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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 29 April 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The House entered into hybrid scrutiny proceedings (Order, 21 April).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Covid-19: Developing Countries

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment her Department has made of the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on developing countries. [902038]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I would first like to put on record my congratulations and that of all in the House on the safe arrival of the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds's son this morning.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House with the following announcement. The coronavirus pandemic shows the vital role that vaccines play in protecting us against disease. The UK is today committing new support to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. The UK's pledge of the equivalent of £330 million a year for the next five years continues our leadership and commitment to global health security. The UK's pledge will help to ensure the delivery of life-saving vaccinations in 68 countries, saving lives and strengthening health systems. It will therefore help to protect the UK and our NHS from future waves of coronavirus. I look forward to the UK-hosted Vaccine Alliance summit on 4 June, which will help to raise all the funds that Gavi needs to vaccinate 300 million children and save up to 8 million lives.

Patricia Gibson [V]: The United Nations has warned that the world is at risk of widespread famine "of biblical proportions", with the number suffering from hunger potentially rising from 135 million to 250 million due to coronavirus. What discussions is the Secretary of State having across the international community to work to alleviate this humanitarian catastrophe?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Coronavirus is a global crisis that knows no borders and will have a profound effect on all countries, including the most vulnerable. That is why the UK is leading the international response and

providing £744 million of UK aid to counter the health, humanitarian and economic impacts. I have mobilised my Department and our country offices to do whatever it takes to help tackle this pandemic and the secondary risks. We have the funding, the expertise and the British determination to stand by our friends in developing countries to prevent a second wave of infection.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: During the coronavirus pandemic, it is imperative that countries and communities engage co-operatively with one another to avoid a scramble to procure goods, personal protective equipment and medical equipment and ensure that there is not a worldwide shortage that prices out the world's most vulnerable. In the light of the announcement made by the President of the United States about ending funding to the World Health Organisation, can the Secretary of State outline what representations she and her Government have made to him regarding the need to follow collaborative principles, which will benefit us all?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK has confidence in the WHO and the work that it is doing globally to bring together every country to do the best they can to look after their communities and citizens. The WHO is co-ordinating PPE for all those countries, and we are supporting it by putting funding into the central pot, so that it can ensure that the countries that are most in need will have the PPE that they require.

Covid-19: Aid Programmes

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the (a) delivery and (b) effectiveness of UK aid programmes and projects. [902039]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure the effectiveness of international development assistance during the covid-19 pandemic. [902043]

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the level of funding made available by her Department to tackle the covid-19 pandemic overseas. [902057]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): There is no country better equipped to help the world out of this crisis than the UK. Over the past 10 years, this Government have made the Department for International Development a global leader in international development and reaffirmed its commitment as one of the world's biggest development donors. It is no surprise that the UK is at the forefront of the global response and has committed up to £744 million of UK aid so far, including the highest level of funding for the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations to find a vaccine. We are working with other donors and refocusing our programmes on the urgent response to coronavirus.

Mr Speaker: We now go over to Sarah Champion.

Sarah Champion [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, we have no sound, so we will go over to Richard Bacon.

Mr Bacon [V]: I welcome the Secretary of State's Gavi announcement. Does she agree that the long-term outlook for DFID's joint funding of vaccine research projects—with, for example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—will be more secure with a separate international aid department than if DFID were merged into the Foreign Office?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Our response to covid-19, including on vaccines, treatments and testing, is a great example of joint working between DFID and the FCO, as well as with Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy experts. We are able to combine our world-class diplomatic network with DFID's global leadership on development. We are proud of the UK's close partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, including on the Wellcome therapeutics accelerator initiative, to which we committed up to £40 million with the aim of bringing 100 million courses of covid-19 treatment to those who will need it the most in 2020.

Wendy Chamberlain [V]: I welcome DFID's announcement on supporting efforts to curb the spread of covid-19, but we need to increase support for non-governmental organisations. They have been granted just £20 million, but say they need £100 million to move quickly and effectively to mitigate the effects of this humanitarian crisis. Today, I have sent a cross-party letter signed by more than 100 parliamentarians from both Houses calling for further funding to be made available. The world looks to the UK in terms of international response, so will the Secretary of State reconsider NGO funding?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: So far, we have made commitments in three areas of funding for resilience of vulnerable countries through international appeals, from the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the UNHCR, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, to which we have pledged £55 million. We are doing a £100 million project with Unilever, for which DFID is providing £50 million, to help to reach more than 1 billion people with sanitation training and tools. That goes alongside more than £300 million which we are providing for vaccines and therapeutics. DFID continues to lead the way forward in how all countries must help to tackle this great invisible killer.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: With virtually no testing capabilities, limited supplies of ventilators and scarce hospital beds, the impact of the coronavirus on the millions of refugees who are living in overcrowded camps will be catastrophic. Since my letter highlighting this state of affairs at the start of the month, what steps has the Secretary of State taken to increase spaces for screening, isolation and quarantine for the world's most vulnerable people?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In these early stages, DFID has led the world in its commitment to supporting organisations that can reach in to the most vulnerable communities, including the Refugee Council. We have provided £75 million to the WHO, £25 million to UNICEF

and £20 million to the UNHCR as initial commitments to help those who we hope are most able to reach the most vulnerable as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: We will now go back across to Sarah Champion.

Sarah Champion [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Bond's recent covid-19 survey reveals that 86% of UK NGO members are cutting back or considering cutting back in-country work, so how is DFID making sure that 30 years of work in alleviating poverty does not unravel as health systems come under more strain in lower-income countries?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There is a real challenge for those of us who are committed to helping vulnerable countries to become stronger and more self-sufficient. We have had to bring some of our team home, but many are still in country. We are finding as many ways as possible to support in-country work on the economic and the healthcare sides, to make sure that those countries do not fall over and that the work that has painstakingly been built up to help them to develop in strength and self-sufficiency does not go backward.

East Africa: Food Security

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the food security situation in east Africa. [902040]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The devastating locust outbreak in east Africa has paralysed communities that are already facing the daily threat of starvation. With British expertise and funding, we are supporting the international effort to track, stop and kill dangerous swarms of locusts. With rising temperatures driving the infestations, Britain is stepping up to help vulnerable communities to prepare for and adapt to the catastrophic impact of climate change.

Mr Robertson [V]: As the Secretary of State says, millions of people in east Africa already live with food insecurity, and poor seasonal rains recently have been followed by the locust infestation. Can the Secretary of State use the DFID budget to provide urgent food aid of nutritional quality to people who, through no fault of their own, face the most basic problem?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: DFID programmes are supporting enhanced regional trade and access to nutritional food in east Africa. In Ethiopia, the UK is supporting the productive safety net programme to provide food and cash to 8 million of the poorest people, and the UK's recent £12 million contribution to UNICEF will provide malnourished children with nutritious food. We continue to work with Governments in the region to ensure that essential supplies reach those in need.

Covid-19: Education for Girls

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the Government's commitment to ensure that girls receive 12 years of quality education throughout the world. [902042]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Government are steadfast in our commitment to ensuring that girls throughout the world receive 12 years of quality education. As well as supporting multilateral education programmes, the UK Girls' Education Challenge, which has projects that span 17 of the world's poorest countries and reaches over a million marginalised girls, is responding to the current pandemic. British expertise is working so that schools are able to reopen without further delay when it is safe to do so.

Marco Longhi [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, whether in Dudley or Malawi, one of the key success factors impacting on children's education is that parents understand the value of education? If so, what is the Government's approach in relation to that specific point?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As we all know, parents are a key success factor in children's learning around the world. UK aid programmes draw on evidence that shows that school attendance and learning can improve when parents and children know about the benefits of education to incomes and when they have local information about the choice of school quality. DFID programmes also address the cost and time barriers to education, especially for girls, to promote the vital role of teachers in children's learning.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: Ebola showed the wider impact of infectious diseases on women, because schools closed and teenage pregnancies spiked, but the impact of covid-19 will be even greater in overpopulated refugee camps. In Bangladesh, nearly 1 million Rohingya now live in cramped conditions in Cox's Bazar, with 70,000 people per square kilometre. In that tiny area, women's education suffers, but gender-based violence will also rise—similar to the current pattern in the United Kingdom. What specific action is the Secretary of State taking to deal with that issue?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The covid crisis has removed 1.5 billion children from school, putting the most disadvantaged girls at risk of dropping out of school permanently. School closures will significantly reduce learning hours, particularly for the most disadvantaged children, and we risk many dropping out permanently. Prior to the crisis, 258 million children and young people globally were already out of school—over half of them girls. The Ebola crisis showed us that female pupils bear the brunt of school closures during disease outbreaks, leading to higher levels of sexual exploitation, abuse, teenage pregnancy and early marriage, so we will continue to prioritise education for all as part of the international response.

Covid-19: Research

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support innovative research in (a) the UK and (b) throughout the world in the development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics for covid-19. [902041]

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that a vaccine developed for covid-19 will be available globally on an equitable and affordable basis. [902044]

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support innovative research in (a) the UK and (b) throughout the world in the development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics for covid-19. [902047]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Wendy Morton): Science can help us to deal with this crisis. To date, the UK has committed more than £330 million to innovative research and development of vaccines, rapid diagnostics and promising therapeutics for the coronavirus. The UK is the world's top donor to CEPI, which is helping to produce a vaccine, including at Oxford and Imperial. We are also funding innovative research on virus tests and antibody tests right here in the UK, which could be suitable for use in developing countries. On Friday, the UK proudly stood with the WHO, the UN and 20 countries to work for global access to vaccines to end the pandemic, save lives and start the global economic recovery.

Elliot Colburn [V]: Carshalton and Wallington residents know that the development of a coronavirus vaccine is the greatest opportunity to save lives across the world. Will the Minister confirm that the UK is one of the largest global donors to the international Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, which is at the forefront of this global research?

Wendy Morton: I can confirm that the UK Government have committed £250 million to the international Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, or CEPI, to rapidly develop coronavirus vaccines. This is the largest contribution of any country to CEPI's covid-19 efforts to date, and it is a major contribution to global efforts to accelerate vaccine discovery. In ensuring that a vaccine is available to all, including the world's poorest countries, we are asking all Governments to contribute to this important international goal as a down payment against the wider funding needs of the covid-19 response.

Steve McCabe [V]: We have all witnessed the battle for access to the drug Orkambi for children in this country. What consideration have the Government given to requests for a patent-free vaccine, thus ensuring that the millions of pounds ploughed in by British taxpayers recognise the truly global nature of the crisis and secure a vaccine for all, rather than a fight over excessive pricing and huge profits for four or five pharmaceutical corporations?

Wendy Morton: This is a very important point because of course a globally accessible vaccine, alongside effective tests and treatments, is needed to end this global pandemic and to start global economic recovery. This will need unprecedented global collaboration and resourcing to drive the speed and scale that are needed, and the UK is at the forefront of global efforts to meet this challenge. Now is the time for us to come together to develop and deliver vaccines, tests and treatments that are safe, effective, affordable and accessible to all.

Henry Smith [V]: The UK is the World Health Organisation's second largest funder, yet that agency has been found wanting and subject to political interference by the Chinese Communist party. After this pandemic,

will the Government look at a new world health order, as suggested by the recent Foreign Affairs Committee report?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is right to recognise that international co-operation is absolutely vital to tackle covid-19. That is why we are working with the WHO and other international organisations to develop and deliver a globally accessible vaccine, alongside effective tests and treatments, and because of this we want to ensure they are safe, effective, affordable and accessible for all, including the world's poorest.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: This week is World Immunisation Week. Every year millions of lives are saved thanks to immunisations, and it is recognised widely as one of the most successful and cost-effective health interventions. With DFID funding going into the global effort to tackle this health crisis, can the Secretary of State explain what safeguards she has implemented to ensure that UK public contributions to the research into and development of covid-19 diagnostics, treatments and vaccines will be guaranteed to every person, and to assure the British public that public money is not just going into lining the pockets of big pharmaceutical companies?

Wendy Morton: Of course, while we are focusing on covid-19, there is the broader issue of vaccines. The UK is already one of the biggest global donors. To date, we have pledged £744 million to support the international response to covid-19. We have also funded £40 million for the Wellcome and Mastercard therapeutics accelerator initiative, up to £23 million for the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics, and up to £5 million through the joint initiative on research for epidemic preparedness. Because we are faced with a global pandemic, we absolutely need an international response, and it is about making sure that vaccines reach all those who need them.

Covid-19: Overseas Territories

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the overseas territories to tackle the covid-19 pandemic. [902050]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Wendy Morton): We will always stand by the overseas territories. A range of Government Departments, led by DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, are supporting the overseas territories to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Support includes essential medical supplies, public health advice, security and access support, and financial aid to mitigate the economic impact in the most vulnerable territories.

Robert Courts [V]: The Royal Navy is providing a pivotal role in providing medical assistance to British overseas territories. Will the Minister join me in recognising the dedication and skill of the servicemen and women of RFA Argus, which is providing that medical assistance to the Caribbean?

Wendy Morton: I know that my hon. Friend takes a keen interest in defence matters, and I absolutely do agree that the Royal Navy continues to provide great service to the territories, particularly in the Caribbean. I, too, commend the servicemen and women of RFA Argus,

who are providing vital support to the overseas territories. RFA Argus is boosting the resilience of the territories as they prepare for hurricane season. The FCO and DFID are providing further support to the territories to help deal with the impact of covid-19. In addition, an MOD security assistance team will be supporting local authorities in some of the territories as they respond to the coronavirus.

Developing Countries: Sanitation and Hygiene

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent steps she has taken to help ensure that people in developing countries have adequate access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities during the covid-19 pandemic. [902053]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Wendy Morton): Hand washing with soap and water, as we are all recognising, is the first line of defence against coronavirus transmission. The UK has world-leading commercial and scientific expertise on water, sanitation and hygiene. DFID has launched a £100 million scheme with British soap company Unilever to promote hygiene in developing countries, and has given a further £20 million to UNICEF to strengthen its coronavirus response in these areas. We are helping people around the world to defeat this virus.

John Mc Nally [V]: The International Rescue Committee has highlighted that hand-washing facilities are absolutely crucial in preventing the spread of diseases in the developing world. Our experience of Ebola shows that NGOs currently working on the ground are best placed to scale up an emergency response, so I welcome the funding given to the Red Cross and others, but what plans does the Secretary of State have to increase funding to other local NGOs working within communities?

Wendy Morton: Good hygiene is the single most effective action an individual can take to prevent covid-19 transmission; that is absolutely an important point. Water sanitation and hygiene are a key part of DFID's work and vital in humanitarian crises. DFID funds the provision of safe water and sanitation in disaster areas across the globe. Since 2015, DFID has helped over 51 million poor people in Africa and Asia get access to a drinking water supply or toilet for the first time. But we recognise there is still more to do.

Covid-19: Nutrition Programmes

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that nutrition programmes are integrated into the global response to the covid-19 pandemic. [902054]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Wendy Morton): The UK has long been a world leader when it comes to nutrition, which is why I am looking forward to supporting the Nutrition for Growth summit later this year. We are working hard to stop poor diets making people in developing countries more vulnerable to coronavirus, and we will not allow malnutrition to exacerbate the crisis. For example, we are working through UNICEF to get life-saving supplies to treat acute malnutrition in children across the Sahel, Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen.

Jessica Morden [V]: As the Minister said, malnourished people are clearly at a greater risk of serious health problems due to coronavirus than healthy people. How is DFID specifically supporting its partners to adapt their nutritional programmes in the light of covid-19 and working to minimise disruption to supply chains so that we do not see a surge in malnutrition cases?

Wendy Morton: This is an important point. We know that for every percentage point contraction in global GDP from covid-19 we would expect to see as a result, sadly, up to an additional 4 million stunted children, and acute malnutrition is likely to increase. Between 2015 and March 2019, DFID reached 50.6 million women, adolescent girls and young children with nutrition services in 25 countries, and this includes life-saving treatment for acute malnutrition.

Global Supply Chains

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the global supply chains of UK businesses. [902045]

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the global supply chains of UK businesses? [902049]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Duddridge): Keeping supply chains open is essential for British consumers to access what they need. It will also help British business to bounce back quickly. We must protect the lives and livelihoods of people in developing countries who work in those supply chains, so we are working across Government within the G20, the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank on development-focused trade support, including flows of medical supplies. We are also working with British business to support vulnerable communities overseas that provide goods to the UK.

Dr Spencer [V]: Domestic and international supply lines will clearly be crucial to the economic recovery of both ourselves and the world as we bounce back from coronavirus. Is the Minister working with colleagues from the Department for Transport and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to also support logistics firms such as those in my constituency and the vital role that they perform in keeping our country running and open for international business?

James Duddridge: I thank the logistics firms across the country, particularly those in Runnymede and Weybridge, for the work that they do. This ministerial team will continue to work with the Department for International Trade to keep supply chains open so that firms can restart exporting as soon as the operating context allows. We will also work with the Department for Transport and BEIS to understand the impacts on UK logistics firms and the critical role that they play in facilitating trade.

Siobhan Baillie [V]: The pandemic is affecting supply chains across the world at the moment, including those that provide vital goods to the UK and businesses in Gloucestershire. What is my hon. Friend doing to make sure that the work in the affected industries in developing countries is supported during the crisis?

James Duddridge: We are engaging with businesses in the UK and in developing countries to understand the challenges that they face to protect incomes and livelihoods. For example, in Bangladesh, through the better jobs in Bangladesh programme, DFID will be supporting 1,000 factories and their workers to return to work safely when they are able to do so. We are also urgently examining what funding is needed and how we can have the biggest impact working in partnership with businesses and addressing these issues in the most vulnerable countries.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Mr Speaker: We now come to questions to the Prime Minister. On behalf of everyone in the House of Commons, may I say congratulations to the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds on the birth of their son? It is such happy news amid such uncertainty—2020 is certainly a year that they will never forget. I will call the First Secretary of State to answer the engagements question. I call James Cartlidge virtually.

[902023] **James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I join you in sending heartiest congratulations to the Prime Minister and to Carrie on the birth of their son? It is wonderful news and I am sure that he will bring them great joy in these difficult times.

On coronavirus, surely we should not underestimate the significance of getting to what we hope is the peak of the outbreak without the NHS being overwhelmed. To do that, we have had to take the difficult but unavoidable decision of putting elective surgery on hold for many people. What more can we do to free up the NHS so that our constituents with cancer and other serious non-covid conditions start being treated again as soon as possible, and in significant numbers?

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): I have been asked to reply on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. As Members will have seen and as Mr Speaker has explained, the Prime Minister and his fiancée, Carrie Symonds, have announced the birth of a healthy baby boy this morning. Both mother and baby are doing well, and I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending congratulations and our very best wishes to them.

The whole House will also want to join me in paying tribute to the 85 NHS workers and the 23 social care workers who have sadly died from coronavirus. My deepest sympathies are with their families and their friends at what is an incredibly difficult time, and we will continue to do whatever it takes to support them.

I am sure the whole House will also want to join me in wishing Captain Tom Moore, who has done so much in raising £29 million for NHS charities, a very happy 100th birthday tomorrow. His life of service for his country and his dedication to helping others is an inspiration to us all.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) notes, it is because we have taken the right measures at the right time that we have flattened the peak of this virus and prevented the NHS from becoming overwhelmed—the two single most important elements of this strategy that we have delivered. That has meant that the NHS has had capacity to deal not just with covid-19 patients but other urgent treatments. My hon. Friend is also right to say that as we move forwards towards a second phase, we must plan to ensure that the NHS is able to deliver elective surgery and to treat patients with other conditions, which is exactly what we are planning to do.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I add my congratulations, the congratulations of the Labour party and, I am sure, of everybody in this House to the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds on the birth of their baby boy? Whatever differences we have in this House, as human beings I think we all recognise the anxiety that the Prime Minister and Carrie must have gone through in these past few weeks—unimaginable anxiety—so I really hope that this brings them incredible relief and joy. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

I join with the words of the First Secretary on those who died on the frontline, and on what he said about Captain Tom Moore—an inspiration to all of us.

Yesterday, an important set of figures was published about the deaths from coronavirus. First were the deaths in hospital, which currently stand at 21,678—that is the number that is published every day. On top of that, yesterday we saw the Care Quality Commission figures for deaths in care homes for the two weeks ending last Friday. That was a figure of 4,343. At the same time, the Office for National Statistics published the figures for deaths outside of hospitals and outside of care homes, which, up to 17 April, was a total of 1,220. There is a bit of complication because of the different dates, but that makes a total to date of 27,241 recorded deaths from coronavirus, and that is probably an underestimate because of the time lag. Behind each number is, of course, a family shaken to its foundations.

Six weeks ago, on 17 March, the Government’s chief scientific adviser indicated that the Government hoped to keep the overall number of deaths from coronavirus to below 20,000. He said that that would be “good”, by which, in fairness to him, he meant successful in the circumstances. We are clearly already way above that number—and we are only part way through this crisis. We are possibly on track to have one of the worst death rates in Europe. On Monday, the Prime Minister said in his short speech that “many people” were “looking now at our apparent success”

in the United Kingdom, but does the First Secretary agree with me that, far from success, the latest figures are truly dreadful?

Dominic Raab: First, I welcome the various points of solidarity between our Front-Bench teams in relation not only to the new baby boy for the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds but to the care workers and NHS workers who have lost their lives.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right that there is a challenge in deciphering the difference between the different figures because of the time lags in relation

to the care home deaths. Equally, I know that on all sides we have wanted to deliver a clearer breakdown of and distinction between care home deaths and deaths in the NHS. I think that is progress.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned the target of 20,000. Of course, this is an unprecedented pandemic—a global pandemic—and in fairness we should not criticise either the chief medical officer or the deputy chief medical officer for trying to give some forecast in response to the questions that many in this Chamber and in the media are calling for. The reality is that we know a lot more about the virus, both domestically and internationally, than we did before.

I absolutely share with the right hon. and learned Gentleman our joint horror at the number of deaths—tragedies each and every one. Equally, I disagree with him: it is far too early to make international comparisons. If they are to be done, they should be done on a per capita basis. We are already seeing that deaths are measured in different ways, not just in the different settings in the UK but across Europe and around the world. This is of course, as I have said, a very delicate and dangerous moment in this pandemic, which is why, with the greatest respect, we need to wait until we have further evidence from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies before moving towards a transitional phase or a second phase. It would be irresponsible right now to start setting out in detail what proposals we might come up with in advance of having that advice from SAGE.

Keir Starmer: To be clear, I was not criticising the experts; I was pointing out the difference between what had been hoped for and where we had got to.

I welcome the clearer breakdown of figures that I think we will get from this afternoon onwards. I also welcome the fact that it appears—I hope this is right—that the numbers of hospital admissions and of coronavirus deaths in hospitals are going down. We have all been looking at those graphs, and I hope that they are continuing in the right direction. From yesterday’s data, however, it appears that that is not the case in care homes. They show that numbers of deaths in care homes appear to have been rising even while the numbers of hospital deaths have been falling.

As the First Secretary knows, that is on the back of concern for some weeks from the frontline about testing in care homes, including the speed of testing, and about protective equipment, and arguments that it has been too slow. We have all heard from the frontline of the care sector expressions of real anxiety about the situation they find themselves in. Why does he think that coronavirus continues to spread so fast in the care sector?

Briefly, I would like to return to something from last week, although I think the First Secretary has already touched on it. Can he give us the up-to-date figures for the number of healthcare staff and social care workers who have died on the frontline? I raised that last week, and I think he has given the figure, but could he just confirm it?

Dominic Raab: I have already given the right hon. and learned Gentleman those figures. They are of course produced in the normal way, and he will be apprised of them, just as he is of the other figures. It is absolutely right to say that there is a challenge in care homes.

In fact, when SAGE produced its advice, and when the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer gave their three-weekly review, several weeks ago now, it was made clear that we had made good progress overall in reducing the level of community transmission but that there remained challenges in hospital settings and specifically in care homes.

There are real challenges in care homes. Unlike in the NHS setting, where we have made such good progress, the principal challenge in the care home sector is one of decentralisation and exercising control over the ebb and flow of people into care homes. That includes residents, care home workers, who will sometimes work in different care homes, NHS workers, and of course friends and families. That is the single-biggest challenge in reducing transmission.

That said, I hope that I can reassure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we have a comprehensive plan to ramp up testing in care homes—the Health Secretary changed the eligibility criteria yesterday—and to overhaul the way personal protective equipment is delivered to the frontline. We are also expanding the workforce by 20,000 through a new recruitment campaign. There is, however, no doubt—I will not shy away from saying this in front of him—that this is a challenge, but it is a challenge that we must and can grip in order to get the numbers down in care homes, as has happened in hospitals and the country at large.

Keir Starmer: On “The Andrew Marr Show” on Sunday, I think the First Secretary said that the numbers of deaths in care homes were falling in line with those in hospitals. That does not appear to be borne out by the figures, unless there are some we have not seen. I wonder if he could take a moment to clarify that.

Yesterday was memorial day for all those who have lost their lives at work, and it is important that we honour and remember all those who have died, whether from coronavirus or anything else, but it is also important that we redouble our commitment to protecting all those at work, which is why protective equipment for the frontline is so crucial. I recognise the challenge the Government face on this—I recognise that getting the right piece of equipment to the right place every time is very difficult—but lives depend on it. It is 10 weeks since the Health Secretary declared that there was a serious and imminent threat to life, and one would hope that by now things would be getting better, not worse, yet a survey of the Royal College of Physicians published on Monday reported that one in four doctors were still not getting the protective equipment they needed, and the RCP president was quoted on Monday as saying:

“it is truly terrible that supply has worsened over the past three weeks rather than improved”.

I know that is not where the First Secretary or the Government want to be—with indications from the frontline that things are worse, not better—but he must recognise that this is a plea from the frontline. What is going on and how soon can it be fixed?

Dominic Raab: On the care home data, obviously we have seen the latest data come out, and there are some positive signs, but they are within the margin of error and we need to be very focused. There is a challenge in care homes and we have a plan in place to grip it. There is no sugar coating that.

I take exception to the suggestion that things are getting worse, not better. That is not true overall. We have seen, through social distancing measures, with overwhelming commitment to them by the public, and with our efforts to ramp up capacity, particularly ventilator beds and critical care capacity in the NHS, that the two central limbs of our strategy, to flatten the peak that we are going through—if we had not done that, the death toll would have been even worse—and to make sure that the NHS had the ability to cope, are working. Those two critical elements of the strategy have worked to date, and it is absolutely important that we keep up the effort on all of that.

In relation to PPE, again, when the right hon. and learned Gentleman addresses that, he must recognise that we face an international—global—supply shortage. Every country—I pick up the phone as Foreign Secretary and speak to leaders, Foreign Ministers and counterparts around the world—faces this. We are now the international buyer of choice. We have had 22 flights carrying PPE and ventilators from China this month; in the last week, over 1.5 million masks from China; three flights from Turkey with gowns and face protection; 140,000 gowns from Myanmar; and we have brought in Lord Deighton from the other place to ramp up our domestic production, supply and distribution. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right—there are challenges on the frontline—and there is no minimising or sugar-coating any of the *cris de coeur* that he mentioned. I feel animated and inspired to do even better, but he needs to recognise on PPE that there is a global supply shortage, and we are doing absolutely everything that we can to make sure that those on the frontline get the equipment that they need.

Keir Starmer: I recognise the efforts that are going on. The First Secretary says that he takes exception to what I said about things worsening. I tried not, in this, to base anything on my own personal opinion, because I do not think that that is helpful. What I was quoting was the Royal College of Physicians—those on the front line. It was not my view—it is their view. I try to be careful to stick to the data and the evidence, rather than just coming up with an opinion.

May I ask the First Secretary about testing? It is clear that there has been an increase in testing in the week since we were last at the Dispatch Box, and I welcome that. Yesterday, the Government announced a further extension and expansion of testing, and I welcome that as well, but there are obviously still significant problems. The Government-reported figures for Monday show a capacity to test of 73,000, which has gone up—it is the highest that it has ever been—but only 43,000 actual tests were carried out. When we drill down into the figures, we see that the number of people tested was only 29,000. Last week, the First Secretary said that the problem was not capacity but lack of demand. I was not convinced, to be honest. Now we know that demand has gone through the roof, and sites were unable to cope with the number of people trying to book tests, so obviously demand is not the problem, yet on Monday, 30,000 tests that were available were not used.

I have to recognise that 100,000 a day by Thursday was only ever a staging post—perhaps the exact date does not matter as much as some would think. On 12 March, some weeks ago, the Prime Minister made clear his plan to ramp up daily testing to 250,000 tests

a day. I agree with him on that—I think that that is the scale that we should be at. Can the First Secretary clarify whether 250,000 tests a day are still a Government target and, if so, roughly when he thinks the Government will hit that target?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman. On this issue of things getting worse, I understand the point that he wants to make about PPE—it is an absolutely valid point—but I do not think that it should be elided into the broader critique that overall things are getting worse. As we come through the peak of this virus, we start to get deaths down—we have to focus on driving them down even further, in particular making sure that we do not risk a second spike by increasing the transmission rate. The right hon. and learned Gentleman could take time to recognise our success on social distancing and critical care capacity, which has allowed that to happen.

On testing, we now have a 73,400 test capacity every day. That is almost double the point we were at when I was at the Dispatch Box last week. On daily tests carried out, the figure is now 43,563, which is well over double the 18,000 we were at last week. In relation to capacity and demand, when we and the NHS talk about demand, we are talking about the number of tests actually carried out; it is not just about people being willing to come forward, but about their actually being able to come forward. What we have done to ensure that we ramp up the testing as swiftly as possible is not just the extension and the widening of eligibility last week; we have gone further, and we now say that we will widen the eligibility to anyone who needs to go to work, says that they cannot work remotely and has symptoms. Anyone over 65 with symptoms will also be able to action those tests. To come back to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's earlier point, tests will be available to all care home residents as well as staff, whether they are symptomatic or not.

This is incredibly important. We are on track to make huge progress. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right that the 250,000 target is still an aspiration, and I am not going to put a date on it, but the key point is that the 100,000 milestone—very important to me, and we are making good progress—is only the first stepping stone towards testing, which is essential to the wider testing, tracking and tracing regime that we will need as we transition to the second phase.

Mr Speaker: I say gently to those on both Front Benches that we are going to have to speed up; otherwise, we will not get anybody else in today.

Keir Starmer: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The First Secretary invites me to recognise the good work on social distancing and on critical care capacity. I do that unreservedly. It has been an amazing piece of work, particularly the ramping up of capacity, and I send my thanks to all those who have been involved. I absolutely recognise it.

I have raised these issues because they are vital to controlling the virus and protecting lives so that we can get to an effective exit strategy. The public need to know what will happen in the next phase. On the exit strategy, I want to be absolutely clear with the First Secretary of State: I am not asking for lockdown to be lifted. We support the Government on lockdown and will continue

to do so, so I am not asking for that. I am not asking for a timeframe. The Government say they cannot give a timeframe. I accept that and we support the Government on that. I said that I would not ask the impossible, and I will not.

What I am asking is for the Government to be open with the British people about what comes next. That is crucial for three reasons. First, we need their trust. Secondly, the Government themselves, the public, schools, businesses and trade unions need to plan ahead, and they are saying that loudly and clearly. Thirdly, and frankly, we would like to try to support the Government's strategy when we know what it is. It is important for us to do so if we can, but we cannot do that if the Government will not share their thinking. The Prime Minister said on Monday that he wanted maximum transparency. Will the First Secretary of State give us some now, and tell us when the Government will publish an exit strategy?

Dominic Raab: I will just remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, as I set out on 16 April, SAGE advised against any changes to social distancing measures at that point. The reason is that that would risk a substantial increase in the infection rate. SAGE is reviewing the evidence again in early March. He has asked for a timeframe and a date. We cannot give it until we have the SAGE evidence. If he thinks there are things we could be announcing—whether it is about the workplace, to which he referred, schools or otherwise—he should feel free to propose those things, but I would gently say that, based on the advice and evidence from SAGE, which he says he wants to closely follow, it would be very difficult for us to responsibly set out those proposals before we have had that subsequent advice from SAGE, both on the rate of infection and the death rate and on the measures that it would be responsible to take. That is why—with the greatest respect; I understand he is trying to be constructive—we cannot be pulled into making proposals in advance without SAGE opining.

Keir Starmer: The problem with the First Secretary's response is that it risks the UK falling behind. France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, New Zealand, Australia, Scotland and Wales have all published exit plans of one sort or another. The First Secretary asked for my proposals and what they should cover. When we look at those plans, as he and I have done, it is clear that there are common issues such as schools and business sectors reopening. Those are the issues, and if he wants me to put them on the table, I absolutely will, because they are clearly the issues that need to be addressed.

There will be other issues, of course, but delay risks not only falling behind other countries but also the successful four-nation approach so far. We want to support the Government on an exit strategy. We want to support the four-nation approach so that we can all exit across the UK at the same time and hopefully in the same way, so I ask the First Secretary if the Government will work constructively and openly with the Opposition on the question of what happens at the next stage.

Dominic Raab: We certainly will engage. I have enjoyed the telephone calls with Opposition leaders, including the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I just gently say that if he is suggesting that we can set out concrete

proposals now, despite clear evidence and advice from SAGE that we should wait for their review of evidence in the next week or so, that is the wrong thing to do. If he thinks he knows better than SAGE and the scientists, he needs to explain that. He talked about the Scottish Government. They have not set out an exit strategy. I read their 25-page document carefully. It was eminently sensible and grounded in the five tests that I set out on 16 April. He talked about some of the other European countries, but he will know, because he is an assiduous follower of the international evidence, that Germany is now having to think twice about easing up the measures because of the risk of a second spike. That is exactly the risk that the Governor of the Bank of England referred to last week, that I referred to on 16 April and that SAGE and the scientists have referred to.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is trying and succeeding in engaging in a very constructive way. He has a strong professional reputation from when he was Director of Public Prosecutions of being guided by the evidence. That is much to his credit. I gently say that he should not abandon that rigour now.

[902026] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Will garden centres and nurseries be allowed to reopen in short order?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for cutting straight to the chase. I totally appreciate the value of garden centres and nurseries. As I have indicated, the current advice from SAGE is that relaxing any measures, including the ones to which he refers, would risk damage to public health, our economy and the progress that we have made—the sacrifices that so many have made; the lives that have been lost. However, I reassure him that SAGE looked specifically at garden centres and we will continue to keep the evidence on each measure under very close review.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: May I send my congratulations to the Prime Minister and to Carrie Symonds on the birth of their son? Long life and happiness to the new born.

We are two months away from the deadline for approving an extension to the Brexit negotiations. Michel Barnier has been clear: the UK is refusing to engage seriously on a number of fundamental issues. The Government are shamefully gambling our economic future with a no-deal Brexit in the middle of a health emergency. Why are the Government threatening to isolate our economy at the end of the year during the biggest economic crisis of our time?

Dominic Raab: I join the right hon. Gentleman in sending those messages of goodwill to Carrie Symonds and the Prime Minister and, of course, their new baby boy.

I am not sure I would take Michel Barnier's word on the state of progress in negotiations quite as readily and as uncritically as the right hon. Gentleman. Let us be very clear: our position is unchanged. The transition period ends on 31 December—that is enshrined in law and there is no intention of changing that. Given the uncertainty and the problems and challenges that coronavirus has highlighted for us and our European friends—and I have worked extremely closely with our German, French and all our other European partners—we should focus on removing any additional uncertainty,

do a deal by the end of the year and allow the UK and the European Union and all its member states to bounce back as we come through coronavirus.

Ian Blackford: What we should do is remove uncertainty and put a stop to those talks. We should make sure that we protect our businesses. The First Secretary's failure to rule out a no-deal Brexit should alarm us all. The World Trade Organisation predicts that world trade may fall by 32% this year, the International Monetary Fund says that the global economy will suffer its worst financial crisis since the 1930s and the Office for Budget Responsibility warns that the UK economy could shrink by 35%. That means that 2 million people are at risk of losing their jobs. Refusing to admit the inevitability of an extension is not a tough or clever negotiating tactic, but a reckless and foolish gamble. Will the First Secretary embrace common sense and recognise the need for a Brexit extension? He should show some leadership, face down the hard-liners in the Tory party, extend the Brexit transition and let us all get on with the job of tackling this health crisis together.

Dominic Raab: If the right hon. Gentleman's desire is to avoid more uncertainty, the right thing for us to do is to double down and get a deal by the end of this year. If his desire is for us to dig ourselves out of the economic challenges that we, the European Union and the world face, the answer is not to engage in protectionism but to do this deal and give a shot in the arm to businesses on both sides of the channel. That is what we are wholeheartedly focused on doing, and we are doing it as one United Kingdom.

[902027] **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Con): The company programme run by the charity Young Enterprise provides young people with the opportunity to apply their skills in real-world situations by working in teams to set up and run their own young enterprise company. Does my right hon. Friend agree that providing financial education in our schools is a vital way of empowering young people and ensuring that we are able to further our levelling-up programme across the country when we come out of this crisis?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that excellent programme. He is absolutely right; a strong understanding of numeracy—for example, calculating percentages or doing divisions—underpins a young child's ability to manage money. This Government's reforms have made a step change in progress on numeracy and literacy for those young children, but that needs to be backed up by practical applications. Many organisations that support schools with financial education are adapting their programmes, and Young Money is an excellent example of that.

[902024] **Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP) [V]: Will the First Secretary of State make a commitment that when a vaccine for covid-19 becomes available, the United Kingdom will take a leading role, together with other nations, to ensure that it is distributed according to the needs of people across the world rather than on the basis of wealth?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As the Health Secretary announced, we have had trials announced very recently and we are taking a lead

on research and development. However, as my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary announced earlier at questions, we are also contributing to Gavi and CEPI to ensure that we can ramp up the international effort to find a vaccine and vaccinate all the people not only here in the UK but in the most vulnerable and poorest countries around the world. I entirely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says.

[902028] **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con) [V]: The Government have pulled out all the stops in providing a range of timely financial support for businesses, but in west Oxfordshire and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on small and micro business, I hear reports of businesses being denied help by banks that are falling behind regulatory systems rather than concentrating on the urgent need to get cash out of the door to the businesses that need it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as the nation makes sacrifices unheard of in peacetime, it is time for the banks to do their bit?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all he is doing to champion small businesses. We want to help all businesses—small, medium and large—in Witney and across the country get through this incredibly difficult period and bounce back with confidence as we defeat the coronavirus. Through the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme and the bounce-back loan scheme, we are lending to businesses of all shapes and sizes. The Government have stepped up to the plate, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we expect the banks to do the same.

[902025] **Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: While working people are having to make huge sacrifices during this crisis, state support is available to big businesses that dodge taxes and pay millions to super-rich executives and shareholders. We should be bailing out the 99%, not the 1%. Will the Government follow the likes of Denmark and stand up to big businesses by saying, “If you want state support, you have to prohibit dividend payments and share buy-backs, and you cannot be based in a tax haven”?

Dominic Raab: I have to say that if the hon. Lady looks at the package of measures that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has put in place in the round, she will see that we are not only dealing with small businesses but helping larger businesses. They are important too; they are large employers. We are doing everything we can to support innovative firms, which will now benefit from the offer of £1.25 billion for high-growth firms. Frankly, I think we should take some of the partisan baggage out of this, focus on targeting the businesses that will create the growth that will drive us through this crisis, and support the workers up and down this country who rely on those crucial businesses.

[902029] **Robert Largin** (High Peak) (Con) [V]: The current crisis has shown just how important it is to have sufficient urgent care capacity in the NHS. I have been campaigning for new urgent care centres at both Stepping Hill Hospital and Tameside Hospital, to help NHS staff provide world-class care to people in High Peak and across the region. Can the First Secretary assure me that the Government remain committed to building these badly needed new urgent care centres?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for the tenacious and doughty way in which he is championing the NHS. I am delighted that Stockport NHS Foundation Trust has been allocated close to £31 million for the provision of a new emergency care campus at Stepping Hill, one of our 20 hospital upgrades, and Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust has been allocated over £16 million to provide emergency and urgent care facilities at Tameside general hospital. The Conservatives are the party of the NHS—more money, more hospitals, more doctors and nurses—and that is one of the reasons why we have managed, through our critical care capacity, to help protect the NHS from becoming overwhelmed by coronavirus.

[902031] **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): May I first offer my deepest thanks to the first responders from the Metropolitan police and the London ambulance service who were greeted with the horrifying scene on Sunday night of an 18-month-old baby girl and three-year-old boy brutally murdered in their own home? There are no words of comfort that we can offer their grieving mother, but what the Government can do is more to support people who are not safe in their own homes. I recognise the £3 million that has gone in to support children who witness domestic abuse and the £2 million that has gone in to support the domestic abuse hotline, but it is not enough and it is not quick enough. In that spirit, may I ask the First Secretary of State to commit to providing the £75 million ring-fenced fund that the shadow Home Secretary has called for, so that in these darkest of times people who are trapped unsafe in their own homes know that support is available?

Dominic Raab: May I thank the hon. Gentleman and say how appalled I am at the tragic case in his constituency? I pay tribute to the frontline emergency responders, and I, absolutely in total solidarity with the hon. Gentleman, pass on my condolences to the family in that terrible case; it sounds absolutely appalling.

The police have been very clear that they will pursue perpetrators and anyone in immediate danger should call 999. We are going through the coronavirus challenge, which has put pressure on the police, but they are there to do that incredible job that they do day in, day out. We have the national domestic abuse helpline, which is staffed 24 hours a day, and we are supporting charities and others supporting victims of domestic abuse with £750 million. The hon. Gentleman makes interesting points about what more we could do; we are constantly looking to reinforce and strengthen the response to domestic abuse, and he is right that there is a specific issue in relation to this crisis. The Domestic Abuse Bill had its Second Reading yesterday; that will help to take our response to the next level and offers an opportunity for him to make further proposals in due course.

[902030] **Mr Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I join in the congratulations to the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds on the birth of their son?

I was recently speaking with a lady who, very sadly, lost her husband in hospital to covid-19. She spoke of the fantastic care given to her husband by the NHS staff, but she also spoke of the incredible support she and her family received from those same NHS workers.

Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating NHS staff not only on caring for those who are ill, but on the wonderful support they give to their loved ones?

Dominic Raab: First, may I pass on my very deepest condolences to the widow in my hon Friend's constituency? I, along with other Ministers, have the grim task of reading out the total death toll at the press conferences, and I always walk away ashen-faced at what this must mean for individual families up and down the country. He is right to pay tribute to those in the NHS, who are doing an amazing job, and I think all of us across the House paid tribute to them and the care workers, particularly with our minute's silence yesterday. My hon. Friend is absolutely right also to say that they are not just there to treat the physical condition, whether coronavirus or otherwise; they do an amazing job as providers of emotional support for patients and their families, and that is too easily overlooked as we come through this crisis.

[902032] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The UK opted out of the EU joint procurement of PPE, ventilators and medical equipment. Will the First Secretary confirm whether that was a political or commercial decision, and take this opportunity to say that we will take any future opportunity to join any EU scheme that helps to safeguard supplies to our NHS, in order to avoid any preventable deaths in our communities, or in the NHS or care services?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he will know, because it has been made clear by the Government and clarified when it was not clear, the original issue was a failure of communication—we did not get the original invitation to tender. It is clear to us that the schemes in relation to the first batch of EU-wide procurement would not have made any significant extra difference or added any value to what we are doing here. I can tell him that we will look at any future EU-wide procurement initiatives, for example, on therapeutics. I can also reassure him that one thing we are doing is working very closely with our European partners on returns and repatriations. That is somewhere we have taken advantage of EU-wide schemes if they can help us to share costs. That is the collaborative, internationalist approach that the UK Government take.

[902036] **Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): The horticultural sector is vital to Shropshire's economy, employing thousands of people. Notwithstanding the First Secretary's earlier response, may I ask that in phase 1 of any unlock, the garden centres and seasonal nurseries will be allowed to open, albeit with careful and considered strict guidelines?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for that second plea for garden centres and nurseries. This is absolutely right, and I understand entirely why it is so important, both economically and socially, particularly for certain members of our community, for whom it will be an important means of getting outdoors and getting out of the lockdown. SAGE has already considered this once, and I know it will consider garden centres and nurseries again. I know that he will expect us to continue to be guided by the evidence, but he has made his point in a powerful way and it is firmly registered that this is an important area to look at for the future.

[902033] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): There have never been sufficient nursery places to meet the extra demand created by the Childcare Act 2016, and now things are set to get worse. I have received a huge number of emails from local nursery managers and workers angry at the Government for failing to take action to protect early years workers during the coronavirus, because they are not entitled to access the furlough scheme. What will the right hon. Gentleman do to sort this out and ensure that these nurseries still exist once the crisis is over?

Dominic Raab: This is a hugely challenging time for nurseries, as it is for schools and other small businesses. The Chancellor has set out the range of support available. It is widespread, covering all sorts of different areas, but of course in relation to nurseries or any other sector that is finding the challenges too much to bear as we go through this crisis, we will make sure we look at them afresh to see what further can be done.

[902037] **Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden) (Con) [V]: I would like to begin by echoing the congratulations that have already been given to the Prime Minister and his fiancée on the birth of the baby boy—I hope they are all in good health.

There was a double stabbing in my constituency at the weekend. In the light of that, will the First Secretary join me in calling on the police and crime commissioner to reverse his decision to close the local police station? What reassurances can my right hon. Friend give the House that as we emerge from this lockdown we are protecting our communities from the scourge of knife crime?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for that. It is a tragic but timely warning that some of the persistent social challenges we face on knife crime, or any other kind of crime, will persist and will not just stay at home because of coronavirus, although overall the level of crime has come down. I send my deepest sympathies to the families of the victims in his constituency. May I reassure him that we have committed to recruiting 20,000 more police officers over the next three years? We are making it easier for the police to exercise stop-and-search powers. We are ensuring that more perpetrators go to prison, and for longer. He will know that it is for PCCs to decide how and where to spend their resources, but I pay tribute to him for being a tenacious and doughty champion on crime issues and the policing that needs to take place in his constituency.

[902034] **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: Many businesses in my constituency and around the UK shut their doors on public health advice and are now finding that insurers are refusing to pay out on business interruption policies. I ask again: will the UK Government intervene and stand behind those claims so that no business loses out for doing the right thing?

Dominic Raab: I do not think it is the right thing to do to stand behind all the claims, but we certainly continue to liaise with the insurance industry to make sure, as far as is legally and practically possible, that it is showing the flexibility as people, and particularly the consumers of those insurance policies, come through this very difficult time.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) [V]: I am absolutely delighted, Mr Speaker, to be able to connect with you this week. I have finally escaped from the Zoom waiting room and, in so doing, I can pass on my congratulations to Carrie Symonds and the Prime Minister on the birth of their son.

I have a large number of haulage companies in my constituency, and I am sure that the First Secretary will recognise that lorry drivers are key workers during this crisis, transporting goods across our United Kingdom. However, many have struggled to access hot food outwith their cabs, and even to access toilet and shower facilities, so can he ensure that we are doing all that we can to support lorry drivers as they carry out their important duties during this crisis?

Dominic Raab: It is always good to see my right hon. Friend, even—or especially—via Zoom. I thank all the heavy goods vehicle and delivery drivers for all that they are doing in the country to keep us going. Across the House I think that we probably agree that our view and definition of key workers have changed as we have come through this crisis; there is an appreciation of people doing those gritty jobs day in, day out and of quite the extent to which we rely on them.

All motorway service stations in England currently remain open to road users. That is why the Transport Secretary is continuing, based on the concerns that my right hon. Friend has rightly raised, to work with motorway service operators to ensure that as many facilities within those individual service stations as possible remain open to make sure that HGV drivers can take a break and use whatever facilities they need before they go back to work. He raises an excellent point.

[902035] **Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP) [V]: The Chancellor said of his covid-19 response:

“We will not leave you behind. We all stand together.”

He then delivered a financial package that did leave behind hundreds of my constituents in Angus and thousands more across these islands—by a Government who will refuse to introduce a universal basic income. I think of people just like my constituent in Arbroath, who could not be furloughed by his former employer and, because of Treasury rules, cannot be furloughed by his new employer either. So now, after 44 years of working, he has been cut adrift as collateral by this Government. What is the First Secretary’s advice to my constituent?

Dominic Raab: We do not support a universal basic income mainly because, it would not target our precious resources at such a challenging time at those who need them most. In total, Scotland will receive a cash boost of over £3 billion to tackle coronavirus, so the financial support from the UK Government is going there. That is on top of the UK military support, with things such as mobile testing and the airlifting of patients from some of the island communities in Scotland. We are also expanding testing capacity right across the UK; centres have recently opened in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. We will get through this crisis and we will do so as one United Kingdom.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: I associate myself with the remarks of the First Secretary in saying congratulations to the Prime Minister and Carrie.

Research from the all-party group on autism found that before the coronavirus crisis more than two in three autistic adults were not getting the support they needed. Sadly, in some areas, emergency powers to ease duties under the Care Act 2014 have had to be triggered. Can my right hon. Friend guarantee that autistic people will not be disproportionately affected by these changes, and will he publish which councils have to resort to emergency powers?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend raises a really important point. We of course want to ensure that all autistic children or any other children with special needs going through this terrible crisis are as protected as they possibly can be. When it comes to looking at the future arrangements for schools, on top of the key workers, we have got to make sure that we do as much as we can to protect vulnerable children, particularly those with particular needs. She talked about the funding going through to local authorities. I will speak to the Education Secretary and the Communities Secretary and make sure that we can come back with a specific answer on the point that she raises.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP) [V]: May I, on behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, echo and pass on congratulations to the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds on the birth of their son?

The headline in this morning’s *Belfast Telegraph* speaks about deaths of those not infected by the virus—people who had not been attending hospital and desperately needed treatment. Will the First Secretary advise us of the measures that the Government intend to take to address the issue and to ensure that more people are able to attend for treatment, including cancer patients?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and pay tribute to all the work he and the Northern Ireland Executive are doing at this difficult time. He is absolutely right to raise the challenge within the NHS more generally of dealing not just with covid-19, but with the wider conditions that people have. The chief medical officer has made it very clear: we have the capacity. The plans that we put in place and delivered through the Nightingale hospitals, the ventilators and the critical care capacity are there to deal not only with coronavirus, but with other non-covid priorities, whether they are urgent or whether they are other forms of treatment in relation to cancer or otherwise.

I am certainly willing to work with the Health Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary to make sure that we can deal with and address any particular challenges faced in Northern Ireland. It is absolutely crucial as we go through this crisis that that NHS capacity is protected, and that is one of the reasons we introduced the social distancing measures and why it is important that they have been so effective.

Covid-19: Repatriation of UK Nationals

12.51 pm

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's response to the covid-19 pandemic. Our team of experienced diplomats here at home and in our embassies and consulates around the world continue to work around the clock, using our unparalleled international connections to help overcome this unprecedented challenge.

Since the outbreak in Wuhan, our overriding priority has been to help British travellers get home safely to their loved ones. We estimate that more than 1.3 million people have returned to the UK via commercial routes since the outbreak began, from countries across the globe. We have seen 200,000 British nationals from Spain and 50,000 from Australia return in the past month alone.

Keeping commercial options running has required an enormous international effort. We have worked alongside airlines and foreign Governments to keep vital routes open and to ensure that domestic restrictions do not create a barrier to getting people home. As the House will appreciate, as countries have increased travel restrictions, often without notice, commercial routes have ceased to be an option for some travellers. Thanks to a £75 million partnership between this Government and airlines, we have now brought back more than 19,000 people on 93 charter flights organised by the Foreign Office from 20 different countries and territories. In some instances, that means bringing home a few hundred passengers from small countries such as the Gambia, and from remote locations such as the outer islands of the Philippines. In other cases, it has meant returning thousands of British travellers, such as the 10,000 people returned home from India and the 2,000 thus far from Pakistan. In the next week alone, we will bring back thousands more travellers on further charter flights, including from Bangladesh, Nigeria and New Zealand.

I would also like to touch on cruise ship travel. More than 19,000 British passengers were aboard 60 cruise ships when the FCO changed its travel advice on 17 March. Working with the local authorities, Governments and cruise operators, the FCO has helped to ensure that those passengers were able to return home. We have provided consular assistance to many of them, and in some cases we have organised direct or supported charter flights for more than 1,500 people.

For those people who have chosen to remain in place or are still trying to get home, our consular teams are providing support 24 hours a day. To ensure timely responses, we have tripled the capacity in our consular contact centres. Our broader consular effort has been centred around supporting British travellers right across the piece. We have worked with foreign Governments to ensure that British travellers can continue to meet visa, immigration or documentation requirements while they are abroad, and we are offering financial protection, including through the same measures available to British workers and residents here at home, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme and access to mortgage holidays.

We are ensuring that British travellers have access to essential care, including food, accommodation and medical care. That includes psychosocial support, and we have

been working with third sector and external partners to deliver that. Most UK insurers will now extend their travel insurance cover, so British travellers actively trying to get home will be covered for emergency medical treatment if they are still stuck abroad for at least 60 days. Our efforts and our aims show that we are committed to helping every British traveller, no matter where they are in the world.

Turning to the FCO's role in procurement, specifically of personal protective equipment, with so many other countries in similar circumstances, we are grappling with a global shortage in PPE. Yet, thanks to the efforts of our domestic manufacturers and our work with international partners around the world, we have procured and distributed more than a billion items to those on the frontline. Lord Deighton, who helped to organise the London Olympics, has been brought in to oversee efforts to boost our domestic supply even further. In the Foreign Office, we are working tirelessly through our overseas posts to get medical supplies into the UK. More than 350 million items of PPE have been procured through our China network alone, and we are working flat out to get orders delivered from, for example, Turkey and Egypt.

We have also distributed more than 1,500 ventilators, with thousands more ordered and on the way. In the past week, we have received shipments of more than 4 million type IIR masks and 1 million other masks. By the end of today, flights will have touched down with more than half a million masks, more than 350,000 gowns, and more than three quarters of a million face shields. Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary and my fellow Ministers at the FCO are on calls with counterparts around the world every day, working to secure new deliveries from abroad, with the support of our excellent and tireless diplomatic service.

From the start of this crisis, the UK has played a leading role in tackling the spread of disease and the world's response to it. We are uniquely placed to do so, as a member of the G7, the G20, NATO, the Commonwealth and the United Nations, and as a major donor to the global health system. As the Foreign Secretary laid out in his previous statement, our international strategy is focused on four key areas: securing a strong and co-ordinated global health response, particularly for the most vulnerable countries; accelerating the search for a vaccine, more effective treatments and testing; supporting the global economy, keeping trade open and securing critical supply chains; and keeping transit hubs and transport routes open to support the flow of freight and medical supplies and, crucially, to bring our people home.

I have outlined our support for bringing British nationals home, and wish to touch on our good progress in other areas. We are helping vulnerable countries with their response to coronavirus by announcing up to £744 million in aid, including for research and development, and support for the World Health Organisation, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations and the Red Cross. Today, my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary announced a funding pledge equivalent to £330 million a year over the next five years to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. That will fund the immunisation of 75 million children against other deadly diseases, supporting the world's poorest countries so that they can cope with rising numbers of coronavirus cases.

[Nigel Adams]

For a covid-19 vaccine, the Government have already committed £360 million as part of our domestic and international effort. That investment includes a quarter of a billion pounds to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations to support co-ordinated global research. That is the single largest contribution by any country. We are also helping to keep vital trade routes and supply chains open by co-ordinating closely with allies and partners in the commercial sector.

Finally, the UK has a responsibility to protect the safety and security of the people of the overseas territories, most of whom are British nationals. We have been providing tailored support to our overseas territories, ensuring that the appropriate resources are provided to them during the coronavirus response.

The scale and impact of this pandemic has been unimaginable but, working alongside our international partners, the UK has been able to demonstrate the kind of leadership, co-operation and collaboration that will get us through this crisis. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: We go to Lisa Nandy in Wigan. We welcome her to her new position as shadow Foreign Secretary.

1 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I confirm that it is as sunny as always in our neck of the woods.

I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and for the weekly briefings that have allowed us to work together over recent weeks to bring some very vulnerable people home. In that spirit, I turn to a number of issues that his statement did not address, so that we can begin to resolve those, too.

I am deeply concerned that, weeks after Britons were advised to return home by the Government, there is still no accurate assessment of who is stranded and where. On Monday, the Foreign Office came up with a figure of 57,500, yet I have been told repeatedly that there can be no accurate assessment because, although some embassies record those who approach them for help, others do not. We do need to know who is stranded and where, so will the Minister now ensure that his Department now counts and publishes those statistics, so that we can bring those numbers down rapidly?

I was glad to hear that the numbers returned on charter flights are up to 19,000, on 93 flights, and I again place on the record my thanks to our diplomats, embassies and consular staff, but this is still frustratingly slow by comparison with countries such as Germany, which by early April had repatriated 60,000 citizens on 240 charter flights. By chartering 20 times the number of flights, Germany was able to bring its citizens home weeks ago—I place on the record my thanks to Germany and other countries that offered spare places on their flights to stranded Britons—and I am sure the Minister understands why people are upset and frustrated that their Government have not done the same.

I know that the Government were keen to reduce costs, but this reliance on commercial flights has left far too many British people at the mercy of cancelled flights, airline strikes, extortionate prices, domestic lockdowns and chaotic booking systems, so can the

Minister commit today to rapidly scaling up the number of charter flights? It is not clear to me what the barrier still is. Ninety per cent. of the country's commercial fleet is grounded. The RAF stands ready to help. Other countries have the same problems as we do, and in recent weeks I have spoken to many global leaders who say that there is a willingness to work together internationally to open airspace and to keep the transit hubs operating. He is doing his best, but this is unlike the problems that the Government have had with testing or PPE; we have the capacity to do more, and we must.

Many people on those charter flights told me that they are being charged up to £1,000 a ticket, so it would be helpful to understand where the £75 million that the Foreign Secretary announced has gone. Has it been spent and, if so, what on? After the Foreign Office website this week suggested that Britons in New Zealand might be better off staying put until the crisis is over, can the Minister commit that all British people who need it will be not just helped, as he suggested, but repatriated, and that the cost will be no barrier to bringing our citizens home?

I also suggested to the Minister last week that it be made easier to apply for emergency loans and that people be allowed to claim universal credit from overseas. He gave me a very enthusiastic response. Can he update the House on progress with that?

Can the Minister tell us what support is being provided to non-UK nationals, many of whom have lived and worked in Britain for decades? Many with whom I am in touch are extremely vulnerable, and others are NHS workers who are desperate to get back to the frontline, but some of them have been told that they are at the back of the queue, while others have been told to contact other countries' embassies for help. We were recently shamed by the treatment of those who made Britain their home and have lived and worked here for decades, and we must not allow it to happen again. I hope he will take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to those non-UK nationals and guarantee them the same rights to return home.

Finally, I would like to ask the Minister about the mixed messages that those returning home are getting. At the weekend, a Government source told *The Telegraph* that a 14-day quarantine period would be introduced. When the Foreign Secretary was asked, he simply said, "I don't know." Yesterday, the Transport Secretary wrote to MPs to tell us that targeted screening measures had been carried out at UK airports but that those have now been stopped. That is really worrying. There are people entering the UK from countries where infection rates are rising, access to healthcare is limited and preventive measures are non-existent. They are travelling back to their families on public transport. This is surely not sensible.

We have discussed that several times. It is frustratingly one of the areas where we have been unable to make progress, and the UK is now a major outlier on this. South Korea, the Netherlands, Greece, Lithuania and Singapore all have self-isolation requirements in place. We must have clear advice for those returning to the UK, with a quarantine period and testing on return to limit the spread of the virus. Can the Minister commit to that today, and if he cannot, will he take it away and ensure that it is acted on? As always, I am ready, happy and willing to offer assistance and support where I can.

Nigel Adams: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment and on the spirit in which she has co-operated. We speak regularly, with our weekly phone calls—I think we are due to have one tomorrow—where officials and I are able to update her. I have been nothing but impressed with her constructive approach to this very difficult matter. I will try to answer some of the points that she raised. I am sure she will remind me tomorrow, when we have our phone call, if I do not get round to answering all of them.

The hon. Lady talked about the data, and posts having information on the number of people who want to return home. Our best estimate at the moment is around 50,000 people, and hopefully, by the end of today, we will have passed the return of 20,000 British nationals on charter flights. We will update her with the numbers tomorrow. It is tricky collecting all the data—I will not pretend that it is not—but I can assure her that, when we do have that information, we will keep her updated.

In the best spirit possible, I would like to politely remind the hon. Lady of something. She referred to the number of people who have been repatriated by other countries. Of course, other countries have taken a slightly different route to get people home, but I remind her and the House that more than 1.3 million people have come back to the UK since the start of the outbreak. That is a phenomenal number of people. We have worked with the commercial sector to ensure that routes are open and that flights are available. We are now focusing on those countries where there are large numbers of British nationals and where there are not commercial flight options. I hope she will recognise that our strategy of working with the commercial sector initially has paid dividends. We are now focusing on our charter efforts.

We are indeed prioritising British nationals on these repatriation flights. Our first priority is those who are vulnerable and who face the greatest risks; that might be because a country does not have a health service that is comparable to the NHS. But we always do our best to consider making space available for others—not least those who are key workers, in particular in the NHS—where we can.

The hon. Lady mentioned the advice that those returning to the country have been getting. Nobody who is symptomatic can take a chartered repatriation flight back to the UK organised by the UK Government. It is absolutely clear that they will not be allowed on the plane. People are given advice on the plane on what they should do. Anybody arriving on a flight from another country should follow the current Public Health England advice, specifically on social distancing and self-isolation.

We continually test strategies with scientists, such as quarantining those coming from abroad to make sure we are able to take any necessary measures. As we consider transition to the second phase, we will be looking at those issues. We have already had discussions with other Departments across Government to make sure that we take all necessary measures to preserve our way of life and to protect people.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: Thank you for calling me to speak today, Mr Speaker. First, may I say “Congratulations” to the Prime Minister, and “Ramadan kareem” to the many in our community who are celebrating the holy month?

What improvements is the Minister going to make to the communications system he has been using to communicate with British people around the world? In the Foreign Affairs Committee, we have been conducting a survey, which is online on the Parliament website now, asking people about their experiences, both good and bad, of being repatriated to the UK. The main issue we have found is the difficulty some people encountered with communications when they were abroad, or the inability to receive communications. There are good examples, such as the high commission in Kenya, and difficult examples, such as the high commission in India. Seeing improvements to that would be important for the whole community.

Nigel Adams: The Chair of the Select Committee raises an incredibly important point. A UK national who is stuck abroad, who is concerned and whose flight has been cancelled by their operator wants some assurance that the Government are on their side and will assist, and communication is crucial. I totally accept that at the start of this crisis, our comms in some parts of the network were not as good as they should have been. There are some brilliant examples, which my hon. Friend mentioned; I point also to the great communications work that our high commission in New Zealand has been doing. We have put an awful lot more effort into ensuring that our embassies and our consulates up their communication game, because it is so important. As I say, people who are stuck want to know that, even if there is no news, they are getting some information. I totally accept my hon. Friend’s point.

Mr Speaker: We now go across to the Scottish National party spokesperson, who has two minutes.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is good to see you virtually.

I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. On a consensual note, I very warmly welcome the announcement of funding for the vaccines network—the Gavi programme—which the SNP called for some time back. I am glad to see we are in agreement on that. The programme will do a lot of good in the world.

Without getting into the specifics, I echo a number of concerns raised already about repatriation. I have praised FCO officials, who are working really hard in tough circumstances, but I have to say the statement seems rather Panglossian and does not reflect the experience of a number of my constituents and, I am sure, those of Members across the House. Will the Minister commit to holding in due course an inquiry into the FCO handling of this issue, so that we can learn lessons for the future, focusing not least on the defunding of the FCO network, which has left it at such a loss that it did not have the capacity to cope with this crisis?

On the procurement aspects, I am struck that the statement makes no mention of the EU procurement issue. In a quite remarkable sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee recently, Sir Simon McDonald had to clarify his clarification. Reading from the letter, he said, quite explicitly, that “Ministers were not briefed” by UK mission on the EU’s joint procurement agreement, but he went on to say:

“Owing to an initial communication problem the UK did not receive an invitation in time to join”

[Alyn Smith]

the EU's covid procurement response. Forgive me, but it seems quite inconceivable to me that UK mission did not make London—call it that—aware of the existence of the schemes. Will the Minister therefore perhaps clarify whether officials in London were briefed by UK mission on the existence of the schemes? Will he confirm whether the “initial communication problem”, which meant that we missed out on procurement schemes that could have been of value to our constituents, was between UK mission and London or was it within London? Will he also assure us that the problems have been dealt with and that we will contribute to and participate in future EU procurement schemes?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive dialogue with Government and also his SNP colleagues in the Scottish Government. I have weekly update conversations with all the devolved Administrations, and they are just as constructive. In reference to one of his earlier points, I reiterate that working with the commercial sector on scheduled flights has enabled over 1.3 million people to get home, so there is something to champion. Of course, the network has been put under extreme pressure. We have never faced anything like this and have never had to repatriate people from all over the globe, but we have done a pretty good job so far, and we will pass the 20,000 charter flight mark today.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's latter point, the permanent secretary of the FCO has issued a correction to the Foreign Affairs Committee, setting out that position and making it clear that a political decision was not taken on whether to participate. As the Health Secretary said, we will participate in the joint EU procurement scheme on therapeutics that is soon to launch, and we have been clear that we will consider participating in other future schemes on the basis of public health requirements, including on PPE.

Finally, I remind the hon. Gentleman that around 10,700 mechanical ventilators are currently available to the NHS across the UK, with thousands more in the pipeline.

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Drax.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: In that case, we will go to Alistair Carmichael.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: May I take the Minister back to the two positions stated last week by Sir Simon McDonald? These are not differences of nuance; they are two fundamentally different positions. Will the Minister share with the House the explanation that Sir Simon gave him for two such different positions being put out in the course of one day? More importantly, will he give us some assurance that if EU procurement processes are to offer a route to much-needed PPE being available in care homes and hospitals across the country, we will not lose out on that opportunity?

Nigel Adams: At the risk of repeating myself, it is actually the case that the permanent secretary issued his reaction to the Foreign Affairs Committee and made it clear that a political decision was not taken on whether

we should participate in the scheme. Again, to reiterate the answer I gave to the SNP, the Health Secretary has confirmed that we will participate in a joint procurement scheme on therapeutics that is soon to launch. We have also made it clear that we will consider our participation in other future schemes on the basis of public health requirements, and that includes PPE.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), will the Minister further elaborate on the work done by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to source PPE supplies for our frontline health and social care workers? Are pre-existing supply lines working? That will be crucial in the Government assessing their key pillar—to have an adequate supply of PPE—for any decisions on loosening the lockdown.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I said in the statement, the Foreign Office is an addition to the domestic work we are doing on PPE. I have had conversations with our posts in China and from China alone we have had over a third of a billion pieces of equipment. That work is continuous. All our posts are on the hunt for equipment—that is one of their tasks—and they are doing a pretty fine job.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab) [V]: Like a number of Members, several of my constituents are still trapped in different parts of the world. One couple from Norwich have been trapped in New Zealand for well over a month. They are running out of money and have been refused a refund from their travel company. They face exorbitant flight prices that they cannot afford and are becoming increasingly desperate. Can I ask the Minister what pressure the Foreign Office is putting on travel companies to refund British nationals trapped abroad, and, to reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), why it has taken so long to put on sufficient charter flights compared to countries such as Germany, which has already managed to get most of their trapped nationals home?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. On New Zealand, I am pleased to say that over 600 UK nationals have returned. One of the problems is that most of the commercial flights back to the UK have been suspended, so flight availability is extremely difficult. We are now chartering flights to help to bring back the most vulnerable British nationals stranded in New Zealand. There are five initial Government charter flights, which started on 24 April. They will bring home over 1,500 people. On cost, I do accept his point about how some airlines have dealt with their customers and not given cash refunds. I do not agree with that. I think it is incredibly bad form for the airlines not to provide timely refunds to their customers. The cost of the repatriation flights is at a reasonable level, with a maximum of £800 if a flight is over 10 hours.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: Through the Minister, may I thank the FCO team for all its fantastic work in bringing back my constituents from Fiji, New Zealand, India and Pakistan? I also know that 10 chartered flights have taken place from South Africa. However, I have an 80-year-old constituent

just outside Johannesburg, who was supposed to have come back to Rainham on 4 April. She has been told by her tour operator that she is unlikely to come back before July. Will the Minister look urgently at this case? I have already raised it with the Minister for Africa, who has been exceptionally helpful, but may I urge the Minister for Asia to please do everything that can be done to help this 80-year-old constituent of mine?

Nigel Adams: The FCO will of course look into the case my hon. Friend raises. I thank him for his praise for the work that has been done to return his constituents from around the globe. As he will know, we have got over 2,000 British travellers back from South Africa on our special charter flights, but we will certainly look into that individual's case and see what support we can give through our network.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Minister talks a good talk. It was good news for my constituent when, for the first time in eight years, he was able to get over to see his ailing and elderly dad, for probably the last time. The bad news, however, is that it was in blockaded Gaza, where there are no flights in or out of what David Cameron called an "open-air prison". Will the Minister, with whom I raised this issue on a conference call on 15 April, please have a word with his officials, who, to date, have told my constituent that it is his own fault, and get a family of four British citizens in Acton their dad back for Ramadan?

Nigel Adams: We will take up that case, if it is not already being taken up. Frankly, I doubt very much whether a member of FCO staff would use language such as "it's your own fault", but we will certainly follow it up. We are due another conference call on Friday this week, which I am holding for right hon. and hon. Members, but we will certainly follow up that case for the hon. Lady.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): First, may I pass on my thanks for the work the Department has done during this unprecedented pandemic? Will my hon. Friend update the House on progress made by his Department in offering consular support to British nationals, especially in Peru?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend raises the important area of Peru. It has been a very difficult country to deal with, given the number of backpackers and travellers dispersed over a very large area. We have got 1,100 people returned on five flights—those people are back—but there are no commercial flights running. We still have consular staff available and other staff in the embassy continue to provide assistance to British nationals in that region.

Mr Speaker: We now go over to Lucy Powell in Manchester.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is very sunny here as well, Mr Speaker.

The travel industry is facing an unprecedented crisis. Although it is completely understandable given the current circumstances, the Foreign Office's indefinite travel ban means it is very hard for companies to plan for the future. What thought is the Minister giving to how that advice might be eased when it is safe to do so?

Has he been involved in the discussions taking place today with EU partners about the forthcoming summer holidays and how they may be made to work?

Nigel Adams: On the hon. Lady's final point, I have not been involved, as yet; I have been at the Foreign Office and here at the Commons. The FCO is constantly talking to the travel sector. Many elements of the travel industry have been decimated by this unprecedented event. It is absolutely crucial, though, that we focus on the job in hand. The FCO's main focus is currently to get British nationals home. The hon. Lady makes a fair point, though, and there will have been discussions with the travel sector as we approach the summer holidays. I would be delighted to update the hon. Lady in a further call.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the Minister's comments about Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. The Government's leadership in this matter is extremely timely.

Will the Minister say what part the Foreign Office played in Exercise Cygnus in 2016, and what exercises the FCO has subsequently run to test the UK's ability to repatriate British nationals in the event of a crisis of the sort we are now living through?

Nigel Adams: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. In respect of Exercise Cygnus, I am not aware of how involved the FCO was back in 2016, but as his constituents and the country would expect, the Government regularly test pandemic plans. As understand it, Cygnus was a test of domestic preparedness for a future flu pandemic. Of course, the lessons learned from Cygnus continue to be considered by Government when we are reviewing our responses.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) [V]: I have a number of constituents who are still stranded in Punjab in India—some of them in real distress. I recognise the effort from the Foreign Office in chartering flights from Amritsar, but after several weeks of this effort my office is still receiving large numbers of calls from people with serious medical needs who have so far not been allocated a place on any of the charter flights and, importantly, do not know when they will be. When does the Minister think this repatriation effort will be completed?

Nigel Adams: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. As he can imagine, there were tens of thousands of British nationals in India. We have got more than 10,000 back on 38 flights so far, and we have another 14 planned. Of course, with India we are doing our best to prioritise the most vulnerable people who have registered that they want to come home. We expect that we will be able to get the number coming back from India to 13,000. We are repatriating people from multiple cities across India and will consider the option of additional flights after these particular flights, based on need and circumstances. The right hon. Gentleman flags up an important area of concern for us.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con) [V]: Can I ask for the Government's help in getting my constituents back from Pakistan? I also ask the Minister to provide more reassurance to constituents here who are worried about the continuation of flights from covid hotspots

[Theresa Villiers]

like Iran without sufficient checks being made to make sure that incoming flights from different parts of the world are not potentially making our virus situation worse?

Nigel Adams: My right hon. Friend raises Pakistan, another area where there are thousands of Brits wanting to return home. We have already brought back more than 2,000 people, and we have another nine flights planned, so I can assure her that, through our mission in Pakistan, we are doing our utmost to get people back. We are also putting on flights from Karachi as well because of the size of the country. With regard to the health points that she raises, I mentioned earlier that the current advice that we are giving people is from Public Health England. As we enter phase 2 of these repatriation flights and phase 2 of the pandemic here, we will be looking very closely at the advice that we will be giving, but no one who has symptoms of this virus can get on one of these flights.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I take the Minister back to the whole issue of the EU procurement schemes? It seems at the moment that, at the very best, the situation is confused and, at the very worst, rather fishy, and the Minister's answers are not giving us any more reassurance or clarity. May I ask him: was any Minister briefed about any of the schemes, and if not, why not?

Nigel Adams: I am at high risk of repeating myself on this point. I understand why the Opposition might want to probe this matter politically, but the fact is that the permanent secretary issued his correction to the Foreign Affairs Committee. He set out his position very clearly, and that was that a political decision was not taken—I repeat “not taken”—on whether to participate. We will be joining the EU procurement scheme on therapeutics, and any other scheme will be considered by the Government according to the public health requirements of the UK.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank the Minister and his Foreign Office team for all the help that they have given me and my team in returning my constituents from across Totnes in south Devon to their rightful place at home. None the less, there are some lessons to be learned from this situation, and I ask the Minister to consider that the Foreign Office might provide a retrospective analysis of how we have repatriated British citizens and present that report to this House so that we can scrutinise it in future, because I think those shortcomings will need to be addressed. Added to that, should we not also be looking at the co-operation that could be had between public and private sector when it comes to commercial flights?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a very sensible point. Every day, we learn the lessons from such a huge operation. This is something that we have never faced before. The nearest that we have come to it is the Thomas Cook repatriation, which was not too long ago—this is a point that a previous questioner asked that I did not get round to answering—so we will learn lessons from that. However, this is on an unimaginable scale. Never before have we had to repatriate this many people. More than 1.3 million people have been brought home on a commercial route. We have been working very closely with the commercial sector. A number of

airlines have signed a memorandum of understanding with Government so that we can ask them to bid for charter flights. My hon. Friend raises a very good point and, no doubt, this will be something that we look at in the cold light of day.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): May I add my congratulations to the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds on the birth of their child?

On 24 March here in the Chamber, I asked the Foreign Secretary about the situation of my constituents stuck in India and elsewhere around the world. Forty are still stuck in India, including Lashkar and Surinder Jhutti, who have been resident in the UK for almost 50 years. She is a specialist neuro care worker who needs to get back to work. There seem to be echoes here of the Windrush scandal in that they have been told that they are not eligible for consular support. She is needed back at work, as I said. Will the Minister intervene and help them, and all other UK residents, to be returned and repatriated to the UK?

Nigel Adams: Let me answer the hon. Gentleman by referring to a previous answer. We are prioritising British nationals. These flights are paid for by the British taxpayer, so our initial priority is with British nationals. Of course those who have indefinite leave to remain should not be discriminated against in any way. The priority initially was British nationals. We are certainly not in the business of breaking up family groups. We want to ensure that families are kept together. I would very much appreciate it if he could flag up that particular case with my office and we will see if we can drill down and get those people home.

Anthony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con) [V]: May I first thank the Minister and the entire FCO team for everything they are doing? I know they are working around the clock to return not just my constituents but all our constituents to their homes.

I am very fortunate that many of my constituents are now home from Pakistan, but there are still some left there. Could the Minister give some reassurance that the repatriation flights being run by the Government will continue until such time that commercial flights resume? I know that PIA was running commercial flights before, but until they do actually commence—I am not talking about promised commencement—will our repatriation flights still go on?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend has been incredibly resilient in pursuing FCO Ministers on the individual cases of his constituents, and he is absolutely right to do that. We are launching a new phase of flights back from Pakistan. We have brought 2,000 people back on our special charters. On Pakistan International Airlines, it is worth pointing out that we are working very closely with the Government of Pakistan and PIA to ensure the continuation of flights alongside the charter flights. It is also worth mentioning that since 4 April, through that negotiation, over 13,500 people have returned to the UK on 40 commercial PIA flights, alongside our charter flights, which are in addition to that number.

1.37 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of hybrid scrutiny proceedings, the Speaker brought them to a conclusion (Order, 21 April).

Mr Speaker: I now suspend the House for 30 minutes. The House will resume at 2.7 pm.

1.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.7 pm

On resuming, the House entered into hybrid substantive proceedings (Order, 22 April).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member contributing virtually.]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (29 APRIL)

Motion made,

That—

(1) The following arrangements shall apply to today's business:

Business	Timings	Remote Division designation
Business Statement	Up to 20 minutes	None
Fire Safety Bill: Second Reading	Up to 100 minutes; suspension; up to two hours	None
Fire Safety Bill: Programme	No debate (Standing Order No. 83A(7))	None
Fire Safety Bill: Money	No debate (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a))	None
Section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993	No debate	None

(2) At the conclusion of the debate on the Fire Safety Bill the Speaker shall put the Question, That the Bill be now read a second time. —(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

The Speaker declared the Question to be agreed to (Order B(4), 22 April).

Business of the House

2.7 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 4 May will include:

MONDAY 4 MAY—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 and the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 followed by motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Automatic Enrolment (Offshore Employment) (Amendment) Order 2020 and the draft Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

TUESDAY 5 MAY—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Fire And Rescue Functions) (Amendment) Order 2020 followed by motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Employment Allowance (Increase Of Maximum Amount) Regulations 2020.

WEDNESDAY 6 MAY—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Census (England And Wales) Order 2020.

THURSDAY 7 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

FRIDAY 8 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 May will include:

MONDAY 11 MAY—General debate on covid-19.

2.8 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. This is my first opportunity to speak in Parliament virtually. It is good to see that Parliament is functioning as it is and has risen to the challenge.

I thank the Leader of the House's office for arranging a walkthrough of remote voting, which I will be doing tomorrow. I, too, send my congratulations to the Prime Minister and Ms Symonds on the birth of their baby. We had a baby born today, and, tomorrow, Captain Tom will be 100. We wish them both well on their life journeys.

The Chancellor said earlier this week that we were all in this together. I was wondering if there was a new definition of "together". Does it include offshore? As the Leader of the House will know, some countries are not providing support to those companies that cannot be bothered to support the country by paying their taxes while they are using its services. May we have an updated statement to set out that the emergency measures will not apply to those companies that are paying dividends or that are offshore? Can that loophole be tightened, because some businesses are collapsing? That phrase has been used by dentists in my constituency. I know that the Minister sent out a helpful letter for emergencies, but businesses will no longer be there. One of my local dentists said that he is sick of giving antibiotics and self-administered fillings. I know a dentist who—[*Inaudible*—] a PPE kit that allows him to tend to his patients. Whom should he contact? We know that our teachers are doing a fantastic job in keeping schools open, as they are doing in Darlaston and Walsall South. They have contacted me to say that they are running out of PPE. Whom should I contact on their behalf to get them that vital PPE?

[Valerie Vaz]

I have been contacted by a number of road haulage businesses requesting urgent Government support. Some 85% of the transport market in the UK is made up by small and medium-sized businesses—they keep the UK's economy moving. They need a cash injection—a grant—to literally stay on the road and move our food, goods and medical supplies. May we therefore have a statement on what support road haulage firms will get? I emailed the Treasury, via the covid-19 email address, on 9 April, but I have not received a response, so I have nothing to say to those companies, which are literally at the end. Will the Leader of the House assure me as to what I can say to them?

May I ask for the Leader of the House's help on another matter? He will know that I have been waiting on responses from various Departments—all on the covid-19 helplines that I use—since as early as 4 April. I am waiting for three from the Treasury, two from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and one from the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport. Interestingly, the Department of Health and Social Care, the DFT and the Treasury circulated an incorrect email address to MPs in a “Dear colleague” letter sent on 26 April. Will he look into circulating an updated list?

When are we likely to have a statement on Brexit negotiations, which the Leader of the House did not mention in relation to next week's business? Yesterday, the whole country stood for our frontline workers who have died looking after us during this pandemic. It is International Workers' Day and Labour Day on Friday. Let us remember the dead but continue to fight for the living.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The connection was not perfect, so I am not sure I got all the points, but I will answer them as far as I can. First, I completely agree with the right hon. Lady in congratulating the Prime Minister and Carrie on the wonderful news of a baby. As a father of six, I know that there is no greater joy than a new life suddenly appearing in the room, and this is a huge joy for the whole country. I believe the Prime Minister joins an exclusive club of Members who are fathers of six, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). I do not know if there are any others I am missing out, but it is a great club to belong to.

As regards who can apply for the support from the Treasury, the rules are relatively clear and well set out. Companies that are not contributing, or that have not contributed, to this country and do not have their operations in this country will not particularly benefit, but employment in this country will benefit. As regards dividends, that, in a way, is a matter for companies. I notice that BP is going to carry on paying its dividend to try to help pensioners, and that is a decision for companies where I do not think it would be right for the Government to intervene.

We know the figures on PPE, as they have been set out, but there is a global shortage and every effort is being made to ensure that PPE gets to people who need it. The Government are working very hard on that and

are investigating offers of supply from around the world. I notice that the *Daily Mail* and its readers are making huge efforts to help as well, so it is a national effort in which we are all involved.

I am concerned that the right hon. Lady says that she has not had a response from various Ministries and that email addresses have not necessarily been working. Particularly during periods of recess it is of great importance that Ministries respond in accordance with their own timelines. I know that there have been strains on certain Ministries, which is understandable, but holding Ministers to account is part of our role, and I will take that up with the Ministries that she mentioned and ensure that correct email addresses are made available.

Regarding particular statements, the right hon. Lady will understand that there is great pressure for statements and urgent questions at the moment. We are sitting for three days, and we have had a statement every day. Today, there is a business statement as well, so there are two statements today. All requests for statements are taken seriously, and I hope that the right hon. Lady will note that the many requests we received for a general debate on covid-19 have been taken up. Finally, she mentioned 1 May. She omitted to say that it is the feast of St Joseph the Workman, so it is a good day to celebrate.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend will agree that is nice to have an Exmoor man having a new child. I congratulate the Prime Minister, especially as he is a local.

My right hon. Friend and I have something else in common—Somerset county—and we are both proud of the area we live in. Big counties have received the lion's share of the very good grants—and I am grateful to the Government—that have been given out to cope with this awful pandemic. However, I must question how some of them are using the money. I have received next to nothing from the county of Somerset, while Devon next door is keeping me enormously informed about what it is doing and how it is spending its money. When the time is right, will my right hon. Friend allow us to have a debate about the way in which counties and districts have handled this crisis in what has been a difficult time for us all?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What a pleasure it is to hear from my hon. Friend in his Somerset fastness—assuming that is where he is—and to admire the collection of ornaments behind him, so elegantly displayed for our delectation.

The spending of public money must always be held to account. It is of utmost importance that what is taken from taxpayers is spent responsibly by the authorities who spend it. The Government have provided £1.6 billion extra for local councils, and £3.2 billion will come in the fullness of time. That money must be accounted for by all councils, even those covering the great county of Somerset.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: First, will the Leader of the House confirm that he will introduce a motion to establish the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs for our next meeting on Monday? He will know that the SNP has withdrawn the amendments that we had tabled on that matter, so there is no need for a Division, and it is important that that vital Committee is up and running as quickly as possible.

Secondly, may I express concern about the speed with which we are progressing on implementing electronic voting? I am well aware that there are some Members of Parliament who view such proceedings with suspicion and, indeed, disdain, but I hope that any attempts to placate those views are not the reason for the delay. Perhaps the Leader of the House would update us on when we might expect firm proposals.

Thirdly, how does the Leader of the House intend Members to contribute in learning from the experience of using digital platforms this week, and in how we might develop that facility? It seems that this hybrid Parliament—while I welcome it and the great effort that has been made by many people to make it happen—has a fundamental flaw. It is not really a virtual meeting—it is a means by which some of us can contribute remotely to physical proceedings in the Chamber, so it will always create two classes of participant, whether we like it or not. As an experiment, I wonder whether we can consider having at least one sitting of a full Parliament in which everyone participates on the same basis and does so remotely, so that there is a level playing field and we can at least consider whether that is something with which we wish to continue.

Finally, I note that on 11 May we will have a general debate on the covid crisis and the Government's response. Rather than that taking place in the abstract, with people chipping in whatever they want from their constituencies, there would be a more focused discussion if the Government could bring to the Chamber at that time their proposals for the second phase of their response. We are now more than halfway through the first phase, and unless we have the opportunity to consider what happens next, I fear that many of our citizens will get increasingly frustrated and disenchanted with what the Government are doing. We need to keep them on board, so having firm proposals to discuss would be exceptionally welcome.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad to bring pleasure to the hon. Gentleman, in that the motion on the Scottish Affairs Committee will be back on Monday. May I say that I am delighted that the Scottish National party is now removing its objections? There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repenteth, etc.

As regards electronic voting, all that is being done is temporary, and it is worth emphasising that. We would not have achieved the consensus across the House to allow these procedures to be implemented if there were any thought that it were permanent. It is being done on a temporary basis, and implemented as quickly as possible. I hope that we will be able to experiment with electronic voting on 11 May, subject to the Procedure Committee considering the proposals and to testing with a large number of Members to ensure that it works.

As regards the hybrid Parliament or all being virtual, I think the hybrid Parliament is actually working well. It is a good indication that those who need to come into work are right to come into work. That has always been the Government's policy, and people coming in is something that they are entitled to do. It is of great antiquity that we have a right to attend Parliament; it goes back to 1340. I think the way you have run these proceedings, Mr Speaker, has made it quite clear that there is only one class of Member of Parliament and that every Member is given exactly the same treatment: there are no interventions, there is no extension on speaking time

and there is no ability to intervene for those who are in the Chamber. I think there is only one class, and it is first class, because of the work done by the House of Commons authorities to get this system up and running as rapidly as possible.

Finally, on 11 May, it will be a general debate. It would be too early to pre-empt what may be said and whether the Government's five tests have had any fulfilment by that stage—that is still quite a time off—but I was responding, as Leader of the House, to the many requests from Members to have a general debate.

Mr Speaker: We now go across to sunny Lancashire and David Morris.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to convey my congratulations to the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds on their new arrival, and to you on bringing forward this virtual Parliament and handling it in such a way that we can actually be in Lancashire, or wherever we are in the country, to make these points heard.

Talking of technology—we have been talking about virtual voting—could we not include in the debate an app, or application, so that with such technology we can move around to see our relatives when the lockdown is eased? Speaking personally—and on behalf of lots of my constituents whose views are in my inbox—I have not seen my elderly father for seven weeks; he is in his mid to late-80s. A lot of people in my constituency are starting to ask me how we can start to ease the lockdown and move around. Would not an app be better?

Mr Speaker, it is very surreal to be talking on my computer to the rest of the Chamber. However, I congratulate you on everything you have done to enable this to happen.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a great pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend, and not surreal for us as we see him in glorious technicolour addressing us. With regards to the lockdown, it is of course difficult for the elderly and for those of us with elderly parents, but we must follow the rules, because that is actually working. No doubt the sun will shine eventually and the restrictions will be lifted, but now is not the time to forecast when.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) [V]: I think that 1 May was also the feast day of St Panacea, which may be of interest to Donald Trump.

I want to ask about cancer, because 367,000 people a year in this country contract cancer and 165,000 die of it. When I last spoke to my oncologist, he said he was terrified of a tsunami of people, who have not contacted the doctor now because they are frightened of going to a hospital in case they contract coronavirus or because they just do not want to take up the NHS's time, presenting with their cancer too late for doctors to help. Is it not important that we get out the message, whether through a debate or statement in the Commons, that if people are ill, the NHS is still there for them now and that delaying taking a dodgy mole or something in their bowel that is worrying them to the doctor is a big mistake?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am glad to say that the health service is opening up for people to go back for continuation of treatments

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

that were suspended and to have tests for potential new illnesses. That is important and was part of the whole strategy to ensure that the NHS could cope and that lives could be saved from other illnesses as well as the coronavirus.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I would like to place on record my congratulations to the Prime Minister and his fiancée on the birth of their first baby.

The Treasury has done a remarkable job in coming forward with various schemes to help people through this terrible pandemic. However, some people have still been left behind. People who run a small business from home and people in professions, such as dentists, solicitors, accountants and others, have complained to me that they seem to be deliberately excluded from the Government's schemes. May we have an updated statement from the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what measures he will introduce to enable those key people, who are fundamental to our economy, to be supported through the crisis until the economy can recover?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Chancellor did make a statement on Monday. The schemes for small businesses are pretty comprehensive, including 100% loans, which have now been announced, the suspension of rate payments, the funding for entrepreneurs and the self-employed and so on. That Government are doing what they can, but those matters could be covered in the general debate on 11 May.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: The hybrid Parliament is a great achievement, but I am sure that the Leader of the House agrees that it does not come close to replicating the true cut and thrust of proper Commons debate, with interventions and so on. Does he intend to continue to proceed by consensus and to introduce only uncontested business at this time, unless it is urgent and absolutely necessary to do otherwise?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the real thing is better than a virtual Parliament. I will not give an advert for Coca-Cola, which views itself as “the real thing”, but there is a lot to be said for the real thing. However, the Government have a legislative agenda that they must get through, so, no, I will give no guarantees that there will not be contested business. That is why we need to have votes: so that Members may express their views.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con) [V]: I want to place on record my thanks to the House authorities for the extraordinary speed at which they have moved to implement a virtual Parliament. It has been a real benefit for scrutiny, and for our constituents who can see what we are doing on a day-to-day basis. I welcome the move to remote voting in the coming weeks. I know there are strong views across the House on that, but, although it is temporary, I would welcome a debate afterwards on how it has worked, because it could bring benefits for those who have caring responsibilities, health conditions and other access requirements, and we should discuss that in the aftermath.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her kind words about the House staff, which are worth underlining and reiterating. I emphasise the temporary nature of what is being done—that is why there has been such widespread consensus and support for it—but the Procedure Committee may want to look into what we can learn from the experiences in future.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: I appreciate that there is a general covid-19 debate scheduled, but I urge the Leader of the House to make time for a specific debate about insurance companies and particularly business interruption insurance. There is real anger and, I believe, a real appetite across the House to properly discuss business interruption insurance. A number of small and medium-sized companies took cover in good faith that does cover infectious diseases, but because it does not specifically cover covid-19 a number of insurance companies have been posted missing. They need to be held to account. There has been a failure of regulation. There is a need for state intervention on this, and we need to debate it soon.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman makes a point that has been raised by a number of other hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House. There are concerns about how such insurance policies have worked. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this can be brought up in the general covid-19 debate, but it can also be taken up directly with the Treasury, and I have no doubt that it will be.

2.30 pm

More than 20 minutes having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the business statement, the Speaker brought those proceedings to a conclusion (Order, this day).

Fire Safety Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: I call Minister James Brokenshire to move Second Reading. He is asked to speak for no more than 20 minutes.

2.30 pm

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire) [V]: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Almost three years have passed since the tragic events on the night of 14 June 2017. It was the greatest loss of life following a residential fire since the second world war. None of us will ever forget the events of that terrible night, and the Government are resolute in their commitment to ensure that they are never repeated. Those 72 people should never have lost their lives. Our thoughts today are very much with the victims' families, survivors and fellow residents, who have had to rebuild their lives over the past three years.

I know from my time as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government the profound effect the events have had on the Grenfell community, but also that community's sense of purpose and its clear demands for justice and change. I have had the privilege to meet survivors and their families, as well as those in the local community who joined together to support them. Those discussions have been humbling and harrowing. They have underlined the responsibility—indeed, the duty—on us to act. The Government will continue to provide support to the affected families and support the creation of a memorial on the site of the tower, a process that is rightly being led by the bereaved and the local community.

The House has had the opportunity to debate the tragic events at Grenfell Tower on a number of occasions. Despite the unusual circumstances we are operating under today, I have no doubt that we will hear once again many powerful and impactful contributions. There is considerable experience across the House, and we will continue to listen to views from all interested colleagues, as well as working with the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue. I welcome the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) to his new role as shadow Home Secretary. We will continue to engage constructively with him and his team.

Our home should be a place of safety and security. At a time when we are asking the people of this country to stay at home—indeed, many of us will contribute to this debate from our homes—we are reminded of the overriding importance of people being safe and feeling safe at home, especially in high-rise properties.

In the days following the terrible tragedy, the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), announced that there would be a full independent inquiry, led by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, to get to the bottom of what happened on that night and to understand why the building was so dangerously exposed to the risk of fire. Alongside the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Home Office commissioned an independent review of building regulations and safety, which was led by Dame Judith Hackitt. Dame Judith's findings have underpinned our unprecedented programme of building and fire safety reform. We are resolute in our commitment to

delivering on them, and significant steps have already been taken to address building safety and fire safety risks.

Where a fire and rescue service has been advised of a high-rise residential building with aluminium composite material cladding, the National Fire Chiefs Council is confident that that building has been checked by the local fire and rescue service and, where appropriate, additional interim measures have been put in place to ensure the safety of residents. The Government have established a fire protection board, chaired by the National Fire Chiefs Council, to provide oversight of the programme to ensure that all high-rise residential buildings are inspected or reviewed by the end of 2021; £10 million has been allocated to support the fire and rescue service in this endeavour.

In December 2018, the use of combustible materials on new high-rise homes was banned, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in this year's Budget that the Government will provide £1 billion to fund the removal and replacement of unsafe non-ACM cladding systems for both the social and private residential sectors on buildings of 18 metres and above. The prospectus for this new building safety fund will be published in May and open for registrations soon after. The funding is an addition to the £600 million we have already made available to ensure the remediation of the highest-risk ACM cladding of the type that was in place on Grenfell Tower.

In January, MHCLG issued specific advice for building owners on assurance and assessment and how to ensure fire doors meet appropriate fire safety standards. We have pushed owners and local authorities hard to identify and remediate unsafe buildings. We work closely with local fire authorities and fire and rescue services to ensure that interim safety measures are in place in all buildings until the cladding is replaced, but there is an urgent need for remediation to progress, even at this challenging time, recognising the continuing risks and the financial burdens on leaseholders in maintaining waking watches. I therefore want to be clear that remediation work can and should continue wherever it can be done safely—wherever it can, whenever it can.

It is critical that this work continue, and to help support that we have published information for industry and stakeholders on the gov.uk website on how to ensure sites can operate appropriately under the current restrictions. We have also appointed a firm of construction consultants to provide specific advice for those carrying out cladding remediation work.

While the focus of much of our activity has been high-rise residential buildings, it is important to stress that our work rightly goes far beyond that. To support the protection work targeting other high-risk buildings, the Home Office will be providing fire and rescue services with a further £10 million to help deliver protection work within their communities.

While talking about essential work within communities, at this time of incredible national challenge I want to use this opportunity to recognise, and pay tribute to, the essential role fire and rescue services are playing in our response to the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to their core duties, fire and rescue services have around 4,000 volunteers working to support ambulance services, coroners and local communities, as well as helping the vulnerable and those isolated at this incredibly difficult time. I want

[James Brokenshire]

to thank firefighters and staff up and down the country for their incredible service, their dedication to duty and their desire to help others where they can, and for the incredible difference that is making.

The Queen's Speech committed the Government to bringing forward two Bills on fire and building safety. The first is this short, technical, Home Office-led Fire Safety Bill, which will amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. The second, the building safety Bill, led by MHCLG, will put in place an enhanced safety framework for high-rise residential buildings, taking forward the recommendations from Dame Judith's review. The purpose of the Bill before the House today is to clarify that the fire safety order applies to the external walls, including cladding and balconies, and individual flat entrance doors in multi-occupied residential buildings. The fire safety order requires responsible persons, often building owners or managers, to assess the risk from fire, to put in place fire precautions so far as reasonably practicable to keep premises safe, and otherwise to comply with the requirements of the order. The order does not apply to domestic premises, except in limited circumstances.

The Grenfell Tower inquiry's phase 1 report found compelling evidence that the external walls of the tower were not compliant with building regulations. In January this year, the independent expert advisory panel on building safety set up by the Government shortly after the Grenfell fire published its consolidated advice. That includes advice on measures that building owners should take to review ACM and other cladding systems to assess and assure their fire safety and the potential risks to residents of the spread of external fire.

We have established that there are differing interpretations of the provisions in the order as to whether external walls and, to a lesser extent, individual flat entrance doors in multi-occupied residential buildings are in scope of the order. For that reason, we submit that the Bill is a clarification of the fire safety order. It will apply to all multi-occupied residential buildings regulated by the order. The current ambiguity is leading to inconsistency in operational practice. That is unhelpful at best and, at worst, it means that the full identification and management of fire safety risks is compromised, which can put the lives of people at risk.

Twenty flats in Barking were destroyed in June 2019 when a fire spread from a wooden balcony. Richmond House was a four-storey timber-framed block of flats in Worcester Park that burnt down in September. Only last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) highlighted a further significant fire in her constituency. Such fires are stark reminders of how a conflagration can spread on the external envelope of a building, and why those risks need to be identified or mitigated.

The Bill will therefore ensure that, when the responsible person makes a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks, it takes account of the structure, external walls, balconies and flat entrance doors in complying with the fire safety order, and allows enforcement action to be taken confidently by fire and rescue authorities. That will complement existing powers that local authorities have under the Housing Act 2004.

The Grenfell inquiry's phase 1 report, published last October, provided a comprehensive picture of what happened on the night of 14 June 2017. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear at the time of publication, the Government accepted in principle all of the 14 recommendations addressed to the Government directly.

For high-rise residential buildings, the inquiry's recommendations included new duties on building owners and managers: to issue information to the fire and rescue services; to ensure that there are premises information boxes; to carry out regular inspections of lifts; and to ensure that building floor numbers are clearly marked. For all multi-occupied residential buildings, the inquiry also called for new duties for regular checks of fire doors.

The objective is to ensure that fire and rescue services can plan for and respond to a fire in a high-rise residential building, alongside overall fire safety benefits for residents. As we said in our initial response to the report, we are committed to working closely with other organisations to ensure that the right changes are brought about to protect the public.

The Bill will also provide the firm foundation on which the Government will bring forward secondary legislation to enact those recommendations. Our proposals will be the subject of public consultation, to be published in the coming months. The consultation will also set out proposals to ensure that the fire safety order continues to regulate fire safety effectively in all the premises it covers, as part of the ongoing improvements to building safety following our 2019 call for evidence on the order.

The Bill will give the Secretary of State a regulation-making power to amend or clarify the list of premises that fall within scope of the fire safety order. That will enable us to respond quickly to any further developments in the design and construction of buildings and our understanding of the combustibility and fire risk of construction products.

As the order and therefore the Bill relate to matters within the legislative competence of the Welsh Assembly, the Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government in the Welsh Assembly has confirmed that she will put the matter before the Assembly for a legislative consent motion.

I am aware that the provisions of the Bill will require potentially significant numbers of responsible persons to review and update their fire risk assessments. For many, that will require specialist knowledge and the expertise of the fire risk assessor. We are working with representatives of the sector to understand the particular challenges in delivery. That will inform our approach to the implementation of the Bill, while maintaining a clear and consistent approach to fire risk assessments. In any event, and in line with the independent expert advisory panel's consolidated advice, I would none the less encourage those with responsibilities to carry out a fire risk assessment under the order as a matter of good practice and to consider flat entrance doors and external wall systems as part of their fire risk assessment for multi-occupied residential blocks as soon as possible, if they have not already done so.

As I have highlighted, there is further legislation to follow. Following the 2019 consultation, the building safety Bill will put in place an enhanced safety framework

for high-rise residential buildings. It will establish a new system to oversee the performance of building control functions, with stronger enforcement and sanctions, and give residents a stronger voice in the system, ensuring that their concerns are never ignored. That Bill will be published in draft form before the summer recess.

We will also establish a new national building safety regulator within the Health and Safety Executive. The new regulator will be responsible for implementing and enforcing a more stringent regulatory regime for high-rise residential buildings, as well as providing wider oversight of safety and performance.

The Fire Safety Bill complements all the actions that we have taken to date. It demonstrates that we are applying the lessons from the Grenfell tragedy and will continue to do everything within our power to ensure the safety of people in their homes. While legislation alone can never provide all the answers, I believe that it will make a significant and lasting contribution to the safety of residents. It will provide a catalyst to drive the culture change that is needed within our building and construction sector to put safety and security at the forefront and provide responsibility and accountability where people fall short. Above all, it will help to provide the legal foundations to ensure that such a tragedy can never happen again. I commend the Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Home Secretary, Nick Thomas-Symonds, who is asked to speak for no more than 15 minutes.

2.47 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the Security Minister for his speech and his welcome. I shadowed him briefly in a previous role over recent months, and I look forward to working with him on issues of national interest.

In our deliberations today, at the forefront of our minds are the 72 people who lost their lives and the more than 70 who were injured in the terrible tragedy of Grenfell on 14 June 2017. All of us in this House and, indeed, the whole country will remember where we were when we first saw those devastating scenes in west London. It was one of the most heart-wrenching tragedies we can all imagine, and what made it unbearable was the fact that the event that unfolded was wholly preventable. It is and always will remain a stain on our national conscience. For those who escaped, for the emergency services at the scene and for all the family, the friends and the wider community, the events of that awful day will live with them forever.

The fact that such a tragedy could happen in one of the wealthiest boroughs in one of the wealthiest countries in the world shines a piercing light on the inequality in modern Britain and the many ways in which it manifests itself. Over the course of this debate, we will, of course, discuss the legislation, the numbers and the finance, but at the heart of it, we must always remember first and foremost that this is about people, and most strikingly, those who lost their lives and those who managed to escape but will live forever with the memories of that night. That is why people will rightly look to this House for not just words but action.

Getting the Bill right is vital, not just to address the failings so horrifically exposed by Grenfell but to guard against similar incidents—incidents that may appear unlikely or unimaginable today, but could be all too real

in future. Labour Members support the Bill, but we urge the Government to go further and faster on fire safety so that there are no more Grenfell Tower tragedies and people are kept safe and secure in their own homes.

In October, we welcomed the first phase of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, which addresses the events of the night itself: when the fire began, when the first 999 call was made, at six minutes to one in the morning, and when the first firefighters reached the tower, five minutes later. We await phase 2 of the inquiry and its investigation into the broader causes, but we already know from the first phase report how it happened. The report says:

“Once the fire had escaped from Flat 16, it spread rapidly up the east face of the tower. It then spread around the top of the building in both directions and down the sides until the advancing flame fronts converged on the west face near the south-west corner, enveloping the entire building in under three hours.”

The report also sets out that there is

“compelling evidence that the external walls of the building failed to comply with...the Building Regulations 2010, in that they did not adequately resist the spread of fire having regard to the height, use and position of the building. On the contrary, they actively promoted it.”

It continues:

“It is clear that the use of combustible materials in the external wall of Grenfell Tower, principally in the form of the ACM rainscreen cladding, but also in the form of combustible insulation, was the reason why the fire spread so quickly to the whole of the building.”

Given the particular focus on the actions of the London Fire Brigade at the scene in the first phase report, recommendations made to the fire service should be given the full response that they require. At the same time, while recognising what the first phase report says and learning the lessons, we continue to pay tribute to the heroic actions of firefighters in our country every day, including on the night of the Grenfell Tower fire, when so many put themselves at serious risk to save the Grenfell Tower residents. We will continue to press the Government to give all survivors the support that they need, to bring those culpable to justice, and to put in place every measure needed to prevent a fire such as Grenfell from ever happening again.

As the Security Minister said, the Bill’s provisions clarify that the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 applies to external walls, including cladding, balconies and windows, and individual flat entrance doors in multi-occupied residential buildings. Responsible persons will need to ensure that they have assessed the fire safety risks of the relevant premises and have taken the necessary fire precautions, with fire and rescue authorities having enforcement powers, including the ability to remove cladding and to put in place prohibitions until changes are made. However, we have to be absolutely clear who the responsible persons are and allow nobody—owners or anyone else—to shirk their responsibilities under the Bill.

Although those powers are welcome, they are clearly not enough in themselves to meet the Government’s pledge to prevent another tragedy from happening. Clause 2 gives the Government powers to make further changes through secondary legislation, and the Government have said that that will provide a foundation to take forward recommendations. The Government have said they will launch a consultation on the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 in spring 2020, and that that

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

will include proposals for implementing the Grenfell Tower phase 1 report recommendations, which will be delivered via secondary legislation.

However, the Government have not given a timetable for when they will deliver those recommendations through secondary legislation. They must do so urgently. There is an urgent need for the fire safety measures recommended, and that urgency must be reflected in the actions of Ministers. Indeed, almost three years after Grenfell, this three-clause Bill is the first and only piece of primary legislation on fire safety that the Government have put before the House.

The Bill does not include provisions for the inquiry's recommendations. The Government had already promised, in October 2019, to implement the inquiry's recommendations in full and without delay. The 2019 Conservative manifesto repeated that commitment, but even the simpler recommendations, such as the inspection of fire doors and the testing of lifts, are not in the Bill. Long-overdue reforms of building safety are also not included in the legislation—they are to be in a separate building safety Bill. The Security Minister indicated that the draft version of that Bill would appear before the summer, but that process still needs to be moved forward as quickly as it possibly can be. He should clarify when it will appear in final form.

The House cannot escape the way in which the inquiry report was repeatedly critical of the Government: for the failure to remove ACM cladding from other blocks; for not funding the fire service efficiently to be properly equipped; for failing to publish national guidelines on the evacuation of tall buildings; and for ignoring recommendations to retrofit sprinklers in social housing blocks in the years leading up to the Grenfell tragedy.

The Bill will require a higher level of inspection and enforcement and will increase the workload on fire and rescue services. There has to be clarity about the funding to carry out such work. The Fire Brigades Union has said today that there are 1,100 fire-safety inspectors left; there have to be more to carry out the duties in the Bill. Between 2010 and 2016, the fire and rescue services were cut centrally by 28% in real terms, with a further cut of 15% by 2020. That led to 12,000 fewer firefighters—20% of the whole service.

As Mayor of London, the Prime Minister was responsible for deep cuts. An independent review by Anthony Mayer found that in the eight years of the Prime Minister's mayoralty, the London Fire Brigade was required to make gross savings of more than £100 million, leading to the cutting of 27 fire appliances, 552 firefighters, 324 support staff, two fire-rescue units and three training appliances, along with the closure of 10 fire stations and a reduction of fire rescue unit crewing levels.

Grenfell was not the first fire in a high-rise block of flats that resulted in loss of life. In 2013, coroners wrote to Ministers about two separate fires: in Camberwell in 2009, in which six people died; and in Southampton in 2010, in which two firefighters died. The coroners' letters included clear points of criticism and recommendations, important parts of which—including recommendations to retrofit sprinklers in high-rise housing blocks and to urgently overhaul building regulations—were either rejected or ignored. Letters were sent to the then Housing Minister by the all-party group on fire safety and rescue, with the last sent just 26 days before the tragedy.

An issue that must be recognised is the reaction to the Grenfell fire, with the Government not acting swiftly enough to remove Grenfell-style cladding from tower blocks and a failure to support residents with interim safety costs. To give an example, waking watches, when fire wardens patrol residences, can cost residents £10,000 or more for very short periods of time.

Coronavirus is an unprecedented challenge and I recognise what the Security Minister said about action continuing where it can and the crisis that we are currently in. We of course recognise that it absolutely changes working patterns, but it cannot ever be an excuse for failing to take strong and swift action on the removal of cladding, because 60,000 worried residents are still living in buildings wrapped in cladding that needs to be replaced. Almost nine in 10 private sector buildings and half of social sector buildings have not had cladding removed.

The Security Minister will, I am sure, remember setting a deadline of the end of 2019 for social sector blocks to be made safe, and of June 2020 for private sector blocks—a deadline that now looks likely to be missed. In addition, the Government have yet to publish their findings from the audit of how many buildings are covered with dangerous non-ACM cladding, such as high-pressure laminate. I urge the Minister to make that audit's findings, which I understand were available at the end of March, fully available as soon as possible.

After Grenfell, the Government accepted that there were flaws in the building safety regime and commissioned the Hackitt review, as the Security Minister said. That was published in May 2018. The Government accept that they did not go far enough. That led to the ban on combustible cladding in November 2018 and the restrictions on desktop studies. As I have indicated, the Government have yet to publish that primary legislation. While the draft will be available in the summer, as the Security Minister said, the process must be faster.

Labour will look to improve the Bill during its passage through Parliament. I urge the Government to have an open mind in the short Committee stage they have allocated and to give reassurance on a timetable for the measures they intend to take. Anything less than that would be a breach of promise to those who were lost and every person affected by the terrible tragedy of Grenfell, which none of us wants to see ever happen again.

I will conclude by taking a moment to pay tribute to all those who were impacted by the Grenfell tragedy and the remarkable community efforts that grew up and have been maintained to support people. In this, the most awful of incidents, we also saw the very best in people. I commend the work that they have done campaigning for justice.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am now introducing a time limit of five minutes. I advise Members who are speaking virtually to have a timing device visible.

3.1 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which has already been published. I also declare an interest in that I used to be a fireman. I look across the Chamber trying to see Jim Fitzpatrick,

but he has retired. His expertise, knowledge and balanced attitude in these debates over the years is something that we will miss a lot.

I am also almost fully responsible for it being the shadow Home Secretary who is representing the Opposition in this debate and it being my good friend the Security Minister, sunning himself in Kent, who is representing the Government. I convinced the then Prime Minister and then Home Secretary that the fire service should be part, along with the police, of the Home Office emergency provision. Sadly we have not yet gone as far as I would like, with the blue-light services coming under one ministerial umbrella. The regulations should have come across with the fire service responsibility. It should not be two different Departments vying over it with the Cabinet Office being involved; it should be one Minister who is responsible for safety in our fire service.

I welcome this very short Bill, but I share some of the concerns about what is not in it—those will be talked about in the House today—and that the shadow Home Secretary has expressed.

It would be wrong for me not to praise and have deep-felt thoughts for those who lost loved ones and have been affected so much by Grenfell, including my former colleagues, the ambulance service and the police who saw things that night and in the following days that they never thought they would ever see in their careers. I was trained in high-rise, and I never thought I would see what I saw on television and subsequently when I drove past on my way into Westminster the following morning. I never dreamed that we would see double-glazing units fully alight falling out and coming down the side of a building, or that the cladding itself would be the perpetrator. However, the cladding is not the perpetrator of what happened at Grenfell; the perpetrator is who allowed it to be installed. Who did not do the checks? The inquiry will go into that. In the five minutes I have, I am not going to be able to go into that in depth, but what needs to come out is how this happened. I am sure that that is exactly what will come out in the inquiry.

It is not only ACM. Other fundamentally unsafe claddings are being put around buildings. I will come on to those in a second. I looked very carefully at the Local Government Association's brief and I share some of its concerns. One of my biggest concerns is the shortage of engineers, to which the shadow Home Secretary alluded. When I was in the job, the firemen did that. We had guys who went away on specialist courses and they were responsible for the topography of their patch. They did those sorts of checks. It was not just the guys on appliances, but officers who had gone away and were trained to do so.

There is an anomaly that can be resolved in the Bill, or the subsequent Bill, to prevent that from happening. One thing that shocked me when I was first made the fire service Minister was that it is not possible for a local fire service to charge the local authority to do such inspections because it is not allowed to make a profit. That is against regulations when there is a shortage of engineers around the country. The other day, I was in a warden accommodation where the lovely folk said, "The firemen came around and said I couldn't have a mat outside my front door." The firemen did not come around and say that; that was a private contractor. Frankly, it is lunacy if you cannot have a mat outside your front door. What sort of problem that is going to be in a fire,

I do not know. Perhaps they thought that people would throw them away. The point is that often it is the fire service that does a lot of those inspections, but very often it is not.

We could change the regulations tomorrow to allow the fire service to do what it wants to do, which is to be responsible for their ground on their patches, in a way that it is unable to do at the moment. Perhaps we could do that through an amendment in the short Committee stage, or perhaps we could do that in the future Bill as it comes forward, because it will be published in draft and we can do a lot of work on it. I will work across the House to help to get this right. The Security Minister has now disappeared from our screens, but I know he would be similarly encouraged to do so.

There is another major anomaly. The LGA's brief says that it should not be responsible for properties owned by leaseholders. The leaseholder does not own the property—that is the freeholder—and they should not have the burden, which is currently on them all the time, day in, day out, in the Bill.

3.7 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: First, may I allude to the work, which has just been mentioned, by my honourable friend and colleague, Jim Fitzpatrick? When he was a Member of this House, he did an awful lot of work in this area, and he deserves to be respected and remembered for that.

This is the first of two Bills to improve building safety, particularly in relation to fire. This Bill will be followed by the building safety Bill, which we understand will come in draft form. If that is the case, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which I chair, will look forward to undertaking pre-legislative scrutiny on it. We will certainly treat it with the urgency it deserves. The Committee has taken evidence in recent months from Dame Judith Hackitt on her report on fire safety, expert witnesses and Ministers. We recommended at an early stage that all combustible cladding should be removed from high rise residential buildings and we called for Government funding to enable that to happen. I am pleased that many of the Committee's recommendations have been accepted, but it is unacceptable that at this stage there are still over 300 high rise residential buildings that have combustible cladding on them.

The Select Committee has just started a new inquiry into combustible cladding. We have had 1,300 responses to a survey. In those responses, we have been told by the respondents that 70% of them are living in buildings that still have combustible cladding on them. We have been told that in many of those buildings, fire breaks and fire doors are missing or inadequate. We have been told that many of the buildings have combustible insulation as well as combustible cladding. Nearly three years after Grenfell, it is not good enough that those buildings are still in that state.

It is welcome, however, that the Bill clarifies the responsibility of building owners with regard to those issues and defects. It gives powers to the fire service to enforce the regulations that are in place. One of the challenges highlighted by Dame Judith Hackitt is the need for responsible and accountable persons at all stages of a building's life. A responsible and accountable person needs to be identified at the construction stage

[Mr Clive Betts]

and then, when the building is built, for its maintenance and management. As the previous speaker, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), said, the question is: who is the responsible owner in each case? Is it the leaseholder? The real problem for leaseholders is that they are not normally the building owner. Is it the freeholder, who may not have legal responsibility, or is it the management agent? Do any of these bodies actually have the necessary skills to take on this role and, indeed, would a management agent want to do that job if they had to take on those liabilities? There are real challenges that are not addressed in this legislation.

On the role of the fire service, it is welcome that it will be given powers to enforce the regulations and make sure that buildings are safe, and that owners do their job. We heard in our Select Committee inquiry that the job of the fire service, in all matters, could be greatly enhanced and helped if every single property has a log book, which has the materials used in the construction of the building, the building's layout and the responsibilities for the management of that building, including evacuation procedures. It would help the fire service to carry out enforcement and, of course, it would make it much easier for the fire service to deal with a fire when one breaks out in such a building.

Dame Judith highlighted the need for residents of these high-rise residential buildings to be fully involved in, informed of and consulted on matters to do with the safety of those buildings. The Select Committee completely agreed with her, and it is welcome that in the Bill, there is the possibility to go on and ensure that evacuation procedures in buildings are fully understood by the people who live in them.

Finally, to echo the comments that have been made, all this legislation we are discussing today and future legislation should have the simple objective of making sure that a Grenfell disaster never happens again.

3.12 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): As most hon. Members are aware, Grenfell Tower is in my constituency, so the whole issue of fire safety is very close to my heart. I start by paying tribute to my constituents, the Grenfell bereaved and survivors, their friends and neighbours, and the wider community, with whom I have spent a lot of time over the last six months, since I was elected to this place. They have been through so much, but they have always conducted themselves with great grace and dignity and they have campaigned tirelessly for improved fire and building regulations, so I commend them for that.

I also commend the Bill to the House, because I believe that it will improve the safety of those living in multiple-occupancy residential dwellings, and it will provide a platform whereby we can implement the recommendations of this first phase of the Grenfell inquiry. As previously stated, the Bill puts beyond doubt that the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 does require building owners, of any height of building, to mitigate the risks in their building when it comes to external walls, balconies and fire doors.

We also need to think practically, and we need to think forward. There is no question but that the Bill will increase, quite rightly, the amount and nature of the

work that needs to be done on fire risk assessment on buildings, so we need to ask industry whether it has enough fire safety experts and whether they are trained to a sufficient standard whereby they can assess the entirety of a building.

Clearly, there will also be cost implications for building owners, and we need to make absolutely sure that if a building owner is unable or unwilling to pay for these remediation measures, that does not stand in the way of fire safety. I would also say to the Minister that we need to act with speed and with a real sense of urgency. I am very conscious that the tragedy of Grenfell Tower happened almost three years ago. We need to see tangible results not only in legislation but in improvements to buildings on the ground. I welcome the £1 billion in the recent Budget for the remediation of non-ACM cladding coming on top of the £600 million fund for ACM cladding, but we need to see that money utilised soon, and the work needs to continue in spite of the coronavirus lockdown. I would strongly encourage industry to focus on that remediation work now.

I strongly commend the Bill to the House, but I cannot stress enough that when it comes to fire and building safety improvements, we need to work collectively with a sense of urgency and purpose. As we spend ever more time in our own homes as a result of coronavirus, it becomes ever more clear that safety in our own homes needs to be of paramount importance. Nothing can stand in the way of improved building and fire regulations. We cannot allow another Grenfell tragedy to happen on our watch.

3.16 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab) [V]: I would like to associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the shadow Home Secretary, both in welcoming the Bill and in relation to what is needed in respect of fire safety, funding for fire services and, in particular, justice for the Grenfell community. I shall focus my remarks on the plight of leaseholders in my constituency, who have been badly affected and for whom I believe the Government need to take much stronger action.

I represent hundreds of people who have been affected by cladding-related issues, including those in the Islington Gates development and at Brindley House in my constituency. Islington Gates is a 144-unit development, and Brindley House is a 182-unit development. Both have flammable cladding, which has rendered the buildings unsafe. In my view, the Government have not moved quickly enough in dealing with cladding that is not of the ACM type that we saw in the Grenfell fire. I welcome the new £1 billion fund, but it took far too long for us to get to that point. It was the result of sustained campaigning from Members across the House, the Labour Front Bench and campaign groups such as the UK Cladding Action Group, the Birmingham Leaseholder Action Group and Manchester Cladators, alongside many others, who kept up the pressure on the Government ahead of the Budget, that the announcement of the remediation fund was eventually made.

Some big questions remain unanswered about that fund, on the speed with which the fund will be paying out for remediation works and on whether there is enough money to cover the cost of all the works that will be required in buildings such as Islington Gates and

Brindley House. If the money is not enough, the Government need to make it clear that they will meet any and all of those costs, and that the £1 billion fund does not represent the limit of the support that the Government are prepared to make available.

These issues are difficult enough for the people who live in these properties, but many, such as those I represent, have now been overtaken by another even more pressing matter: the insurance cover for their buildings. On this issue, there has been a depressing lack of understanding and engagement from Government. If we are not to preside over an even bigger social disaster, that has to change.

At Islington Gates, residents were already paying very large sums for interim fire safety measures before they were hit with a fivefold increase in the cost of insuring their building from £36,000 to £190,000. They had to find a consortium of five insurers to provide cover for their building. When those sums are added to the money that leaseholders already have to find for interim fire safety measures, they are looking at bills of many tens of thousands of pounds—more than some of them will earn in a whole year. For residents of Brindley House, the new quote for their insurance costs is 1,000% higher, having soared to £530,000; the commission and taxes alone on their premium are more than the whole of their premium for the previous year. Last year, they spent £150,000 on internal compartmentation and fire door works; they are paying over £180,000 for their 24/7 waking watch; and on top of all that, they have had to pay £100,000 to replace their fire alarm system.

Can Ministers on the Treasury Bench imagine the stress of receiving a bill for a sum that is much more than they earn in a year? On top of that is the tightening of everyone's financial circumstances as a result of the covid crisis. My constituents are enduring a level of stress that has left them at breaking point. Their situation is unconscionable, given that they have done nothing wrong. They are facing the consequences of national regulatory failure, and they should not simply be left to it. I have asked the Government repeatedly to take action on insurance for buildings affected in this way. In other parts of the sector, where insurance companies have been unwilling to provide affordable cover for natural disasters such as flooding, the Government have stepped forward with measures such as the Flood Re scheme. I urge them to consider stepping forward in a similar way on cladding insurance cover. It offends every part of our British values, our sense of fair play and decency, that people face ruin through no fault of their own. It is a national failure and it requires a national response.

3.21 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Today our country is in the midst of a national crisis, and together with the rest of the world we face an invisible enemy. No individual or group of people can say with any certainty how this crisis started and how it will end, but I feel certain that working together we will overcome it. That is in sharp contrast to the Bill before the House, which was of course triggered by the Grenfell disaster.

Who can forget the chilling morning of 14 June 2017, when we all woke to see the Grenfell Tower become a burning inferno? Words cannot describe adequately the horror that I and everyone in our country felt when we

saw the tower ablaze. We could see the enemy there. It was a fire, and yes, Parliament could and should have done something to prevent it from happening. The all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group drew attention on countless occasions to the underlying issues surrounding the cause of the fire, but unfortunately, those warnings were not acted on swiftly enough.

I, as chair of the APPG, do not want to dwell on the past. Instead, I want to say that I am delighted by and welcome the Bill, which will at long last require owners and managers of multi-occupancy residential buildings in England and Wales to reduce the risk of fire through unsafe materials on the external walls of buildings and individual flat entrances. Essentially, I am delighted to say, it closes at last a legal loophole that left it unclear whether fire safety legislation applied to certain parts of multi-occupancy residential buildings, such as the structure's external walls, including anything attached such as cladding, balconies and windows, and the entrance doors to individual flats that open on to common parts. Our APPG strongly supports the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), who represents the constituency where the tower is, said, the Bill provides reassurance to residents that the Government have learned lessons from the Grenfell tragedy and are taking steps to improve the safety of those residents while ensuring that building owners and managers—the Opposition spokesman was right to draw the House's attention to this—are clear that they are responsible for assessing the risk of external walls and fire doors of any height. If I had the time, I would say something else about height, but I hope that Members will discuss that in Committee.

The fire and rescue services' role of undertaking enforcements against dangerous cladding and fire doors in residential buildings is also made clear. While the application of the order initially applies to a building containing two or more sets of domestic premises, the relevant authority may, by regulations, amend the order to change or clarify the premises to which it applies. The Bill will bring these areas within the scope of the 2005 order, ensuring that the responsible person assesses and mitigates the fire safety risk associated with these parts of the building. Fire and rescue services will at long last be able to take enforcement action and hold the responsible person to account if they are not compliant.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister of State said, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will gain powers to amend the 2005 order by way of secondary legislation, enabling Government to adapt legislation to align it with the proposed new building safety regulatory system and to implement the recommendations of phase 1 of the Grenfell public inquiry, such as new requirements for signage and evacuation plans in residential buildings. As has been said, this Bill is, in effect, enabling legislation that will address much-criticised legal ambiguity that has hampered fire and rescue services in trying to deal effectively with unsafe cladding and flat entrance doors. They will be expected to use these new powers, and landlords and responsible persons should be prepared for that, as the Minister of State said.

For the past 11 years, since the July 2009 Lakanal House fire tragedy, and with more intensity since the inquest on that fire seven years ago, the all-party parliamentary

[Sir David Amess]

group has warned what would happen. I am delighted that now the Minister of State will work with us in the future.

3.27 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) [V]: Criticising this Bill would be as futile as criticising an empty bookshelf: one needs to look at the quality of the books. Clause 1 simply clarifies the fire safety order of 2005, and clause 2 is no more than a delegated power to make regulations amending that order in future. While the Bill is, in itself, welcome, it is no more than a piece of legislative furniture—the content is yet to come.

I want to illustrate the futility of even the best regulations on fire safety if the monitoring and enforcement regime is flawed from the beginning. Almost 1,000 people had their homes in the TNQ development of 460 flats in my constituency. The flats are unsafe because of fire stopping and other defects, which means that there is no compartmentation between them and a fire would spread swiftly up inside the walls of the building. When the building was completed in 2015, the regulations from the 2005 order were not unclear in any way. Approved document B specified that fire and smoke will be prevented from spreading to concealed spaces in the building structure by fire stopping and fire cavity barriers. Those are the rules. They are good rules, and they were not followed.

When it became clear in 2017 how unsafe the building was, my constituents had every confidence that the developers, Royal London and NEAT, would swiftly put things right. They were wrong. A complex blame game began. In January this year, the remediation work had scarcely started and was loosely timetabled to take another two or three years. When the defects were found, I asked what I believed was a simple question: who was responsible for inspecting the work? The answer, it appears, was everybody and nobody. The National House Building Council conducted over 1,000 spot inspections before it issued its insurance certificate in 2015. Its CEO, Steve Wood, informed me that he was disappointed to learn of the failures in the original construction. I wrote back to say that he could hardly have been surprised, given that his own inspection reports, which I had obtained, spoke of

“potential risk to health and safety of occupants, fire safety compartmentation, inadequate fire stopping, barriers to separating walls between units not fitted to design.”

The National House-Building Council signed off and issued the insurance cover just two months later without any further in situ checks being done. Instead, it relied on everyone else. The law says that final responsibility for building control matters lies with the developer, but the approved inspector is key to the developer being able to discharge that responsibility. Competition between private approved inspectors has undermined the impartial inspection regime provided by local authorities. Head Projects, with the approved inspectors, was obliged under the Construction Industry Council approved inspectors register code to provide a guarantee of compliance with the building regulation—in this case Approved Document B of the 2005 Fire Safety Order. I wrote to Rob Burrows, its managing director, asking how such systemic failings in the construction had come about under his regime.

He refused to provide further information, and shortly thereafter the company went into a very convenient liquidation—so much for CICAIR accreditation.

Finally, what of the project managers, CBRE? It made literally thousands of inspections. Its corporate social responsibility report declares that it is a leader in responsible business practices, serving its clients with integrity. Surely it would not have signed off on a building that it knew to be unsafe. Perhaps, but I have received leaked copies of internal correspondence between the company and its own clerk of works at the development. In that correspondence, the company is accused of amending reports he had submitted detailing the failures of defects. It was specifically told that, to allow occupation without making occupants aware, there would be no protection against the spread of fire—[Inaudible]—therefore leaving life at risk, as these areas did not comply with current building regulations. That was tantamount to fraud under the Fraud Act 2006. The regulations were there; the proper, disinterested monitoring and enforcement were not. No matter what sensible regulations the Government put on this bookshelf of a Bill, they cannot make safe a building that was not constructed safely. My constituents thought they were protected. The law said so in the regulations. They have learned that to have a right, but no means of enforcing that right, is to have no right at all.

3.31 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): In January of this year, I attended the graduation ceremony for on-call firefighters at the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service. This prestigious event was held at Easthampstead Park in Bracknell and involved 24 impressive young men and women rightly celebrating their hard work and success. As anybody in this place will know, we depend on our emergency services to keep us safe, so I wish to pay tribute to everybody in uniform, particularly at this time, for the outstanding work that they do on the frontline. One can only imagine the challenging experiences they face on a daily basis and I know that we should never take this for granted.

The graduation ceremony got me thinking: our fantastic fire services across the UK are ultimately employed as an insurance policy. Although they play a vital role to advise, plan and prevent, they also serve as a last resort to deploy to incidents when something has gone wrong, to protect life and property and to pick up the pieces when the human cost of not doing so becomes unacceptable.

We as policymakers have not just a moral obligation to protect those members of the public, who rightly expect the best possible regulatory framework, but a responsibility to those whom we always call on in unforeseen circumstances to perform their selfless duty and to ensure that they do not fall victim themselves to tragic circumstances. No one here needs any reminder that fire is a killer. I can vividly recall watching those awful pictures of Grenfell Tower on the news and subsequently seeing its charred shell while driving into London for work. One can only shudder at the unimaginable horror of those so gravely affected, not least the 72 men, women and children who lost their lives.

As a young teenager in 1985, I can also recall those terrible scenes of the Bradford City fire disaster playing out on television, with another 56 lives lost. As a regular football fan, it is clear to me that no one at any

significant sporting, recreational or social event should unwittingly place themselves in harm's way, and nor indeed should anyone in any public or private building—at their place of work or simply residing at home—feel vulnerable.

That is why I welcome the Bill. It is a much-needed piece of legislation and fulfils many objective purposes. As we know, it will amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 to clarify that the responsible person or duty holder for multi-occupied residential buildings must manage and reduce the risk of fire in respect of both the structure and external walls of the building, including cladding, balconies and windows, and in respect of entrance doors to individual flats that open on to common parts.

I can confirm, having informally consulted this week with the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, that my local authority welcomes the fact that all services across England and Wales will be empowered to take enforcement action and hold building owners to account if they are not compliant. This will enable the authority to build on the proactive work it has already undertaken on high-rise residential buildings with unsafe cladding and to ensure that Berkshire residents are safe. It is also prudent that the Secretary of State will be given the power to amend the list of qualifying premises, that the Bill will enable rapid developments in the design of buildings, and that provisions will allow these requirements to be brought in over time, thereby allowing a pragmatic clause 2.

What of the future beyond the Bill? While I look forward to seeing the detail of the secondary legislation to ensure that the recommendations from the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 1 report are implemented, there are two points in particular that I hope the Secretary of State will take away. First, the organisation Electrical Safety First has long advocated that electrical safety checks be obligatory in all tower blocks and that building management companies hold a register of white goods operating in those properties. Electricity causes more than 14,000 domestic fires a year, resulting in many deaths and injuries, so it is reasonable to suggest that electrical safety be included in any subsequent legislation.

Secondly, if we are to enable authorities such as the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service to deliver for their residents using the new powers, it is imperative that fair and sustainable funding be provided. Aside from the additional resources needed to identify who owns specific buildings, reasonable initiatives for council tax could be considered. Berkshire has been a historically prudent authority. The average householder in any constituency pays just £67 per year for their fire service. This is in the lower quartile of all fire authorities in the UK, yet the authority delivers an upper-quartile-quality fire service, as awarded by its 2019 inspection report. I therefore recommend the “fiver for fire” initiative to the Secretary of State, which would provide fire authorities with the flexibility to ensure that the right resources are in place. A few years ago, this was an additional allowance for fire services that could be put on to council tax—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am terribly sorry, but we have to stick to the time limit as the debate is oversubscribed.

3.36 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

Fire safety is an important issue in my constituency. I have spoken before in the House about Aura Court, a residential block in Old Trafford, which has numerous fire safety features and risks and remained occupied despite being subject to Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service enforcement notices. I therefore welcome measures to strengthen the safety regime, but I have some questions that I would like to ask of Ministers. First, I would like to understand more about how the Bill will fit with the anticipated building safety Bill. Will that Bill supersede any of the provisions of this Bill? Is there scope for confusion? As Dame Judith Hackitt pointed out, the overlaps and mismatch across different regulatory frameworks make it significantly more challenging to achieve a holistic focus on the fire safety of occupied buildings. That is particularly important in relation to regulation and enforcement.

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service tells me that the fire safety order provides an adequate framework for regulating the management of safety in high-rise buildings where it is complied with and where those responsible for the building understand their obligations and have the requisite competence. The difficulties arise where the fire safety failings are due to non-compliance with building regulations arising from the design and construction phase and the weakness of the building standards inspection and sign-off process.

I note that fire and rescue services will be able to take enforcement action against building owners who fail to comply with the provisions of the legislation, but there remain important concerns about the building standards regime in general and about local authorities' enforcement role and whether they have the necessary resources to carry out their functions. We all know the pressures that local authorities have faced over the past decade, and they are now compounded by the costs of coping with the covid crisis.

I welcome the additional funding for fire and rescue services set out by the Minister in opening the debate, but Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service has experienced £22.4 million of central Government funding cuts in the past 10 years, despite our population increasing by more than 100,000 between 2010 and 2018. The built environment in Greater Manchester is becoming more complex, with the development of new blocks and, in particular, office-to-residential conversions in my constituency and with the pace of development required to deliver the homes and infrastructure we need, which is becoming ever more rapid. At a time when the demands on the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service are increasing, in terms of support for our residents and the regulation of buildings, central Government funding per head reduced from £28.30 in 2010 to £18.82 in 2020. That is simply untenable.

I would also like to inquire further about the nature of the responsible persons in the legislation. It seems from what the Minister said earlier that the definition will include managing agents. Do the obligations apply both to them and, equally, to their principals? Must a responsible person be a named individual, or could it be an organisation? What steps are being taken to ensure that those undertaking this role have the necessary qualifications? Are the Government confident that a

[Kate Green]

pipeline of people with suitable skills exists or, if not, what plans are in place to develop such a thing? Finally, I note that Dame Judith recommended that fire safety order risk assessments should take place annually, so why has that not been specified in favour of only regular inspections?

I do, of course, support the Bill, but I hope that the concerns that I and others have expressed today will be addressed as the Bill continues its passage through Parliament. Getting this legislation right is fundamental to protecting the safety of all of our constituents.

3.42 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con) [V]: I am pleased that this Bill has been brought to the House for its Second Reading. After the terrible Grenfell tragedy in 2017, it is of the utmost importance that high-rise buildings are made safer and more secure so that such a tragedy never happens again. I have been encouraged by the Government's commitment to deliver the most significant improvement in building safety for a generation. Promising progress has already been made in this area, and I commend the Housing Secretary for announcing in January the creation of a new building safety regulator. As colleagues across the House will agree, it is crucial that families feel adequately protected in their homes, and it is our duty as parliamentarians to improve our nation's safety standards. Having managed my own electrical company for many years before becoming a Member of Parliament, I know how vital it is that residents know that their accommodation is safe and secure.

With this Bill, we now have a chance to learn from the tragic events of the past and to make the United Kingdom a world leader in building and fire safety. The three main aims of the Bill—giving fire and rescue authorities greater enforcement powers to increase accountability, complementing existing legislation that deters non-compliance, and assisting the introduction of secondary legislation that is supported by the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 1—are all noble causes that I am proud that this one nation Conservative Government are pursuing.

This legislation will be even more effective if the Government continue to follow the guidance of the Grenfell tower inquiry and introduce further secondary legislation. Phase 1 of the inquiry has already concluded, and I wholeheartedly agree with its recommendations, namely that those responsible for high rises should be forced to inspect lifts and that the Government should develop national guidelines for the evacuation of buildings. I am therefore encouraged that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government have accepted the need for inspection of lifts. Furthermore, I shall follow the work of the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as their newly formed steering group reviews the “stay put” policy. That policy is of particular concern. Having spoken with many clients over the years, I believe that it can cause confusion and puts responsibility on the tenant to do something that does not feel right in the event of a fire. It also relies on people keeping doors closed, which in real life is not always practical and can be very difficult to manage.

While I support the Bill, I believe that it could be further developed, and it is just the beginning on improving fire safety laws in the United Kingdom. It is my hope that it will widen the discussion on what work can be done to strengthen the role of third-party certification schemes in the fire protection and building industries. After all, in my own professional experience, I have noted how third-party certification registration bodies such as BAFE, which audits companies in numerous fire-related industries, can provide responsible persons with the assurances they need that a company they purchase a service from is working to an approved standard.

I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on how third-party certification registration bodies can play a greater role in improving fire safety, and whether further legislation that deals specifically with the design, installation, testing, inspection and, most importantly, verification of fire safety systems could complement the proposals set out in the Bill. That said, I believe that the Bill marks a great first step in the provision of safer accommodation.

3.46 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) [V]: It is a pity that this small Bill is all we have by way of primary legislation almost three years after the horror of Grenfell Tower. There is nothing to object to here, because there is little to see. There is nothing to implement the recommendations of phase 1 of the Grenfell inquiry, which is delegated entirely to secondary legislation. It is good that the reach of the fire safety order has been extended and clarified. The fire risks of exterior walls, windows, balconies and front doors have all been implicated in the Grenfell fire and other major residential fires of recent years.

We await the companion building safety Bill. It would have been helpful to have the Bills side by side to ensure consistency and to ensure that all angles are covered. This Bill covers any building containing two or more domestic premises. The building safety Bill will cover a more restricted range of buildings over a certain height. I find that dislocation unhelpful. For example, talking recently to a developer who is seeking planning permission for a 20-storey block of flats in my constituency, I pointed out that, like Grenfell Tower, it had a single staircase which, should there be a need for evacuation, would be used both by escaping residents and by incoming rescuers. That led to a discussion about whether evacuation in case of fire was likely in future, as opposed to a “stay put” policy; about the need for alarm and sprinkler systems and clear instructions for evacuating; and about the use of only non-flammable and fire-resistant materials for construction. The bottom line was that putting a second staircase in would reduce the number of flats and, he alleged, the viability of the project.

My point is that we should not be trading cladding for fire doors, sprinklers for alarms, or means of escape for evacuation procedures. We should do everything necessary to prevent any further loss of life and destruction of property, especially in high-rise buildings. To make that assessment we need to have all the facts and all the proposals in front of us, not the piecemeal and provisional approach evidenced by the Bill. We are so far from a comprehensive response to Grenfell that I fear we will have more tragedies before we learn the lessons. Getting the Government to act on unsafe cladding, to take one example, is a tortuous process. First, they concentrated

on aluminium composite material, which was the type of cladding used at Grenfell. Then it was pointed out that high pressure laminate, the culprit at Lakanal House, was just as dangerous. Other materials, such as timber, are being investigated, but the basis for selection and the testing regimes do not command confidence.

Last week, I asked the Housing Minister whether the Government's building safety fund would apply to all combustible cladding and insulation, and combinations of combustible and non-combustible materials. Earlier this afternoon, he replied that the criteria for the fund will be published next month—I hope that they do not disappoint. Certain buildings are vulnerable in a fire by virtue not just of their height or construction, but of their use: schools, hospitals, hotels and care homes. When are those to be brought within the same restrictions that apply to high-rise residential blocks, and who is going to bear the additional costs of inspection and enforcement consequent on this Bill?

These are not academic matters; they are questions of life and death, asked daily by my constituents. In September 2016, a very serious fire occurred in a 19-storey block, Shepherd's Court, in my constituency. The cause was a known fault in a tumble dryer which had not been repaired or recalled. Why are high-rise blocks not subject to inventories of electrical products that are a major cause of domestic fires and why are they not checked periodically, as Electrical Safety First recommends? Grenfell is a mile from Shepherd's Court. The friends, neighbours and relatives of Grenfell residents, those who died and those who survived, are my constituents. Other residents in Shepherd's Bush found after Grenfell that their newly built homes had ACM cladding—it is now thankfully removed—and thousands of my constituents who live in tall buildings still have concerns over the safety of their homes.

I pay tribute to those who are working hard to resolve these issues, but the Government's response is just not good enough. This Bill looks like a bookmark, marking the place in a narrative they will return to when they have more time. But the time for action on fire safety is now—in fact, it is long overdue.

3.51 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I am a former chairman of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority. One week after the Grenfell fire, the London Fire Brigade took me to the top of the tower, and what I saw there was a sobering experience, to say the least. So, this Bill is to be welcomed. It was a Conservative manifesto commitment last year, and it was announced in the Queen's Speech at the start of this Session. I do not believe that the Bill represents the final destination on fire safety legislation, but it is a good first step along the way to prepare the ground for further legislation later this year.

Although the Bill is short, it seeks to take a grip on a key issue. As my right hon. Friend the Minister said in his opening statement, in amending the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, the Bill makes it clear that enforcing authorities can hold building owners to account if they are not compliant with their responsibilities for external walls of buildings, which is particularly pertinent in the light of Grenfell, as well as for the inside. That is a major step forward. However, there are areas of the Bill that could be improved as it progresses through Parliament.

The first issue I wish to address was also touched on by the hon. Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), and that is the issue of the responsible person. The Bill does not make clear what constitutes a “responsible person”—what skills and abilities they need or what precise enforcement powers they have. Pinning down the identity of the responsible person has long been the bane of various fire and rescue authorities' existence, and it can lead to long delays in taking enforcement action. The designation of who is a responsible person has in the past been applied to individuals, owners, tenant management organisations, local authorities, other forms of residents and groups, and so on. This legislation would be considerably strengthened if it were to require the designation of the identity of the responsible person on a building-by-building basis. There are also questions associated with the competence of the responsible person, and this issue is not dealt with in the Bill. Greater clarity on what constitutes competence on a building-by-building basis would be very beneficial, because the skills for fire assessment in a low-level, one-storey care home might be materially different from those for assessment in a multi-storey tower block.

There is a gap, too, regarding how the impact and success or otherwise of the Bill are to be measured. One way might be the speed with which enforcement can be carried out through legal proceedings and prosecutions—in other words, the length of time between a defect being identified and a prosecution being brought. Unfortunately, at present, that can take years in some cases. Identifying the responsible person who is the chief cause can be very problematic, and even once identified, they will often attempt to find a legal loophole to evade responsibility. Tightening that up would be of clear benefit.

The Bill could also be clearer on the ownership of premises where the responsible person finds it difficult to enforce front doors on flats in a building where some of the flats have been bought under right-to-buy legislation. It would be good to tighten that up. Similarly, the Bill does not deal with the need for private owners of individual flats in a block to comply with risk assessments, which can be a risk to a whole block. There was a tragic example of that in 2009, with the Lakanal House fire in the London Borough of Southwark. On that occasion, the fire started in a flat that had been purchased under right to buy, and the owners had made structural alterations—knocking walls down and so on—without telling the local council. Risk was not assessed prior to those alterations. Any such changes ought to be notified to the building owner, and the responsible person must be informed in advance.

None of those are reasons to reject the Bill at this stage, but I hope that they can all be picked up as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

3.56 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab) [V]: This Bill is clearly important and timely, given that it aims to ensure that people feel safe in their homes, at a time when the vast majority of UK citizens are locked down because of covid-19. Of course, the Bill was drafted well before the pandemic hit, but it is poignant and appropriate that, as we are being encouraged to stay home and work from home, a Bill is being debated that protects those in homes of multiple occupancy and high-rise blocks.

[Mike Hill]

However, let us not forget that the principal aim of the Bill is to ensure that a tragedy such as the Grenfell Tower fire never happens again and that the lives of the 72 people who sadly died there were not lost in vain. It also means that the brave efforts of the London Fire Brigade firefighters at Grenfell—lessons needed to be learned from their actions and traumatic experiences—and the subsequent excellent lobbying for improvements to fire safety regulations by the Fire Brigades Union will not be in vain.

In Hartlepool, we are fortunate that we do not have any high-rise accommodation similar to that of Grenfell or the problem of flammable cladding on a scale that we see elsewhere in the Tees Valley, in neighbouring Billingham, Stockton and Middlesbrough. But over recent years, we have seen a proliferation in private rented accommodation, an increase in the number of homes of multiple occupancy and the introduction of student accommodation, thanks to the success and reputation of the Northern School of Art, which is located in the town.

The student accommodation and multi-occupancy dwellings are relatively new phenomena in their numbers and therefore have posed new challenges for council inspectors and the local fire authority. I recently met the chief fire officer for Cleveland Fire Brigade, Ian Hayton, who outlined his frustration at his officers having no powers of inspection of homes of multiple occupancy because they are classed as dwellings, not businesses or places of work. The National Fire Chiefs Council has been calling for additional powers since 2017, as has the FBU. The secondary legislation that the Bill enables will hopefully shift the responsibility for fire safety on to building owners and managers of high-rise and multi-occupied residential properties, with powers of enforcement going to fire and rescue services. I hope the secondary legislation will make that clear and put the power of inspection in the hands of the fire and rescue service.

I welcome the fact that the secondary legislation will require landlords, building owners and managers to undertake regular inspections of lifts and report results to the local fire and rescue service; ensure that evacuation plans are reviewed and regularly updated, with personal evacuation plans in place for residents whose ability to evacuate may be compromised; and ensure that fire safety instructions are provided to residents in a form that they can reasonably understand. However, the right of inspection must be firmly provided to fire and rescue services in order to underpin that.

Eliminating and mitigating fire risk not just in people's homes but in all buildings must be a priority, and we must learn the lessons from Grenfell. In Hartlepool, I am proud that, post-Grenfell, our council is insisting that sprinkler systems are installed in new-builds—for example, the new English Martyrs and High Tunstall schools—and that our social housing providers are investing in improved fire safety precautions in their homes, but the challenges are out there, particularly in the private rented sector, so I fear that, even with all the positives coming out of this legislation, more will need to be done to truly protect all tenants, not just those living in high-rise flats or multi-occupancy dwellings.

4 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this important debate. I start by expressing my heartfelt sympathy for the victims and their families in the Grenfell Tower disaster. I thank successive Ministers on updating the House on progress in remedying the disaster and in legislation, but it is sobering that almost three years on from the disaster we are considering this Bill.

I have had the opportunity of going through the various different updates and reviews that we on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee have conducted and, indeed, I have heard at first hand evidence from Dame Judith Hackitt. I would echo, therefore, all the remarks of the Chair of the Select Committee in drawing attention to the work that the Select Committee is doing on this subject.

I want to mention first and foremost the problems of the testing regime. It is easy to test cladding by directing a flame or heat straight on to the surface, but the problem is that both ACM cladding and other forms become a huge fire risk when holes are cut for windows and other such purposes. The regime must test all forms of cladding and other building materials properly and safely.

There is another issue on which I would echo the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon). From serving on the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority before coming into Parliament, I know that who is responsible for signing off the different safety regimes must be clarified. I am afraid that the Bill as it currently stands needs further clarification, because it could lead to confusion. I hope that that be rectified in Committee.

I have a further concern, which I hope will be flagged up by Ministers dealing with the other legislation that is required: what we do about electrical fittings in general. We have very strict regulations for who can fit gas appliances, but the regulation on who can fit electrical fittings is very loose indeed. People who fit the gas appliances must have proper training and certification, but electricians merely need three days' training. I think most people would think that that is bizarre in this day and age, because those people will be at huge risk.

I also ask for clarity on what we mean by some of the specific definitions in the Bill. For example, references to buildings could be interpreted to mean semi-detached or detached properties of only two storeys. I am sure the definition is intended to cover multi-storey buildings. We will have a huge problem with fire assessments for householders and the fire authorities if it is not clarified.

The definition of "common parts" is normally considered to cover entrance halls, corridors and suchlike, but it needs to be extended to cover other areas of high-rise buildings, such as lift shafts and other systems. At present, there is doubt as to whether they would be in scope. There is of course also the issue of structure. At present, we are clearly thinking of particular types of structures, but we will have problems if that is not clarified by definition.

There are clearly some issues that need to be resolved, but a lot is left to secondary legislation. I trust that, during the passage of the Bill, we can clarify some of these issues, so that we can include them within the scope of the Bill without putting them in secondary legislation, so that everyone is clear.

In summary, I strongly support this Bill, and I hope we can speedily push it through to its conclusion. I look forward to the other legislation that is going to have to come through to improve fire safety in this country for all people in whatever type of housing they live.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The last speaker before our half-hour suspension is Daisy Cooper.

4.5 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: Nearly three years after the devastation of Grenfell Tower, I and the Liberal Democrats welcome the Fire Safety Bill as a first move in the right direction—but it is only a first move, because key aspects are not addressed. As currently drafted, tenants, leaseholders, local government and the fire service will take the weight of the new legislation. The recent building safety guidance for building owners, released by the Government in January, was foisted on the sector without any real regard for the expertise and training that would be required, and without any thought about how the changes were going to be paid for and by whom.

First, let us look at the scope of the Government's cladding scheme. The Chancellor's announcement in the March Budget of an additional £1 billion to replace dangerous cladding was welcome, but it does not cover a whole host of further measures that buildings need to take to ensure compliance. Fire safety assessments, the replacement of fire doors, installing smoke detector systems—these are just some of the major expenses that fall outside the Government's scheme.

Secondly, there are the financial pressures on leaseholders. The Government's Bill today has put the onus of fire safety on the building owner, but it does not say enough about who should be taking the financial burden. In my constituency of St Albans, one residents association has been told that it will be up to individual leaseholders to face the extra charges of about £20,000 per flat for this remedial work. Some service charges have increased sixfold since the tragedy of 2017 in preparation for the necessary works. I hope that the Government will agree that hitting individuals with a bill of £20,000 at any time, but particularly now, is completely unacceptable. More needs to be done to protect them from being financially crippled.

The third issue is about fire assessments, and specifically the EWS1 survey, which seems to have brought many flat purchases to a grinding halt. Most mortgage companies now seem to require an EWS1 certificate before lending, but feedback from my constituents, their management agencies and the local authority indicates that there is a very severe shortage of professionals around the country who are insured to sign off on this new survey.

My constituents have told me of 12 to 18-month delays, where they have to put their lives on hold and are left in constant fear of living in a dangerous home. Hon. Members will of course understand the impact that a 12 to 18-month delay will have on a pregnant constituent of mine who is looking for a suitable home for her growing family, or on the pensioner living in my constituency who is relying on the sale of their property to support them in retirement. Again, this is all the more urgent for those who find themselves and their jobs in a precarious situation as a result of coronavirus.

Finally, in line with the Hackitt review, these risk assessments should not only be held by building owners, but kept centrally with a public body, such as a Government-appointed regulator or a local council.

I am asking the Government to respond to these issues as a matter of urgency. We need to ensure that the EWS1 surveys are expedited. We need to have clarity for the industry about whether existing fire safety assessments may still be valid. We need to ensure that there are enough fire safety engineers—professionals—who can implement these changes and are insured to do so. Crucially, we need the Government to say what resources will be made available so that leaseholders are not faced with crippling fees. As a House, we have a responsibility to ensure that when we say an event like Grenfell will not happen again, they are not just words. We need to see far more action.

4.9 pm

Sitting suspended (Order, this day).

On resuming—

4.40 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. This is a sensible Bill, which I hope the whole House will support. I too pay tribute both to the memory of those who lost their lives in the Grenfell tragedy and to the emergency services. Like previous speakers, I had the honour of serving as a member—indeed, at one time as the leader—of what was then the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority. We ought to recognise the value of the work that the emergency services have done.

Given that the Bill is sensible and limited, and seeks to build on the lessons of Grenfell, I shall touch on two matters related to the broader policy areas that sit behind it. First, the Bill seeks, together with other legislation, to address some of the lessons that are being learned from Grenfell, but we should not forget the need urgently to address the position of those who are still living in accommodation with Grenfell-type ACM cladding or other dangerous cladding. Other hon. Members have referred to that, but I reiterate it to Ministers.

Many constituents of mine live in a tower called Northpoint in Bromley. I wrote to the Housing Minister, whom I am delighted to see on the Treasury Bench and I welcome to his position, on 26 February setting out the plight of those residents. I know that he has much on his plate, but I am sorry to say that I have not yet received a reply. That tower has a mixture of ACM and other flammable cladding. I am glad that, as I understand it, that will now be within the scheme, and I am glad that the moneys in the scheme have been extended. The Government are doing the right thing in that regard, and I welcome it. However, we are not addressing this issue with the speed and urgency that the desperate state of these people requires. All of them—many of them first-time buyers, others downsizers—live in flats that are now valueless. Most of them have mortgages; they cannot remortgage any more, and they cannot sell.

Although the scheme is welcome, it has two failings. First, as I set out in my letter to the Minister, it is extremely slow and bureaucratic to access. Those residents have already paid out something like £400,000 for the cost of a waking watch. Their service charge has gone through the roof, and their management reserves are

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

expended entirely. Potentially, they will spend more months forking out up to about £11,000 a month on a waking watch until this issue is resolved.

To access the scheme, those residents have to go through a bureaucratic procedure to show that they qualify. There is no doubt that they qualify, for heaven's sake. It takes far too long for them to access the scheme. By the time they have gone through the form-filling, the getting of surveys and then the commissioning of contractors and the getting in of materials, all of which has been slowed up by the near cessation of building works during the coronavirus emergency, it will, on current form, be a long time before they actually see that money. They are getting into more and more debt.

This is affecting my constituents' health—their physical health and their mental health. I urge the Government, who have done the right thing and said they will step in to assist these people, to get a move on, cut out the red tape—cut through the bureaucracy—and get the money to these people at the earliest opportunity. In the social sector, much has already been done. We ought to be treating people in the privately owned sector in the same way. No question of any moral hazard arises, because these people relied on the regulatory system that was then in place, which said that their properties were safe and suitable. If there was a failing in that system, that certainly is not their fault. They acted in good faith, and we ought, in all decency and as a matter of good governance, to speed the process along. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister will want to do that, and I urge him to look urgently at, among the many other things on his desk, these particular cases and those of many other people as well.

My second point relates to the responsible person regime, which is a good and sensible thing to bring in. However, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) picked up on the difficulty for many contractors in getting insurance in order to be able to undertake that work. A contractor operating in my constituency and that of my right hon. Friend the Security Minister tells me that its premiums have gone through the roof, with an increase of about 140%, and the extra cost even to small firms has been about £250,000. Also, many insurance companies are writing exclusion clauses into their contracts, which effectively means that they will not cover anyone on their professional liability insurance if their fire risk assessors or fire engineers undertake cladding work. That will drive many firms out of the market, and this needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

4.45 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: On 14 June 2017, 72 people died tragically when fire ravaged Grenfell Tower. More than 200 firefighters and 40 engines responded. However, prior to the fire, the Grenfell Action Group had identified the fact that the block constituted a fire risk and a death trap. I would like to express my solidarity with the families and loved ones of the victims in their fight for justice.

We have seen years of Conservative failure on fire safety, before Grenfell and since. Lessons from previous major fires have not been learned by the Government, and despite Ministers pledging to implement in full the

recommendations in the report on the first phase of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, the Bill does not include provisions for any of the measures called for by the inquiry. Martin Moore-Bick, who is leading the inquiry, originally promised to deliver the report on the first phase by April 2018. However, it was 18 months late and criticised by family members. They have called for a more independent and diverse decision-making inquiry panel. In January, a new addition to the inquiry panel, Benita Mehra, was forced to resign after it emerged that she was linked to the charitable arm of the firm that had supplied Grenfell's deadly cladding.

The Bill is expected to result in greater clarity on the responsibility for fire safety in buildings containing more than one home, and to make necessary changes to fire safety law, but it does not go far enough to meet the Government's pledge to prevent another Grenfell Tower tragedy. This is the only piece of primary legislation the Government have produced on fire safety. The fire safety order requires building owners and other responsible persons to undertake regular fire risk assessments. These changes mean that the safety of elements such as cladding will need to be considered in any fire risk assessment.

In Liverpool, 10% of buildings have the Grenfell-type highly inflammable cladding, with 5% having fire retardant cladding, meaning 85% of blocks with cladding. Social care settings in my constituency have HPL-type cladding, which is inflammable but not to the same extent. However, it is still a serious safety risks to residents, and there is still no firm enforcement of the Government's recommendation that building owners, rather than leaseholders, take responsibility for removing and replacing it. The Government's refusal to extend the Liverpool landlord licensing scheme will further impact on fire safety for many of my constituents. Last week, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government unveiled the voluntary pledge that essential safety work would continue despite the coronavirus. It was signed by regional leaders such as Sadiq Khan and Andy Burnham, but there were no signatures from construction companies or building owners.

The Bill will require a high level of inspection and enforcement, and will therefore increase the workload of the fire and rescue service. It is important that those inspections are completed by trained firefighters, and not by civilians or private contractors. The Fire Brigades Union estimates that potentially hundreds of thousands of premises would require additional activity by inspectors and that, as a result, fire and rescue services will need significantly increased resources to cover and carry out those duties of inspection, audit and enforcement.

The FBU has highlighted that, between 2010 and 2017, the number of fire safety inspectors fell by 28%. That is even greater than the already drastic fall in staffing across the fire and rescue services. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service has suffered 35% cuts in funding since 2010 and lost a third of its firefighters, which has had a significant impact across the region. As a result of 10 years of chronic underfunding, fire services now operate with fewer firefighters, fewer fire appliances and slower response times. There are 11,500 fewer firefighters than in 2010. That equates to a 21% cut.

The Government have confirmed that a money resolution is needed for the Bill, but there is no clarity on how much will be provided to fire services to fund the additional work. The FBU described an additional

£20 million allocated in the Budget in March for fire and rescue services as a pittance compared with the £141.5 million cut since 2013. It is utterly insufficient.

Ministers must commit to funding fire and rescue services sufficiently to ensure that the new duties of inspection, audit and enforcement can be carried out to prevent any more tragedies like Grenfell.

4.50 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): The tragedy that took place at Grenfell Tower in June 2017 claiming 72 lives can sadly be classed as one of the UK's worst modern disasters. The tragedy should never have happened, and the lives lost are rightly not forgotten by the House, the Government or the wider public.

In my Delyn constituency, we have three tower blocks in the town of Flint: Castle Heights, Bolingbroke Heights and Richard Heights. They have undergone regular fire assessments and were refurbished in 2015 to include measures such as the installation of protective fire doors to all tenants' properties and a refurbished sprinkler system. That has reassured tenants that their homes are secure and that it was done to ensure their safety.

It is vital that fire safety is treated with the right level of seriousness. That may not always have been the case. It is therefore right that the Government are seeking, through the Bill, to provide the appropriate regulatory framework and statutory requirements to ensure that that happens nationwide.

The Bill is part of the Government's wider commitment to ensure that a tragedy such as Grenfell will never happen again and to reassure the public that everyone, wherever they live and whatever their background, should feel safe in their own homes and be protected from fire risks.

In introducing the Bill, the Government are rightly listening to those who have been affected and are following through on commitments in our manifesto, on which Government Members were elected and which they are being seen to fulfil.

I want to take a few moments to discuss the Bill's substance and how it is designed to reduce the risk to people's lives through improved regulatory standards. It does that in two ways. First, it clarifies it in law that building owners have a duty and responsibility to implement general fire precautions regarding certain structures, and to ensure that their premises are safe for those who live there and that the risk of fire is managed and reduced. It is critical that all members of the public feel safe in their own homes. The Bill, by making it clear that fire safety is a key priority in the management of buildings and properties, helps ensure that people are indeed safe in their homes and not put at risk by the very fabric of the building in which they live. That seems such a bizarre thing to have to say, but it is so relevant to these proceedings.

Secondly, the Bill provides greater power to fire and rescue authorities so that they can properly enforce the rules and take action against those who fail to comply with the fire safety orders. It is important that there is much greater transparency between those responsible and the fire authorities so that those who put residents at risk by not following safety regulations can be properly held to account. That also allows individuals who live in the buildings to feel secure in the knowledge that a framework is in place that clearly sets out the legal

requirements for responsibility for safety, and that the correct powers exist to hold people to account for failure to keep residents safe through not doing the right thing. The Bill will also inevitably help militate against the unfortunate box-ticking mentality that often gets in the way of good maintenance practice.

The Bill amends and reforms the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 to clarify that those responsible for multi-occupied residential buildings must take appropriate steps to ensure that their premises have been assessed continuously and have taken the necessary precautions. It makes it clear that the provisions explicitly apply to the structure and external walls of buildings, including cladding, as well as entrance doors to individual flats that open on to common areas. It reduces any previous legal ambiguity about safety regulations, which may have hampered fire services' efforts to tackle unsafe building issues.

While the Bill is a start, there is further to go, as other hon. Members have mentioned—I am referring to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and, more especially, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who spoke early in the debate with particular expertise on the subject. That said, it seems clear to me that the Government are committed to putting people's lives first, and the Bill is a step towards achieving better levels of safety for individuals who need it most through a sensible range of reforms of fire safety laws. I am happy to support the Bill on Second Reading.

4.55 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) [V]: Many of us simply cannot understand why tens of thousands of residents still live in blocks with Grenfell-style cladding. When we look beneath the rhetoric, the endless legal complexities and the passing of the proverbial buck, that is the truth of the situation and the reality of what so many people endure day to day. That is what is important here and what is at stake. Years have passed since the Grenfell catastrophe, and yet still no one has been called to account. When will we ever get answers? When will the victims ever get justice?

To be completely clear and frank, it is utterly unacceptable that residential blocks in my constituency of Poplar and Limehouse and elsewhere, covered in Grenfell-style ACM cladding, have still not had it removed. The remediation of unsafe buildings is a national issue, and supporting affected residents and leaseholders must be paramount, but it is not clear that the Fire Safety Bill will address the fact that a majority of the blocks remain covered almost three years after Grenfell, and that other types of cladding identified as dangerous and ordered to be removed have not yet been removed.

I am alarmed that residents and leaseholders are suffering from anxiety and stress, and that leaseholders in blocks with ACM and other types of cladding experience problems in selling or remortgaging their home. Most fundamentally, people are forced to continue to live in an unsafe building. It is not obvious what will be done for the hundreds of blocks that have either missed, or look set to miss, deadlines for cladding removal, or what assistance the Bill will give to residents who are trapped in buildings with Grenfell-style cladding but where work has stopped because of covid-19.

[Apsana Begum]

On top of that, there is much uncertainty regarding the sufficiency of the Government's funding and assistance. The Government must acknowledge the difficulties that leaseholders face in particular, and the Government need to ensure with action, not simply words, that remediation work should not in any circumstances whatever fall on individual leaseholders in affected private blocks. Likewise, it would be helpful if the Government provided assurances today that support will be extended to all leaseholders, regardless of the type of unsafe cladding on their building, and that the coverage of the cladding replacement fund will extend to all types of blocks that the local fire service has identified as being unsafe.

As mentioned, the coronavirus has caused many contractors to cease work on cladding sites, while others have not even begun yet due to complex legal disputes. Such delays mean that residents in buildings continue to face extortionate fees for interim safety measures. The Government must ensure that leaseholders in blocks are not forced to shoulder the costs of such interim safety measures, especially those in blocks whose owners have been named and shamed by the Government for refusing to make their blocks safe.

The Bill is only a modest improvement to the fire safety regime. As I and many colleagues have said, it does not fundamentally solve the problems we face. That will require substantial investment in fire and rescue services, to ensure adequate staffing levels and appropriate levels of training. Yet existing policies continue to cut frontline services. In the meantime, firefighters take on new areas of work to keep their communities safe. On the frontline, they are helping us through this crisis, while still responding to fires and other emergencies.

It is time for the Government to step up, to take responsibility and ownership of the issue, and to ensure that the Grenfell Tower fire never ever happens again. The truth is that the decisions of central Government, stretching back for years, have led to the gutting of the UK's fire safety regime and the failure to regulate high-rise residential buildings properly for fire safety.

Policies relating to housing, local government, the fire and rescue services, research and other areas have been driven by the agenda of cuts, deregulation and privatisation, fostered by the direct lobbying of private business interests. What is certainly without any doubt is that it is not the fault of individual residents that they are now subjected to the awful situation of living in an unsafe building. They most certainly should not have to pay the price accordingly.

5 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: This legislation is crucial to show that Governments can and do learn lessons. In the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) the Bill closes a legal loophole and ensures that it is the responsibility of owners and managers of all multi-occupancy buildings of all heights to have their façades, flat entrance doors and all communal fire doors checked as part of the periodic fire risk assessments. The events on 14 June 2017 have had an untold effect on the lives of survivors, their friends and family, and residents of the local area, all of whom experienced unfathomable trauma that night. The scars Grenfell has left on our society will

be visible for years to come, and to do the memory of those who lost their lives justice, we must spare no expense in legislation, funding and preventive measures in the future.

My partner has recounted to me emotionally the impact the fire at Grenfell Tower had on her, her colleagues and the pupils she taught at one of the nearby secondary schools. She saw at first hand the devastation the fire wrought on the little community and on those who tragically lost friends and family members. I say to the families and friends of the victims of Grenfell Tower and the wider community surrounding it, I am sorry for your pain and suffering. I am sorry that the laws created here did not go far enough to protect your loved ones. I hope that, in time, we in this place can rebuild your trust.

The amendments proposed in the Bill to the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 secure the responsibility and accountability of building owners to reduce fire-related risks from external structures, such as cladding, balconies and windows, and internal structures, including flat doors that open on to communal living spaces. That is a vital change to the law, as it provides no room for misinterpretation and removes ambiguity. Building owners and managers will be responsible for the adequate maintenance of a building, including lift inspections, evacuation plans and easily understandable advice and direction in the event of an emergency. Those protective measures will undoubtedly save lives and I welcome them wholeheartedly, but I would like to see more preventive measures, including stricter monitoring and regulation of electrical equipment, especially in multi-occupancy residential premises and tower blocks.

Members of the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group, of which I am a member, have pointed out that the Bill introduces new phrases and terms that have not previously been used in a fire safety order and are undefined—for example, “building”. That term is included in new paragraph (1A) of article 6 of the 2005 order, inserted by clause 1(b), which starts:

“Where a building contains two or more sets of domestic premises, the things to which this order applies include—”.

A potential consequence of that drafting, with the term not further defined, is that semi-detached and terraced houses come within scope, as arguably they form one building. It seems unlikely that that is the intention, as it would impose on residential occupiers a responsibility to carry out fire risk assessments and require the relevant authorities to enforce that. Some definition of new terms such as “building”, “common part” and “structure” would be welcomed.

The importance of learning from national tragedies cannot be overstated if we hope to help with the emotional and psychological recovery of those affected and to secure safe housing for every man, woman and child in this country, irrespective of borough or socioeconomic background. Will recently conducted fire safety risk assessments remain valid? If so, how do the Government intend to ensure that residents are protected to the letter of the law? Given that the inclusion of façades and fire doors requires specialist product knowledge and experience in carrying out assessments, to what extent will the Government take steps to ensure better systems for encouraging the qualification and certification of appropriately and suitably trained risk assessors to the high levels of understanding and attention required by the Bill?

5.4 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: Like many other Members, I vividly remember 14 June 2017 and my horror at the tragedy of the Grenfell fire. I was a brand new MP, with just a hot-desk and a laptop. Like so many, I was overwhelmed at first by the harrowing pictures and then by what felt like—and must be by this point—tens of thousands of emails from my constituents, hastily written, expressing sorrow, outrage and anger at how something like this could ever have happened. It feels like I have come full circle today, in what will be my maiden virtual speech, nearly three years later. I express my deep sympathy for the families and communities affected. I am sorry that it has taken this long to get this far. I am sorry that this has ever happened. We cannot let this happen again.

Grenfell showed us that we need properly to enforce and monitor fire safety regulations, and the Bill is welcome step. As my party's education spokesperson, I welcome the fact that the Bill will help local authorities to enforce the ban on combustible-materials cladding on new tall buildings, including student accommodation and school dormitories. But we need to make sure that our fire and rescue services and councils are financially protected and supported, and that any operational changes necessitated by the Bill, and the secondary legislation, do not leave them out of pocket.

At a time when many are facing huge shortfalls because of covid-19, the Government need to be careful to make sure that the situation is not made any worse. The delaying of the comprehensive spending review and the precarious funding of our fire services mean that the money guaranteed in the Bill for them to carry out audits is in danger of being eroded away. I would welcome clarification from the Government on their long-term plans to support councils and fire services financially to ensure that the regulations remain fully enforceable and that no corners are ever cut.

It is absolutely right that the Bill will mean that fire risk assessments are improved, but the Local Government Association has concerns that the UK currently has a chronic shortage of fire-engineering expertise. We need to take this seriously across Government; without the skills and the know-how in our workforce, the Bill, and the building safety Bill to follow, may fail. The Fire Industry Association plans to advise its members that they should not provide fire risk assessments that cover cladding unless they have the requisite expertise; most, as yet, do not. Without the necessary competence and skills, the new risk assessments, which are absolutely needed, may be impossible to fulfil. We cannot provide any landlord with an excuse for not following the guidance.

We need more fire engineers—it is as simple as that. I would welcome clarification from the Department on what is being done with the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make having more fire engineers a priority, and on what courses are planned. It strikes me that conversion courses and apprenticeships in particular are really needed. After all, it would be such a shame if the Bill's ambitions were curtailed because we did not plan ahead and did not invest in training.

We need to continue to plan ahead. If we are to avoid another tragedy on the scale of Grenfell, we need to make sure that our country is equipped with the skills it

needs to keep buildings safe, assess the risks and save lives. We owe it to the victims of Grenfell to make sure that we get this right.

5.8 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) [V]: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As other people have said, the Bill has come as the direct result of those terrible events of 14 June 2017. Like every single person in this country, I watched those events with a growing sense of shock and dismay. I pay tribute to the emergency services and apologise to all those who lost loved ones in that terrible tragedy—and, indeed, to anybody who is affected in any way by this tragedy, and may be for many years to come. It was such a needless tragedy.

I would thank the members of Grenfell United. When I sat on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, we looked into all these events. I found Grenfell United, a representative body for many of the residents of Grenfell, very good to work with and constructive. It played a huge part in getting us to where we are today.

The important thing is that when you lose, you do not lose the lesson. The whole country has lost due to this tragedy. The Government rightly acted quickly, following calls from the Select Committee and others, to ban combustible materials on the outside of tall buildings. In addition to that and the provisions in the Bill, it is right that we look at why this happened and why there were decades of mistakes that contributed to this tragedy—it is a case of decades of mistakes; it is wrong to try to use this as some kind of party political opportunity.

Having looked at why this happened with the Select Committee, I came to the clear conclusion that it was the result of unclear guidance. Approved document B, in particular, was very unclear. It had been criticised by the coroner in the Lakanal House tragedy as being very difficult to work with. If we look at clause 12.5 and the related diagram 40, it is very confusing regarding what is and is not allowed in terms of cladding on tall buildings. Understandably, people made mistakes or took shortcuts. Whatever the reasons, that gave people the opportunity not to follow the right route to ensure that those buildings were safe.

The Government moved to ban combustible cladding on new buildings, which was the right thing to do, but we then have to deal with existing buildings. Much as we talk about holding building owners responsible, that proved to be impossible in many cases. It was therefore right that the Government put together a financial package of £1.6 billion to remediate those buildings.

The reality is that many buildings have unsafe cladding on the outside. A key person in this whole debate has been Jonathan Evans of the Metal Cladding and Roofing Manufacturers Association, who provided the Select Committee with much useful and important evidence. For example, he has shown that high-pressure laminate cladding is pretty much as bad as ACM in terms of fire performance. We need to remediate these buildings urgently to prevent another tragedy.

Many of the right solutions are contained in the Bill, and I commend Ministers for bringing it forward, but we need some other measures. We need to ensure that

[Kevin Hollinrake]

the supply chain is there so that we can get remediation done quickly for many of these buildings across the country. We also have to question why we lost sight of the importance of non-combustible materials on buildings in the first place—perhaps it relates to the drive towards energy efficiency, or the commercial interests of the people responsible for testing these products. The Select Committee looked at the conflicts of interest that exist in the Building Research Establishment. It would be sensible to have a national public testing facility that represents the national interest, rather than the commercial interests that a private commercial organisation such as the BRE may have. We should look at that to ensure that the drafting of future guidance is informed by a national public body.

5.13 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab) [V]: I am pleased that the Fire Safety Bill is finally being debated in the House, nearly three years after the Grenfell Tower tragedy. I remember that awful tragedy very well. I carried out the Grenfell community engagement on behalf of the Mayor of London. I would like to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the brave emergency service workers who attended the fire. I must also pay tribute to the amazing communities that offered help to the people affected on that tragic night and afterwards, as they began to rebuild their lives. I ask that we hold the 72 victims in our thoughts and remember the human costs involved when the right measures are not taken to protect people.

People in tower blocks have lived in fear since the Grenfell tragedy and continue to do so today. Constituents have contacted me about being trapped in unsafe homes, unable to seek alternative accommodation or to pay for safety upgrades to their buildings out of their own pockets. They will be relieved to hear of these legislative changes. To put into perspective why we need them so urgently, I will read a message from one of my constituents who is concerned about the safety of a nearby tower block in the borough:

“The tower blocks have been found to be clad in combustible material and the landlord is currently unwilling to pay for the replacement. It would cost almost £40,000 per flat to replace—which individual homeowners are unlikely to be able to afford. They have already been hit with higher service charges to pay for patrols. Over two years after the Grenfell Tower tragedy, people are still living in fear and unable to get on with their lives due to being unable to sell their properties.”

The constituent goes on to make a very worthy point—it is one that in the conscience of most people would not have to be made, but the fact that it does explains why we urgently need the Bill. They said:

“Homeowners should not be expected to foot the bill for decisions made by governments who set the building standards. As homeowners cannot afford to fund the replacement of the cladding, the necessary building work will not happen and people will continue to live in unsafe properties risking another tragedy. These building works should be funded by the government as a matter of urgency and the liability for the costs agreed between the government and builders.”

Legislative change to ensure that building owners take responsibility for the safety of their tenants is necessary because, as we are seeing, when a loophole exists, someone will exploit it, despite the risk posed to residents.

I must also take this opportunity to raise concerns about the practicalities of the Bill. It is important that we make these legislative changes, but it is equally important that they can be acted on. The Local Government Association has raised concerns about disparities between the fire safety order’s concept of a responsible person, and the proposals for an accountable person and a building safety manager in the Government’s response to the “Building a Safer Future” consultation. Clear guidance must be issued on who is responsible for carrying out essential fire safety checks or we face the risk of some continuing to avoid their responsibility to their tenants. Local authorities and fire services must also be supported financially and logistically in ensuring that these checks can be carried out. Councils with large stocks of social housing have a duty to ensure the safety of a large number of tenants, and even before the introduction of this legislation have raised concerns that there is a chronic shortage of fire engineering expertise in the UK. The Government should act now to set up degree, conversion and apprentice schemes to address this.

I hope that the Government will take steps to ensure that no tragedy like Grenfell Tower can be allowed to happen again, and that, after nearly three years, residents in tower blocks can feel safe in their own homes.

5.18 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: I want to begin by welcoming this long-overdue Bill. We all know what the consequences can be—[Inaudible.] Nobody here will ever forget the tragedy of Grenfell Tower, but only last autumn a block of student accommodation called The Cube, just over the border from my constituency in Bolton, caught fire. There were no casualties that time, but—[Inaudible.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to interrupt the hon. Lady because the sound quality is not very good. Let us try again for a few seconds, and if it does not improve, we will leave the hon. Lady and come back to her later.

Barbara Keeley: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Although this Bill is overdue, it does not guarantee action immediately. I understand that the current crisis makes it difficult—[Inaudible.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am very sorry, but I have to interrupt the hon. Lady again. Those in the Chamber, and presumably those listening in other ways, cannot make out what she is saying, so we will interrupt her speech for the moment and hopefully come back to her shortly.

I am glad to see that in the Chamber we have, without any sound difficulties, Meg Hillier.

5.20 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I wish to start by declaring my own interest, in that I am a leaseholder in an affected block. Happily, the owner of my block has taken on all the costs of replacement but, like many of my constituents, and others up and down the country, I live in a property that is technically

valueless at the moment. That is causing problems, which I will touch on, but I also want to use this opportunity to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) to her place on the Front Bench. She has been a doughty campaigner on this issue in her previous portfolio, so it is great to see that she can continue to fight for all those up and down the country who are affected. I hope that the Minister will hear what I have to say, and what others have said, and answer these questions, some of which go a little beyond the Bill, because it goes only so far, as a short, three-clause Bill, and there are wider issues here.

The Bill is long overdue—it has taken a long while to get this far—not just because of the tragedy of the Grenfell fire three years ago, but because of changes over many years and, as others have highlighted, under different Governments, that led to weakness and confusion over who is responsible for fire safety in a block. That and recent developments have led to real misery for many leaseholders in my constituency and up and down the country. Such people are mortgage prisoners, trapped with expensive mortgage payments and valueless homes. They are therefore unable to sell or rent their properties out, and they are dealing with the costs involved, including those for a waking watch, which in many blocks means two people per block. That is very expensive, but these people are also dealing with the upheaval, and the fear of scaffolding and major works going on around their home, which makes it harder for them to have peaceful enjoyment of their homes.

As of March 2020, only 54% of social housing blocks had had their remediation works done and nearly 90% of private residential blocks still had work to be done. That means that overall three quarters of ACM blocks—266 blocks, mostly flats—have yet to have remedial work done. We have highlighted in debates beyond this one the need for experts to do this work, and with coronavirus we have hit another challenge, because we cannot bring in expertise from elsewhere. Coronavirus is also increasing cost, making it harder for contractors to do the work, which means more delays and yet more costs for leaseholders. This therefore has to continue to be a priority, even during the pandemic. I know that this is not the direct remit of the Minister, but the Bill, and particularly the secondary legislation that follows it, could play a part here.

In the Budget, the Chancellor set aside £1 billion to do this remedial work, but we know that that is not enough—we see that when we look at the Bill and the amount of work involved. It might be a 10th of what is needed, and there is still no clarity about who will bid for that money. The Home Office is responsible for fire safety, so it needs to work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure that the money that is available is properly applied, easy to bid for and quick to be spent so that we make sure that these blocks get dealt with. The Home Office is responsible for fire safety, so if MHCLG does not have enough funds to help to deliver that, there will be ongoing problems.

I could raise many specific examples—I have raised them in the House before—but when there are owners with housing associations involved, there is double trouble, because there are leaseholders of the housing associations, and the HAs have a relationship with the owner or developer of the block. I want to highlight some of the

tactics that can be in play and the delays that owners and developers can inflict on residents. I wish to highlight the case of Regal London, which built The Cube building in Hoxton. In the first year, when many residents were raising snagging issues, Regal did not respond. That lack of response has continued. There has now been five years—scaffolding has been up for a good couple of years—with residents still not sure what is going to happen and who is going to pay. In the meantime, the block has some fire safety issues, and with the to-ing and fro-ing between the owner and leaseholders, the resolution is not there.

While the Bill goes so far, there is a practical element to this, too. As we in this place know, legislation does not solve everything. While what needs to be done will be on the statute book, and that is a welcome beginning, there is a big practical job of making sure that the Bill is real, living legislation that delivers on the ground. While there are legal wrangles going on between owners and residents and organisations such as Regal, which is leading constituents a merry dance and not responding very well, this causes a problem. We know the costs for individuals are huge. I hope the Minister will, in Committee, be able to answer our questions on how this will practically deliver. It is a welcome first step late in the day. It is a start, but I hope that in Committee we will see discussion and movement on how this could be the beginning and not the end.

5.25 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) to her place on the Opposition Front Bench. Like her, I arrived here on 11 June 2017, along with Emma Dent Coad. I want to place on record my thanks, and I think those of many, for the great campaigning work she did for the residents and the community in the immediate aftermath of the terrible tragedy that was the Grenfell fire. I then sat on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and it was a privilege to meet many of the survivors of the terrible events of that night. They have acted with such determination and diligence to force through many of the changes I am sure we will see over the coming months.

I welcome the Bill. It is an important first step in making our high-rise tower blocks safe for those who live in them, but it is just a first step. It is the first and only piece of primary legislation that has been brought forward by the Government since the tragedy of that night. Three years on, I am afraid I just do not see it as good enough. For all that time, people across the country have remained in unsafe housing. As someone who lives at the top of a very high tower block, I can understand the fear they live in.

A few months ago I set up the all-party group for council housing, which seeks to represent the views of council tenants here in Parliament. In that spirit, I mention the meeting I hosted with tenants back in the summer of 2018. We heard from tenants across the country about their priorities and how they felt, time and time again, that they were not being listened to by the Government or local authorities, and that the response to Grenfell had been inadequate. They still felt at risk in their homes a year on from the tragedy, and they still do

[*Matt Western*]

three years on. Ed Daffarn, one of the survivors of Grenfell who campaigned brilliantly on the issue, spoke of the institutional indifference of the council and national Government to the concerns of Grenfell residents before the fire. I am afraid that that still exists in places.

Three years on, up to 60,000 worried residents are still living wrapped in lethal Grenfell-style cladding. Almost nine in 10 private sector buildings and over half of social sector buildings affected have not had that cladding removed or replaced. That is despite the former Housing Secretary, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), setting a deadline of the end of 2019 for social sector blocks to be made safe and a deadline of June 2020 for all private sector blocks to be made safe—a deadline that now looks likely to be missed. For years, Ministers did everything they could to avoid taking responsibility for ACM cladding removal. I am afraid that they had to be dragged into action by the campaigning of groups such as Grenfell United, the Labour party and others. It is still not happening quickly enough.

Elsewhere, the Grenfell inquiry found that the Government ignored recommendations to retrofit sprinklers in social housing blocks in the years leading up to the tragedy. It included the recommendations from the coroners after the loss of life in the Lakanal House fire in 2009 and in Shirley Towers in 2010. The lessons were not learned then and they are not being learned now. Some 95% of local authority-owned tower blocks taller than 30 metres still do not have sprinkler systems installed. We have repeatedly called for a £1 billion fund to retrofit sprinklers in all high-rise social housing blocks. Sadly, that has been ignored. I called for sprinklers to be retrofitted. As a new MP, I could see how desperately they were needed. I wrote to my district council asking for that to happen.

The Bill is important. I do not wish to downplay it. It is welcome and necessary, and I hope that it results in much greater enforcement action, and particularly in the removal of ACM cladding. However, we must be confident that the resources are there for enforcement to happen. I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). We know that £142 million has been cut from fire and rescue services since 2013, and that between 2010 and 2017 the number of fire safety inspectors fell by 28%. Without them, we have no protection on the frontline. Finally, I want to be assured that there is absolute clarity in the Bill that it will be the ultimate owner of high-rise blocks, not individual leaseholders, who will be responsible where remedial action is not being taken.

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill. It seeks to underline the importance of ownership, accountability and responsibility, but we have been slow in getting to this point. I look forward to the building safety Bill coming through, hopefully this summer, because it is critically important. At the same time, however, the Government must take urgent and necessary steps to get all cladding removed and install sprinkler systems in all high-rise social housing blocks, and we need to ensure that national, independently funded testing facilities are established as soon as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Christine Jardine—the hon. Lady cannot hear us. Do we have a connection? We can see her, but we cannot hear her. We will come back to her. Meanwhile we will go to Vauxhall.

5.30 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: In my first virtual contribution, I start by paying tribute to the House staff for their tireless work over the last few weeks to make these hybrid proceedings possible.

I support this long overdue Bill, which provides much needed clarification on fire safety law, but we must go further if we are to prevent the potential for fatal fires in people's homes. The Bill does not include the provisions arising from the recommendations made during the first phase of the Grenfell inquiry—something that Ministers had promised—and it does not include the much-needed changes to building safety standards.

It is nearly three years since the tragic Grenfell fire, which claimed the lives of 72 people, and for the Government to move so slowly on this is unacceptable. Like many other Members who have highlighted this today, I remember that fatal night, as I sat up for most of the night nursing my young son, who was just one week old on 14 June 2017. I sat up watching the scenes unfold during the night, and we must never forget those 72 innocent victims.

I also pay tribute to our hard-working firefighters, who continue to put their lives at risk and who need the Government to provide the necessary funding and assurances that this will never happen again. Will the Minister today confirm when we expect to see the recommendations from the inquiry brought into law and when the Government finally plan to bring forward a building safety Bill?

Legislation is only one piece of the puzzle in making our homes safe to live in. During this lockdown period, I have been contacted by many leaseholders in my constituency of Vauxhall who live in flats owned by private companies and who are having severe problems and delays in removing this dangerous cladding from their homes. This is not the fault of those leaseholders, and they should not be the ones to shoulder the blame for the Government's failures, yet they are the ones who are struggling to get the necessary safety gas certificates and paying for really expensive service charges and interim security measures, and they are now having to spend this lockdown in unsafe buildings, worried that their homes will catch fire.

I welcome the £1 billion announced by the Chancellor in the Budget to remove the dangerous cladding from residential buildings, but the £200 million offered to private residential blocks to remove the cladding has been available for over a year now, and only two buildings have accepted that grant. Three years on, almost nine out of 10 private sector buildings affected have not yet had the dangerous cladding removed or replaced. The Government set a deadline of June for all private sector buildings to be safe, yet we know that the deadline is certainly going to be missed.

The Government need to accept responsibility for making our homes safe now and make the necessary steps to ensure that the money that they have made available is used to remove this dangerous cladding as soon as possible. We must not and cannot afford to wait.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will now attempt again to go to Christine Jardine.

5.34 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Good, we can hear you.

Christine Jardine: I am delighted to be able to join this debate. Each time the House debates or acknowledges in any way the horror that was Grenfell and the 72 lives lost that night, I find, like so many others, my mind going back to that evening. As a new MP, excited by the opportunity to effect change, I was horrified to turn to my TV in my hotel room and see the tragedy that was unfolding across the city. As so many right hon. and hon. Members have said, that memory remains with me. More than that, it is what drives my and so many others' commitment to preventing it from happening again.

In this Parliament and the previous one, we have become accustomed to using words like “unprecedented”, “historic” and “crisis”. I hope that when we reflect fully on this period, we will be able to be confident that we gave this issue the attention, energy and commitment that it deserved. We need a commitment to ensuring that Grenfell is fully investigated and the victims and survivors honoured, and we have to make sure we have done everything possible to ensure that it cannot happen again. For that reason, I, with my Liberal Democrat colleagues, welcome this legislation today, but with a caveat. Several aspects of the Bill perhaps miss an invaluable opportunity to introduce other vital fire and safety mentions. There is no mention of evacuation plans for high-rise blocks or three-monthly fire door inspections, as recommended by the inquiry chaired by Sir Martin Moore-Bick. When will the House see those measures introduced in legislation?

A building safety Bill is urgently required. As more people spend time at home isolating, the risk of injuries and harm increases. When will that legislation be laid and what impact will the pandemic have on instigating necessary change and improvement? Those questions need to be answered.

While this Bill may be designed for England and Wales only—Scotland has its own fire safety regulations—it is far-reaching and has potentially serious implications for Scotland, where many homeowners now find themselves faced with a significant problem. Nine out of 10 mortgages in Scotland are provided by London-based lenders. The terms of those mortgages are based on English law and regulations. The effect of that is that many in apartment blocks are finding that their flats are now worthless. The mortgage lenders have placed a zero value on their property, because, according to those regulations, accommodation over six storeys must have an official external wall fire review, ensuring that the cladding is safe.

In England, one person would normally own the block and lease out the apartments to the owners. In Scotland, all the apartments are owned outright; there is no leasehold. The difficulty is down to that different ownership model. In England, it is relatively simple for one person to organise the checks and work on the apartment block and then bill the leaseholders. In Scotland, that is impossible. In a block of 250 owners, there would have to be 250 EWS1 forms verifying cladding. Each one costs thousands to complete. That anomaly is

blocking any checks and many sales in Scotland. People cannot sell their apartments in such blocks without an EWS1 form, and in many cases no apartments are valued at more than zero. That is not to say that the regulations should be compromised—far from it. We need acknowledgement of the issue and arrangements made for properties where there is no leasehold.

I do not believe that any one of us is not committed to doing everything we possibly can to ensure that no family and no person ever has to endure the horror that the residents of Grenfell and their loved ones have endured over the past three years. To do that, we have to not just pass this Bill—[*Inaudible.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have lost contact with the hon. Lady, just as she was coming to her peroration. I think that everyone present, and in particular the Minister, can imagine what she was about to say, so we will assume that her peroration is complete.

5.39 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: I hope everyone can hear me. I welcome the Bill—all three clauses of it—but it is not sufficient to deal with the problems that have been happening in relation to buildings across the country. The Grenfell fire occurred three years ago, and although the taskforce reported last year on the things that needed to be done, none of them has yet been implemented, despite the Government promising that all the recommendations would be encompassed, lock, stock and barrel. I hope that the Government will soon introduce a Bill that does all those things.

The Bill is very welcome, but it requires proper resources. The Fire Brigades Union has estimated that it will result in hundreds of thousands more buildings needing to be inspected, which is obviously the right thing to do. However, since the Government have, for years now, been cutting fire brigade services, we have fewer fire officers and less equipment. The response can therefore often be slower than it should be. Since 2013, £141.5 million of cuts have been made to the fire budget. Clearly, if the Bill is to have an impact, money must be provided to the fire brigade so that it can carry out its work.

There has rightly been talk about the Grenfell fire, but in my constituency of Bolton South East, The Cube, which was student accommodation, also erupted into fire, leaving 200 students homeless. Fortunately, no one was injured. The university has been great at looking after the students, even though the building did not belong to it, and the local community has been fantastic. I thank the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service for dealing with the situation so speedily and effectively. However, it leads to the question about the height of buildings. High buildings are considered those of 18 metres; The Cube was just 16 cm short of that.

The Cube's cladding was what is called high-pressure laminate, unlike Grenfell, which had ACM cladding. People rightly talk about ACM cladding, but there is unsafe cladding across buildings in this country, some of which is high-pressure laminate and some of which is not. It is imperative that the Government test every single building in our country to ensure that they are safe for the people in them. Although such things cost money, at the end of the day, people's lives are destroyed. The Grenfell Tower showed the tragedy of how many people died and how many lives were destroyed.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

Although I welcome the Bill, I urge the Government to introduce a Bill that deals comprehensively with fire safety across all buildings—not just high buildings, but smaller buildings, such as hospitals and shopping centres. We need to have proper regulation, and proper inspections should be carried out for new buildings. I ask the Government to please sort this out. People's lives must not be played with.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will now go back to Barbara Keeley. The connection is not good enough to give us a video connection, but we will have an audio connection.

5.44 pm

Barbara Keeley [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let me try again to welcome this long-overdue Bill. We all know what the consequences can be when fire safety is neglected in blocks of flats. We have heard, and we are clear, that nobody here will ever forget the tragedy of the Grenfell fire, but only last autumn a block of student accommodation in Bolton called The Cube, just over the border from my constituency, caught fire, as we have just heard from the local Member. There were no casualties, but it reminds us how important it is that we address the issue as a matter of urgency.

Although the Bill is overdue, it does not guarantee action immediately. I understand that the current crisis makes it difficult to set a hard date for it to come into force, but that is of little comfort to people living in unsafe accommodation. Will the Minister tell us when he expects the Bill's provisions to come into force? I am concerned about the cost of the additional work that will be required. To protect people who live in flats, the owners of many blocks will certainly need to carry out work to ensure that they are safe. That work is needed if buildings are not safe, but I am concerned that in too many cases the burden will fall on leaseholders with increased service charges.

In a recent survey of residents by the Greater Manchester High Rise Task Force, more than half of owner-occupiers said that they had been landed with increased service charge costs. One resident reported an increase from £90 to £400 a month; another faced an increase to £1,000 a month to cover the cost of remediation. Those extra financial pressures have had a significant impact on residents' mental health and wellbeing, on top of the impact of the covid-19 crisis. It is not the fault of leaseholders if their buildings are unsafe.

The Government have previously offered funding to ensure that it is not leaseholders who have to pay for the removal of unsafe cladding, but that only applies if the building is over 80 metres high. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), funding would not therefore have been available for The Cube in Bolton—a six-storey building wrapped in high-pressure laminate cladding. If the Government are serious about ensuring that blocks of flats are safe, they need to ensure that funding is available for work on all blocks regardless of height, and I hope that that can be discussed in Committee. The Government must go further in funding work to remove dangerous cladding.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) set out, the costs of waking watches or other interim measures are often borne by residents. Will the Minister confirm that the scope of Government financial assistance in this area will be expanded, as the Greater Manchester High Rise Task Force has called for? Specifically, will the Government fund interim measures and renovations required to ensure fire safety in all residential blocks, not just those over a certain height?

We must also ensure that a change in the regulations leads to a change in practice. The current regulatory system is not up to the task, and we need detail on how it will be changed to enable local authorities and fire services to inspect residential buildings and take action against building owners who do not meet their new obligations. We cannot deal with the regulatory system later. When will we have details of a strengthened regulatory system, which has been promised as part of the Building Safety Bill?

When fires occur, sprinkler systems and fire alarms are crucial to protect life and property. I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned about the installation of mist sprinklers in residential units, rather than traditional fire sprinklers. Mist sprinklers are not subject to a common standard, whereby each case in which they are used must be assessed individually to determine whether they are a suitable solution. My constituents are concerned that such water-mist systems have been installed not because they are right for the job, but because they cost less. It would not be acceptable for people's lives and homes to be put at risk because the cost to their landlord is lower. Will the Minister confirm that guidance will be published on what is considered a suitable sprinkler system for residential blocks, emphasising the need for the right solution, not the cheapest one?

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), I remain concerned about the financial situation facing Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, which has seen a cut of more than £22 million of central Government funding in the past 10 years, which amounts to a 36% cut. At the same time, our population has increased, and the built environment in Greater Manchester has become more complex. In addition to the legislation that we are debating and the new regulatory system, we must take account of the increased demand on services such as the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service. We need the resources to have the right number of pumps and fire officers. As with the NHS, we must give better support to fire officers. They were the frontline at Grenfell—we must give them all they need for fire safety in future.

5.48 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab) [V]: It is a privilege to speak in the debate. I should like to begin by paying tribute to the Grenfell families and survivors, and to the fire service. I should add that it is a pleasure to follow hon. Members across the House, although it is somewhat strange to take part in the debate from my sofa.

I am pleased with the quality of today's debate and the many thoughtful contributions from across the House. I, like other Opposition Members, welcome the Bill; it is a step forward, although a modest step, and I urge the Government to go much further.

I would like first to reflect on the situation affecting many residents in my constituency, particularly in central Reading where there is both a huge number of larger blocks and many much smaller ones, which—like the block referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley)—are below the height threshold but where there are serious concerns about their safety nevertheless.

I want to reflect on an email from a constituent that I found extremely moving. It was from a young woman who had been living, for several months at this point, in great stress in a flat in the town centre that had dangerous cladding. She and her fellow residents in the block have now been living in this condition for almost three years, and it is simply appalling that people are still having to put up with such enormous stress and worry, which is shared by residents across the country. As has been said, many of them are simply trapped in their properties; they are unable to sell, and are living in properties with dangerous cladding, either ACM or one of the many other types of dangerous cladding. We heard about the high-pressure laminate earlier, and it is also worth considering the danger from wooden cladding; there was the dreadful case of a fire in Barking a few months ago.

In the Reading area, we have ACM, wooden cladding that has been found to be dangerous, and laminate types. In my constituency, four or five large blocks have been inspected by Royal Berks Fire and Rescue Service and found to be not up to the required standards. The work is under way in one of those blocks, but in many other cases has been delayed. To make matters worse, there is the related issue, mentioned earlier, of smaller blocks that fall below the threshold yet have many dangerous fire safety issues—either dangerous cladding or a host of other problems, such as substandard fire doors, which have been discovered recently.

This is a very substantial problem affecting towns and cities across the whole country. We are only just beginning to discover the full extent of it. It started with the awful fire at Grenfell and similar fires which predated it and which should have been a warning to the Government. There have been subsequent fires, such as the Barking one or The Cube fire in Bolton, but there are many other dangers out there and I would like to draw the House's attention to some of them, particularly those to do with HMOs.

There are huge numbers of HMOs in my constituency and many other towns and cities, and the numbers are growing. HMOs are not well regulated, and local authorities do not have the power to institute the sort of fire safety measures residents would often ideally want. There is also a growing market in unregulated and illegal HMOs, often tucked away and out of sight, which are not being inspected.

I want to make two points calling for more action from the Government; one of them relates to this issue of inspection and the other is a more general point about liability. On inspection, I hope the Minister will acknowledge what I have been saying about the scale of this issue in towns such as Reading, a typical medium-sized urban area in Britain. Our local fire and rescue service estimates that 30 additional officers would be required to inspect the county of Berkshire, which has a population of about 800,000, with towns including Reading, Slough and Bracknell. Given the number of smaller but still possibly dangerous buildings, substantial investment is

required from Government. I hope the Minister reflects on this and comes up with a realistic plan for funding the emergency services so that they can properly inspect the vast multitude of potentially dangerous buildings. They include, as mentioned earlier, educational buildings, and there is a whole series of other types of building that people use, as well as flats and HMOs. All these need to be inspected and the resources are currently very limited.

I should add that it can take up to two years—possibly in some cases longer, depending on the grade of the person—for fire safety officers to be fully trained. They need to be trained firefighters who specialise in this field.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I trust the hon. Gentleman is bringing his remarks to a close.

Matt Rodda: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I apologise if I have somewhat overrun.

My other point is briefly to reiterate the wise comments made by colleagues about the need for the owners of blocks—not just leaseholders, but freeholders—to contribute towards these schemes.

In summary, this is a step forward, but much more needs to be done and I urge the Government to look at the resources needed, particularly for inspection.

5.55 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: We meet in extraordinary times, and it is incumbent on us, as the democratically elected representatives of the people, to chart our way through this crisis. As such, I would like to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your staff for ensuring that people's business can continue in this hybrid Parliament at this time.

I wish to start by paying tribute to all those NHS workers who have lost their lives in recent weeks. They have lost their lives in the line of duty, on the frontline, and we will all be forever grateful to them and their families for the sacrifice that they have paid.

Of course our responsibilities to the people whom we represent go on and they continue to be varied and diverse. That is why I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate and to welcome this long overdue piece of legislation that makes much needed changes to fire safety laws in England and Wales.

Although this is a Bill that has support from across the House, it is a Bill that we should have seen so much sooner. I share the concerns of the Fire Brigades Union about the Bill's modesty and the important point that it will require substantial investment in fire and rescue services to ensure that there are adequate staffing levels and the appropriate level of training. This needs costing by individual fire and rescue services and a guarantee from the Government to support and fund what is necessary to keep people safe in their homes. The FBU wants fire and rescue services to quantify the number of inspectors necessary to carry out the additional responsibilities and Ministers to agree to fund the service accordingly. That is a call that has my support, as does the work of the FBU in standing up for our much valued frontline public sector workers.

After almost three years since the heartbreaking events at Grenfell, this is the first and only piece of primary legislation that this Government have brought forward on fire safety-related powers. This is a time for the

[*Ruth Jones*]

House to unite and, in doing so, I would like to thank my right hon. Friends the Members for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for the work they have done to honour the memory of those who died at Grenfell.

The wider response to the Grenfell Tower fire has been far too slow and—let us be honest—too weak on every front. I do wish the Prime Minister well as he celebrates the birth of his son today, but he and his Government must acknowledge and urgently act on their wider failures since the Grenfell Tower fire. They have failed to remove flammable Grenfell-style cladding from tower blocks and failed to support residents with interim safety costs.

We also need to ensure that the wiring of new build properties is undertaken correctly and that properties with dangerous electrical systems are updated at the earliest opportunity. We all need electricity to function, and with millions working from home at present we know that that is the case more so than ever, so we must get this right.

The Government promised in October 2019 to implement the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry in full and without delay. Six months later, we now have a piece of legislation, but it fails to contain a single measure recommended by the Grenfell inquiry. I hope the Minister will address why this is the case when the debate is wound up later today. It is shameful that there are still tens of thousands of residents living in tower blocks with dangerous and flammable cladding. In Newport West, we have had our own problems with unsafe cladding, and I hope that this Bill will go some way to speed up safety measures that my constituents and people across the United Kingdom deserve. The current covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis. I join the National Fire Chiefs Council in welcoming the Bill, but I urge the Government to go further.

I pay tribute to our fire and rescue service personnel. They are, as always, going above and beyond to support the response to the crisis despite the many unnecessary Government cuts from the Tories and Lib Dems since 2010. The pandemic must not divert us from the urgent need to take strong and swift action on fire safety, such as the removal of flammable cladding. It is for this Government to show leadership and deliver. I look forward to playing my part in holding them to account and to delivering on the promises made to the families of those who died in Grenfell, as we look to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again.

5.59 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I was a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee in the last Parliament, when our work focused on the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. The courage and dignity of the Grenfell survivors in continuing to speak not only of their own collective fight for justice but of the need to reform fire safety and building safety regulations to protect others from suffering as they have done is humbling and remarkable.

I also speak as someone who was elected to Southwark Council 10 months after the Lakanal House fire, in which six people tragically lost their lives, had shocked and devastated communities across the borough. The newly

elected Labour administration that took over the running of the council in May 2010 did everything it could to address fire safety within Southwark, spending £60 million on fire safety works. Lakanal House was widely understood to be a warning siren for fire safety for the whole country, but no national reform of building safety and fire safety was delivered at that time. As we debate this Bill, we must reflect that had the coalition Government got a grip on fire safety reform, subsequent tragedies, including Grenfell, may have been avoided.

I want to focus my remarks this afternoon on three areas. First, how disappointing it is that so much of the substantive reform entailed by this Bill is deferred for secondary legislation. I understand that there will be new recommendations arising from the final phase of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, but three years on, there is much that is already known and action has been far too slow. In particular, I am concerned about the lack of dovetailing of this Bill with the forthcoming building safety Bill. This Bill establishes who is responsible for fire safety, but it does not establish how they should achieve it. We know that, across the construction and building management sectors, there is still total chaos caused by the lack of clarity on which materials are flammable and the lack of progress on testing and certification. We need urgent clarity on all forms of cladding so that the removal of all flammable non-ACM cladding on residential buildings can be completed with urgency. Action on this is long overdue.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for the proper resourcing of every organisation that will have new fire safety responsibilities as a result of the Bill. The number of fire safety inspectors is 28% lower than in 2010. Local authorities have seen more than 60% of the funding they receive from central Government cut over the past 10 years. Both our fire safety and local authorities must be properly resourced to deliver a new fire and building safety regime. This need for resourcing extends to training and professional development to build a skilled fire and building safety workforce. Grenfell Tower resulted in a collapse of confidence in fire and building safety and exposed many problems with accountability, which this Bill seeks to address, but also with expertise for certification. There is a chronic shortage of fire safety expertise in the UK at present. Can the Minister confirm in winding up that the new burdens calculation for this Bill will account for training and workforce development as well as the new inspection responsibilities?

Finally, there are half a million fire risk assessments in social housing in this country. Most councils and housing associations have worked hard in the past three years to bring their assessments up to date, but there is an important question about the validity of inspections undertaken under a broken fire and building safety regime. Equally, there is concern that if social landlords are asked to complete half a million new assessments in short order, this would be a costly and challenging task. Please can the Minister clarify how the transition to the new regime will take place such that all residents can be confident that a building with an up-to-date safety inspection is safe to sleep in at night?

As we are all spending much more time at home, I know that fire safety concerns—whether about cladding, compartmentalisation, lack of sprinklers or means of escape—are weighing heavily and adding to the burden of anxiety that many people are suffering at this time.

This issue could not be more important, and I urge the Government to increase the pace of urgency to bring forward the substantive reforms of fire and building safety that residents across the country so desperately need.

6.4 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab) [V]: I fully support the broad purposes of this Bill. Any Bill that takes us a step closer to righting the wrongs of Grenfell tower gets my full support, and my thoughts are also with those who died in Grenfell and with those injured and all the families, friends, survivors and firefighters.

Greater powers and meaningful sanctions to ensure that residents are safe in their homes are welcome. However, this Bill is a huge missed opportunity to address a big issue in my constituency and around the country: that of leaseholders being made to pay for the cost of the unsafe cladding still on their buildings. It is too long to wait for the building safety Bill, and the deadline for the removal of all unsafe cladding in private blocks by June 2020, set by the Government, will clearly not be met. In the meantime, thousands of people are left in limbo because of the cladding crisis.

The Swish building and Riverside Quarter in Putney are two examples. They have 66 and 200 flats respectively, and their cladding is a mixture of the Grenfell-type ACM and HPL. Leaseholders have been told by their freeholder that the cladding and other fire safety measures in their building do not meet the standard now regarded by the Government as adequate to obtain a fire safety certificate. For a fire safety certificate to be issued, the building will need to be re-clad. Without the certificate, leaseholders cannot sell, and they have to pay for an expensive nightly waking watch, which costs about £100,000 a year. They are being told they need to foot the bill for the re-cladding, which they are told could be between £50,000 and £80,000 per flat.

It is simply unfair to make leaseholders foot the bill. They are not multimillionaire landlords, but normal people—many of them retired—trying to live their lives, which have been made even more difficult by the current crisis. They do not have a spare £50,000 lying around or the means to get it. The emotional toll is enormous, which is why the matter needs to be addressed urgently, so it is disappointing not to see that in this Bill. The situation has left leaseholders in complete limbo, as has been mentioned by other Members, and facing an uncertain future. Mortgage lenders will not issue mortgages for homes without a fire safety certificate, so people are stuck. One resident, who has been unemployed for over a year, told me:

“The net result for me is that I will lose my home”.

Another said:

“We now face financial ruin as a direct result of the Government’s retrospective change to fire safety regulation.”

Another resident said that their flat is

“unsaleable and therefore effectively worthless... We cannot afford to pay a sum of this size.”

The Bill offers nothing for leaseholders at the Riverside, Swish or in other similar tower blocks. While I appreciate that the building safety Bill is coming, this Bill could provide the measures that the cladding crisis victims need. In particular, I would like a commitment to adequate Government funding for cladding remediation

work or to ensure that freeholders foot the Bill, as they, not the leaseholders, will be the ones who benefit from building improvements. The additional funding announced in the Budget is welcome, but it is also too hard to claim. Only two buildings have made claims from the existing £200 million private property fund. Ministers must take more responsibility.

I would also like local government reimbursement. To ensure that the legislation is successful in protecting lives, national Government must make sure that local government and other fire authorities are reimbursed for any additional costs arising out of the operational changes mandated by this Bill. Our already underfunded local authorities must be given extra capacity to make homes safe.

We also need greater clarity on the non-ACM cladding that is deemed unsafe. There is huge confusion about which cladding is safe or unsafe. Are people living in really dangerous buildings or not? Confusion reigns, and the Bill needs to address that.

In conclusion, we are approaching the third anniversary of the Grenfell tower disaster, and so many questions remain unanswered. This Bill fails to address them and will disappoint thousands. I welcome the Government’s work on cladding so far, but so much more needs to be done.

6.9 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The House is sitting in unique times, in a unique way. Every Zoom picture we have seen today has told a story of hon. Members safe at home with their loved ones. That is what home should be: a place of safety. During this lockdown, for all its stresses, we have come to understand even more urgently that sense of a place of safety.

Yesterday, we heard harrowing tales of people whose homes are not safe because of abuse. Today, we are talking about another group of people for whom home is not safe—people who are not as lucky as us; people who live every day with the fear that what happened at Grenfell may happen to them. They suffer this amid the economic shock of covid-19, which has further reduced their incomes and their choices, and stopped the remediation work that they have long needed. They are forced to stay in a place of unsafety; a place of fear. They cannot forget what happened on 14 June 2017, and neither should we.

I pay tribute to the Minister, officials and House staff who have worked hard to get us here today, and I thank the fire Ministers—the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and Lord Greenhalgh—for their detailed briefing over the phone to me on Monday. We all agreed that our fire and rescue services deserve huge credit for going above and beyond the call of duty against covid-19. They deserve our full support.

I am also grateful to all the hon. Members who spoke with such passion and expertise today. As ever on this topic, there is agreement on both sides of the House. Members and former members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee have done so much to highlight these issues. We heard from the ever-wise Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts); the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake); and my hon. Friends the Members

[Sarah Jones]

for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who have sat or sit on the Committee.

Members of the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, who were warning Ministers to act many years before the Grenfell Tower tragedy, also brought us their expertise. Its chair, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), has been dogged in his campaigning for fire safety, and the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning)—he brings his own unique experience—and the hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), for Thirsk and Malton and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) all brought great experience to the debate.

We welcome the Bill, but it goes nowhere near far enough to prevent another Grenfell tragedy, nor to undo a decade of cuts to our fire and rescue service. The Grenfell community were failed by a system that did not listen to them. We must never forget that failure. I pay tribute, as others have, to Grenfell United, the families and the whole community for continuing to fight for justice, but why has it taken three years to get to this? The Bill is the first and only piece of primary legislation on fire safety introduced by the Government in those three years. It is just three clauses long, and it fails to implement any of the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 1. At every stage, we have had to drag the Government into action. Coronavirus is an unprecedented crisis, but it cannot be an excuse for failure to act on fire safety. We need to be much stronger and go much further.

I shall mention four key problems with the Bill, which we will explore in Committee. The first is the competence of fire risk assessors, which the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead mentioned. It is frankly outrageous that it is perfectly legal for someone with no expertise and no qualifications to set up as a fire risk assessor and complete fire risk assessments for schools, hospitals or tower blocks. The Bill makes the issue of competence even more pressing, because it will make fire risk assessments more complex by including elements such as the nature of cladding materials.

How is it that 15 years after the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 was passed we still do not have a proper system to accredit those carrying out fire risk assessments? I am aware that a working group has been looking at this issue. Will the Government commit to legislating, through the Bill, for higher standards and greater public accountability in fire inspections?

The second problem is the slow pace of implementation. The powers in the Bill will not come into force until an undetermined date of the Secretary of State's choosing. This is simply not good enough. We are calling for the implementation of those powers from day one. This call is supported by the London fire brigade, among others. The fire service has developed a model for a risk-based approach of inspection, modelled in my own town of Croydon, which could be reflected in the legislation. A vague commitment to bring the Bill into force over time, as the Minister wrote to MPs yesterday, is not

good enough. As many Members have mentioned, the Government have also promised to make further changes to the fire safety order via secondary legislation to implement the Grenfell Tower inquiry recommendations, but again at an undetermined date in the future. Six months ago, the Housing Secretary promised to implement the findings of the inquiry in full and without delay. We have a Fire Safety Bill here in front of us, and we have a series of recommendations that could have been consulted on and placed into the Bill.

The third question relates to residents trapped in Grenfell-style buildings across the country. This issue was raised by many Members in the debate. It is the most immediate and pressing fire safety issue and it is being exacerbated by covid because of stalled work to remove flammable Grenfell-style cladding from buildings. Not only are these residents in danger; they are now facing ruinous costs for waking watch, building insurance and other interim safety measures at a time when many have lost income due to covid-19.

We have heard excellent speeches and experiences from my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for Reading East (Matt Rodda) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, as well as from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who has just told us about constituents who are losing their homes. I spoke to leaseholder residents yesterday who are paying £14,000 a year for waking watch. Who can afford that? There is one block whose residents have spent £700,000 on waking watch because they were told that they had to, but the building has now been tested and found to be safe. This whole area is a total mess—or total chaos, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said. If we do not fix the problem now, people will go bankrupt at the height of this crisis. I know that the Housing Secretary has launched a pledge to keep cladding removal work going, but we need more than a pledge. We need action. And will the Government please make good on our waking watch system? It is simply not fit for purpose, and it is ruining people's lives.

My final point is that, as the Fire Brigades Union and many Members including my hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) have said very powerfully today, the Bill could have significant resource implications for fire and rescue services, but the reality of the past decade has been devastating cuts to firefighter numbers and fire appliances, leading inevitably to slower response times. Fire inspectors—those we need to audit and enforce these new powers—have seen some of the largest cuts. Their numbers have fallen by almost a third since 2010. Will the Minister agree today to publish an impact assessment of the resource implications of the Bill and commit to funding it properly?

In July 2017, I made my maiden speech during the first full debate in this Chamber on the Grenfell tragedy. I did not think that, three years later, I would be facing a Government that have still yet to pass a single Act of Parliament to deliver on the clear promises made in the wake of that tragedy. We welcome this legislation, but it cannot be enough. This piecemeal response to Grenfell cannot be enough, and this delay and dither cannot be enough. The tragedy of Grenfell and the scandal it

exposed of unsafe housing across the country have been too slowly addressed by the Government and too quickly overshadowed by other events—first Brexit, now covid. The Government have a chance to put this right, and we will work hand in hand with them to do that. Everyone needs a place of safety. We in this virtual House all have one. Three long years after the Grenfell Tower fire, we must move faster.

6.18 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): It is a pleasure and an honour to wind up the debate for Her Majesty's Government. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and other hon. Members for the insightful contributions that they have made. I will try to answer as many of the questions asked as I can, although I am conscious that something like 32 Members have spoken today. The fact that we do not have a huge amount of time before the moment of interruption, and that there were so many contributions, may well preclude me from providing substantive responses to all the questions raised, but as the Bill makes progress through the House, I am sure that there will be further opportunities for everybody to debate and test its provisions.

I shall begin by commenting on some particular contributions. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chairman of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, made it clear that his Committee will treat the pre-legislative scrutiny of the building safety Bill very seriously. A number of Members have mentioned that Bill. Let me confirm that we will bring it forward in draft form before the summer recess, which will give Members an opportunity to begin to consider it.

I should also like to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), who noted how the survivors of Grenfell have conducted themselves throughout with grace and dignity—she is right. She was also right to say that we need to work collectively and with purpose to address what happened that night.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) said that he had not received a letter from me in response to his, written on 26 February. I will certainly look into that, because I know that he has long campaigned for his constituents living in Northpoint.

Members across the House campaign for their constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who is in the Chamber, campaigns for her constituents who lost their homes in the lace mill fire a little while ago. Homes were lost; thankfully, no lives were lost.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and others raised the question of fire risk assessors. The Government have been working with the fire risk assessment sector to develop a clear plan to increase its capacity and capability. We will work at pace to do that, and we will introduce a panel of expert fire engineers to ensure that there is expert assessment of more complex buildings. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), who raised the question of the inspection of lifts. He may wish to continue to raise it as the Bill proceeds through the House.

All Members who have taken part in the debate have rightly put the need to safeguard residents such as those who were involved in the Grenfell fire at the front and

centre of their contributions because, ultimately, what matters is saving lives. We cannot bring back those who lost their lives on 14 June 2017, but we can keep moving forward, applying the lessons that we continue to learn, and taking the necessary actions to keep others safe so that a residential fire such as the one we saw at Grenfell Tower can never be repeated.

As we have said and demonstrated by our actions over the last three years, we are committed to a generational reform of building and fire safety. We have to get this right. This is a short, technical Bill—I make no apology for that. It clarifies the law and constitutes a further step towards ensuring that there is better identification and management of fire safety risks in all multi-occupied residential buildings. It will also give us the firm foundation needed to bring forward further legislation under the fire safety order to deliver the recommendations from the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 1 report, issued on 29 October last year, which called for new obligations for building owners. The Bill will give certainty to all those working under the fire safety order, those who are regulated by it and those who enforce it.

There are challenges in respect of how we implement the Bill, particularly regarding the assessment of external wall systems. We will continue to work closely with our partners to deliver assessments on the ground in a way that is manageable and that takes account of the capacity and capability issues that hon. Members have raised. However, the direction of travel is clear, and I urge building owners and managers, in line with the independent expert panel's recent consolidated advice note, to start taking account of fire risks arising from external walls and cladding as of now, if they have not done so already.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security mentioned in his opening speech, my Department will bring further legislation before Parliament for scrutiny in the course of this year. The building safety Bill, which I have mentioned, will deliver an enhanced safety framework for higher-risk residential buildings and provide wider and stronger oversight of safety and performance across all buildings. Residents' safety is at the heart of all these reforms.

The Government have already taken forward a range of other legislative and non-legislative measures, including the provision of £1 billion to remove unsafe cladding, such as high-pressure laminate and wood on all blocks of flats over 18 metres; the provision of £600 million for the replacement of unsafe aluminium composite material cladding on high-rise social and private buildings over 18 metres; banning the use of combustible materials in cladding systems on high-rise blocks, as well as in hospitals, care premises and student accommodation; publishing a summary of responses to the call for evidence on the fire safety order; and setting up, in shadow, the building safety regulator.

I hope that hon. Members will acknowledge that we are taking forward a comprehensive response to the tragedy of that night in June 2017. The system failures in building and fire safety that have been identified by Dame Judith Hackitt in her report—the next phase of the Grenfell Tower inquiry will consider them further—are at the heart of our agenda. The importance of the work on building and fire safety is underlined by the fact that Lord Greenhalgh has recently been appointed to work jointly across both Departments to deliver these important

[Christopher Pincher]

reforms. In that vein, I remind the House that my right hon. Friend the Security Minister has huge expertise in this area because of his previous service in my Department and his current service in the Home Office.

As I anticipated at the start of my speech, I have not been able to address everybody's concerns, but there will be further and ample opportunity, during the Bill's passage through the House and through the scrutiny of other legislation, to address Members' concerns. This is not the only piece of legislation coming forward and it is not the last piece of legislation coming forward; it is the first piece of legislation to address the concerns that colleagues have raised.

This debate has shown the House at its best. Despite the restrictions—the very physical restrictions—that have been placed on us by covid-19, the Members of this House have operated in a new way of working to ensure that we have meaningful and, for the Government, challenging debate. I welcome the strong measure of cross-party, collaborative support mentioned by the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones); I will work with her to make sure that we get the best piece of legislation on to the statute book.

As the third anniversary of the Grenfell fire approaches, the Government are steadfast in their determination to see this Bill enacted as quickly as possible as a prelude to further legislation. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

FIRE SAFETY BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Fire Safety Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 25 June 2020.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

FIRE SAFETY BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Fire Safety Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

SECTION 5 OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (AMENDMENT) ACT 1993

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Order, this day),

That this House approves, for the purposes of section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, the Government's assessment of the medium term economic and fiscal position as set out in the latest Budget document and the Office for Budget Responsibility's most recent Economic and Fiscal Outlook and Fiscal Sustainability Report, which forms the basis of the United Kingdom's Convergence Programme.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

6.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Order A(5), 22 April).

Written Statements

Wednesday 29 April 2020

CABINET OFFICE

Digital Identity and gov.uk Verify Programme

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): I would like to update the House on the gov.uk Verify programme and the provision of digital identity services to Government, following the written ministerial statement of 9 October 2018, *Official Report*, col. 3WS, by the former Minister for Implementation, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), CBE.

As you will know, the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic has led to unprecedented demand for key online services using digital identity such as universal credit. In this light, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has given approval to the Cabinet Office to continue gov.uk Verify operations for up to a further 18 months.

The Government have also taken steps to bolster the resilience of the service which is facing an unprecedented level of usage.

During this time the Government will continue to update the House on our broader work as it progresses [HCWS217]

Contingent Liability: Ventilator Capacity

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): During the course of the coronavirus outbreak, the Government's strategy to increase ventilator capacity has focused on procuring more devices from existing manufacturers overseas, scaling up production of existing ventilator suppliers, and working with industry to design and manufacture new devices.

The ventilator challenge was launched in March. At present, two devices from the ventilator challenge are ready for use in hospitals, with the Penlon ESO2 device becoming the first newly adapted device to receive approval for use during the pandemic from the regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). A number of other devices are currently undergoing tests for regulatory approval.

Given the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, Cabinet Office has given indemnities both against IP infringement, in respect of the designs, and against product liability claims against the manufacturers of rapidly manufactured ventilator system (RMVS) products.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present to Parliament a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

Unfortunately, due to the urgent need to finalise the deal and the confidential commercial nature of the negotiations, it was not possible to notify Parliament of the particulars of the liability and allow the required

14 days' notice prior to the liabilities going live. A delay would have resulted in an unacceptable delay in lifesaving equipment being provided to the NHS.

The precise commercial terms which have been negotiated for each supplier are, and will remain, commercially confidential. While it is difficult to estimate the potential liability exposure, it could exceed £300,000. For this reason, I am informing Parliament of these arrangements.

On this basis, I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute setting out what these indemnities are.

The Treasury approved these liabilities before they were activated. However, if any Member of Parliament has concerns, he/she may write to me and I will be happy to examine their concerns and provide a response.

The Departmental Minute (Departmental Minute-Notification of Contingent Liability.pdf) can be viewed online at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-04-29/HCWS216/>.

[HCWS216]

TREASURY

Bilateral Loan to Ireland

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I would like to update Parliament on the loan to Ireland.

In December 2010, the UK agreed to provide a bilateral loan of £3.2 billion as part of a €67.5 billion international assistance package for Ireland. The loan was disbursed in eight tranches, and the final tranche was drawn down on 26 September 2013. Ireland has made interest payments on the loan every six months since the first disbursement.

HM Treasury has today provided a further report to Parliament in relation to the loan as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010. The report relates to the period from 1 October 2019 to 31 March 2020. It reports fully on the one principal repayment and one regular interest payment received by HM Treasury during this period, and sets out details of future payments up to the final repayment on 26 March 2021.

HM Treasury received a further payment on 20 April 2020, after the scope of the report published today. In line with the agreed repayment schedule, HM Treasury received a total payment of £406,672,904.07 from Ireland. This comprises the repayment of £403,370,000 in principal and £3,302,904.07 in accrued interest. The total outstanding principal on the loan is £1,613,480,000, and the Government continue to expect the loan to be repaid in full and on time.

A written ministerial statement on the previous statutory report regarding the loan to Ireland was issued to Parliament on 3 October 2019, *w*, column 62WS.

[HCWSD219]

Coronavirus-related Activities: Statutory Residence Test

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government warmly welcome the expertise and resources offered by those who wish to come to the UK to combat the coronavirus, from anaesthetists through to engineers working on ventilator design and production.

However, the actions and presence of these individuals in the UK could inadvertently and unfairly affect their own tax residence status, and potentially deter others from giving their assistance.

Accordingly, the Government will legislate in Finance Bill 2020 to amend the statutory residence test (SRT) to ensure that any period(s) between 1 March and 1 June 2020 spent in the UK by individuals working on coronavirus disease-related activities in specified sectors will not count towards the residence test.

[HCWS218]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Maximum Sustainability Yield: UK-relevant Quota Stock Species

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): I would like to update the House today on a change to the number of total allowable catch limits (TACs) for quota stock that the UK has an interest in that will be fished at or below their maximum sustainable yield in 2020.

Analysing the UK's progress towards delivering sustainable fisheries management including fishing at MSY is complex. This is because few total allowable catch (TAC) spatial management areas directly overlap with their corresponding International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) biological stock advice areas, with examples of both pooled TACs comprising elements of multiple biological stocks, and other biological stocks being split across TAC areas.

Noting these complexities, and in partnership with our scientific advisers at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), we have now reviewed the outputs from the fisheries negotiations for 2020. In doing so we have identified some corrections need to be made to the number of TACs at MSY that the UK has a fishing interest in for 2020. With these adjustments—a change related to one stock—accounted for, the UK had 36 (67%) TACS set at MSY out of a total of 54 TACs derived from stocks with MSY assessments in 2020. These figures are different from the figures previously communicated for 2020 i.e. 37 (69%) TACs set at MSY out of a total of 54. The figures for 2019 are unchanged: 30 (59%) TACs set at MSY out of a total of 51 TACs derived from stocks with MSY assessments in 2019.

As we have left the EU and the common fisheries policy, the UK Government will undertake a further forward-looking review of the methodology applied to assess the sustainability of fishing opportunities. In doing so we will seek the views of stakeholders. The new methodology will inform our negotiations for fishing opportunities in 2021 and will represent a fresh and transparent new approach to assessing outcomes on TAC setting including in relation to MSY that will reflect our objectives for delivering sustainable fisheries as an independent coastal state.

[HCWS213]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Ministerial Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Innovation (Lord Bethell of Romford) has today made the following written ministerial statement:

I would like to inform the House that a written answer I gave on 15 April to the noble Lord Sharkey contained information that was out of date at the time of answering. I wish to correct the formal record.

In my reply, I stated that information on the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's (NICE) methods review was not yet available. However, information had been shared by NICE that updates my answer as it originally stood, therefore, making the information provided on 15 April out of date.

The updated position is that NICE has considered its ability to carry out and complete the methods and process update and has decided to extend the timelines. NICE now plans to hold a six-week public consultation on proposals in October 2020 and a further consultation on a draft programme manual in February 2021, with implementation in June 2021.

[HCWS215]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Covid-19: Misuse of Drugs Regulations

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Today, the Government are laying the Misuse of Drugs (Coronavirus) (Amendments Relating to the Supply of Controlled Drugs During a Pandemic etc.) Regulations 2020 ("the 2020 regulations") in the House.

These regulations enable emergency supply of controlled drugs during a pandemic and will come into force on 30 April 2020.

The instrument amends the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 ("the 2001 regulations") in order to allow pharmacists at a registered pharmacy business to supply, in a pandemic situation, medicines without a prescription, where the patient has been receiving a schedule 2, 3 or part 1 schedule 4 controlled drug as part of ongoing treatment, and to supply schedule 2, 3 or part 1 schedule 4 controlled drugs under a serious shortage protocol. The amendments also allow pharmacists, in a pandemic situation, to change the intervals on instalment prescriptions for schedule 2 and 3 controlled drugs without the immediate need for a new prescription from an authorised prescriber under the 2001 regulations, with the approval of the prescriber or their appointed representative.

The amendments are enabling and would only be used in limited circumstances following an announcement by the Secretary of State and under conditions specified by the health service in the area(s) to which the announcement applies.

On 1 April 2020, I wrote to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), to set out the proposed measures and to seek its advice. The ACMD provided its advice on 7 April, and this is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/acmd-advice-on-covid-19-emergency-legislation-to-enable-supply-of-controlled-drugs>.

I have considered the ACMD advice carefully, consulted with the Department of Health and Social Care, and agreed to all the recommendations. Further explanation of the legislative changes is set out in the explanatory memorandum attached to the 2020 regulations.

[HCWS214]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Finance

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I wish to set out to the House the financial support my Department has provided to local government so that it can fulfil its essential role in the national response to covid-19.

Additional Funding

In total I have announced over £3.2 billion of additional funding for councils to support their continued efforts to address the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic in their communities, both through increased expenditure and those budgetary pressures that arise from falls in income during the lockdown period.

Recognising that councils are best placed to decide how to meet pressures in their local area, this funding has not been ring-fenced; however, we expect councils to prioritise spending in those areas where we asked them to carry out extra work and new tasks, in particular, in relation to adult social care, children's services, public health services, shielding the vulnerable, homelessness and rough sleeping, supporting the NHS, and managing excess deaths.

An initial £1.6 billion of funding was announced on 19 March, and allocated based on a mixture of the adult social care relative needs formula; and the 2013-14 settlement funding assessment, which is a measure of general service needs, both of which are familiar formulations to local councils. Further details of this allocation, broken down by individual local authority, can be found on the Government website.

On 18 April I announced a further £1.6 billion to support councils in their continued response to the pandemic. Full details of the allocation of this further funding were announced on 28 April 2020 and have, once again, been made available on the Government website. These additional allocations have been made on a per capita basis, using the latest ONS population projections. This reflects that this is a national emergency and there are a range of pressures across local government. For two-tier areas, the split of this funding between county and district authorities will be 65:35. This provides significantly more funding to district councils than the first round of allocations reflecting the impact that a reduction in incomes from sales, fees and charges has had, particularly on these councils. However, this formulation also continues to reflect the acute pressures on social care.

Of the additional funding, £28.5 million will support stand-alone fire and rescue authorities (including Greater Manchester Fire). In addition, the Home Office will launch a £6 million Fire Covid-19 Contingency Fund,

specifically to support fire and rescue authorities who incur significant costs as a result of additional duties during the covid-19 outbreak.

Cashflow Support

On 16 April, I announced measures to provide cashflow support to authorities. These were intended in part to mitigate the impact of temporary delays in tax payments. These measures include deferring the payment of the central Government share of business rates by councils: payments collectively worth £2.6 billion; and bringing forward central government payments of social care grants worth £850 million, so that they are paid entirely in April rather than in April, May and June.

Future Reform

I am committed to reforming the funding framework for local government so that it is simpler, more up to date, and more transparent. However, in order to ensure that we get these reforms right, both the Government and councils need to work together to arrive at the right approach. Neither we nor councils currently have the capacity, nor the necessary degree of financial certainty, to engage properly with these reforms now. As such, I have announced that we will be suspending implementation of the review of relative needs and resources and the planned increase to 75% business rates retention in 2021-22. These decisions will allow councils to focus on meeting the immediate public health challenge posed by the pandemic.

The Government will work closely with local councils as it determines how best to treat accumulated business rates growth and the local government finance settlement in 2021-22.

[HCWS220]

TRANSPORT

Planning Applications

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): This statement confirms that it has been necessary to extend the deadlines for decisions on the following five applications made under the Planning Act as indicated below to allow for further work to be carried out before they are determined by the Secretary of State:

Lake Lothing 3rd crossing Lowestoft: for the proposed development by Suffolk County Council of a new multi-span single highway opening bascule bridge over Lake Lothing in Lowestoft. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on 5 September 2019 and the current deadline for a decision was 5 December 2019. The deadline is now extended to 5 May 2020;

West Midlands strategic rail freight interchange: for the proposed development by Four Ashes Limited of a new strategic rail freight interchange and other supporting infrastructure works near junction 12 of the M6 motorway in South Staffordshire district. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on 27 November 2019 and the current deadline for a decision was 27 February 2020. The deadline is now extended to 5 May 2020;

A303 Sparkford to Ilchester Dualling: for the proposed development by Highways England of a continuous dual carriageway on the A303 linking the Podimore bypass and the Sparkford bypass. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on 12 September 2019 and the current deadline for a decision was 12 December 2019. The deadline is now extended to 17 July 2020;

A63 Castle Street improvement—Hull: for the proposed improvement by Highways England of approximately 1.5 km of the A63 and connecting side roads in Hull between Ropery Street and the Market Place/Queen Street junction. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on 24 December 2019 and the current deadline for a decision was 24 March 2020. The deadline is now extended to 31 May 2020; and

A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down: for the proposed construction by Highways England of a new two-lane dual carriageway for the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down in Wiltshire. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on the A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down development consent order application on 2 January 2020 and the current deadline for a decision was 2 April 2020. The deadline is now extended to 17 July 2020.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the House of Parliament announcing the new deadline.

The Department will also endeavour to issue decisions ahead of the deadlines above wherever possible.

The decision to set new deadlines is without prejudice to the decisions on whether to give development consent for the above applications.

[HCWS212]

Petition

Wednesday 29 April 2020

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Ladycross House Local Authority Care Home

The petition of the residents of Erewash,

Declares that Ladycross House Local Authority Care Home, which serves the community of Sandiacre and surrounding area, provides an excellent, caring home

for residents; and notes that a decision to close this care home will have significant negative consequences for residents, their families and staff, in addition to local NHS provision.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press upon Derbyshire County Council to keep Ladycross House Local Authority Care Home open and, at the same time, design and implement a long-term plan for the care of elderly residents, not only in Erewash, but across the county of Derbyshire.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Maggie Throup.]*

[P002566]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 29 April 2020

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Covid-19: Local Authority Funding

The following is an extract from Housing, Communities and Local Government questions on Tuesday 28 April 2020.

Anthony Browne: Parish councils in South Cambridgeshire have been heavily involved in co-ordinating the volunteer effort and bringing support to vulnerable people, and I commend them for stepping up to the plate and for that vital work, but at the same time many parish councils, including Cottenham and Cambourne, are suffering a loss of income—for example, they can no longer hire out halls—and some are suffering financial distress. My right hon. Friend has talked about the welcome support he is giving to county councils and district councils. Will he tell me what his Department is doing to support parish councils in their time of need?

Robert Jenrick: I am very grateful to parish councils, their members and their clerks for the vital work they are also doing to support communities. They harness the networks of familiarity and loyalty upon which society is built and have the relationships to support

the vulnerable. I can announce today that as we bring forward the allocations for the £1.6 billion of funding, there will be a significant increase in the amount of money paid to district councils. More than 70% of district councils will receive an additional £1 million and in many cases significantly more, and I ask those district councils to work with their parish councils where appropriate to ensure that a fair share of that funding flows through to parish councils, if they are in financial distress.

[Official Report, 28 April 2020, Vol. 675, c. 206.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne).

The correct response should have been:

Robert Jenrick: I am very grateful to parish councils, their members and their clerks for the vital work they are also doing to support communities. They harness the networks of familiarity and loyalty upon which society is built and have the relationships to support the vulnerable. I can announce today that as we bring forward the allocations for the £1.6 billion of funding, there will be a significant increase in the amount of money paid to district councils. **Around** 70% of district councils will receive an additional £1 million and in many cases significantly more, and I ask those district councils to work with their parish councils where appropriate to ensure that a fair share of that funding flows through to parish councils, if they are in financial distress.

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PETITION

Wednesday 29 April 2020

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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Wednesday 6 May 2020**

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