huq: I am pleased that the Minister is giving us some good news about this advertising campaign—at last, because it seems to have been a bit slow. Could he shed light on two anomalous categories of business, examples of which have contacted me? Buttons Nanny

Agency says that domestic staff fall into the category of workers who do have to physically turn up, but it is not clear whether they will retain 80% of their salary; they are in a strange and anomalous position. What is to be done about them? West London English School is a private language school that falls above the rateable value level, but it is an educational service. It is very worried that it is about to shut down. The rateable value of many businesses in my constituency is above £51,000 because it is London and it is different here. Could the Minister do something for them? Very briefly, let me also say that domestic violence is set to rise. Where has the abortion amendment gone? Many of us are concerned that it seems to have vanished.

Jesse Norman: I was just discussing the process of improving the Government response through feedback, often from colleagues, so I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving her feedback on those specific areas. In so doing, she will have activated Government processes with the relevant Departments, which will then look at the issues that she has mentioned.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In the spirit of clarifying anomalies, I have been contacted by many businesses who tell me that, because they do not have business premises or work in co-working spaces, they appear not to be eligible for the business grants. I can understand why they would not be eligible for the rates support, but I do not understand why they would not be eligible for the grants. They are also telling me that they are required to put their own personal homes on the line to get the loans from the banks, so they do not want to take them up and get into debt.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point. I will look into the question of whether there should be any relation between business loans; I am certainly not aware of one myself. It ought to be possible for people to claim business loans as she has described. As regards the business interruption loan scheme, borrowers are not required to pledge their house, but there may be some requirement for personal guarantees of other kinds, which is what one would expect, and which will open up lending in other ways. The Economic Secretary is very engaged on this issue. There are 40 lenders involved, so ironing out the guidance with all of them, to ensure a consistent picture, has not been the most straightforward thing one could imagine.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I will read out what Barclays is saying to businesses about personal guarantees:

“Loans will need to have a director’s guarantee, or in the case of partnerships and sole traders, you will be personally liable”.

If a person’s only asset is their home, pledging it and being liable amount to the same thing. Will the right hon. Gentleman deal with that problem? That quote was read to me by a person from a company that will now have to lay off its staff and close, and so will not be eligible for the furlough scheme. This will hit workers as well as businesses.

Jesse Norman: I cannot comment, obviously, on the specific circumstances that the hon. Gentleman describes, but I can certainly say that the Economic Secretary to

the Treasury is working very closely with the banks to make sure that no business is forced to close as a result of coronavirus.

Sarah Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jesse Norman: We have discussed this quite a lot, so as I have quite a long speech, and a fair number of colleagues want to speak, I will press on, if I may.

We must face facts: it may take several weeks—possibly longer—before this national effort is reflected in a fall in infection rates, and it may take longer still to defeat the virus completely, but however long it takes, we will do what we can to support businesses and workers. As the House will know, under the jobs retention scheme, the Government will pay 80% of staff wages up to £2,500, provided businesses keep those staff employed. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is working tirelessly to get the scheme up and running. The first grants will be made in a matter of weeks.

Of course businesses face cash-flow concerns, and we are recognising that through the business interruption loan scheme. For larger enterprises, the Bank of England is providing a new facility to help overall liquidity, and HMRC’s existing time to pay arrangements are available to help businesses make ends meet. We have deferred VAT payments for the next quarter, so that VAT-registered businesses will not need to pay VAT alongside their normal returns; that intervention alone is worth over £30 billion. Those measures are on top of those announced in the Budget earlier this month.

As colleagues across the House have mentioned, this is a particularly worrying time for the self-employed. I am acutely aware, as are all Ministers, of how deeply these concerns are felt across the House. Let me be clear that the Government recognise the specific challenges that self-employed people face. We will respond shortly. There has already been discussion of this, and a commitment from the Prime Minister on this issue, with tailored and targeted action. As the Chancellor has said, this problem is very far from straightforward. We are trying to be as inclusive, but also as fair, as possible.

Jeremy Corbyn: Could the Minister tell us how quickly this will be done, because the levels of stress out there among the self-employed are absolutely huge?

Jesse Norman: I understand that. The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that if we date the official recognition of the need for intervention on coronavirus from the Budget, we are two weeks into the situation. The Prime Minister knows the situation; he made a commitment to the right hon. Gentleman an hour or two ago, and I cannot do better than the Prime Minister.

As of Monday, sole traders and freelancers have been able to gain access to the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, provided that their activity is channelled through a business account. We are removing the universal credit minimum income floor, so that self-employed workers have access to universal credit, and we have deferred the next deadline for self-assessment income tax payments until 2021, so that self-employed people can manage their finances better over the course of the year.

It goes without saying that more needs to be done and, as I have said, we will do that, but as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury made clear

[*Jesse Norman*]

to the House yesterday, it is essential that that support reaches the people who need it the most. The Chancellor will provide a further update, as I have described, shortly. Until then, the Government will continue to listen carefully to hon. Members and, crucially, to those most directly affected. As the House knows, just as we are supporting businesses and employees, so we are also supporting families through the crisis. Those on low incomes will benefit from a package of measures worth more than £6 billion, including a £20 a week increase in universal credit standard allowance and the working tax credit basic element—an increase from £318 to £410 a month for a standard claimant over the age of 25. Those who are new to universal credit will not be required to attend assessment interviews. Advances for those claimants who need them will be available by phone or online.

Through these measures and others, the Government are absolutely clear that the burden of this pandemic must not fall on the lowest paid. We are particularly mindful of the needs of the most vulnerable members of our community and the charitable organisations that are working so hard to support them. The jobs retention scheme is available to all PAYE employers, including charitable and not-for-profit organisations. Furthermore, the business interruption loan scheme is applicable to social enterprises and to charities that receive half their income from trading. Charities will also benefit from a three-month VAT deferral to the end of June, and many are already eligible for 80% charitable rate relief as well, and, of course, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, we are giving councils an additional £500 million in hardship funding to ensure that help is available for the most vulnerable people in our society who may be struggling to pay council tax bills.

Sarah Jones: On the point about the extra funding for councils, when I was talking to my own council yesterday it says that that will barely cover the number of people who will be applying for council tax relief; it will just fill that hole. It is looking at things such as the grant scheme. The loans that it will have to administer will amount to £50 million in my borough of Croydon, and there is no system in place yet to help it to understand how it is supposed to administer them, how it will work, and, indeed, how it will fund the support for the very vulnerable, many of whom are already struggling and will be struggling increasingly over the coming weeks.

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady for registering that point. She will be aware that we have made £1.6 billion available to support local authorities and, of course, we are specifically supporting them by bringing forward the cash-flow element of business rates. We are leaning into this problem hard, but I thank her for putting the concern on the record.

It has been suggested that this may be the Leader of the Opposition's final outing at the Dispatch Box. I am sure the House will not welcome that. I will leave it to others to write any political verdict or obituaries that may come, but let me say that no one in this House—certainly not I—would doubt the sincerity and the commitment that he has shown to his beliefs over many, many years, however vigorously we may disagree with

them. For myself, I believe in a big society rather than a big state, but let us be clear that, in a time of national crisis, both will be needed. Finally, I think I can speak for my colleagues on the Conservative Benches in saying that we will be sad to see him go.

The coming weeks may be difficult. The action that we have taken has far-reaching consequences for our economy and our society, and yet it has the power to save thousands of lives. Throughout this time, the Government will continue to listen to the concerns of hon. and right hon. Members and of the public. They have already delivered one of the most generous and comprehensive interventions of any Government of the world, and we stand ready to do more. We will make every effort to safeguard people's jobs and livelihoods, to support our public services and local communities, and to preserve and protect businesses, large and small, across the country. Our message is this: we have got your back and, together, we will defeat this virus and the Britain that emerges from this pandemic will be not only stronger and more resilient, but more united, too.

2.34 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a considerable pleasure to speak in this debate on the motion that has been tabled by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. It has always been a privilege to follow him in a debate, as I often have to do, and it is very much so on this occasion.

We are now a number of weeks into this emergency, and yet its impact and the measures required to fight it remain shocking to all of us. This virus has come to dominate not only everything that we do, but all our thoughts. It is truly all-consuming. The misery of this virus will undoubtedly come to define this period, but it must not come to define how we as human beings have responded to it. As we collectively face the difficulties of the weeks and months ahead, it is right that we reflect on all that is good about the human spirit of service and sacrifice that reaches into every corner of these islands. That duty and sacrifice has been seen day after day across our communities in our health services, our police, our carers, our civil servants, our small businesses and so much more.

This is primarily a health crisis, but its economic impact is deepening by the day. Thousands have already lost their jobs and millions are threatened with the same. People are deeply and genuinely worried about keeping their income, protecting their families and keeping a roof over their heads. My party has been open and public in welcoming some of the measures brought forward by the Chancellor last Friday, but we have also been crystal clear that more needs to be done, and done now.

There has been one massive gap in the Government's economic response to the crisis: so far, the self-employed and the unemployed have been left behind, and left to wait. They have been left with no protection and have been left to live with that uncertainty for weeks. I am sure that all Members across the House have been inundated with emails from people living in those terrible circumstances. They are rightly worried: they are worried about putting food on the table; they are worried about looking after their family; they are worried about keeping a roof over their head.

On Saturday, I wrote to the Chancellor calling for an urgent cross-party meeting. I am saddened to say that I have not had a reply. The SNP has pressed the UK Government to introduce a financial package of support for self-employed and unemployed people. They cannot wait any longer.

We have proposed four key measures that would help. I again ask the Chancellor to ensure that everyone has a guaranteed income by using the tax and welfare systems to put money directly in people's pockets through a universal basic income, reverse national insurance or another similar mechanism. I ask him to raise the UK's statutory sick pay to the EU national average and expand entitlement to the self-employed and those under the earnings threshold. I ask him to include self-employed people in the coronavirus job retention scheme, providing the same support for the self-employed that has been announced for employees. That would be the right thing to do; that would show compassion for all our people in their time of need.

The coronavirus lockdown makes it even more urgent that the UK Government deliver a comprehensive financial package of support for the millions of freelance, self-employed and unemployed people who are struggling to get by in this unprecedented emergency. There is no good reason why these moves should be put on hold when people are already in need. We in Parliament should be debating the Government's response today.

If we are truly to fight this crisis together, there is a desperate need to protect those who were vulnerable before the pandemic and are more vulnerable now. That means strengthening social security protections, increasing child benefit and making universal credit more flexible. Once again, my party has brought forward practical and compassionate solutions.

On universal credit, we have proposed introducing an immediate up-front payment, not a hardship loan; extending the backdating of benefits for those who might not have realised they were eligible and relaxing the criteria under which backdating is allowable; providing a new one-off hardship payment for self-employed people who are impacted; removing the nine-month qualification period for support with mortgage interest and providing a one-off grant for mortgage holders making new claims; removing the capital tariff reduction to universal credit when claimants have £16,000 in savings; removing the shared accommodation rate from the local housing allowance for both universal credit and housing benefit; stopping the bedroom tax; and uprating employment and support allowance and the personal independence payment.

Those are practical measures that are needed to protect the most vulnerable through this crisis period. I am often reminded of the phrase I have used in this Chamber before: society is only as strong as its weakest link. How we protect these people will be the truest test of how we all respond to this crisis, and if we truly meet the challenge of this time together.

It is right and proper that Government step in with solutions and supports. Government must rise to the challenge, because our communities are already rising to the challenge before them. Given the enormity of the challenge ahead, it would be easy and understandable for people to feel overwhelmed and frightened to function, yet all that we hear—and all of our experience tells us—is that their reaction has been the exact opposite.

Since the crisis began, people have risen to all the unknowns that have confronted them. Day in, day out, they continue to do it, in the full knowledge that the worst is yet to come. It is their spirit and example that strengthens our faith that we will get through this together. It is that partnership across every single aspect and element of society that will see us through this crisis. It is a crisis that has suddenly reminded us of just how fragile our world is, but it also reminds us of what really matters: our health, our community spirit and our solidarity. If we stay true to those values, we will come through.

I conclude by paying my own tribute to two individuals in this Chamber who have given long service in the defence of public investment, institutions and protecting the vulnerable. I know that today is perhaps the final occasion when the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor will lead their party into debate in this House. This is a very appropriate debate to mark that end. I know that for both of them, community activism has always taken prominence ahead of parliamentary routine, but I also know that the constituencies they serve in this House have benefited greatly from the care, diligence and representation they have both given for decades. I have worked constructively with the Leader of the Opposition since the election. We have met on numerous occasions and had wide-ranging discussions.

Jeremy Corbyn: And good biscuits.

Ian Blackford: Indeed—sometimes that has been to the frustration of our respective advisers, Jeremy, if I may use that word in this context.

From his beloved allotment to an expansive interest in international affairs, the Leader of the Opposition could never be accused of limiting his interests or his ambitions. He has contributed to debate and diversity in this House and across these islands. If I may say to the right hon. Gentleman, I have enjoyed our engagement. No doubt we will continue to meet in the Tea Room and discuss the merits of allotments and crofting—you may be excluded from those, John—but one thing is for sure, I know that he is not the retiring type. His enthusiasm for issues and activism is in no danger of dimming.

In recent months, I am sure the shadow Chancellor has taken some comfort from the fact that the Conservative Chancellor appears to be embracing a more expansionist state. Perhaps they have passed around the little red book that he gave to George Osborne a few years ago. However, I do have a suggestion for him. As he returns to the Back Benches, I would suggest he now has the time to write a little red book all of his own. He is uniquely qualified in the House to write it, and I suspect, in the current context, people are about to get back into the habit of reading.

The shadow Chancellor has a lot to look forward to in the weeks ahead. Despite the fact that the premier league is postponed, it is only a matter of time before his faithful following of Liverpool football club will pay dividends with a title after a 30-year wait. Not even the virus will be allowed to get in the way of that. I can only hope that my beloved Hibernian will one day scale the heights of the Scottish league and deliver our championship. If the shadow Chancellor thinks 30 years is a long time, try 63. Mind you, having waited 114 years for the

[*Ian Blackford*]

Scottish cup success to be delivered, as it was in 2016, we can wait. I wish both the right hon. Members and their families every best wish as they return to the Back Benches of this House.

2.44 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): We parliamentarians are assembled in this Chamber facing a crisis that none of our predecessors faced, because the crisis that we are dealing with is invisible. I have listened very carefully to the proceedings from the start of the House's sitting this morning, and it is obvious that Members of Parliament are raising a huge number of issues. They are constantly changing, and Ministers are grappling to come up with the answers to them.

I would like to say to the Leader of the Opposition before he departs that, although I missed him, I had not realised that today was his last Front-Bench appearance. He, the Labour Chief Whip and I were all elected 37 years ago—I think only four or five of us from then have survived—and we were actually in the same queue, although they both happened to be ahead of me. Although the right hon. Gentleman and I do not share the same politics, I think we both are united in wanting the very best for our constituents and the country. I have seen a few Leaders of the Opposition over the years, and he has at all times done the very best he can to try to work with the Government and achieve the best endeavours. I wish him well in whatever he does in the future. As far as his football team is concerned, he will continue to support Arsenal and I will continue to support West Ham and Southend. I think his team is doing a little better than mine at the moment, but I wish him well.

Jeremy Corbyn: And good luck to the city of Southend.

Sir David Amess: If there had been an opportunity, I would have mentioned that tomorrow, but I have decided that, in these unique times, it is best that I not mention that Southend should become a city. However, when we overcome this crisis, I will never forget that the Leader of the Opposition said to the Prime Minister that he very much supported the idea that Southend should become a city, and I am very grateful for what he said.

As far as this crisis is concerned, this is the first opportunity that I have had to comment on it. It occurs to me that we Members of Parliament are struggling to decide what our role should be. There is only one Member of Parliament in each constituency, we have a relatively small number of staff, and every Member is inundated with questions from constituents asking all manner of things. It occurred to me, following what the Leader of the House said this morning, that one of the most useful things that the Government could provide is a dedicated hotline. I know that we have four dedicated hotlines already, but if there was some way—perhaps through Zoom, which I am now using and finding pretty effective—to roll out dedicated hotlines to all Members of Parliament, particularly when all of us have constituents and their families stranded abroad, which is even more frightening, that would be very useful indeed.

I do not want any my parliamentary colleagues to take offence at this, but how are the Government dealing with this crisis? The jury is out: we do not know how

well they are dealing with it at the moment. The overwhelming majority of my emails are from people who are quite satisfied with the leadership that our country is getting at the moment and are full of praise. That may change, but that seems to be the case at the moment; however, one thing has occurred to me. Not all parliamentarians are blessed with great oratorical skills because the way that we deal with matters in this House has changed dramatically. I do not offer my voice—it would be a big turn-off. The Dimbleby family had wonderful broadcasting voices, which reassured the general public. I think the message is getting through better—as I drove here this morning, I saw that people seem to be observing the distancing advice in the queues outside supermarkets and taking the advice about social gathering more seriously. However, if we intend to do a few public service broadcasts, I cannot think of anyone better to ask to do that than Sir David Attenborough or Dame Judi Dench, who are well respected and probably listened to in a way that does not apply to all politicians by young, old and middle-aged. I have not been in touch with them, but I assume that they would be only too delighted to help. I throw that in for what it is worth.

Essex Members of Parliament have by and large already returned to Essex. My constituency office is being set up as a centre now that we are leaving Westminster. Yesterday, we successfully video-conferenced our chief constable and the lady in charge of the fire service. In the context of the motion we are debating, all sorts of financial matters were mentioned then. At 3.30 this afternoon, I will take part in a video conference with all Essex Members of Parliament to talk to our health managers throughout Essex, specifically dealing with several points that the Leader of the Opposition mentioned, such as personal protective equipment. We are working together pretty well.

Before I comment briefly on the financial measures, like all Members of Parliament, I want to praise the way in which local residents are coming together. Southend council has set up a coronavirus action group, working with Southend Association of Voluntary Services, local charities and local Facebook groups, pairing volunteers with those who most need help in a safe and well organised way. Last night, I had a message from Southend scouts. Five hundred adult scouts in Southend have volunteered to assist with food deliveries. That is absolutely wonderful. They have buildings that can be used as delivery hubs and they will help pack and deliver food parcels.

This is not a party political point, and I will talk only about my party. Political parties employ staff to do politicking. There is no politicking happening at the moment. I hope that my party will give a lead. I have written to the chairman of the Conservative party to suggest that the people we employ throughout the country could do some sort of volunteering work. That would give a useful lead because there should be no party politicking at a time of national emergency.

HARP has set up an emergency taskforce along with the council and public health organisations to take rough sleepers off the streets and safeguard them and the wider public from the spread of coronavirus. On people's health and mental wellbeing, the remarkable David Stanley of the Music Man Project has risen to the challenge of teaching during the lockdown and is

personally calling every one of his students who has got learning disabilities and engaging with them through a video conference session. Another organisation that helps people with mental health problems is Growing Together, which, through its wonderful leadership, is bringing positive change to people who experience mental health problems and is messaging individuals to support them.

Earls Hall Baptist Church has said, “You can have our building. Do what you want with it.” Nazareth House, which I mentioned at Prime Minister’s Question Time, has been evacuated and offered to house doctors. Grosvenor House Hotel has offered its building. This morning, we phoned the Royal British Legion. Members who are under 70 are running errands for those unable to shop or collect prescriptions.

However, in the context of the crux of the Opposition motion, there are undoubtedly problems for charities. The British Legion has had to cancel fundraising activities, particularly for the 75th anniversary, and is worried about its finances. Age Concern Southend has seen the closure of shops and suspension of services, and is very worried about the situation as well.

The shadow Chancellor might have an answer to this, if he replies to the debate, but in simple economic terms we are all saying that we have to get financial help to the self-employed and to every facet of society. I am very much in favour of that, but if we keep giving more and more money, will the country go bust, meaning it will be very difficult to run a successful economy afterwards? Or will we all, throughout the world, have to reset the value of our currencies? Presumably, somewhere in the Treasury someone is working on this deep, deep problem.

On the subject of the financial measures that the Opposition are worried about, I have four emails to touch on quickly. A lady has emailed me today saying that she is a self-employed sole trader. She is a seamstress and works regularly altering people’s clothes, especially for weddings and proms. Her husband is a key worker as a bus driver. He is okay—he can get money—but what is she going to do? Another person says that her husband is self-employed as a foot health practitioner. Of course, elderly people want podiatry to continue, but it cannot at the moment. She does not have any income, so what can we do to help? Another person has said that her partner works as a cook in a local private nursery. She suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and is concerned about her vulnerability to covid-19. What are she and her family going to do?

On a slightly different subject, the fourth email is from someone saying that she is diabetic and has her 74-year-old mother staying with her. They are following the Government’s advice on staying indoors, and they have tried all day to book a delivery slot. She has a three-year-old who needs feeding and everywhere is booked up, and those offering priority slots for vulnerable people are uncontactable. She says to me, quite rightly:

“How are we supposed to stay indoors with no food and no way of getting any!”

There are all types of lists. What about wedding planners? I have one daughter who was married last year, and another who is going to get married this year. People are dealing with the emotional stress of that, but the people who run these businesses and are self-employed are asking what they are going to do.

I could burden the Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), and the Chancellor of the Exchequer with a never-ending list of questions on which we need answers. Members of Parliament from all parties very much want the Government to get through this crisis and to succeed, and I think they are genuinely not being too critical of what is happening at the moment.

I was in business before I became an MP, and we as Members of Parliament do not need to worry about where our salaries will come from. We are paid from the public purse, and there are many other people in that situation. The risk of running a business is a huge one in itself, and when someone is self-employed and might not have put the money aside for their pension or all those other things, it is even more challenging. My hon. Friend the Minister was wonderful in what he did to help on caravans and motorhomes, which is only a drop in the ocean compared with what we are dealing with now, and I know that he and his team must be working on this problem. I share the frustration of Opposition Members, who obviously wanted to be in this place to question Ministers when the package is announced, and we obviously will not be here to do so. I do not know whether there can be some videoconferencing, but there will be many questions that Ministers and their advisers have not thought about. I say again that we as Members of Parliament, with our small teams, are expected to come up with the answers. People are very worried and very frightened at the moment, and it would be so helpful if we could somehow have an increased availability of hotlines to deal with all these issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we, of all nations, know more than most that by working together and supporting each other we will get through this national crisis.

2.59 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): May I start by adding to the tributes to the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor for the roles that they have played? As shadow Housing Minister, I have benefited greatly from their prioritising housing as an issue much more than perhaps we did before, and that has been right and a good thing to do.

I start by thanking the civil servants and everybody who is working on the Government’s response to coronavirus. It goes without saying that everybody is working incredibly hard and it is right that they should be acknowledged and appreciated.

I want to take just a few minutes to talk about housing, which I have already done this week, but I want to talk about it again because there is a particular problem with people who are renting, which has yet to be resolved by the Government. There is misinformation about what has changed and what has not changed in terms of the emergency legislation and what support renters can expect to get over the coming weeks and months. The Prime Minister said several times today that he wanted us all to put our arms around everybody in the country at this time and make sure that they are supported, but renters are not being supported at this time, and it is really important that the Government intervene. The Prime Minister promised last week that nobody would be evicted during this crisis, but that promise has not been upheld and it needs to be.

[Sarah Jones]

There are 20 million renters in England, 6 million have no savings whatever, and in 1.5 million households the renter is someone over the age of 65. Those are potentially vulnerable people. Any one of those people, at any point over the coming weeks and months, could find an eviction notice drop on their doormat. The Government have done nothing to stop landlords sending eviction notices to people who are renting their properties.

What the emergency legislation does, to be clear, is say that someone who is being evicted cannot be taken to court for three months rather than two if they have not left the property. So we are shifting to 12 weeks rather than eight, which means that someone sent an eviction notice might get evicted in June rather than May, if things go to court. The point is that most people leave when they get an eviction notice; they do not wait for things to get to the point where they go to court. When someone is given a notice of eviction, they have to leave the property, but people are misunderstanding the implications of what the Government are introducing. People will still at this point be getting eviction notices dropping on their doormat, so we could have families and vulnerable people, who have been told by the Government that they must stay indoors, receiving eviction notices telling them they must leave. That must be wrong, and something has to be done about that.

The Leader of the Opposition mentioned what we think needs to be done. We need a ban on evictions for six months and maybe more. Three months is not enough. We cannot have people going to court in June and being evicted, because we will still be in the middle of the crisis at that point. We need to see a suspension of rents if people cannot pay them and a manageable repayment system set up, and we need a substantial increase in support for rent costs through the social security system. We need the courts to be instructed to suspend all possession orders. In Prime Minister's questions and in the debate since, Members have raised cases of people being evicted right now, and that cannot be right. Shelter can help with the changes that need to be made. We need clear Government guidance to people that if they are served an eviction notice, they must not leave their home. They must stay where they are there, because we do not want them to leave. If people are getting eviction notices, the Government must make it clear that they should not leave. We do not want that to happen to people.

I want to raise two other housing issues, if I may. One is the post-Grenfell situation. Tens of thousands of people in blocks covered with Grenfell-style cladding are going through the process of getting that cladding removed. They need some urgent guidance from the Government about whether the removal of that cladding will remain an essential construction task. They are in buildings that could go up in flames or be dangerous. Many of them are paying for waking watch, which is costing them hundreds of pounds a month each. They are funding waking watch to make sure that, if there is a fire, people can get out quickly enough.

These people have also seen huge rises in their insurance costs, which they are really struggling to pay. I will give just one example. For Islington Gates, a block with 141 households, the insurance for the block has gone up from £36,000 to £191,000. The residents have been told

that they have to pay £10,000 each by 1 April, or there will not be any insurance on the building any more and they will all have to leave. Those are the real situations such people are finding themselves in, and we need some clarity from the Government about whether the cladding works will proceed.

At New Capital Quay in Greenwich—one of the first blocks to be identified as being covered with the same cladding as in the Grenfell Tower fire—the residents were contacted just yesterday and told that all the cladding removal will be halted. They have to carry on paying for waking watch, and they have to carry on with the uncertainty of living in a very dangerous building, so we need some clarity about that, please.

The other group of people I want to mention are those in temporary accommodation. We know that 125,000 children live in temporary accommodation, and we are facing several problems here. The first is that they can be evicted at any point in time, which is a great worry. In the past 24 hours, Travelodge has closed many hotels, evicting the families who were using them as temporary accommodation. This is a live and very real problem for families right now, and the Government need to intervene there.

There is also the problem of people in bed-and-breakfast and hostel accommodation and the risk of spreading coronavirus there. The Mayor of London has found some hotels that he can use to put rough sleepers in so that they have somewhere they can go. As I understand it, the Government have also identified hotels where people can go if they are displaying symptoms or need somewhere to be if they are on the streets. However, we need some clarity about what that programme is and what is being done there.

I will leave my remarks there, because I know other people want to speak. I would just say that, at this time of great crisis, we are all retreating to our homes to be safe. If we find ourselves in a situation where people cannot stay in their homes, which we will do unless the Government act, that will be a great injustice for those people.

3.8 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I would like to concentrate on a few of the enormous number of issues that this crisis is throwing up, and which our constituents are contacting us about and expecting us to have the answers to. I appreciate the difficulties for the Government, but here are just a few of the most pressing issues.

The first issue is children's hospices. In the best of times, children's hospices provide invaluable comfort and support to some of the most vulnerable children and families in our society, but these are not the best of times. Despite the range of measures announced by the Government to support the NHS, businesses and individuals, many children's hospices rely on charitable donations and already receive very little Government funding.

The urgency of the situation is illustrated by Shooting Star Children's Hospices, which cares for babies, children and young people with life-limiting conditions and their families throughout all 11 districts of Surrey and across 15 boroughs of London. Just 10% of its funding is from the NHS, with the rest through charitable donation. On

Monday, Shooting Star had to close Shooting Star House in Hampton, owing to the immediate financial implications of coronavirus. That could get worse. If Government support does not come urgently, the charity might be faced with closing its doors permanently in all its hospices.

Many children's hospices across the country will be in the same situation, but without hospice services, families will be forced to rely on the NHS or council social care at a time when both are under extreme pressure. The need does not disappear. My question to the Minister and the Government is, will they provide urgent help? I ask that not only on an emotional and a moral basis, but on a financial basis.

If anybody compares the cost of a bed in a children's ward in an acute hospital with the cost of a bed in a children's hospice, far more taxpayers' money goes into the hospital, and the care cannot be as great, because the hospices are the specialists in that regard. For relatively little amounts of public money, the Government can save more money and provide much better care to those children and those families.

Secondly, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) has already raised the issue of evictions, but the question needs to be clarified. Section 21 no-fault evictions are the biggest single cause of homelessness in this country. Last week, I called on the Prime Minister to ask the courts to stop all section 21 evictions, to take pressure off hard-pressed councils and worried families. The Prime Minister reassured me and this House that legislation would be brought in. The Housing Secretary assured me, face to face, directly after PMQs, that there would be no evictions for three months. Contrary to that, however, the Government proposals instead appear simply to extend the notice period for section 21 notices by four weeks.

What then happens to all those tenants who already have an expired section 21, or who already have an unexpired possession order, let alone those people with expired possession orders who are waiting for the bailiffs to call at any moment? How can they stay at home to save lives if they are going to be evicted? We have even heard unbelievable reports of landlords threatening to evict health workers, because of their risk of exposure to coronavirus. That is completely unacceptable. Will the Government urgently clarify their position, and legislate so that no one is kicked out of their home in the heart of a global pandemic?

A further, smaller but nevertheless important, issue to those going through the process is for those who will be completing on the sale of their homes over the coming week. Miss O from Morden emailed me a number of times over recent days, as she is due to complete her sale on Friday. She has been told by her solicitor:

"If you are unable to complete on time, whatever the reason, including coronavirus, you will be in breach of contract".

She has been told that if she cannot complete on Friday, she will be fined or liable to costs of £33,000. Miss O is entirely dependent on the banks and building societies working, and on the home removal company still being able to move her goods out of her home, for her chain of four sales actually to go ahead. She is a woman who has worked hard to own her home, and she has been through a difficult process of selling her home. What advice can we give her?

Thirdly, I would like to discuss charities. I am sure all colleagues from across the House share my admiration and gratitude for the selfless work that is done by the voluntary and charitable sector at this extraordinarily challenging time. Charities in my constituency are calling for urgent support. Their questions are clear: how will the job retention scheme affect staff who are furloughed—I did not know what that word meant until today—but want to remain working as volunteers to keep these essential services going? The current guidance for employees states that to qualify for the scheme, they should not undertake work for their employer while furloughed. Will charities receive emergency grants to survive at the time when they are needed most? Donations and fundraising have plummeted. Will small business rate relief be extended to smaller community organisations, too? The Prime Minister indicated this morning that he would look at a package of measures for community organisations, but organisations such as the Commonsides Community Development Trust in my constituency simply do not have the time to wait. Will these measures come in, and what will they entail?

Finally, I want to mention gas and electricity prepayment meters. Have the Government considered calling on companies to override gas and electricity key meters so that no one needs to leave their house to recharge a key and, importantly, no voluntary organisation needs to spend its time working out how they can do that? Current policies across the industry differ greatly. SSE can send pre-loaded credit to people's homes, whereas E.ON's emergency credit scheme requires customers to visit their local top-up stores three times in advance to get their key activated. Similarly, EDF is helping vulnerable customers by offering them pre-loaded keys, to a total value of about £3 million, and even offering to collect deliveries from chemists and shops. British Gas, meanwhile, is offering next to nothing, other than that customers can phone the company if they get into difficulties. We know that some of our most vulnerable constituents have prepayment meters. They are precisely the people who we do not want to have to go out to charge their keys, even if they are in a financial position to do so.

I have outlined four urgent measures on hospices, evictions, charities and utilities that could make a key difference to so many families at this time. I appreciate that the situation is coming at the Government from all sides, but we need answers to these very basic questions.

As many have said, although we are in a terrible time, we are seeing the greatest sacrifice and kindness from so many of our constituents. Merton Voluntary Service Council has set up a scheme to help people and get volunteers. Only yesterday, Mrs B from Mitcham rang me to say that she could not get out to shop because she was caring for her disabled husband. Within an hour, the voluntary service council had the shopping on her doorstep. Today, my great friends Jenny and Mark Allison, together with a team of volunteers, have run a food bank from Commonsides trust, which they have trialled to make sure that it poses no medical threat to the volunteers or to the families who need its help. Without these people, we will not get by. They are silent, and they do not look for glory, but I just want to say thank you to each and every one of them.

3.19 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): First, I send my deepest condolences to all who have lost loved ones in this global pandemic, and to all who are worried about loved ones. I thank the Clerks, the cleaners, the police and all the essential staff who are here keeping Parliament running, but I echo the sentiments of the Members from across the House who have said that we really must investigate how we can work remotely in this time of crisis. I am not trying to make any cheap political points, because this is not the time to do that, but it is the right time to talk about politics, because we are closing Parliament for Easter. Politics is about resources. It is about spending money. It is about what and whom we value and what our values are.

Those values have never been more vital than in the midst of a crisis such as this. It should not have taken a crisis to prove that the country's safety net keeps us all safe, but it has. It should not have taken a pandemic for cleaners, delivery workers, waste disposal workers, transport workers, care workers and domestic violence workers—to name but a few—to be recognised as key workers, but it has.

It is at moments such as this that we are forced to reflect on what sort of country we are creating, what sort of country we want to be and where our priorities lie. We have the second biggest economy in Europe, but one of the lowest rates of sick pay. The Government have suspended mortgage payments, but not rents; they have given £350 billion in grants and loans to businesses, but little for the 5 million self-employed or the 1 million on zero-hours contracts and in the gig economy. We hear that that might happen on Thursday, but we will not be here to question the Government.

As for the millionaires and billionaires who are dismissing staff or telling them to go and work in Tesco—Wetherspoons and Branson—I will not even waste my breath on them, because the first priority must be to protect the most vulnerable. Now more than ever, in the truest sense of the word, we are all in this together, and nobody should be left out in the cold.

Let us imagine key workers cleaning away the deadly virus or care workers looking after the elderly. They would all be judged as unskilled under a points classification system. The postal workers who cancelled the strike action to deliver prescriptions, the supermarket workers and all those key workers looking after the most vulnerable—they all answered the call, and while there will be no box on a form that says, “I served my country”, no one should ever doubt again that they did. Every day they go out and work on the frontline, but if they fall ill, they might get £94.50 in sick pay.

It goes without saying—it has been said many times—that sick pay needs to be increased if we are to value our key workers. They say that, in times of crisis, when current policies are not working, those in power need to use whatever ideas are lying around. It is lucky that the Labour party, under my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), put together such a comprehensive set of ideas and recorded them in two Labour manifestos. We are now treating people the way we should have been treating people all along. It should be the norm.

Sometimes, the discussions in Parliament sound sensible, but they do not reflect what is happening in constituencies such as mine in Brent. I have lots of homes in multiple

occupation in Brent—loads of people with no recourse to public funds. They stay in one house, often a house with strangers, but that never normally matters, because they often work shifts, so they do not see each other. Being forced into lockdown is causing multiple problems in Brent, and I wonder whether that has contributed to my constituency's having such a high infection rate and such a high death rate. I thank Brent Council for considering all that and for the work it is doing. I thank the businesses that are offering accommodation and extra help to the most vulnerable in my constituency.

To all the domestic abuse survivors, I would like to say, “Please do not suffer in silence.” We know that domestic abuse increases during the holiday season, and this lockdown is much worse. I worry about the rise in domestic and child abuse. If the Government's “whatever it takes” is to mean anything, there will be a safe place for people to go. To all those who are suffering, I say, “Please make that call.”

Now I would like to talk about the superheroes—the doctors and nurses. They might not take home £2,500 a month, but they risk their lives every day. The nurses now being asked to work did not have nursing bursaries when they started, but now they have been called in early—and they have come willingly. The Government now need to offer them a £15,000 grant to compensate, now that nursing bursaries have been reinstated. At the end of the day, doctors and nurses are becoming ill. Some, sadly, are dying. One nurse who we read about this week committed suicide because of the number of people who died on her ward. We need to ensure that there are tests, tests, tests, and that there is personal protective equipment for the doctors and nurses. There is no excuse. There is no value in going on TV and praising nurses and doctors, calling them “angels”, and then neglecting them when they are on the frontline.

It needs to be said that austerity has made the situation much worse than it needed to be. If this is not a time to prioritise key workers and increase pay, when is? We in this House can say thank you—we have all said that, and will continue to—but that will not put food on the table. It will not put clothes on people's backs or pay for a much-needed holiday when we get through this—and we will get through this. But the Government can make the difference, and this is what it takes: to improve the wages and terms and conditions of our key workers.

I want to thank all the people who are helping to build and rebuild communities and helping the most vulnerable, as well as everyone who is staying at home to keep others safe. I say to all who are panic-buying that I understand the need to feel in control, especially at a time when there is so much conflicting information. But most will have what they need now, for several months probably, and our key workers do not. Please leave some toilet paper for others. At moments such as this, each individual must take responsibility for what they do. They must be reminded that their actions impact on not only themselves but others. Everyone must do what they can. Remember that, although we cannot control the situation around us, we can control our actions.

I say to the Government that, as we go forward into this crisis, for the sake of the nurses, doctors and all our key workers, please get your priorities right. So far 422 people have died. Hospitals are struggling to keep on top of the virus. Each number represents a loved

one—a mother, father, son, daughter, uncle, auntie or friend. Each number represents a hole in people's lives: a truncated grievance process and a broken heart that will never fully heal.

I conclude with this. It will take a long time for us to come to terms with this deadly virus and pandemic and understand what we have faced and are going through, but we must emerge from this better. We must pause to think that many of these workers are migrants. In a year's time, people who want to come and do key jobs in our country's vital sector are going to be told that they have not gained enough points. It is a shame that people do not get any points for mere humanity.

I say to the Government: as you work to protect the economy, remember who the economy is ultimately for. Remember who creates the wealth and who keeps us safe. Remember the people who put their lives on the line. Remember who tended the sick and the appeals for compassion, consideration, solidarity and responsibility. Those values do not work just in a pandemic: they are the cornerstone of a decent society and a vibrant nation.

3.28 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who has just made a most moving and thoughtful contribution. I was particularly taken by what she said about our need to give thought after this to the country that we wish to be. I absolutely agree that in all that we do we must emerge from this better.

Significant policy changes when it comes to the support on offer for the economy have already been announced in the House over the past couple of days. On Monday there was the Coronavirus Bill, and we took further important steps yesterday—we did a rain dance around the much fabled magic money tree, to make sure that the supply was there to give effect to the policy changes. It was important to make sure that we did that to protect our constituents.

My party has been resolute in its support for that package of measures. It is clear that the response continues to evolve. We have already heard from Government Front-Bench Members about the changes being put in place to make it easier for distillers, for example, to produce quantities of hand sanitiser. In my constituency, a brewer and distiller, BrewDog—other brewers and distillers are available, but that one comes to mind—has already been supplying hand sanitiser that it has been making to the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. That is exactly the sort of repurposing and innovation that we need. The Government must always be there to facilitate and enable that, and I am pleased that that has happened.

Like those of all hon. Members, my constituents are increasingly getting in touch in response to the crisis with questions of detail that are underpinned by deep questions of substance. We might think that the Government have been clear about who should be at home and who should be working. Nevertheless, I am hearing worrying stories. My inbox is becoming increasingly active with stories of employers who, through a lack of knowledge or awareness, or because they simply think that the rules do not apply to them, are trying to force people out to work under pain of disciplinary action, redundancy, termination of contracts or not being paid.

My office has also found stories of employers who seem reluctant to pass on the considerable amount of support that has already been offered to companies and to PAYE employees. The Government have taken the right actions, but they need to reinforce the right expectations of where that resource is supposed to go. If that resource does not hit the pockets of working people, it will certainly not achieve all that we need it to achieve to get through the crisis.

While we are rightly about to fire-hose cash at businesses and PAYE employees, I make no apology for returning to the issue of the self-employed and those on zero-hours contracts, who find themselves outwith furlough schemes, who are now underemployed, and who might expect to see reductions to their take-home pay in consequence. We need to make sure that we are also supporting them. Although I am reassured that the Government are giving considerable thought to how they support the self-employed, I have picked up worrying signs that they might be overthinking it by trying to follow every glitch and contour in a determination not to see a single penny go astray. The bigger picture point is perhaps being missed in paying attention to the wrong sort of details.

In summing up the debate on the Contingencies Fund Bill yesterday, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said that he did not share my enthusiasm for a universal basic income, which is a shame. I respect his view, but nobody has yet devised a perfect welfare system that is entirely free of bureaucracy or of some perverse incentives, or that manages to make sure that people never lose from their earnings more than they would lose from the support that was there when they were not earning. That has led to many people finding themselves trapped in a poverty that is not of their choosing and that they would desperately like to escape from. A universal basic income would resolve many of those problems if we were prepared to consider it as part of our package of support for the self-employed and others.

It is also clear that businesses are still in need of more and different types of support. We have heard about the difficulties—indeed, I was speaking to an employers' federation this morning about the need for clarity on insurance, in order to trigger payments from insurance companies. It is not good enough just to say that the words we have heard from Ministers ought to be sufficient; they need to be sufficient. I encourage the Government to continue to engage with not only the insurers but the various industry sectors, to ensure that clarity is absolute and that payments can be triggered in the light of the response we are expecting.

Other measures are required. We need to raise the statutory sick pay level to at least the EU average. We need to get rid of the bedroom tax. We also need to scrap the rape clause. Let us not forget the impact that advising people to stay at home can have on households where there are, sadly, abusive relationships and how much worse it must be at this time of dread for so many people to find that the financial support that would ordinarily be on offer simply is not because of the two-child limit.

Ministers have rightly praised NHS workers who are on the frontline of the response to this crisis, but there is one subset of NHS workers who might be entitled to find those words just a little hollow: those who have

[Richard Thomson]

come here to work from elsewhere, whether that be the EU or countries outwith it, who are expected to pay the NHS health surcharge. I was contacted this morning by the husband of a nurse who works at the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. She came to the United Kingdom in 2017 from the USA. She is here perfectly legally, with a visa. But in order to have the right to access the services of the NHS that she and others work so hard to support on a daily basis, she has to pay a fee of £400 a year, which the Chancellor announced in his Budget will soon rise to £624 a year. At this time of national crisis when we expect so much of workers in the NHS in particular, is it not sending the wrong message entirely that we are charging people to access services that they may need more urgently as a result of the help they are trying to give others? I urge the Government to consider that point carefully.

We must consider how we prepare ourselves for the period after this. Earlier today, the Prime Minister said that he believed the country will “emerge better and stronger” from this crisis. I very much hope that he is correct, but the one thing that is certain is that we cannot allow a return to business as usual. We have to think about how we lay the foundations of recovery—economic, yes, but it is not just about the economy. It is about how we build on the efforts we are seeing in our society to rebuild social infrastructure and ensure that it is fit for purpose for the country that we will be living in afterwards.

We need to be placing much greater value on the ethos of public service, and we also need to value more the public services that we have. As I said in relation to the NHS surcharge that is expected of those from outside the country, we need to value far more the contribution of those who have paid us the compliment of choosing to come and live their lives among us. I do not wish to make this about Brexit, but it is inescapable that since the UK voted to leave the European Union, a meanness and a nastiness has crept into some of the discourse. I do not blame Brexit for that—I think that it was always there in many respects, but it seems to have been emboldened. We need to do far more to value the contribution of those who make their lives here. As we expect discipline, patience and self-sacrifice, we need to expect similar levels of those attributes from those who have most, and not just, as ever, those who have least.

Whatever challenges we face today, we know that there will be a tomorrow and that we must make it better. We owe it to all those we represent to make sure that the tomorrow we are about to bequeath to our constituents is, through our actions and our foresight today, better than the country that far too many of us were prepared to tolerate the unfairnesses and injustices of.

3.39 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): As this will be one of the last debates in Parliament before recess, it is important to put on record my thanks to the leader of my party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), on his last day as leader in Parliament. It is a shame that the parliamentary authorities have not managed to get their act together to organise an electronic, online continuation of proceedings. During a recess in normal times, in a

crisis, we would be recalled, and this is a crisis, so we should be able to continue our work. For Ministers to ask for our work to continue through correspondence is not satisfactory. However, I actually think it is not the Ministers who need to step up; it is the parliamentary authorities, the Speaker’s Office and IT. If they are having problems, I am sure we can find people who can fix them. It is important to press that, and colleagues who dismiss it need to have a look at themselves.

I, to some extent, am lucky. I got the virus and was ill for five or six days with a horrible, unpleasant fever and flu-like aches and pains, and then it disappeared. That is what will happen to most people, but in that time I did not have to worry about whether I would be on sick pay, were I to spend another week and a half, as I did, in self-isolation, to ensure that the virus had fully gone through my system. The doctor’s advice was followed. I knew that I would be paid full wages. The problem is that during that period many people will be paid not full wages but statutory sick pay, which for large numbers of them means absolute ruin. It means ruin because they will not be able to afford to pay their rent or mortgages properly, or to eat or live properly. They may have to borrow from other people, or potentially banks, and when they get out of the crisis, if they are able to work again, they will struggle for many months, and maybe many years because for many there will be a long, scarring effect on their wellbeing.

We need to do something to support people on sick pay; that is clear. The Health Secretary said that he would struggle to live on that level of pay. I note that Australia has already raised by three times the amount of statutory sick pay offered during this period. It is time that we do something similar—and quickly. We should have always had a sick pay system based on contribution and therefore a percentage of earnings, but now is the time to do that.

I want to touch on a problem that many workers have with 80% of pay versus sick pay. For many, it will be advantageous to take the 80% pay the Government are potentially offering and be furloughed for this period. However, some employers are not offering that. Some constituents have contacted me to say that airlines, for example, are just offering less work—sometimes 10% or 20% of what that employee would normally get—so that employee, on a retention contract, a zero-hours contract, a minimum hours contract or whatever anyone wishes to call it, is receiving far less in wages than they normally would, and the Government scheme is not an option for them. That needs to be resolved. It could be done quite easily by looking at what a worker’s pay was last month—if they are on the PAYE system, that is already known by the Government—and allowing companies to put them on the Government scheme, with a variation if the company needs workers to go in. At the moment, the bar on any work being done by those on the 80% scheme means that many companies are avoiding putting workers into that scheme. That needs to change.

We also know that many people will struggle to pay rent in this period. I mentioned this earlier, but there is a real problem with some of the mortgage lenders. I should declare an interest: I have a buy-to-rent house that I rent out. One of the two people I rent out to works in the theatre and the other produces circus equipment, so as hon. Members can imagine, their

work has ended. I immediately rang my mortgage provider and asked what the arrangements were for suspending mortgage payments on the buy-to-rent house, so that I could pass it on directly to the tenants. I think every landlord should be doing that if tenants are not able to pay. The mortgage company said that because my wage is not directly affected by this, it expects the mortgage to continue to be paid. It said it could offer me a three-month holiday, but after that, I would be expected to make up every single penny that I had not paid in that three-month period.

I can probably do that, and I have made sure to give my tenants reduced rent this month, while they still have some ability to pay. My tenants will be able to stay there as long as they need, but many landlords are not in the same position as me. They need to be able to get a proper holiday—to push the mortgage back, suspend everything, and put it in stasis. That way, their mortgage might end six months later than planned, but that is the relief that is needed, not being told that interest will accrue on the mortgage and it will have to be paid back. Many landlords will simply pass those costs on to renters, forcing them, in effect, to self-evict.

We know that eviction prevention measures do not necessarily prevent evictions—the Rachmans of this world will find other ways to squeeze tenants out—but during this period, we also need to stay aware of the condition of rented property. Many people live in damp, squalid, poor conditions. They survive because they do not spend much time in their house; they sleep in the damp bedroom, but are able to get out in the fresh air. Now, if they demand improvements from landlords and the landlords are not able to make the improvements, they will have to live in squalid accommodation for months on end; that will harm their health and might even exacerbate the current health crisis. Also, if they make demands, there is a danger of revenge evictions after the crisis is over. The whole issue of housing needs to be reviewed urgently; otherwise, we will be building up another crisis for ourselves.

I want to talk about universal credit and disability benefit appeals. A number of my constituents have had their disability benefit reviewed and downgraded. In normal times, my office or one of the disability offices in the constituency would help them to put in an appeal. When we put in an appeal, we know that there is a very high chance of success and of the award being backdated. We have been told that appeals are now being suspended for the period of this crisis. If no appeals can be dealt with, people will be waiting a long time and it may be harder to backdate awards—it is almost impossible to backdate further than the start of the appeal process. In my view, the Government should continue to pay the higher rate to anyone who was recently downgraded and who has put in a paper appeal until that appeal is processed, so that no one is disadvantaged. If they do not do that, many people who deserve the money will never be able to get it, and they may get into a spiral of debt trying to survive in the meantime. That is not good enough.

We have heard a lot about self-employed people, and I would like to add my thoughts on the subject. Toni, who lives in Saltdean, contacted me. He is a construction industry scheme self-employed builder. He says he has been told by the NHS that he is high-risk vulnerable. He is on some medication and has an underlying condition,

but he is fit and healthy in every other part of his life. Because he is self-employed, it now looks as if he will get statutory sick pay, which will not even cover his outgoings. He has a mortgage that will offer some support, but not complete support, and he says

“for lots of the lads at the sites, including mine, it is now looking like our families could starve if we don’t get money.”

Please do not let his family starve. Please can we get something that is fair?

In my view, universal basic income would have done that. It would have been simpler, it would have been easier, and it would have been quicker. The Government have the details of most people’s bank accounts linked to their national insurance number, through either the benefits system, PAYE, the self-assessment tax system, or the pensions system. A universal basic income could be paid to everyone immediately, and then clawed back through a proper progressive taxation system at the end of the year. That would have allayed all the Government’s fears about people who are still earning. At the end of the year, when self-assessment or general taxation is due, that money could be clawed back, and it would have been fair. Instead, the Government have introduced this complex system of mortgage relief, rent relief, 80% here, blah blah blah, and it is extremely confusing and scary for self-employed people. I look forward to the chance to consider that on Thursday, but I wish the Government had acted more quickly and decisively on something like a universal basic income.

3.52 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). He made his points well and with force and clarity, and I agreed with much of what he said.

I understand that this afternoon is a testimonial for the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, in terms of their performance at the Dispatch Box. I count them both as good friends, and I wish them well for the future. They have always led by example in speaking truth to power. That is something I have always tried to emulate, and they set a good example for other hon. Members. We must speak truth to power, particularly given the current situation.

In my view, the past two weeks have brought out the best in people, but sadly, and as we have read and seen on the television, all too often they have also brought out the worst. We have seen behaviour in supermarkets that I found extraordinary, and we have had to put pressure on supermarkets to ensure that they do not cut orders to local foodbanks. I thank supermarkets for addressing that and ensuring that foodbanks get the support they need. I also thank foodbank volunteers right across these islands, as well as workers in our national health service and in local and central Government, as they try to assist people through this process.

I also wish to mention the constituency office staff of every hon. Member of the House. They have been flooded this week—as have we all—by emails, particularly from constituents who are abroad and trying to get home. I am concerned by some information that was provided to me by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who told me that the Foreign Office is not providing support to individuals who have dual nationality.

[Chris Stephens]

That really is nonsense. Glasgow in particular has a thriving Asian community that does great work across the city, and many of those people will have UK as well as Pakistani citizenship. If UK citizens are stuck in Pakistan, we should be doing everything we can to bring them home, and we should not refuse to help them because they happen to have dual nationality. I hope that the Foreign Office will address that urgently.

Let me say for the third time today—I am going to keep mentioning it as often as I can until the message is driven home—that there are far too many businesses out there that are still open but should not be. They are defying clear public health advice. The advice is clear that, by doing what they are doing, they are putting not just public health, but lives at risk. I think we know what is happening here. This is blatant opportunism. They are blatantly trying to make money and make a profit. There is only one way to deal with these people, and that is to issue them with closure orders and heavy fines. They are only operating to make money, so the only way to deal with them is to take money off them.

We cannot have a situation where businesses are threatening staff—including, I am sad to say, those at risk—with their jobs. People with symptoms and those with a health condition that means they are at risk of getting this virus are being ordered into work by too many employers. It really is a disgraceful situation. If the Government do start fining those businesses, I hope they name and shame them publicly in the same way as we do with employers who do not pay the national minimum wage. Once the crisis is over, I think consumers will be entitled to know what businesses defied the public advice given not just by the UK Government but by devolved Administrations.

In the past two weeks we have also seen some—not all, but some—employers opportunistically try to lay off workers and tell them they will no longer have a job. That was completely unnecessary. The best example I can give is the G1 Group, which notified 200 people in Glasgow on Friday that they were being laid off due to a lack of trade. If it were not for the great Unite hospitality branch we have in Glasgow, which organised a sit-in by workers in one of the G1 premises, those workers would not have had the victory of being told that they are being kept on and that the company will apply for the job retention scheme.

I want to say a word about the job retention scheme. If any of the businesses that are still open today—I am sure they will, in due time, be ordered by the Government to close—apply for the job retention scheme, that money should not be backdated to 1 March. I hope the Government take cognisance of those companies that have tried to lay off workers and ensure that it is made clear to companies that apply for job retention scheme money that it is not an excuse to lay off workers once this crisis is over. That would be an abuse of public money, and I will name and shame any company that tries to do that, as I am sure will many other hon. Members.

I hope the Government are taking seriously their responsibilities to their own workforce when it comes to social distancing. I am thinking in particular of workers employed in service centres by the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and

Customs. I am picking up examples where social distancing is not taking place and there is a lack of basic health facilities. The Government have a responsibility and a duty to ensure that those workers are protected—that their health is protected and their lives are protected.

That also goes for those Government contractors—I am thinking of Adecco and Atos—that have ordered at-risk employees into work. I am thinking in particular, because he gave me permission to mention him, of my constituent Andrew Rossetter, who clearly has health conditions that mean he is at risk, being ordered into his workplace. Why is a Government contractor doing that? It is time the Government had a word with those contractors to ensure that they are applying the appropriate guidance and advice, and are doing so to the letter.

I received a letter this afternoon from the Glasgow Institute of Architects, which is rightly concerned about what is happening on construction sites as we speak. Construction workers are being ordered into work. I really cannot see the purpose of that. It is clearly against the advice and guidance the Government have given, and it really needs to be sorted out. Of course, it comes as no surprise that some of the companies trying to order construction workers into work have traditionally operated blacklists. We need an assurance from these companies that they will not put any worker who decides to self-isolate on any blacklist. Blacklists are, of course, illegal, but we will make sure that that does not take place.

This morning, the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, asked about the pressures being put on DWP staff as a result of 500,000 people applying in one day. We have probably all seen the screenshots on social media showing where people are in the queue—I have seen one where someone was 100,011th in the list of those trying to get their claims processed. I am sure that I speak for many Members in saying that we support the staff going through this process. We understand, of course, that the Government will have to redeploy staff to make sure that claims are processed and that people get the money they deserve and are looked after, but we need the Government to keep in touch with us on what the pressures are. If the Government need to hire more people, they should do so. If they need to redeploy staff from other Departments, they need to do so to ensure that everyone is looked after.

On statutory sick pay, I join other colleagues in saying that £94.25 a week is not enough to live on—indeed, I think the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is on record saying that. We need to see the level of statutory sick pay rise, certainly to the European average. I do agree with many—the Select Committee had a chat about this today after our session with the Secretary of State—that we really do need to look at a universal basic income. In a time of crisis such as this, we need to consider and address the need for a universal basic income.

In closing, I just want to say—I am thinking particularly of what the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said last week—that after this crisis is over, there will be political choices to be made. The last thing we need is another decade of austerity. The decade of austerity we have lived through has shown us that the public services are not all ready to deal with situations like this. We need to have a serious conversation about the role and function of public services and to make sure that they are properly financed, maintained, resourced and staffed.

We also need to have a conversation about the status of the worker in the workplace, because, as we have seen in the past two weeks, there are a lot of opportunistic, bullying employers out there. We need to sort out, once and for all, who is self-employed and who is not self-employed. Far too many workers are finding out only now that they are self-employed, and they should not be self-employed—they are directly employed. If someone has to go in for a job interview, I think it is safe to say that they should be considered as being directly employed.

I hope that after this crisis there is no return to austerity and that we invest in our people and our public services. That will be the people's bail-out, and it will require the sort of investment that the banks got in 2008.

4.4 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Before I begin, and since it is the last time they will speak from the Opposition Front Bench as Leader of the Opposition and shadow Chancellor, I would like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I would like to put on record that they are among the most principled people in politics and their leadership has been no exception to that. Before he was Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North was for me someone who always gave a voice to the voiceless and championed the oppressed. Few have done as much as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington to champion the interests of the working class, and to build on the idea of society marked not by greed and fear, but compassion and equality. I thank them for giving me and so many other people hope for a better future. I look forward to many more years campaigning together.

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me, too, to place on record that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is a principled, down to earth, decent individual who is committed to his cause. Like the shadow Chancellor, he has done that not just for a year or two, but for decades. It has been an honour and a privilege to serve as the Leader of the Opposition's permanent private secretary. Does she agree that they are excellent individuals?

Zarah Sultana: Absolutely. I wholeheartedly agree.

Ten years ago, in response to a crisis, the then Prime Minister said that we were all in it together. A decade of public service cuts tells a different story. It tells a story of the working class paying the price for a crisis not of their making. Our services have been run into the ground and our NHS pushed to the brink. That has left us more vulnerable to this pandemic. The chairman of the British Medical Association said earlier this month that, after a decade of underfunding

“Our starting position...has been far worse than many other European nations”.

We see that with the NHS staff confronting this crisis without the resources they need. They do not have the proper protective equipment, ventilators or tests they deserve. Frankly, that is a scandal. Before I go on, I want to put on record my thanks to and admiration for the NHS staff at University Hospitals Coventry and

Warwickshire and across the country. Their bravery, dedication and self-sacrifice at this time is an inspiration. If we are to learn one thing from this crisis, I hope it is that no one will ever again undervalue or underfund them and our NHS again.

This emergency has already taught us something: it has taught us who our key workers are. It is not the bankers or the city traders. It is the nurses, the doctors, the cleaners, the shop assistants, the teachers, the bus drivers, the carers, the postal workers and the delivery drivers. It is the 99%. It is the working class in all our diversity. This crisis shows that society is nothing without the labouring class. But just as the financial crisis showed us, it is the working class who risk being hit hardest by this crisis. Belatedly, the Government are appreciating the scale of the economic challenge, but they are not going far enough, fast enough. They are allowing bosses to force staff to go to work even in non-essential areas. If we are fining individuals for going out when they should not, surely it is right to fine businesses that tell their staff to come into work when it is unnecessary.

The job retentions scheme offers support for businesses, but it gives no guarantees that workers will be able to retain their jobs. It does not cover the 5 million self-employed, from actors to taxi drivers. The Chancellor has promised further measures, but they should never have been excluded in the first place or left with the fear of their incomes disappearing overnight. I urge the Government to extend the scheme to the self-employed before they are pushed into poverty. Poverty is what it would be, because at £94 a week universal credit is simply not enough to live on. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has himself admitted that.

It is the whole system that is broken. We see that at the moment, with reports that online queues for universal credit are 150,000 people long. It is taking days to move forward just a few thousand places. That is what happens when we gut the social security system. It is about time that this broken system was fixed and funded properly. Again, I urge the Government, before more people are driven into totally unnecessary poverty, to end the five-week wait, suspend all sanctions and raise the universal credit rate to a liveable rate. Our social security system must be extended to people currently excluded from it. Before this crisis, “no recourse to public funds” was an injustice. During this pandemic, it is a public health calamity. Migrants must be given access to healthcare, vital public services and financial support. The Government must end “no recourse to public funds”.

The final point I wish to touch on is the position for renters. Last week, we called on the Chancellor to suspend rents and ban evictions. Ministers promised that our concerns would be swiftly met, but we are still waiting. The Government's announcement on evictions was inadequate to start with and has only disappointed on closer inspection. It is not a ban on evictions; it only extends eviction notices to three months. Evictions are going ahead right now, as the charity Shelter has warned. People cannot stay at home if they are being kicked out of their home. So, again, I urge Conservative Members to live up to their promise and ban evictions throughout this crisis. But banning evictions alone is not enough. If rents are not suspended, debts will pile up and renters will be at the mercy of landlords when this outbreak subsides. The Government have “asked” landlords to “show compassion”, but if there is one thing I have

[Zarah Sultana]

learnt after years of renting it is that we cannot rely on the compassion of landlords. So I tell the Government: suspend rents before it is too late.

I will finish on one final point. Yesterday, it was reported that banks are exploiting this crisis, putting up the cost of personal loans, quadrupling interest rates on overdrafts to nearly 40% and failing to pass on Bank of England's interest rate cuts. We bailed them out when they crashed the economy, and we paid the price. We cannot let that happen again. So I urge the Government: this time, let us bail out the people. Let us protect the incomes of the self-employed; raise statutory sick pay for all workers; increase universal credit, end "no recourse to public funds"; suspend rents and ban evictions; and make sure that working people are not hit the hardest ever again.

4.11 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I know that all right hon. and hon. Members will want to pass on their condolences to the family and friends of the 435 people who have died in this coronavirus epidemic. Each of those deaths is a personal tragedy for them and their families, and, sadly, we know that there will be more in the coming days and weeks. I also want to put on the record my thanks to those working in the NHS, our vital emergency services, including the police; the civil service; and to local government officers, some of whom are working round the clock; retail distribution workers; postal workers; and those in our armed forces. Mention was made earlier of cleaners, whom we should thank in particular, because they are going to be important in fighting this epidemic. We need to be honest and say that these are fraught times and tempers may get frayed in the coming weeks and months, but may I urge people not to take it out on the individuals who are there working on our behalf—shop workers and others—who will be vital in getting us through this crisis?

I am disappointed that the Government have not brought forward measures to support the self-employed. Last Thursday, I raised the case of Andrew Brown, a graphic designer in my constituency whose business folded overnight last week. Since then, I have been inundated with questions from individuals who are in real need—taxi drivers, self-employed individuals, and people who run businesses. Let me say to the Minister, as I said to the Chancellor last week, that these individuals do not have recourse to independent wealth and do not have masses of savings. In most cases, they are living and working week to week. Some, such as taxi drivers, have ongoing bills, for example for the rental of cars, that they have to meet. If they cannot work, they do not have recourse to funds that they can suddenly find somewhere else. It is important that a sense of urgency is brought into this, and I am not sure the Government recognise the deep upset, hurt and fear that these people are facing.

Catherine West: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that it is deeply disappointing that the package is likely to come out tomorrow or Friday, when the House is not sitting, so Members will not be able to scrutinise it in the way in which we are accustomed to do?

Mr Jones: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I have been raising this issue for the past week, as I know other colleagues have. The Federation of Small Businesses, for example, has been lobbying not only us but the Government, asking them to do something urgently about this.

Another key point is that some individuals, if they are not supported now, will not be in business after the crisis is over. All our communities need the services that those businesses supply. It is about not only supporting individuals, but supporting those businesses in our local communities. I urge the Government, as I have been doing for the last week, to do something about that urgently. I hope that that comes in.

When the Financial Secretary to the Treasury opened the debate, he talked about communications, which the Government have not got right. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) mentioned companies that are still asking people to go to work. It is okay for the Prime Minister to go on television and say, "This is what you can do," but this morning I received telephone calls from individuals who have been told by their employer that they must go to work in their local engineering company or they will not be paid.

That is fine for people who have great savings or access to a trust fund, or for those who are independently wealthy, but some people need that money to survive. The messaging is okay when it is said, but turning that into action is another thing altogether. As the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) said, some companies know that their workers are not needed with regard to the criteria that have been laid out. They are putting not just those individuals at risk, but the rest of us as well.

The other issue is the support that has already been given to business. I welcomed the comprehensive package that was introduced last week for business but, again, communication is an issue, and the Government need to look at that. As the debate started, I received an email from Scott Hawthorne, who runs a waste disposal company in my constituency. He asked whether it would be possible to get clarification on the announcement on furlough funding, because he wants to keep people on. However, he cannot do so, since he cannot explain the basic, simple messages to people because he does not have the information about what the deal is. His finance director cannot make an assessment regarding cash flow, who they can keep on, and whether they will get the money in time.

Earlier in the week, that waste disposal company offered its services to the local county council. The company wants to do good, but the messaging has to get out. I know the people at this company; if they are having difficulty interpreting the Government's scheme, I am sure that others will be in a similar situation. That is leading to a lot of uncertainty on behalf not only of companies, but the individuals they employ. There are companies that want to do the right thing by their employees, and we should support them. I urge the Minister to ensure that that advice is put up on Government websites and reaches such companies as a matter of urgency.

In Durham, we have a number of prisons and a lot of prison officers live in my constituency. There is an issue for prison officers regarding exposure to the virus in

prisons. The Government need to take some steps as a matter of urgency to ensure that those prison officers and other people working in prisons have protective equipment. I think the Government will also have to make the decision to release individuals to take pressure off those hard-working staff.

On communication, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) mentioned MPs having hotlines. If those hotlines are anything like the one that the Foreign Office set up, do not bother, because it did not work. We have people abroad. The message has been put out: "Please return home from overseas." However, if people do not have the means of doing so, that needs to be put right straightaway. In Prime Minister's questions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) raised the issue of leasing aircraft. That needs to be done as a matter of urgency, to get those people home.

I will finish on the issue of community support. These are dark times but there is a lot of good will out there. I have been humbled by the great work being done in my constituency. People have been coming forward to help Pact House, a community charity in Stanley in my constituency that is delivering meals and support to local people. Local people want to do the right thing, but they need to know how to do it. I congratulate Stanley Town Council, which yesterday provided £63,000 to a number of community groups, to support their efforts in these difficult times.

The Government need to address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). We supported charities in 2008—I can remember doing it. Without direct financial support, some of these charities—we need them now and we will also need them in the future—will go under. It is important that that is also done as a matter of urgency. There are demands on their services now and we are going to need them in the future. Without them, we will find it very difficult.

Finally, I wish you and your family all the best, Madam Deputy Speaker, in staying safe in the coming weeks and months. I also extend those wishes not only to all right hon. and hon. Members of this House, but to the hard-working staff who have worked really hard over the past few weeks to keep us going. Let us think about them in the coming weeks and months.

4.21 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I begin my echoing his appeal for support for local charities and community organisations, on which we are going to be very dependent over the next few weeks, and which we need to survive the challenges they face with loss of funding, bookings and so on in the period ahead.

I warmly welcome the employment support package announced by the Government last week, including the commitment to pay up to 80% of the wage costs of those employees who are furloughed. I welcome the fact that it came forward quickly, just one week after the Budget. A huge package was put together in a very short period and I congratulate those responsible for it. I must say that, over the following week, the package

has stood up quite well to the scrutiny to which it has been subject. The Government and those involved can take credit for that.

Like others, I think it is a shame that we still do not know what is going to be done for self-employed people. It is particularly regrettable that we are not going to know before the House rises, so Members are not going to be able to scrutinise that package when it is unveiled. Inevitably, we need to talk about the position that self-employed people are going to find themselves in over the next few weeks. Whatever is in that package tomorrow or the following day—I have no idea what is going to be in it—it is clear that universal credit is going to have to carry a fair amount of strain in supporting people through the period ahead.

I therefore want to speak about universal credit, picking up on some of the points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who was at the Select Committee on Work and Pensions session that I chaired this morning. He has referred to the very large number of people who have applied for universal credit—470,000 since Tuesday of last week, and 105,000 yesterday—and it is a good thing that, so far, the systems have not collapsed. We can be thankful for that. Like others, I have seen screenshots telling people that they are in a queue—due to the incredible volume of new users, there is a queue—and:

"Number of users in queue ahead of you: 79129. Your estimated wait time is: more than an hour."

Indeed, it is quite a lot more than an hour.

It is right, however, to pay tribute to all those in the Department for Work and Pensions who are working very hard to deliver much-needed urgent support over this period. I am grateful to the DWP's permanent secretary for offering this morning to give the Select Committee weekly updates on how things are going. It is clearly very important that, once people apply for universal credit, they get the help to which they are entitled quickly, because people are going to need urgent help, including those self-employed constituents we have heard about whose businesses disappeared last week. They need help urgently.

Chi Onwurah: My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly important point about universal credit. The system of universal credit has been in design for years and was supposedly designed, so we were told, to be agile, adaptable and scalable. Is this not absolute confirmation that the system cannot be effectively scaled? Does he agree that universal credit needs to be scrapped and a system put in place that actually works?

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We took evidence this morning on that very point—the need to improve universal credit and change some of the problems. Unfortunately we were told that, because of the IT systems, there is very little that can be done in the short term.

For example, one thing the Government have agreed to do is reduce the maximum deduction from people's standard payment of universal credit. There are deductions for people to pay back the advance they receive up front and for other reasons. There is a case for suspending those deductions for the time being, but that is not the Government's intention at the moment. They have agreed that the maximum deduction will be reduced from 30%

[Stephen Timms]

of the standard amount to 25%, but they tell us that they cannot do that until October 2021 because of the problems with the IT system.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for reminding the House that, years ago, we were all told that this was going to be done in agile, precisely in order that changes could be made quickly. I am afraid that those promises have not been fulfilled. We were assured time after time that all the problems of the old DWP systems would be solved by adopting the agile approach. Sadly, that does not seem to be the case. Despite that, I am going to press this afternoon, as I and the Committee did this morning, for changes to universal credit. A way has to be found to overcome some of the problems and to get these things done much more quickly than is suggested will be the case.

I very much welcome the fact that the headline rate of universal credit and working tax credit has been increased, although only for a year. Given the long freeze in the rates of benefits, there is a case for making that increase permanent rather than temporary. That is something we will no doubt come back to in the months ahead.

When it comes to universal credit providing much needed support to the self-employed, people who come off zero-hours contracts and freelancers, there are some serious problems with the way it works at the moment. The Trussell Trust has found that people on universal credit are two and a half times more likely to need a food bank than people on legacy benefits, such as jobseeker's allowance.

There is a remarkable article in this month's issue of *The Lancet Public Health* about universal credit, which finds that

"an additional 63674...unemployed people will have experienced levels of psychological distress that are clinically significant due to the introduction of Universal Credit".

It goes on to estimate that more than a third of those people

"might reach the diagnostic threshold for depression."

A little further on, the article states:

"When the policy change was introduced, the prevalence of psychological distress started to increase among those eligible for Universal Credit; however, the prevalence remained constant for people not affected by the change".

Lastly, the article states:

"We also tested if there was an increase in the number of participants transitioning from unemployment into work in the intervention group after the introduction of Universal Credit relative to the comparison group; the reform had no effect on employment".

There are serious problems with the way universal credit is working, and we are now forcing—understandably—hundreds of thousands of additional people on to this benefit. What is the problem? Why does it cause so much more difficulty for people than jobseeker's allowance and other past benefits? A big part of the answer is the fact that people have to wait five weeks after applying to receive their first regular benefit payment. That is inevitably pushing people into debt with the Department for Work and Pensions. A lot of people are then choosing to say, "In that case, I'd better not pay my rent for a bit," and they are getting

into rent arrears. The National Housing Federation is reporting that people on universal credit are significantly more likely to be behind with their rent than people on jobseeker's allowance, both in the past and currently. This is a problem that will affect very large numbers of those who are now applying for universal credit.

It seems to me that it cannot be a good idea—given the boldness and generosity and the welcome characteristics of the package for employees that was introduced last week—to force self-employed people, by contrast, on to an arrangement where they do not get a substantive payment for five weeks.

Mr Dhesi: Does my right hon. Friend not agree that many of the individuals on universal credit and jobseeker's allowance are having to go to food banks, and at the very time that we need support for food banks, many food banks are unfortunately having to close because of the age demographic of the volunteers, who are normally a lot more mature? That is why, within this package, we need more support for food banks and the charitable sector.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I very much agree about the need for more support for charitable organisations. I spoke yesterday to the chief executive of the Trussell Trust, who told me that of its 1,250 food banks, two have closed so far. One of them is reopening and some other arrangement is being put in place for the other one instead. It is a remarkable tribute to exactly the people that my hon. Friend refers to, who are running those food banks, that despite the potential risks to them, they are carrying on. The whole House will be grateful to them for their extraordinary effort.

Catherine West: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. One of the constituency inquiries coming into inboxes at the moment is about the availability of certain food products to elderly people. Even those who do not need to go to a food bank but who are trying to get food from supermarkets find that the things that they want are not being fulfilled on their lists. Therefore, that is creating a situation of food insecurity, whether people have the money or are on universal credit. In general, the food supply is a really tricky situation, which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs could look into.

Stephen Timms: That is one of quite a number of anxieties that are around at present.

What should happen with universal credit is that the advances that are payable to people up front—about a quarter of those who have been applying over the last few days have applied for an advance—should be converted to grants for the duration of the current crisis. We were told this morning that it is very difficult to change the IT so that the advances are not automatically clawed back from subsequent payments, but I really cannot believe, even with this extraordinary IT system that appears to be in place, that that is beyond the wit of those who are running it to manage. It is a very simple thing: just do not claw back the advances from subsequent payments, because otherwise, people will ask how the Government can treat self-employed people so badly by comparison with the package for employees.

I also think that the current savings limit for eligibility for universal credit needs to be lifted, if it is going to do the job of supporting self-employed people. At the moment, if someone has more than £16,000 in savings, they get nothing at all from universal credit. If someone has more than £6,000 in savings, the amount that they get in universal credit starts to be reduced. If we are going to support adequately self-employed people over the next few months, that needs to change.

I hope as well that during this crisis, there will be a long and careful look at the rules around sanctions for universal credit. People will not be required to go into jobcentres for the time being, which is welcome—I am glad that that has been announced—but I hope the opportunity is taken to ensure that sanctions are not applied, because people will not be required to look for work in the normal way. As for the handling of deductions for past debts—tax credit overpayments and that kind of thing—I hope that there will be some easements in the application of terms.

I very much welcome the increase in the local housing allowance, which is back up to the 30th percentile. I hope that it will stay at that level so that it can adequately support rent in the future. However, there is a problem in London of the interaction between that new higher level of the local housing allowance and the separate housing support cap, which means that many renters in London will not be able to benefit from the increase in the local housing allowance. I hope that the cap will be addressed. I was disappointed this morning to hear that there will not be any change in the overall benefit cap level, and I think that that may well need to be looked at again as things develop over the next few months.

My final point has been referred to already a number of times in this debate. There is a large group of people in my constituency, and in many others, who are hard-working, law abiding, and permitted to work in the UK, but they do not have indefinite leave to remain and they do not have recourse to public funds. That means that if they have to stop working because they have to self-isolate, or because their business has collapsed, they will get no help at all as things stand. We do need people in that position to be able to support themselves, because, otherwise, they will have no alternative but to carry on working at risk to themselves and to wider public health. I want to end with a plea that the Government should, at least temporarily, lift the restriction of no recourse to public funds to those who have leave to remain but not yet indefinite leave to remain.

4.37 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The badge on the Chancellor's Twitter account says: "Stay At Home save lives". I completely agree with the sentiment behind that message. A number of hon. and right hon. Members also have that badge on their Twitter accounts. However, if people cannot afford to stay at home, they simply will not do so. They will have to go out to find the money to put food on the table. That applies, as things stand, to very many self-employed people. It also applies to many people who have lost their jobs because of the financial downturn that has happened so suddenly and unexpectedly. People who do not qualify for sick pay and who have symptoms of the virus will also have to go out to find money, as will those who suffer as a result of the delays in universal credit, which have been so well described by

many hon. and right hon. Members. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, it will also happen to those who have no recourse to public funds.

Health has to be absolutely paramount in everything that we say and do, by which I mean the health of the individual and their potential to pass on the virus to other people, especially to health workers who we need to look after the rest of us.

Mr Dhesi: Today, we have heard the sad and shocking news of the death of a 21-year-old lady in Buckinghamshire who had no underlying health conditions. Does my hon. Friend agree that there are many individuals and employers out there who are under the misconception that those who are younger, or who have no underlying health conditions, will not suffer from this virus? They need to take heed of this story and look after the health not just of themselves, but of those around them.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. It is really, really important that everybody—no matter what their age or health condition—recognises that we are all at risk from this. But there are groups who are especially at risk, and we have an enormous responsibility to protect them as much as possible, including the health workers who we will need to look after us all.

If we want people to stay at home and to observe the 2 metres rule when they are out and about, we have to do everything in our power to make it as easy as possible for them to comply. Delivering financial security is crucial to ensuring that nobody has to go out unless they absolutely have to. I asked the Leader of the House earlier to pass on my point about the construction industry to the Prime Minister. I will make that point again now. There are too many people going on to construction sites that are not essential work. Such construction must stop, otherwise people will carry on going to work. Somebody who works away from home emailed me just this afternoon to tell me that their employer is saying, "I am only interested in the profits of my company"; they do not care about anything else. Those workers are being forced to go to work. If they do not, their pay will be cut and they will have nothing, and they will not be part of any income retention scheme if and when it is applied by that employer.

Dawn Butler: The mode of travel for construction workers going to work is often trains and the tube. The Minister and the Government talk about the trains and the tube system, and about how people should be staying at home. How can they marry the two? If we do not close the places where people go to work, they are going to travel on the trains. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and of course those trains and buses are needed by our health workers to get to hospitals. If they are infected by being in close conditions with people who have the virus and who are going to work—not just in construction sites, as this is true of call centres and a number of other places of employment, because of the behaviour of some employers—we run the risk of spreading the virus right across the country.

[Bill Esterson]

Health has to be paramount, but if that is to be the case, rent has to be covered. We cannot have people feeling that they are at risk of being evicted; that has to be taken away completely. I am afraid that the Prime Minister's assurances earlier went nowhere near far enough in demonstrating that the Government are serious about no evictions because, as has already been mentioned in this debate, evictions are already happening.

People who are desperate will do desperate things. I am afraid that it does not finish with people going out to work to earn money to put food on the table. What will happen in those cases, in a few days' or weeks' time, where people simply have nothing left to feed themselves and their families? I do not want to paint a picture of too much disaster, but I am sure we can all imagine what might happen if people took it into their own hands to go and get food just to survive, if they do not have the means of paying for it. "Everything it takes" must mean that we do not get to that situation in the coming days and weeks, and giving people the financial security to ensure that that does not happen must be an absolute priority.

I want to talk about some of the practical steps. The behaviour of the banks, in saying that they will put up interest fees from 9% to typically 39%—is nothing short of usurious and extortionate. The same applies to the credit card companies. Where people cannot pay back their credit card debt, there must now be a case for a delay in the repayment of credit cards and a number of different kinds of loan.

There are still gaps in the job retention scheme; many workers will not qualify. A number of Members have mentioned charities. Charities are going to need to carry on working, and we are going to need them to carry on working because they provide essential services and are an important part of the answer in dealing with the health crisis.

Catherine West: Is my hon. Friend aware of the situation for religious charities in particular? In cases where there is usually a weekly collection, some mosques, churches and other faith gatherings are really struggling to pay their own bills because they are not getting that regular income.

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend makes an important point about those charities paying their bills. The point that I was getting to was that they will not be eligible for the job retention scheme because they and their workers will have to continue working—quite rightly, and we will want them. Therefore, alternative arrangements are needed to pay their bills, to which she refers, and their wages, if they are to play their full part in providing the support that we all need them to.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham has covered universal credit in the technical detail that pretty much only he in this House can, and I thank him for that. Suffice to say that a constituent of mine said that, after three and a half hours on the phone, they were given a phone appointment for next Wednesday. They will then face a five-week wait before getting any money. They need the money now. They have no money; they need to put food on the table. That is typical of the kind of examples that we are all hearing, and it needs to be addressed.

That brings me to the self-employed. The Chancellor has made clear his preference for a targeted scheme—that applies to a number of the schemes that the Government are coming up with—that gives money to those in need. In normal times I would completely agree with that approach, but I am afraid that time is up. We cannot afford to wait any longer, and if a few people who do not need the money are given extra so that the vast majority—a far larger number—who need the money get it, and get it now, when they need it, so be it. That has to be the sensible way forward in this extreme emergency, and it is not without precedent in normal times. The entrepreneur's relief gives money to very many people who actually do not need it, according to the Government's analysis of the application of that scheme. If it is good enough for some wealthy entrepreneurs, it is certainly good enough for our constituents who are self-employed and, indeed, for constituents who need sick pay or universal credit now.

Then there is the behaviour of certain businesses—I can mention Virgin, Sports Direct and Wetherspoons. Travelodge, I believe, has already been mentioned for its behaviour in evicting homeless families. This must end. The Government must make it clear right now that any such behaviours that disadvantage people who will be put into difficulty cannot be tolerated. Intervention is needed, not just words from the Dispatch Box or on television.

I will quote the example of Village Hotels, because my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) asked me to do so. She has had a solicitor's letter from Village Hotels for raising on social media what was sent to her by one of her constituents who is on a zero-hours contract. They have been told by Village Hotels that they will receive no pay and she has been told to take down the post, which is entirely true because she has quoted and shown a copy of the letter. Such behaviour by the company is completely unacceptable, and it should withdraw its letter to my hon. Friend. Her constituent and everybody in that position on a zero-hours contract needs to be the same position as every other member of staff at Village Hotels and everywhere else, so that they can be part of the job retention scheme. I hope that my raising this in the Chamber will enable a change of heart.

I really do not want to say what I am going to say next, but I have now heard from doctors who are saying that they believe, and they have had this confirmed by senior people in the health service, that the time is fast approaching when they will be forced to decide who lives and who dies. We know, I am afraid, that that must be true because of what is going on in other countries. That is why it is so important that we reduce the impact on the national health service and minimise infection. The points I have made and the examples I have given, like those of all hon. and right hon. Members, are designed to do just that. We have to make sure that people are financially secure and have somewhere to live, whether they are self-employed or unemployed; whether or not they have recourse to public funds; and whether they are renters, mortgage holders, homeless or rough sleepers. The "stay at home, stay safe" advice is absolutely right, and we must make it possible for everybody to follow it.

4.50 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a real privilege to speak in this incredibly important debate. As I am, I think, the last speaker from the Back Benches, it is appropriate to start by paying tribute to the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor on the day of what may be their last appearances on the Front Bench. I regard both of them as comrades and friends, though I would not necessarily say that I have agreed with everything that they have said and done—but that is how it is in our great Labour movement. I particularly thank them for always bringing a deep care and concern for the most vulnerable in our society to the heart of our debates; for vanquishing austerity economics, which had such a grip on our political debate five years ago, and still has consequences for so many in our society today; and indeed for the way in which we are responding to the covid-19 crisis.

Like most Members here, I have been overwhelmed with emails from constituents—from a supply teacher who does not know how he will feed his family; from a plumber who feels that his health is in jeopardy, and feels abandoned by the Government; from a cancer survivor who needs to self-isolate, but does not know what she will eat on Monday; and from a circus owner who does not know whether her Newcastle-based circus will survive this crisis. Parliament should not be the only circus to survive the pandemic; I hope it is not disorderly to say that. It is really important that all our performers, and all our self-employed, of whom there are 5 million in this country, have the support that they so desperately need.

When I took the tube to Parliament today, I felt a bit of a fraud, because I did not feel like a key worker. I was not going to save lives. But when I thought about the impact of the Government's delay and intransigence—I am sorry to have to use those words—in providing the support that is so desperately needed by freelancers and the self-employed, I realised just how much they need our voice. I have constituents who lost their jobs because the Chancellor delayed announcing the very welcome job retention package. The delay in respect of measures for the self-employed will not only cause lost jobs, but lead to deaths. The Minister shakes his head, but as we have heard in many excellent contributions, the absence of support for the self-employed is driving people to go to work when they should not, and to put themselves and others at risk, as well as causing enormous mental distress.

Parliament rises tonight, but I urge the Minister, Chancellor and Prime Minister to set out immediate measures to support the self-employed. Unfortunately, all those who are employed are not necessarily protected. We have heard again and again from Members of Parliament the desperate appeals from constituents whose employers are not protecting them from the coronavirus. I am going to name some from the emails I have received, and they can get in touch with me and explain how they are protecting their employees. DHL, the delivery service, is not offering any personal protection equipment to its deliverers and is not following the 2-metre guidance. Tolent builders are not following the 2-metre guidance. Serco and EE, which have many call centre employees in large rooms, are not following the 2-metre guidance. Santander is apparently bringing in contract workers to work on PPI, which I do not believe

to be an essential service, and is not following the 2-metre guidance or social distancing. Then there is our very own Mike Ashley, the owner not only of Newcastle United but of SportsDirect, who, after claiming that SportsDirect was an essential service and finally—

Bill Esterson: It's essential to his fortune.

Chi Onwurah: It is an essential service for his fortune, but not in this crisis. He finally agreed to close his shops, hiking prices online while still making employees come into empty shops to act as security.

The Government's payroll support and job retention scheme are very welcome, but we must have greater clarity for businesses on what they need to do to stand by their employees, as the Prime Minister said. Any private sector bail-out must have strings attached to it. Banks were bailed out in the 2008 financial crisis and people were rewarded with austerity. In this crisis, we must champion the good businesses that are doing the right thing.

Ian Blackford: I congratulate the hon. Lady, who is making a very gracious speech and a number of strong points. She is talking about the austerity that followed the bail-out of the banks, and one thing we need to put down as a marker today is that when we get through this crisis the poor must not pay the price a second time.

Chi Onwurah: The right hon. Gentlemen makes exactly the point that I was going to make. It is pleasing to see that that is at least agreed across the Opposition Benches, and I hope to hear a message from the Government that in this crisis, after this crisis, the people must be rewarded and not asked to bear the burden.

Bill Esterson: On the behaviour of the banks, I mentioned the 39.9% interest rates that the banks have announced that they will charge pretty much across the board—funny that, isn't it? Does that not suggest that they are already embarked on exactly that approach of trying to make everybody else pay when they should be taking the opportunity to pay back for their role in the financial crisis?

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Without wishing to go into the financial crisis and the, in my opinion, very well deserved backlash against the financial sector, which continued to make profits while so many people felt the impact of that crisis, it now has the opportunity to demonstrate the social value and support it can provide in times of crisis and emergency, especially, as my hon. Friend says, for those who have taken out loans or credit cards and those who need loans. Many businesses are still saying to me that they are not getting the loans that they are promised, particularly the tech sector start-ups, which rarely have the assets that banks feel are necessary to offer such loans. We want greater corporate citizenship from the financial sector and from other businesses, too.

I applaud and echo what many of my colleagues have said about those who are suffering the most in this crisis, but my focus is on the impact of the digital divide in our country in relation to coronavirus. We know that access to and ability to use the internet is not evenly spread across our society. In the UK, data from the

[*Chi Onwurah*]

Office for National Statistics indicates that in 2018, 10% of adults said they did not have access to the internet at home, while 4.3 million had no demonstrable digital skills. That data also showed that 12% of those aged between 11 and 18 years reported having no internet access at home from a computer or tablet.

Since 2011, adults over the age of 65 have consistently made up the largest proportion of adult non-users of the internet. More than half of all adult internet non-users were over the age of 75. Across all age groups, disabled adults make up a large proportion of adult internet non-users.

In normal times, access to the internet improves hugely the chances of, for example, finding work. It also, as we have heard, makes it easier to access universal credit—in fact, it is essential to access universal credit—and it enables people to connect and communicate better with family, friends and the community. These are not normal times, however, and for the next few weeks and perhaps the next few months, social distancing is going to be the norm. Social distancing must be accompanied by digital coming-together, and for that we need digital skills and digital access. We have heard about the implications for mental health of isolation without the ability to communicate. I want the Minister to think about what that means for the 11% who have no access to the internet.

What I want to see from the Government in the next few days is first, digital skills. There are those who have access to the internet but do not have the real digital skills to use it. They need to be able to take advantage of the many different courses and means of entertainment and so on, which are all fantastically being developed at the moment. They need the digital skills to be able to access that. In that respect, I recommend the work of Sue Black with the #techmums initiative, which is still rolling out during coronavirus, and also the work of many other charities.

Secondly, there is the question of capacity. Here I am really concerned, because all we have had from the internet service providers and network operators is general vague promises that there will be the capacity and it will all be fine and all right. To be frank—I have been known to mention this, but I will say it again—as someone who worked designing telecom networks as an engineer for 20 years, that does not reflect at all my experience. Capacity needs to be dimensioned and built in. There will be capacity now that is dedicated to business networks that may need to be moved over to support home networks with the huge increase we are seeing in working from home.

Moreover, we need to be able to secure capacity for our essential services. I am already hearing that in Newcastle, for example, Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust cannot provide the capacity for administrative workers to work from home. If those essential services can be delivered from home, it frees up space and hospitals and car parks and so on.

Just as with personal protective equipment—we had a lot of time to prepare that was perhaps not best used, and there was a lot of talk about everything being okay, which has turned out not to be the case—I fear that over the next few weeks, when we are all confined to our homes with only the internet to serve as a social medium

that we can take advantage of, we will find that there is not enough capacity. Networks will fall over. There will be delays and, as always, it will be the most vulnerable and the poorest who will suffer most. I would like to see modelling of the traffic impact on our networks. I would also like to see a commitment to digital access for all, particularly for young people and schoolchildren who will be expected to be learning from home. They need to have free access to the internet to enable them to do that.

Moving on, I want to say a little bit about where we need to go from here. In economics classes, we were taught that the virtue of a capitalist market economy is that it ensures the efficient allocation of capital, as market competition drives inefficiencies out of the system, ensuring the cheapest, most innovative products and services possible. The best the state can do, we were told, is to get out of the way. But the capacity to deal with a major health or economic shock is, by definition, inefficient when that shock is not there, so extra ventilators and stocks of masks or toilet paper are inefficiencies that the free market system drives out. They can only be provided and stocked by the state, and the problem with the lean, mean state machine that the Conservatives advocate and have done their best to create over the 10 years of austerity is that the state is then no longer equipped to provide the resilience, the stock and the inefficiencies that are necessary to support our population in a time of crisis as we have now.

This is a war, and as a war it has real heroes—NHS workers, care workers, teachers, transport workers and cleaners. Not all of them are in the public sector: we have heroes in the private sector too, in supermarkets with our retail workers, and those isolating at home, which is something we have never asked people to do before. As a woman of colour, I know that there is despair at the realisation that natural hair may no longer be a choice, but the only option for us. There are many sacrifices, large and small, which are expected to be made over the next few weeks. Obviously, not everybody faces the particular challenge I just mentioned.

The heroes of this war must be rewarded. After the second world war, we had the national health service, homes fit for heroes and the welfare state. After this battle, we need an economy fit for heroes. We who have the privilege of walking in these corridors of power are insulated from some of the worst impacts—the desperation, the fear and the confusion that I know is going on in homes across Newcastle. I want the Minister's reassurance that we will build a better and fairer economy out of this desperate crisis in order to be an economy fit for the heroes who are now helping us to drive out coronavirus.

I want to end on a note of hope and optimism, because in Newcastle and across the country we have vibrant, active people who want to do the right thing and want to support and look after others. We have great communities across our country, such as in Newcastle with the Newcastle City Council city lifeline, which allows people to volunteer their time to support community organisations and projects. We have already heard that the national Government scheme for national health service volunteers has been inundated.

Newcastle upon Tyne Central has 11 active community Facebook groups that residents can post their needs and volunteers commit their time to. Slatyford tenants association in my constituency, which offers bingo and

tea once a week, has closed down for the duration of the coronavirus crisis, but is looking forward to opening again. Mrs T's Café in Blakelaw, which supports the local community through excellent nutritious food, is looking forward to getting back.

Of course, we also have our food banks. Newcastle United Supporters Trust is one of the most impressive organisations I have ever seen. As a Newcastle United supporter, one of the most inspiring sights on a Saturday when walking past St James' Park is the Newcastle United Supporters Trust stall, where those shaking the buckets, as I have done, will find people putting in £1, £5, £10 or £20. We should not need food banks, but when we do, such generosity from Geordies and people across the country is inspiring. Although we cannot have stalls on the streets—we have no more football matches for a while—we still get fantastic support online. Food is being donated by businesses such as Fenwick, TK Maxx and Thorntons. Geordies from Newcastle, but also from Brighton, London and, I understand, the Falkland Islands have donated money online. We also have Newcastle United Foundation, which is delivering hot meals to schoolchildren. They all need our support, as do our theatres, cinemas and charities.

Much of the real world is going online and we need to ensure that we have a real-world community, as well as real employment and a real support and welfare sector for when the crisis is over, when we can build an economy fit for the heroes we will create.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

- Contingencies Fund Act 2020
- Coronavirus Act 2020.

Financial and Social Emergency Support Package

Debate resumed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is a poignant moment as I call the shadow Chancellor to make what might be his final speech from the Dispatch Box.

5.11 pm

John McDonnell: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On Monday, the Prime Minister ordered the 21-day lockdown and asked non-essential retail and leisure facilities to close. We all supported that measure. Indeed, we called for and welcomed it. Today we need clarity and security for all. The spike in deaths that had been predicted hit us yesterday, with 87 of our fellow citizens killed by coronavirus in a single day. The number of people who have lost their lives has reached 435, and we all send our condolences and deepest sympathy to their families and friends. Sadly, we know that there is every likelihood that worse is to come. People understand the health risks. They fear for their loved ones and neighbours.

In many ways, the human response has been tremendous. I pay tribute to the British people for their response. We have heard about many of the community-based mutual aid groups that have sprung up, as well as the 170,000 people who have signed up as volunteers to offer support for those who need it. National health service staff have been mentioned today. We just cannot thank them enough, heroes and heroines. There are also the 11,000 recently retired NHS staff, who, despite all the risks, have returned to the profession.

People and businesses were initially reassured by the Chancellor's financial package, but we have to be honest with ourselves: in recent days, gaps have emerged. People are worried and alarm bells are ringing across our constituencies. We in this House are trying to behave responsibly—we are socially distancing ourselves. *[Interruption.]* Some want to distance themselves even further. But politically we have come together, and we are working across party lines to get this right. In that spirit, we have all been appealing to the Government to act urgently to plug the gaps that have come to light. Let us be honest: this is not a blame game, but genuine, constructive engagement from Members of all parties.

Our constituents are raising issues with us—with all of us—as Members have mentioned. The self-employed in our constituencies, workers on insecure contracts, health and social care workers and so many others—we have been inundated, have we not, with emails, telephone calls and even personal representations—all have one thing in common: they are worried about their security, their income, their job and in some instances their home, but especially about the wellbeing of their families, their children and their elderly relatives.

It is the job of Government, the job of politicians and the job of all of us to provide such reassurance, especially at the most worrying times. I have to say that while people by and large are behaving responsibly, some employers are not. We have heard about them today from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—he urges us to name and shame them—my hon. Friend the Member

[John McDonnell]

for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). All of them named such businesses.

I have been contacted by one of the hon. Members who could not be here today, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne). He gives the example of Matalan in his Liverpool constituency, where shops have been closed but online shopping goes on. The employer has got 200 workers in a shift—packed together and working closely—handing items of clothing straight to each other with no gloves, masks or cleaning products. It is now reported that contract workers have been told they face the sack if they self-isolate. That sort of behaviour is unacceptable. Yes, there are the Tim Martins and the Mike Ashleys, but we have heard today that too many employers are behaving in this way.

Let us be clear as well—and let us do this cross-party—that while we condemn those employers, we also condemn those banks that see this crisis as an opportunity to hike interest rates on overdrafts, knowing that so many are going to see their income fall. We condemn those retailers that are hiking prices as people anxiously shop less frequently—profiteering in a crisis.

The whole country needs clarity about what should be happening in this lockdown for both businesses and workers. The Prime Minister described it as a war against this virus, and I agree with him. In the second world war, the initial period was described as the phoney war. I have to say that for many, because of the inconsistencies of the interpretation of the lockdown, we seem in some places to be in a phoney lockdown.

Catherine West: In reference to mixed messages, does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a mixed message from the Foreign Secretary, who says that all UK citizens must return home, yet when we contact the Foreign Office it appears there is no help available for people to come home?

John McDonnell: I will come on to the issue of repatriation, but let me mention it now. All of us now have constituents contacting us about their loved ones who are not able to come home. We need clarity about what support is available and can be given. If it requires emergency measures, let us undertake them, because people are now deeply worried and isolated.

Dawn Butler: I do hope this is not my right hon. Friend's last outing at the Dispatch Box. I very much thank him for writing two Labour manifestos; a lot of that is being carried out today. He talks about this being a war and the Government talk about it being a war. If it is a war, is it not right that we should be sending in our doctors and nurses with the protective equipment they need to fight that war?

John McDonnell: I welcome some of the reassurances that we have heard from the Prime Minister and others today, but I have watched the interviews with individual doctors about the risks that they have taken. They are heroes and heroines, but they should never have been put in a position where they took those risks in the first place.

Mr Dhesi: My right hon. Friend mentioned profiteering a short while ago. There are very unscrupulous retailers and wholesalers. While some of them are acting very responsibly, the unscrupulous individuals are profiteering at the very moment that people are at their most vulnerable and are then having to contend with those hiked prices. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those individuals should bear it in mind that people have long memories, and they may very well find that after this crisis is over their

John McDonnell: Profiteering businesses need to recognise that reputational damage to their operations will last beyond the crisis.

The point I was making is that if we are to be serious in this war-like situation about defeating the enemy, we have to go all the way. People and businesses need absolute certainty. The Prime Minister said that all businesses should close down unless they have an essential role to play in the fight against the coronavirus, or unless the business can continue to operate with staff working from home.

Let us be clear: construction sites should be closed down, unless they are building health facilities. They should close now. They are putting lives at risk by operating still. The Scottish First Minister says they should close, and the Mayor of London says they should, but the Government are allowing them to continue.

I have spoken to construction workers and their unions in recent days. They have told me that social distancing on a building site, as anyone who has worked on one will say, is just not possible. For some roles, it would not be safe either.

Yesterday, unfortunately, the Health Secretary tried to blame the Mayor of London for reduced services on the London underground. Earlier in the day, the Mayor had explained that some 20% of staff on the London underground are either off sick or self-isolating as a precaution, and that the tube was running at the maximum capacity it could, given those constraints. Construction company Taylor Wimpey—I praise it—has taken the responsible decision to shut down all its sites, and I commend that.

The Government must back workers and their unions who refuse to work in unsafe workplaces. The Government—let us be clear—must order workplaces to close if they are not essential to the fight against the virus. Businesses and workers need the clarity that they deserve. The Government also needs to reassure those businesses that they can furlough their workers, the directly employed and others.

Chris Stephens: Does the shadow Chancellor agree that businesses that refuse to close should be subject to closure orders and heavy fines? That is the only way that we can get some of those businesses to close.

John McDonnell: The Government must get serious now, at this stage in the attack by the virus. Therefore, sanctions are required, if necessary.

Workers must also be assured that, as has been said, 80% of wages will be paid and backdated, and that the interest-free loans are available without the onus of the

guarantees that are being asked of some companies. They should be readily acceptable now to meet any short-term shortfall.

Chi Onwurah: My right hon. Friend may not be aware of reports that the Government have announced that they will make a statement on support for the self-employed tomorrow. Does he agree that the Government should come before the House today, while it is sitting, so that we can scrutinise that statement?

John McDonnell: A bit of practice that has crept into our politics recently is that announcements are made at press conferences, rather than to this House. Mr Speaker has made it perfectly clear that that is inappropriate behaviour. We have time left for a Minister to turn up in this House to take us through it.

Ian Blackford: For clarity, Robert Peston is saying that the Government have confirmed, that the Prime Minister has confirmed, that the Prime Minister will announce that tomorrow. He ought to come to this House before it rises to make that statement. It is highly irregular for the Prime Minister not to, on a matter that is so important and that many of us have raised on a daily basis. I have to say that it shows contempt for this House and for Parliament. That should be happening here.

John McDonnell: I support the words of Mr Speaker last week, when he made clear the practices that Ministers should pursue, and I believe that this is an act of bad faith on the part of the Prime Minister.

Let me make other demands on the Government. Here is a small one: can apprentices, many of whom are paid just £3.90 an hour, be furloughed too? Can they please get 100%, not 80%, because they earn so little? As I asked the Chancellor yesterday, can the scheme be flexible? Workers put on reduced hours must be eligible, so that the shortfall in wages can be made up. Some businesses will lose part of their operation. We need them to carry on in a reduced form, so that would be the right solution for them.

Bill Esterson: I want to take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend and the Leader of the Opposition for the work they have done over the last five years and for their friendship and support of all Opposition Members.

My right hon. Friend mentioned furloughing. Can he reiterate that there should not be any situation in which pay is allowed to be below the national living wage, and if that means going above the 80% rule, that is what should happen?

John McDonnell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's words. We have asked for a while, not least when we put forward our proposals last Thursday, that there should be a floor of the national minimum wage. If those who are on low pay get 80% of their pay, many of them will be taken below the national minimum wage. It is set at that level because it is a basic survival level, so we urge the Government to act. Again, that is only a small step.

It cannot be beyond the wit of the great minds in the Treasury to find a way to resolve a number of these issues, and that call was reiterated by the Resolution

Foundation this morning. A YouGov poll found that one in 10 people surveyed are still in work but with reduced pay or hours. Those people are not protected by this scheme. For businesses to stay afloat, many of them will need part-time workers, and those part-time workers need the support that this scheme should provide.

Zero-hours contract workers and agency workers who are not on PAYE are limb (b) workers, as I explained to the Chancellor and wrote to him about at the beginning of the week. They must be made eligible for the job retention scheme; otherwise, there is the potential that 2 million workers will not be included in the scheme. These are some of the workers who are most at risk of losing work and not being able to put food on the table during this downturn.

Several Members mentioned this, but I urge the Government to give an assurance that non-UK nationals are eligible for this scheme. I also appeal to the Government to ensure that support is provided for non-UK nationals in the coming weeks when travel is so restricted. Let me echo what several Members have said: that must include the suspension of the rules of no recourse to public funds. The rules that have been put in place may be acceptable to some Members, but in this period those rules are brutal and will force people into penury.

Staff who can no longer work because of childcare responsibilities must be protected as well. Why on earth are they not eligible for this scheme? Just think of the single parent who cannot work because they need to stay at home with their child—surely they should be covered as well. On the subject of childcare, can the Minister be clear that childcare providers should not be charging parents for services that they no longer deliver or cannot now deliver? Those childcare providers must be supported in the long term as well, because we will need them.

My concern, which many Members have expressed today, is the gaps in the scheme and the fact that it will not be operational until April. People will not receive funding for weeks, and it certainly will not be taken up at the rate that many of us would hope for, given the indications from a large number of employers. Lay-offs are happening at scale.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government need to ensure that anyone who was laid off before the announcement of the scheme can be brought back into employment and put on the scheme, and that any employer that does not do that should be named or required by the Government to do that?

John McDonnell: The problem we have, as my hon. Friend points out, is that this is a voluntary scheme for employers to participate in. What we have to do is to use everything we possibly can to urge employers to participate, protect their workers and use to maximum effect the scheme itself.

Catherine West: Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on the fact that Wetherspoons just did a U-turn, so that staff will be paid and participate in the Government's scheme? Is that not an excellent exhibition of what cross-party MPs can do? People scoff at Back-Bench MPs, but is it not wonderful to see the Select Committee

[Catherine West]

in action and to see that Wetherspoons is now going to do the right thing? Does that not the challenge for groups such as Cineworld to do that as well?

John McDonnell: It demonstrates that naming and shaming works, and at some time in the future I might drink to that.

Mr Kevan Jones: Not in Wetherspoons.

John McDonnell: Not necessarily.

Lay-offs are happening at scale, as I said, and hon. Members have mentioned the statistics. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has said that nearly 500,000 people have now applied for universal credit. I welcome, as always, the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and his Work and Pensions Committee have done in demonstrating the nature of the reforms that are needed to universal credit. We need those reforms rapidly now to be able to assist people and keep them out of poverty.

Chris Stephens: I thank the shadow Chancellor for giving way again; he has been extremely generous. Coming back to the point about lay-offs, does he agree that we must ensure that opportunistic employers who have either carried out lay-offs or are threatening them at the moment do not, once they have received funds from the job retention scheme and once the crisis is over, immediately think they can lay people off? Does he also think that we need some guarantees from the Government on that?

John McDonnell: I am grateful for the intervention, if only because it enabled me to have a drink, but it was a useful one, because the hon. Gentleman will argue that we were suggesting to the Government that some of these loans should be conditional on participation in the scheme and the guarantee not just of the 80%, but of the 20% that employers would pay to top up the salaries as well.

That 500,000 people are applying for universal credit is a sign of the scale of job losses that we are facing now, so there is a real need to close the gaps and bring forward the scheme with some urgency. As many have said, there are 5 million self-employed out there. Let us be clear: the self-employed pay the same rates of tax, so they deserve the same protections and they are losing out.

As we have heard, the scheme will be announced tomorrow at a press conference, so let us say clearly that the self-employed must be treated fairly and they must be treated as any other workers, as in the job retention scheme. Let them be able to claim 80% of the income lost—yes, self-declared—and if there are any concerns about overpayments, exactly as has been said, they can be clawed back in their next tax return. This is not as complex as some have said. If people claim fraudulently while still working, they will rightly be prosecuted. It is as simple as that.

But right now, as we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and others, millions of cabbies, childminders,

plumbers, electricians, painters, decorators and actors have all lost work or have had to close down their businesses, as have builders designated as self-employed under the construction industry scheme, and they have no income. They need a solution now.

We will see what the scheme is tomorrow, but the delay has just been unacceptable. For all those saying it is complicated, yes, it can be complicated, but other countries are managing it. One example that was given earlier was Ireland, where the national support scheme will be up and running on Friday and covers both PAYE and self-employed workers at 70% of their net wage. Many other countries have had more comprehensive and more generous schemes.

I turn to the issue of statutory sick pay, mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Brighton, Kemptown and for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). As has been said time and again in this House, when the Health Secretary and his predecessor were asked whether they could they live on £94 a week, they were honest and said no. It is blindingly obvious that the rate has to be increased. At the moment, it is less than half the level of many other European countries. Our view is that it should be at the level of the real living wage, but we need an increase, and we need it rapidly, because people are having to choose between health and hardship.

I give the House another real example that was sent to me by an hon. Member whose constituent has been told that their terms and conditions are being changed, so instead of getting sick pay of three weeks on full pay, they will get merely SSP. While the Minister is at it, let us stop insulting the unemployed and disabled people by telling them that they have to live on £73 a week, or, if they are under 25, £57 a week.

Thousands of workers have been laid off in recent weeks through no fault of their own, and many are struggling to make a claim for universal credit online, as several hon. Members have pointed out. We want to know urgently from the Government what they are doing to expand capacity in those departments. I urge the Government to heed the call of the Resolution Foundation today to raise jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance, exactly as we are saying. We also suggest that there is an urgent need to increase the carer's allowance.

Other hon. Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) earlier this week, have proposed at least a temporary £10 increase in child benefit to help to lift children out of poverty. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham said, the Government have to get to grips with reducing the five-week wait for universal credit and follow the calls of groups such as the Child Poverty Action Group to turn that advance loan into a grant. We should not be pushing the poorest people in our society into further debt.

I spoke to the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents staff in the Department for Work and Pensions. As a point of fact, during the last spike in demand after the global financial crash—a number of us were here—the DWP had 130,000 staff. Today it has just 78,000 staff. We are told that an extra 10,000 may be coming, but as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West said, the contractors and the staff who are directly appointed need to be cared for, so we are asking for the enforcement of social distancing and proper protections.

Many of the Government's workers have not received personal protective equipment and clothing, with nurses and doctors relying on makeshift masks and plastic bags. Again, I pay tribute to the bravery and dedication of the NHS and social care workers who have ploughed on regardless, but they deserve better too.

Individual cases are being brought to us that it would be useful for the Minister to be clear about. For example, on medical advice, should pregnant workers be self-isolating if they cannot work from home? The advice that has been given appears contradictory to many workers and employers. I have been forwarded a case where a pregnant worker was told to take three months' unpaid leave if she would not continue to do face-to-face working. That is the sort of treatment of some people out there at the moment.

We welcome the moves to protect mortgage holders and ensure that payment holidays are in place, but as many hon. Members, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Brighton, Kempton and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), have said, we need the same security for renters. The difference needs to be understood: a rent holiday is not the same as a mortgage holiday. Rent is paid continuously while in tenancy, while mortgages are fixed-term, meaning that repayment terms can simply be extended. It is therefore important that the Government act to ensure that people's rent payments are covered for this period, not merely suspended.

As others have said, we are extremely disappointed by the legislation published yesterday—frankly, the Prime Minister has broken his promise to the country's 20 million renters. It was not an eviction ban, as promised: the legislation will not stop people losing their homes as a result of the virus. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Housing Minister said, it just gives people some extra time to pack their bags. The Housing Secretary said this morning that the Government could extend the three-month delay on evictions. He said it was extremely unlikely that any repossession proceedings would continue. That is just not clear or strong enough. The Government must look again at this.

There are wider problems. Over recent years, austerity cuts have lessened the value of support available via housing benefit. The Government must immediately suspend the benefit cap—and yes, the bedroom tax must go. We welcome the moves announced last week on local housing allowance, but the Government must go further and restore the allowance from the 30th percentile to the 50th percentile of market rates, as it was before 2010, under the last Labour Government. People will have made rental decisions based on their incomes, and they should not be penalised by the unforeseeable impact of the virus. Now is not the time for families to be downsizing or sofa-surfing with parents, grandparents or friends in the cramped and overcrowded conditions that my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) described so clearly.

We cannot have a situation in which, at the end of this, tenants have either depleted all their savings or—worse—amassed large and unpayable debts. The suspension of evictions for private and social tenants must be extended from three to six months. Shelter has told us that as many as 20,000 eviction proceedings are already in progress and will go ahead over the next three months

unless the Government take action to stop them. They must be stopped, and I urge the Minister to be absolutely clear when he stands up: no evictions of any kind.

Others are also being hit by the impact of the virus. We need to ensure that undergraduates are not charged rent for student accommodation that they are no longer using as their institutions close. We need to know what scheme is in place for students to claw back rent or escape tenancy agreements rendered defunct by the crisis. Likewise, we are urging the Government now to suspend the interest on tuition fee debt.

The issue of utility bills has been discussed on both sides of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden gave the stark example of what has happened with key meters and the behaviour of British Gas at the moment. Unless we do something to intervene on utility bills, especially when families are at home and their energy bills are increasing, families could shortly be threatened with disconnections. We cannot have bailiffs coming round to houses about water, energy or even internet bills.

What about the internet? My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central emphasised the critical importance of internet capacity and access at this point in time. We need to know what the Government are doing about internet access. Many people in our community used to rely on libraries to access the internet, but now libraries are closing. The Government must bring forward new measures to ensure that people can get online—whether for benefit services or to maintain some proper form of social contact.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden and for Brent Central, and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham all raised the problems of charities, at a time when many people are falling back on charities. We have been told, by Members here and by reports coming in from across the country, that charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises are running out of money; the predicted losses will be about £4 billion in the next 12 weeks. What is being done to support those groups? The Government also need to clarify whether some of them could participate in the job retention scheme.

Finally, I echo what others have said; my hon. Friends the Members for Brent Central and for Coventry South put it eloquently. Lessons must be learned from this crisis. We must ensure that in future we build into all our public services the resilience they need to deal with any future crisis. We must eradicate from the economy the low pay and insecure work that prevent people from having the personal economic resilience to cope when hardship threatens. Above all, as others have said, we need to learn the lesson that austerity is no solution, and never will be. As has been said, let us start planning now for the economy and society that we want to shape after we have won the war against this virus.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you mentioned that this is my last speech in the Chamber as shadow Chancellor. I am grateful for the many kind words said about me and the Leader of the Opposition. In fact, I do not recognise myself from them, but thank you very much. It is almost as though I have been tamed.

Some Members present will recall that when I address party meetings, I usually end with a single word. It is a word upon which the Labour and trade union movement

[John McDonnell]

was founded. It is based on a secret we discovered; one that working people learned in the fields and workshops of the early industrial revolution. It taught us, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said, that unity is strength and an injury to one is an injury to all. That word is solidarity. It is solidarity that will see us through this crisis, protect our community, and on which we should build our society in the future. Madam Deputy Speaker, I end with solidarity.

5.46 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): I begin by offering the deepest thanks and praise of all of us in this House for all those working to deliver essential services to the public across the country. The way they have come together is nothing short of astounding. Equally astounding is the fact that the Prime Minister confirmed this afternoon that, in the past 24 hours, 400,000 Britons have signed up to act as volunteers to support our NHS, which is an incredible statement of the shared sense of purpose we all feel in this unique national endeavour.

I want to address directly every individual working to deliver an essential public service or a business, or to support their local community during this crisis, from NHS employees, local government workers, care workers and community volunteers through to those keeping our supermarket shelves full: you are keeping this country running and collectively helping to shoulder the burden, and we thank you. The whole House will want to join me in recognising the contribution they have already made and will no doubt continue to make over this period of crisis. We need the help of the British public to ensure that we beat the virus as quickly as we can and, above all, we need them to stay inside whenever possible.

This is the worst public health crisis in any of our lifetimes. The Government are responding, and we aspire to make our measures as comprehensive as we possibly can. A national crisis needs a national response and we are offering UK-wide support to ensure that people in all four corners of the country are receiving help.

Whatever resources the NHS needs, it will get. As an aside, today we have agreed with local councils in England to provide free parking for our NHS and social care workers as they fight coronavirus. I am working closely with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Chancellor and other ministerial colleagues across Government to ensure that public services receive the funding they need to get their residents through this crisis. That means supporting those on the frontline; those who are in a dispensable. Generous tributes have been paid to them in excellent speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones)—I will return to some of the points she made—the hon. Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), for Gordon (Richard Thomson) and for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), as well as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), whom we are all glad to see back in his place after recovering from the virus, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens),

the right hon. Members for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the latter an expert in all matters to do with the welfare system, and the hon. Members for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) and for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). I thank everyone who has taken part in this afternoon's debate. I assure all hon. Members that the Government are absolutely resolved to do whatever is necessary to support public services and authorities through the response to the coronavirus.

In normal times, I am a convinced believer in an agile state supporting free enterprise, which delivers jobs and revenue for our public services. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central gave a paean to the power of the market, but she is right: these are not normal times. In this strictly limited period, we must all accustom ourselves to a relationship between the state and civic society that is unprecedented in peacetime.

Chi Onwurah: I have to correct the record. It was not a paean to the power of the free market; actually, I was identifying its critical failings when it comes to providing capacity for the state to respond to pandemics of the type we face.

Mr Clarke: I will of course take that point for the record. Let me in turn pay my own tribute to the power of the market.

In these unusual times, we have a shielding policy, for which my Department is responsible. Letters have been sent to 1.5 million high-risk individuals asking them to shield themselves and stay at home for the next 12 weeks. I think we all recognise the magnitude of what we are asking people to do. I emphasise to everyone who is in the process of becoming shielded that we are there for them and we will not let them down.

Chris Stephens: Let me ask the Minister for, I think, the fifth time today, what action are the Government considering to protect workers and employees who have one of those letters but whose employer is forcing them into work? What are they going to do for people put in that dreadful situation?

Mr Clarke: To put it simply, none of those individuals ought to be going to work at this time; the Government would stand with anyone who refused to go to work because they need to be shielded, and we will stand up for them if any employer is so foolish as to try to press that point.

Those who are being shielded will benefit from a website and a telephone helpline, both of which are now fully operational. We are working with all partners—councils, the food industry, local resilience and emergency partners and voluntary groups—to ensure that essential items can be delivered as soon as possible to those who need them. Deliveries of food will start this week, medicines will be delivered by community pharmacies, and groceries and essential household items will be delivered by local councils and food distributors working with supermarkets to ensure that no one needs to worry about getting the food they need. Parcels will be left on the doorstep.

The Government, the food industry, community pharmacies, councils and emergency services are working around the clock to get this scheme off the ground. I pay tribute to the civil servants who have been working tirelessly throughout this period. I am enormously impressed

by the dedication and resolve that they have shown. I can also confirm that, from today, we have deployed military planners to every area of the country to help to co-ordinate this work. We pay tribute also to our armed forces and the role that they will play in this effort.

As Members have highlighted, it is not only the incredibly hard-working medical professionals on the frontline against coronavirus who are under immense pressure. We in my Department know that local authorities, which are essential to the running of this country, are feeling the pressure too. We have already announced £3.4 billion to alleviate that pressure, comprising £1.6 billion of covid-19 pressures funding and the initial £1.8 billion grant for business rates relief measures. We know that immediate pressures require immediate cash, so we can now confirm that the funding will be with every local authority, in its bank account, by Friday. We have said that we will do everything we can to support the sector, and this is us doing it.

When it comes to grants for businesses, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has now issued guidance to all local authorities, and we will provide the full £13 billion of funding for the business grant support scheme at the beginning of April. We must acknowledge that the crisis will not just burden our social care system and affect our most vulnerable; it will also affect our local economies, so local authorities should be confident about contacting businesses in their patch and making arrangements for the grants to be paid as quickly as possible. Time really is a vital factor here.

Further to the targeted funding, we have set out detailed guidance for local authorities on the 100% business rates discount for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, which was published by my Department this week. Today, we have announced a further expansion to the discount to remove some of the previous exclusions from the relief, to ensure that businesses that are now required to close—including estate agents, letting agents and bingo halls—will pay no business rates this coming year. My Department will amend guidance as necessary this week. We will, of course, fully compensate local authorities for the costs of this measure.

More broadly, I acknowledge that asking businesses to close their doors is a huge ask—those businesses have often been built up over many years of hard work and sacrifice—but it is only through such measures that we will ensure public safety. By the action that the Government are taking, we will mitigate the effects of the crisis so that once it is over, businesses can bounce back and renew our economy.

The Government's measures not only are targeted at our businesses and public sectors but will support citizens at an individual level, too. We are working to support those who, through no fault of their own, are facing a sudden drop in income. The Chancellor has announced unprecedented measures to support people by making funding available to cover up to 80% of wages. In response to a point raised by the shadow Chancellor in his speech, I can confirm that apprentices will qualify for that if they are on PAYE. I will write to him on that point, but it is certain that they are included.

Mr Kevan Jones: I accept what the Minister is saying, but during my contribution I referred to the email that I received from Scott Hawthorne, who runs a recycling

business. He wants to do the right thing by his workers but he is still waiting and does not quite understand how to implement the scheme. I urge the Minister to get the information out to businesses as a matter of urgency, because those that want to do the right thing need to be able to implement it.

Mr Clarke: I take that point to heart. If the right hon. Gentleman sends me the details, I will write to him after this debate and ensure that that company is contacted personally so that we can provide the guidance needed for his constituents.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: My ex has been sent a letter from his employer saying, "We want to put you on the 80% but we don't yet know how this works. We do not know the details." I suggest that it is perhaps not just one employer that needs to be written to; all employers in this country need to be given greater guidance. That letter came from a top law firm that his employer had got in to try to work out the system, and that firm could not work it out either. I do not think it is about an individual case. Will the Minister please put on the public record the details of how employers will use the scheme?

Mr Clarke: I can confirm that other Government Departments, alongside my own, will have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and we will ensure that they are taken to heart.

This is a convenient point to discuss universal credit and some of the related issues, which the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown raised, as did the hon. Member for Glasgow South West. I can confirm that advances for all new universal credit claimants are now available online or by phone, with no requirement to attend the jobcentre. Earning rules for the self-employed have been temporarily relaxed for those who are sick or self-isolating. From 6 April, we are increasing the standard allowance for UC and the basic element in working tax credit for one year: both will increase by £20 a week on top of the planned annual uprating, and that will apply to all new and existing universal credit claimants and to existing working tax credit claimants, too. We recognise that there is going to be an enormous increase in the number of people claiming universal credit; we will continue to make sure that the system responds to this fast-changing situation.

Mr Dhesi: Will the Minister advise Members as to whether local authorities will be given full information about the number of universal credit claimants? As he rightly points out, many of us, along with local authorities—including mine in Slough—are expecting a huge hike in that number.

Mr Clarke: I can of course commit that we will share that information whenever we have the full dataset available. It is obviously important that we make sure the figures are accurate, but we will share all the relevant data so that local authorities can plan.

We have announced a £500 million hardship fund so that local authorities can provide council tax relief to vulnerable people and households in their area. Working-age

[Mr Simon Clarke]

people who already receive council tax support will have their council tax reduced by a further £150 and local authorities will have the flexibility to provide funding to support others, too.

On renters, we are aware that for many who are not receiving their regular income a financial strain will be put on all aspects of their lives. We want to protect tenants during this crisis. To address the concerns raised by the hon. Members for Croydon Central and for Mitcham and Morden, and the shadow Chancellor, I can confirm that the Government are clear that no renter who has lost income because of the coronavirus will be forced out of their home. The very clear guidance we have given to judges and bailiffs means it is extremely unlikely that any possession proceedings will continue during this period.

Sarah Jones *rose*—

Mr Clarke: I will give way in one moment. We expect a formal practice direction to the courts imminently, underscoring that point.

Sarah Jones: I thank the Minister for finishing his sentence so that I heard that last bit, as it was helpful. He said just a few minutes ago that letting agents and estate agents are now on the essential list of things that have to close. I did not think that they were; I thought that was the advice. Either way, people are being evicted right now and will not be included in that definition the Minister used. How on earth are they going to find anywhere else to go if there is nowhere open to help them? We need clear guidance from the Government that nobody should be evicted, for any reason, at this time.

Mr Clarke: I will write to the hon. Lady with full details on that point and make that letter public. That is a firm commitment to the House this afternoon.

I am conscious that time is pressing. On support for rough sleepers, I want to confirm that the support package is comprehensive and, of course, therefore extends to some of the most vulnerable members of society. Not all of us are so fortunate as to have a stable home in case we are sick, so we are developing a bespoke response and have launched a £3.2 million covid-19 rough sleeping fund. Dame Louise Casey is heading up our rough sleeping response to covid-19, and our aim is to make sure that everyone is protected and is in appropriate accommodation. On the point raised by the hon. Member for Croydon Central, hotels engaged in this process should stay open, and the Department is working closely to ensure that that is the case. We are working intensively across all local authorities in England, and Dame Louise is focusing on high-priority areas, both in and outside London. The hon. Lady raised the issue of Grenfell, and we are absolutely clear that building sites and priority work, where appropriate PHE guidance has been observed, can continue, where the work is genuinely essential. We will be issuing further detail on this point. We want to see the Grenfell issue of cladding continue to be addressed at this time, assuming that safe practice can be followed.

On the care system, we are providing £1.6 billion for local authorities' response to the covid-19 pandemic, to address the additional pressures they are facing. We

expect that the majority of that funding will be spent on providing adult social care services, which are going to be required. I can confirm that 26,000 care organisations—care homes, home care and hospices—have each received 300 fluid-repellent masks. Obviously, many more will be needed and we are dramatically ramping up the supply of those. The Army is now involved in making sure that they are distributed across the country as required.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden raised the issue of children's hospices in her question, and I can confirm that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is working on a support package for charities right now. We are working at pace and hope to bring forward plans shortly, recognising that, as she rightly said, time is of the essence in making sure that these places do not have to close. On children, young people and those who work with them, our priorities are their safety, minimising disruption to everyday life and not unduly impacting on their progression and education. That is why we have asked parents to keep their children at home wherever possible. Schools and all childcare providers have been asked to continue to provide care for a limited number of children: those who are vulnerable; and those whose parents are crucial to the covid-19 response and who cannot be safely cared for at home. We are extremely grateful for the work of teachers, childcare providers and local authorities, and we will continue to monitor closely what is happening on the ground. To be clear, the position is as follows: children should be sent to school only if they have to be because someone's work is genuinely crucial to our national response. If people are able to keep their children at home, they should do so.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor for raising the point I raised with Treasury Ministers yesterday about child benefit. Surely raising child benefit by at least £10 a week, as recommended by the Child Poverty Action Group, during this time—children are at home and the price of food is going up, as they will not now get free school meals or meals at school—would be quick and easy to do, unlike other schemes which are taking longer to set up?

Mr Clarke: I thank the hon. Lady for her suggestion, which will have been heard. I can confirm that free school meals ought to continue to be available during this time. Schools have discretion to make sure they find the appropriate way to do that, but I take her point on board. Costs will be higher for families at a time like this.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Minister said that only children of parents who are engaged in essential services should be going to school. Earlier in his remarks he talked about "essential" construction. Can he confirm that the children of construction workers working on an essential site will also be included?

Mr Clarke: It is key workers only. I have to correct the hon. Gentleman. It is only those who are doing the jobs specified in the list we have issued.

To conclude, the Government have responded rapidly to this crisis. An enormous amount has happened in the past two weeks. I am proud of what we are doing. We are ensuring the long-term protection of public services and businesses.

Siobhain McDonagh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Clarke: I think I must move on.

Once this crisis is passed, the United Kingdom can re-emerge with pride and purpose. The Government are working flat out to get the right support to the right people at the right time. We must address this crisis very frankly. If too many people become seriously unwell at one time, the NHS and our public services risk being overwhelmed. It is absolutely vital that we slow the spread of this disease. We must do so together as one nation. I offer my deep thanks for the constructive approach and hard work of our counterparts in Opposition. We must look out for one another, our loved ones, friends, family, neighbours and strangers, because that is how we will overcome this. I urge any local authority, if faced with immediate unmanageable pressures, to contact my officials at the earliest opportunity. We are likely to be sorely tested in the weeks ahead, but I ask Members to rest assured that Her Majesty's Government are prepared to do whatever it takes. The message to the public is very clear: we will support you and we will get through this together.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the emergency financial and social package needed to support people, families and business through the covid-19 outbreak.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am most grateful to you for granting this point of order. Robert Peston, the ITV journalist, is tweeting that Boris Johnson has confirmed that the Government will be making an announcement tomorrow on help for the self-employed. Mr Speaker, you will recall the ticking off that you gave to the Chancellor for making statements that should have been brought to this House. First, I just wondered, given the time, why the Government are not coming here this evening, if they are ready to make an announcement on help for the self-employed, especially given the fact that so many right hon. and hon. Members right across this House have been asking for that day after day. Secondly, if it is the case that, for whatever the reason, the Government cannot come to the House this evening, why are we not sitting tomorrow? Why did the Government seek to move the motion that the House would be going into recess tonight? It is simply unacceptable that while so many of our constituents are in financial peril, their elected representatives will not be able to hold the Government to account. Further, I wonder, given the circumstances and because oversight is now so critical, why we are not due to be here for more than three weeks. What can we do to make sure that the Opposition parties can scrutinise the Government? I ask through you, Mr Speaker, that at the very least Opposition party leaders are offered the opportunity of ongoing conference calls with the Government as these announcements are made. The way the Government are behaving is simply not acceptable.

Mr Speaker: Quite rightly, emotions are running very high, and quite rightly, Members have been asking what measures are going to be put in place. I do not think that a tweet by Peston is the way that business should be carried out. If there is something to be said, people should come here tonight. I assume—I stand to be corrected—that they have not got the necessary information.

I accept that, but if there is information, I would expect them to come. The right hon. Gentleman asks what we can do about the Adjournment motion. I have not got there yet. If he feels that way inclined, that might be a good time to question it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Following what the SNP spokesman just said, may we ask you, through your good offices, to arrange for the leaders of all the parties to be included in a discussion, online or whatever, with you and the Government so that, as crucial things come up, as they will over the next three weeks—important decisions and announcements will have to be made—we have a chance to understand what they are, to comment on them and to suggest changes if we want changes, so that there is at least that degree of accountability? You will be aware that today, during the statement by the Leader of the House and questions to the Prime Minister, Member after Member made it very clear that we might be in recess for three weeks but that that does not mean democracy is closed down. Democracy must go on in this crisis, and that means questions—tough questions, yes, but that is what we were elected to this place for.

Mr Speaker: I will be quite honest. This is a time when people in the United Kingdom expect the parties to come together to work on behalf of this country, and I do not disagree. This is about ensuring that there is dialogue across the political parties to ensure that we do the right thing by the people in this country.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I echo the sentiments you just outlined—this is a time for coming together and putting political differences aside—but we have been played here. This issue was highlighted by hon. Members last week and into this week. The Government have had time to look at it. I accept that there are complexities in the process, but to have it announced that the statement is going to be made tomorrow in a press conference is totally unacceptable. May I ask your advice? If we were to vote down the motion on the Adjournment for the Easter recess, would that make it possible for us to sit tomorrow to accept this statement?

Mr Speaker: It would take us through probably to next Tuesday.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise to seek your advice further to what has just been highlighted to your good self. It seems that this is emblematic of the way the Prime Minister is dealing with this national crisis. At no point has he come to this Chamber to make a statement and to be held to account, apart from the very limited questioning that is available at PMQs and at the press conferences he attends. What powers do you have, through your good offices, to ensure that the Prime Minister comes to the Chamber to make statements, and what powers do you have to reprimand him?

Mr Speaker: In fairness, I am a servant of the House, and the House will decide whether we sit or do not sit. The House will decide what it wishes. I will be quite honest. The Leader of the Opposition quite rightly made a plea that party leaders should come together by

[Mr Speaker]

phone to have discussions about how we move events forward, because events will begin to overtake us. We have to remember that we will have a vote shortly on whether to have the Easter recess, and I will abide by what the House decides.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I absolutely agree that, at this time of national crisis, parties should come together. I think the Prime Minister is in breach of that sentiment and trust by briefing journalists that he is going to make an announcement tomorrow. If we suspend before the Adjournment today, can we order the Prime Minister to come to the House to deliver the statement that he has already written and is planning to deliver at the press conference tomorrow? Can that be done, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: If we were to sit tomorrow, no doubt somebody might wish to table an urgent question. I will leave it there.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiment that this is a time for the parties, and indeed the country, to come together, but that requires us to share information, which is also part of my role as a Member of Parliament. After the Prime Minister's announcement on closing pubs and the lockdown, and the Chancellor's announcement about support for jobs, I received hundreds of emails asking for clarification—indeed, I received hundreds of emails about help for the self-employed before any announcement. What is your advice, Mr Speaker, about how I can perform my role as a Member of Parliament and share information, if we do not have the Prime Minister here to share it with the House?

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Would the hon. Gentleman like to make a point of order?

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it within your powers to suspend this sitting while an urgent request is made to the Prime Minister or Chancellor to come and announce what he has already said he is going to announce tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: I suspect the answer will be that the Prime Minister is not ready to tell the House. I suspect that—I could be wrong. [Interruption.] The Leader of the House is indicating that he wishes to comment on these points of order, and it might be beneficial to listen to him. As I said, the House has got it upon itself to decide whether or not it wishes to accept the dates for the Easter recess. That is a course of action that the House may wish to take. I am not encouraging or saying it, but it is an option.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether I can be as helpful as possible to the House, and to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). During Prime Minister's

questions, the Prime Minister committed to bring forward a package for the self-employed within 48 hours, and I reiterated that in the business statement that I gave shortly afterwards. It will now be brought forward within 24 hours, and that is in response to considerable pressure and interest from this House, which asked for it to be done urgently. I have been informed that it is a complicated package that is not in fact ready for announcement today. Had it been ready today, it would have been brought forward today. The Government are keen to get on with this announcement, which will provide support and comfort to a large number of the self-employed. There is no discourtesy to the House. That was what the Prime Minister told us during Prime Minister's questions, and the announcement will now be made slightly faster than was promised.

On holding the Government to account, I recognise, as did the Prime Minister, the major contribution made by Opposition parties to the development of policy in relation to the coronavirus. The Government are committed to working on a cross-party basis in dealing with this matter and, if further measures need to come before the House, they will be carried out on a similar basis. That is an important part of how the Government operate.

On the key question of how the Government will be held to account during the recess, I said during business questions that I would make available to all right hon. and hon. Members the hotline numbers that people can use, and email addresses for contacting Departments, so that Members may continue to raise questions or—perhaps more importantly—to seek information and answers for constituents during the recess. To facilitate that and to make it easier for right hon. and hon. Members, a consolidated list will be circulated. The Government are ready to be scrutinised.

Finally, although some right hon. and hon. Members would like the session to continue, we brought forward the date of the recess, having received many representations from many Members of Parliament who felt that, once we had completed the urgent business, we should, like the rest of the country, not be here. That was something we took on board, and that message came from across the House.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You made it very clear in your statement exactly how you wanted matters to proceed when announcements are made. I think the Chancellor did say that. I did say that he did not accept what you said or admit it, but he gave you an assurance that that is what he would do.

I say to the Leader of the House that this matter has been raised for three weeks now. The shadow Chancellor wrote to the Government—to the Chancellor—a week ago with a package. I appreciate that civil servants have a lot to take on, but if it has been announced to Robert Peston, surely it must have been signed off. Could the Leader of the House please say exactly when the package was signed off? If they are making a press announcement, it must have been signed off.

We have heard that condolences should be sent after Steve Dick, the deputy ambassador to Hungary, sadly died of the virus. We therefore understand how important this matter is.

Mr Speaker: It is very important. Ian Blackford, did you want to come back on this?

Ian Blackford: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am very grateful for the statement from the Leader of the House. What is different is that the expectation was that the announcement would come on Friday, when we would not normally expect Government statements. This is rather regrettable, to say the least, because it is a very important announcement that is coming tomorrow. We should be here to question the Government on it.

I would like an undertaking from the Government that, at the very least, they will consult Opposition party leaders when they are going to make any significant announcement, in the way that I and the Leader of the Opposition have said. We want to work with the Government. There is frustration that we are outside this; we are not in a position to give advice when it would be pertinent to do so. The Government must think very carefully about how to create the circumstances whereby we can all work together through this crisis.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand some of the difficulties, but perhaps we could get an assurance that we will at least have a copy of the proposals in advance, before the media. We will honour whatever embargo is placed upon us, as we always do with statements that are provided to us. That would give us the opportunity to frame any subsequent questions we want to put to the Government, to respond to any concerns that are raised by our constituents and to prepare a briefing for our own Members of Parliament.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Health Secretary held a very innovative press conference that was completely online. On Monday, I and many other Members held a very good meeting with the immigration Minister via Skype. Can there not be a reassurance that Ministers will undertake to hold briefings over telephone calls or online for Members—it does not have to be a sitting of Parliament—so that we can ask those questions directly, because often one gets a better or more nuanced response in person than through written correspondence? It would help resolve some of the issues if Members had access to Ministers directly after an announcement in that kind of mode.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This is deeply unfortunate. I fully understand the work that officials will be doing and the pressure on Ministers. Whatever Ministers say to us, time and again it seems that people in No. 10 are working without any regard for the House of Commons and treating it as an inconvenience. We saw that with the Chancellor's statement, when he did the press conference in spite of explicit assurances, as we understand it, that he would address Parliament first. We therefore need a statement, even if it is an interim one. If the announcement is going to be made tomorrow, there may be final details in some areas where he has to say, "We haven't finalised that," but he should be able to outline the main points. Frankly, we have a Treasury Minister on the Bench now and we should be getting answers to some of these questions, so that there can be proper scrutiny and accountability.

Mr Kevan Jones: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the House is an honourable man. There is a sense of anguish out there among our constituents who are self-employed. He will have had the same emails and phone calls as I have had. The way this is being handled is terrible. Reassurance is being given and I accept that it is not easy to bring these schemes into being, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) has suggested, the announcement could be made tonight instead of tomorrow. A Treasury Minister—the Economic Secretary—is present, or somebody else could be made available in the next few minutes. If the Leader of the House knew that the announcement was going to be made tomorrow, it would have been in order for him to amend the business motion so that we could sit tomorrow to look at it. He is supposed to be our voice in Government, and I suggest that he should have done that. It would have been a good way forward. The alternative is that we vote against the Adjournment tonight.

Mr Speaker: I will come back to the Leader of the House. I think it is quite clear that those channels should be opened by the leaders of the parties. Some good offers have been made and I hope that the Leader of the House can respond.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. If I may respond immediately to the point about what I knew earlier, I will be indiscreet and confess to this House that, after I said that the proposals would be brought forward in 48 hours, when I got back to my office, I was told that they thought I had said rather more than I was briefed to say, because at that stage it was not certain when the proposals would come through. It is being worked on as quickly as possible, but it is not yet ready. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary is not able to make a statement because the plans have not been completed. What has been announced, and what was announced by the Prime Minister at his press conference, is that the plans will be announced tomorrow and they will be completed in time for tomorrow's press conference.

As I have been sitting here, my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has said that he—and this is typical of other Ministers—is always willing to brief his opposite number and to ensure that correspondence is going on so that people are kept informed. Ministers are indeed willing to do teleconferences, to keep Members up to date. It is important that we keep everybody informed and that we work on a cross-party basis. We are keen to do that, but we cannot bring announcements to the House before they are written.

Jeremy Corbyn: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. A very clear request was made by my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor that we get embargoed copies an hour or half an hour—whatever it happens to be—in advance, as we do with ministerial statements, so that informed comments can be made by Opposition parties. We fully understand all the difficulties of getting this package together by tomorrow morning, but I do think we should be informed as to what is in it so that we can make what may well be helpful and informed comments. We, too, represent deeply stressed constituents at the moment.

Dawn Butler: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the House says that it is not possible to brief the House before this is ready, but if that is the case why has the press been briefed before this House? Does he not think that things have been done in reverse? He is holding the House in contempt. He is the Minister who loves the procedures of this House, so why have the Government briefed the press before the House?

Mr Speaker: The only thing I would say in their defence is that I do not think there was much detail in Peston's tweet. I call Kevan Jones.

Mr Kevan Jones: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has made a very good suggestion. Could the Leader of the House indicate whether he would be able to take that forward? I think it would be a helpful way of moving this on.

Mr Speaker: I think the Leader of the House has a note that he might be able to share.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Inspiration has come to me. It is possible for verbal briefings to take place, but it has to be borne in mind that in some instances the plans are finalised only minutes before they are released. It is not like announcements to this House. This is a particular crisis. It is an unusual crisis and decisions are being made and taken as rapidly as possible, so I cannot undertake that advance copies will be given, but I can undertake that Ministers will be happy to speak to their opposite numbers.

Mr Speaker: On that basis, I am going to put some questions. Somebody has asked why we cannot suspend. We cannot go beyond 7 pm or the whole thing would collapse. There are some things that you may choose to support or not. That is up to the House.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS)

Ordered,

That:

(1) the Resolution of the House of 16 January 2020 (Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)) is amended as follows:

(a) leave out "27 March 2020"; and

(b) leave out " and 29 January 2021" and insert ", 29 January 2021 and 5 February 2021";

(2) the Orders for Second Reading of Bills on each of the days listed under Day 1 in the table below are read and discharged;

(3) each such Bill is ordered to be read a second time on the corresponding day listed under Day 2 in the table; and

(4) those Bills are set down to be read a second time on the appropriate Day 2 in the order in which they were set down to be read a second time on the corresponding Day 1.

Day 1

Friday 27 March 2020
Friday 24 April 2020
Friday 15 May 2020
Friday 12 June 2020
Friday 26 June 2020
Friday 10 July 2020
Friday 11 September 2020
Friday 16 October 2020
Friday 30 October 2020
Friday 27 November 2020
Friday 15 January 2021
Friday 29 January 2021

Day 2

Friday 24 April 2020
Friday 15 May 2020
Friday 12 June 2020
Friday 26 June 2020
Friday 10 July 2020
Friday 11 September 2020
Friday 16 October 2020
Friday 30 October 2020
Friday 27 November 2020
Friday 15 January 2021
Friday 29 January 2021
Friday 5 February 2021

—(*James Morris.*)

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (EASTER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising today, do adjourn until Tuesday 21 April 2020.—(*James Morris.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Before the House adjourns, can I wish every Member and your families well and once again reiterate that the staff in this House have done a fantastic job? [*Applause.*] No clapping, whatever we do! There are things that we can learn and there is technology that we can bring in, but the fact is that we do not have the staff to carry out a lot of things that we want to happen at this moment. They are with us during the Easter break and we will see what we can do. Of course, we have been told time and again that there are certain measures we should have taken. Security-wise, we are not licensed. I make an appeal to the Leader of the House: Downing Street does have a licence, and if we could share that, it would enable our technology to move very quickly and give Members the reach that they need to become part of the virtual Parliament and virtual Select Committees. If that could be taken on board, I would be very grateful. Thank you, everybody. Please keep in touch with the leaders. A lot has been said tonight that must and will be taken on board. Thank you, everybody. I wish you well.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved,

That this House do now adjourn.—(*James Morris.*)

6.31 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 25 March 2020

CABINET OFFICE

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The first meeting of the withdrawal agreement joint committee will take place on 30 March 2020 by remote means.

The meeting will be co-chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and Vice-President of the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič.

The agenda will include four items:

- Introduction and opening remarks from co-chairs
- UK/EU updates on implementation of the withdrawal agreement
- Tasks and responsibilities of the specialised committees
- AOB

The UK delegation will include:

- The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, (Michael Gove)
- The Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt)

[HCWS190]

TREASURY

Financial Services Regulation

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In preparation for leaving the European Union, HM Treasury made over 50 EU exit statutory instruments under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to ensure the UK's financial services regulatory regime stood ready for all scenarios at exit day. This included introducing a range of temporary permissions and transitional regimes to minimise any disruption to firms and consumers as we leave the EU.

The UK has now left the EU and entered a transition period, which will last until 31 December 2020. The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 ("EUWAA 2020") delayed those parts of the EU exit statutory instruments that would have come into force immediately before, on, or after exit day so they instead come into force at the end of the transition period. As a result of further secondary legislation made under the EUWAA 2020, the temporary permissions and transitional regimes will also now apply at the end of the transition period.

While, in general, the same laws and rules will apply at the end of the transition period, HM Treasury recognises it will be important, irrespective of the agreement that is reached between the EU and UK, for the regulators to have the flexibility to smooth any adjustments to the UK's regulatory regime for financial services at the end of the transition period.

The Department will therefore retain the regulators' "temporary transitional power" (TTP), which was introduced via the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, and

shift its application such that it is available for use by the UK regulators for a period of two years from the end of the transition period.

The TTP will allow the Bank of England, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority to phase-in changes to UK regulatory requirements so that firms can adjust to the UK's post-transition period regime in an orderly way, in line with the objectives already set by Parliament.

[HCWS188]

Oil and Gas Decommissioning Relief Deeds

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): At Budget 2013, the Government announced they would begin signing decommissioning relief deeds. These deeds represented a new contractual approach to provide oil and gas companies with certainty on the level of tax relief they will receive on future decommissioning costs.

Since October 2013, the Government have entered into 96 decommissioning relief deeds.

Oil and Gas UK estimates that these deeds have so far unlocked approximately £8.1 billion of capital, which can now be invested elsewhere.

The Government committed to report to Parliament every year on progress with the decommissioning relief deeds. The report for financial year 2018-19 is provided below.

Number of decommissioning relief agreements entered into: the Government entered into five decommissioning relief agreements in 2018-19.

Total number of decommissioning relief agreements in force at the end of that year: 92 decommissioning relief agreements were in force at the end of the year.

Number of payments made under any decommissioning relief agreements during that year, and the amount of each payment: one payment was made under a decommissioning relief agreement in 2018-19, for £43.2 million^[1]. This was made in relation to the provision recognised by HM Treasury in 2015, as a result of a company defaulting on its decommissioning obligations.

Total number of payments that have been made under any decommissioning relief agreements as at the end of that year, and the total amount of those payments: four payments have been made under any decommissioning relief agreement as at the end of the 2018-19 financial year, totalling £94.0 million.

Estimate of the maximum amount liable to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements: the Government have not made any changes to the tax regime that would generate a liability to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements. HM Treasury's 2019-20 accounts will recognise a provision of £285.9 million in respect of decommissioning expenditure incurred as a result of a company defaulting on their decommissioning obligations^[2]. The majority of this is expected to be realised over the next four years.

^[1] This figure takes into account a revision made to a claim in 2017-18 that was reported in a previous written ministerial statement [HCWS1435].

^[2] This figure takes into account payments made subsequent to the financial year covered by this written ministerial statement.

[HCWS189]

Pension Reforms

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are developing proposals to address the unlawful age discrimination identified by the Court of Appeal in the 2015 reforms to the judicial and firefighters' pension schemes.

On 15 July 2019, the Government announced they would take steps to remove this discrimination retrospectively [HCWS1725]. It confirmed that this would apply to pension scheme members with relevant service across all those public service pension schemes that were introduced in 2014 and 2015, regardless of whether individuals had made a claim. This is a complex undertaking, and it is important to get it right.

Since February 2020 relevant pension schemes have been conducting technical discussions with member and employer representatives to seek initial views on the Government's high-level proposals for removing the discrimination.

I am grateful for the constructive engagement of trade unions, staff associations, public service employers and other stakeholders in these discussions. The Government are considering the initial views of stakeholders and continuing to work through the details of the technical design elements of the proposals. Detailed proposals will be published later in the year and will be subject to public consultation. The Government will welcome views on these proposals.

For the avoidance of doubt, members of public service pension schemes with relevant service will not need to make a claim in order for the eventual changes to apply to them.

I would like to reassure members that their pension entitlements are safe. The proposals the Government are considering would allow relevant members to make a choice as to whether they accrued service in the legacy or reformed schemes for periods of relevant service, depending on what is better for them. The Government will provide more detail later in the year, but if an individual's pension circumstances change as a result, the Government may also need to consider whether previous tax years back to 2015-16 should be reopened in relation to their pension.

The Government will also set out their proposal to remove the discrimination for future service in the forthcoming consultation.

In January 2019, the Government announced a pause to the cost control mechanism in public service pension schemes, due to uncertainty about benefit entitlements arising from the McCloud judgment. Alongside their proposals for addressing discrimination, the Government will also provide an update on the cost control mechanism.

[HCWS187]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Rules: Simplification

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): This Government are committed to creating a firm and fair immigration

system that prioritises the skills people have to offer, not where their passport comes from, and restores public trust by ensuring the immigration system truly works for this country.

The immigration rules form one of the foundations of our immigration system. So I am pleased today to publish our response to the Law Commission's report and recommendations on simplifying the immigration rules. I am extremely grateful to the Law Commission for their detailed and constructive work.

The first recommendation from the Law Commission is we should overhaul the immigration rules, consolidating and streamlining, based on the principles it has identified. I am pleased to announce we accept this recommendation. Our aim is to complete this overhaul by January 2021.

Simplified rules will be at the heart of Britain's new, global points-based immigration system.

For far too long, users have struggled to understand the confusing and complex immigration rules. They create barriers for employers who want to bring skilled workers to the UK; to colleges who want to encourage international students to come to the UK, and to the brightest and best migrants from around the world who want to make a contribution to the UK.

We will cut through the complexity and make the rules clear, consistent and accessible, to encourage those who have the skills or talent to benefit the UK, and to crack down on illegal migration and remove those who abuse our hospitality by committing criminal offences.

In line with the Law Commission's recommendations, I have already established a Simplification of the rules review committee to look at the drafting and structure of the rules. The committee will ensure the simplification principles put in place now continue to apply in future, while providing ongoing support to continuously improve and adapt the rules in our changing world.

The Law Commission made 41 recommendations for change. We accept 24 of the recommendations, and partially accept the other 17 recommendations. Where we have not fully accepted a recommendation that does not mean we disagree with the ambition behind the recommendations; it generally means we want to explore how it can be delivered in practice.

Simplification of the immigration rules, the global points-based immigration system, and the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill which will end free movement, will deliver the biggest shake-up of the immigration system in a generation.

The Government's response has been published on gov.uk and can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/simplifying-the-immigration-rules-a-response>.

A copy of the response will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS186]

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