

**Tuesday
5 May 2020**

**Volume 675
No. 54**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 5 May 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, 22 April).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Covid-19: Home Learning

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What steps he is taking to support children and young people to continue learning at home while nurseries, schools and colleges are partially closed as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [902238]

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support children and young people to continue learning at home while nurseries, schools and colleges are partially closed as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [902239]

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): What steps he is taking to support children and young people to continue learning at home while nurseries, schools and colleges are partially closed as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [902241]

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to support children and young people to continue learning at home while nurseries, schools and colleges are partially closed as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [902242]

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support children and young people to continue learning at home while nurseries, schools and colleges are partially closed as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [902249]

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to support children and young people to continue learning at home while nurseries, schools and colleges are partially closed as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [902254]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I am determined to help learning continue in these challenging times. We have committed over £100 million

to provide devices and internet access to vulnerable children and published a list of high-quality online educational resources, and we continue to support parents and teachers in supporting children at home.

Julian Sturdy [V]: Headteachers in York have told me of their frustration that they will have to wait at least another month until they can provide students with laptops under the Government's scheme. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me that support will be available to schools in the meantime to help their most disadvantaged students learn from home?

Gavin Williamson: As I am sure my hon. Friend will understand, £100 million for computers and other support for schools is a major investment, and it takes a while for these resources to arrive at schools. We have already notified multi-academy trusts and local authorities of what resources they will be getting, and we continue to work to provide resources, with the BBC providing resources in the homes of children right across the country.

Nigel Mills [V]: Parents across Amber Valley have been doing a fantastic job of supporting their children to continue to learn while their schools are closed. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking them and set out what more we can do to support them to help their children continue to learn?

Gavin Williamson: I would very much like to join my hon. Friend in thanking the teachers and all the support staff who have done so much to support home learning and ensure that schools remain open for the children of critical workers and the most vulnerable children. We have seen the launch of the Oak National Academy, which is providing educational resources for children of all ages to support them in their learning, and we are looking at putting more and more resources online, to help schools and, most importantly, to help children continue to learn.

Brendan Clarke-Smith [V]: I very much welcome the funding for IT equipment, because there is nothing worse than when computer says no. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the laptops and tablets provided to disadvantaged and vulnerable young people will not just benefit them while schools are closed, but will continue to be used by their schools to aid learning in the future?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is right in his analysis. It is not just about helping children during this crisis; it is about helping and supporting children for many months and years to come, ensuring that schools continue to have that resource and helping many children through that resource over a long period. We recognise that a lot of work needs to be done to support children as they catch up on what they have missed, because there is no substitute for a child being in a classroom, learning directly from a teacher.

Lee Anderson [V]: School closures will, of course, affect children of all ages and backgrounds in different ways. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to have access to the internet via a mobile or tablet. Will the Secretary of State confirm that devices with internet access are being sent to disadvantaged

children, so that they can learn online more easily? That would certainly help to ensure that the disadvantaged children in my constituency of Ashfield and Eastwood, which the Minister visited recently, are not further disadvantaged by this crisis.

Gavin Williamson: I had the great privilege of joining my hon. Friend on a visit to Leamington primary school in his constituency, to see the amazing work being done there. We have made substantial investment in not just laptops but 4G routers, to ensure that families have better access to the internet and that children can benefit from the brilliant resources, many of which have been made available for free by people, companies and organisations, to allow children to continue to learn.

Mrs Drummond [V]: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating schools in Hampshire on their success in ensuring that 31% of vulnerable children are attending school, and in thanking all the teachers, school staff and children, particularly those in Meon Valley, for their hard work both in school and at home? Has he assessed the impact on the mental health of children and young people during the coronavirus crisis?

Gavin Williamson: I do indeed join my hon. Friend in thanking the teachers, the support staff, the social workers, Hampshire County Council and all those who have been involved in making sure that schools stay open and available for vulnerable children. They have done amazing work. The attendance rate she highlights is truly outstanding. Since the Easter holidays, we have seen a doubling of the number of vulnerable children who are attending school, and that is down to the work of teachers, school staff and social workers, reaching out and encouraging them to come into school. Mental health, which my hon. Friend also raised, is an important issue. That is why we have committed £5 million of funding to support charities to help children with mental health concerns and issues while they are at home.

James Cartledge [V]: While schools are closed, the issues of home-school transport affecting my constituents have effectively been paused, but they will come back eventually and potentially result, for example, in siblings having to go to separate schools. Although this is a county council matter, the Government issued a consultation on home-school transport last October, and five Suffolk MPs, including me, wrote to the Government asking them to consider changing the guidelines to state that siblings should not be separated by changes in school transport policy. Has my right hon. Friend had time to consider that consultation, and will he publish the response soon?

Gavin Williamson: The consultation closed in October last year. We were hit by twin issues of purdah being imposed and now, obviously, our principal focus being on dealing with the coronavirus. We hope to respond to the consultation in the near future, but I am not currently in a position to give my hon. Friend an exact date.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Constant speculation on when schools will reopen and whether it is safe to do so is leaving many parents, pupils and staff anxious. Last week, it was reported that the Government

were looking at best practice in other countries; this weekend, it was reported that the Government would reopen schools for year 6 pupils on 1 June; and last night, it was reported that there were discussions in Government about giving schools and multi-academy trusts the flexibility to decide for themselves, amid concerns that Ministers were coming under pressure to help to kick-start the economy. I am sure the Secretary of State will want to reassure parents, pupils and staff that their safety is the Government's No. 1 priority, so will he clarify the basis on which the Government are making decisions on school and college opening, and when will he make the scientific advice supporting his strategy publicly available?

Gavin Williamson: First, let me take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Lady on her new appointment. I appreciate the time she has made available to speak with me, and I hope the regular briefings from officials that we are providing are of considerable assistance to her, as I think they were to her predecessor.

All SAGE advice is made public, and we will certainly do that. On the return of schools, I am sure the hon. Lady shares my desire for children to be given the opportunity to return to school when it is the right time to do so. The decision will be based on the scientific and medical advice that we receive. I assure her that we will take a phased approach to reopening schools, and we will always aim to give schools, parents and, critically, children maximum notice of when that will happen.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the Secretary of State for his kind comments. He must understand that faith that children and staff are safe will be necessary to parents having the confidence to send their children to school, but nearly 1 million pupils in English schools are in classes of 31 or more—an increase of 28% since 2010—so there is understandable concern that social distancing will be difficult in schools. Everyone wants a return to vital education to support pupils and to stop the ever-widening attainment gap, but does the Secretary of State agree that first we need a national plan for social distancing and personal protective equipment, evidence of a sustained downward trend in cases, comprehensive access to testing for staff and pupils, a whole-school strategy for when cases emerge, and protection for the vulnerable? In the words of the National Education Union:

“Anything else will be a dereliction of duty from government”.

Gavin Williamson: I think the hon. Lady would very much appreciate the fact that I take my responsibilities for the safety and the health of children who attend school as the absolute principal motivation for everything I do, as is the case for those who work in schools. I always welcome constructive dialogue with her, which is why we have made every effort to do so, about how best we can support children to be in schools. Let us not forget that the overwhelming majority of schools—over three quarters of them—are currently operating in a safe, considered and proper way, supporting the children of critical workers as well as those children who are most vulnerable in society. Every step we take is about making sure that we look after those who are the most important part of our society, and that is our children, but also about supporting those who work in educational settings.

Covid-19: Vulnerable Children

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that vulnerable children are identified and supported during the covid-19 outbreak. [902244]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Schools remain open to children in care, and local authority virtual school heads are actively tailoring their expert offer of advice and support to all children on what they are learning in schools. For those not attending, we have made it clear to local authorities and schools that they should be doing everything they can to maintain contact with and support for children not attending school.

Henry Smith [V]: What specific support during the covid-19 pandemic is being provided for children in care and children with special educational needs, such as dyslexia?

Gavin Williamson: We have been working right across the sector to make it absolutely clear that we understand the need for very specific, tailor-made guidance for a lot of children in special educational needs settings. We have been working with special schools to be able to provide that. We have also been providing tailored advice, support and resources online for children with a whole spectrum and range of special educational needs, as well as on how we support families to give education at home.

Mr Speaker: I welcome Tulip Siddiq to the Front Bench. I call the shadow Minister.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Last week, the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, said that the Government's latest reduction in legal protections for children in care without proper scrutiny or an opportunity to scrutinise was not justified, given that the staffing in social care is "holding up". The Labour party agrees with the Children's Commissioner for England. Does the Secretary of State also agree with the Children's Commissioner for England?

Gavin Williamson: On the regulations we have laid, we worked very closely with the ADCS—the Association of Directors of Children's Services—on how we make sure we do everything we can to maintain the very best support for all children when they are in care. It and the sector have specifically asked us to make sure that some flexibilities are made available to them. This is a temporary measure that we have taken in response to concerns that people have raised about making sure they are able to provide the best care for the most vulnerable children. It is certainly not something that is going to be continued once we are through this crisis.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: First, will my right hon. Friend thank the teachers and support staff of Harlow, who have been doing everything possible to teach children of critical workers and vulnerable children over the past few weeks? Given that only 5% of vulnerable children are being educated in schools, nearly 50% of under-16s are potentially being exposed to online harms and possibly two thirds are not accessing online education,

does my right hon. Friend agree that a catch-up premium, with tuition, mentoring and wellbeing, will be necessary for these vulnerable children as schools begin to reopen once again?

Gavin Williamson: I certainly will join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to the teachers and all those who work in schools not only in Harlow but right throughout the country for the amazing work that they are currently undertaking.

We are working closely on how we ensure that every child in this country has the ability to catch up, and I was interested to hear my right hon. Friend's ideas. We are looking into how we can take forward some of those concepts, including the enormous good will among the British public, to help to support children to make sure that they do not miss out as a result of this crisis. We need to make sure that that is not just an idea but actually becomes a reality.

T-levels

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the introduction of T-levels on the (a) quality and (b) recognition of technical education. [902253]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): T-levels are based on the best international examples of technical education and, crucially, they are employer designed. They will help to raise the quality and prestige of technical education across the UK, with longer teaching hours and a meaningful industry placement. I am confident that they will provide a high-quality alternative to A-levels, giving technical education the status and recognition that it deserves.

Steve Double [V]: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is clear that T-levels will have a valuable part to play in ensuring that we have the workforce of the future across the economy, but the sector of the economy that is being most adversely affected by the current crisis is hospitality, and it is vital that that sector is able to access the workforce that it will need to recover, particularly in a post-Brexit world, so will the Minister please consider bringing forward a T-level in hospitality as soon as possible?

Gillian Keegan: I agree with my hon. Friend: equipping people with the skills that they need is crucial to our economic recovery, particularly in St Austell and Newquay. To support tourism and hospitality, which are important to his constituency, we will offer T-levels in cultural heritage and visitor attractions, catering, and management and administration. I hope that, with my hon. Friend's support, T-levels will be available soon so that young people in St Austell and Newquay can benefit from a high-quality technical education.¹

Covid-19: Further and Higher Education

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for the further and higher education sectors during the covid-19 outbreak. [902245]

1. [Official Report, 1 July 2020, Vol. 678, c. 2MC.]

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for the further and higher education sectors during the covid-19 outbreak. [902246]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan) [V]: I take this opportunity to thank all staff in the further and higher education sector for their hard work in responding to this unprecedented challenge. I reassure the House that we have protected grant funding for the FE sector for the full year, and we will provide additional targeted support. Yesterday, we announced an HE package of measures to boost support for students, stabilise the admissions system and ease pressures on universities' finances.

Joanna Cherry [V]: I thank the Minister for her answer. A survey by the National Union of Students has shown that 85% of working students will need additional financial support after losing their jobs as a result of the current crisis. With rent being the most significant financial demand on students, will the Minister tell us what discussions she has had with the private rental sector to ensure that students are not being charged for rooms that are lying empty?

Michelle Donelan: We understand that this is a difficult time for everyone, including students, which is why we have worked with the Office for Students to help providers. We have reallocated funds totalling £46 million for April and May for hardship funds for students. On accommodation specifically, we have sent the clear message that accommodation providers need to be fair and transparent in their policies for students. The Treasury has announced additional measures to protect renters who are tenants.

Owen Thompson [V]: Researchers at the University of Edinburgh's world-leading Roslin Institute in my constituency are at the very heart of the global fight to find solutions for covid-19, but such higher education institutions are struggling to get the support that they need through existing Government schemes. Given the complexities of the funding models for higher education and the immense impact of the lockdown on such institutions' current and future finances, will the UK Government provide a support package specifically tailored for jobs in the higher education sector, to support the economy and their covid-19-fighting efforts? What additional support is the Minister seeking to support research groups throughout the UK?

Michelle Donelan: We should not underestimate the impact of the package that we announced yesterday, which builds on the Treasury announcement that universities are eligible for Government financial support worth at least £700 million. This package also brought forward £100 million of research funding. We have also brought forward £2.6 billion in tuition fees to help with cash flow. Most fundamentally, this is a package that is designed to stabilise the higher education sector and safeguard it as a whole.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: May I take this opportunity to welcome the new Labour Front-Bench team to their positions and also to pay tribute to all those working in the education sector to support our young people through this pandemic?

The £100 million of quality-related research funding that the Minister has just referred to is research for England. Can the Minister confirm that this is indeed new funding and that these increases to the English QR grants will deliver Barnett consequential for universities in Scotland?

Michelle Donelan: I can confirm that this is QR funding that has been brought forward for English universities, but the hon. Member will have noted in the announcement yesterday that it also included a research taskforce designed to prioritise safeguarding our research base. That is a cross-governmental taskforce on which the devolved Administration Ministers will have a seat.

Early Years Sector

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to support the early years sector. [R] [902240]

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of support available to childcare providers and nurseries during the covid-19 outbreak. [902243]

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes to the coronavirus job retention scheme on the ability of nurseries and childcare providers to retain staff. [902248]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford) [V]: We have two key priorities at this time: making sure that there is sufficient childcare for critical workers and vulnerable children; and ensuring the longer-term sustainability of the vital early years sector. Therefore, the Government will continue paying local authorities for the hours that we normally fund, and, where appropriate, providers can also access business rates relief, grants, a business interruption loan and the self-employment support scheme, which is especially helpful for childminders. In order to retain staff, providers can also furlough up to the proportion of their salary bill that would normally be considered as being paid from non-public funding sources.

Robert Courts [V]: I thank the Minister for that answer. With a young son at a local nursery—I declare that interest—I am acutely aware of the pressures faced by early years providers at this time. The Government said that they expect childcare providers and local authorities to work together to ensure sufficient childcare for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, but will the Minister also confirm that she will do everything in her power to support our vital early years providers, including meeting representatives to understand what more it might be possible for her Department to do?

Vicky Ford: My officials and I are in continual contact with early years sector organisations through regular meetings and working groups and feed their messages right into the heart of Government. We have put £3.6 billion into the sector through funding the entitlements this year and will continue to ensure that providers get the best possible support on the many different Government schemes while also staying within the rules. We also have a new announcement for parents. Parents who are

normally eligible for the Government's free childcare will continue to be eligible for those entitlements during this summer term, even if their income levels have changed because of the virus. This will be a massive support to families as well as to providers.

Steve McCabe [V]: Nurseries and childcare providers have struggled to stay open during this crisis. The Minister will know that the confusion over the Department for Education statements on free entitlement and the furlough scheme has caused many financial headaches. Last week, the First Secretary of State said at PMQs that if those providers were finding it too much to bear, the Government will look "afresh" at what can be done. Can the Minister tell me when the Secretary of State will look afresh at what needs to be done, and, given that the Minister is regularly in touch with nurseries, will she tell me the last time that she spoke to the nurseries and childcare providers in my constituency, because they do not seem to know about plans to rescue their provision?

Vicky Ford [V]: I spoke to early years organisations only last week, and speak to them on a weekly basis through my officials and in meetings that I join regularly. On the coronavirus job retention scheme, the initial guidelines were first published by the Government on 26 March. I am sure that Members understand that it would not be right for providers—or, indeed, any business—to receive two Government incomes for the same costs. We have worked closely with the sector to clarify this position, and will always make sure that early years providers get the best support possible. This will be an important discussion at the next spending review—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: Changing the guidance on the job retention scheme at the last minute has pulled the rug from underneath many nurseries and childcare providers. A survey by the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years has found that 40% of childminders are not confident that their business will survive this crisis. Despite the answers that the Minister has given, there is a lot of confusion. Will she do the right thing and bring forward a comprehensive plan to protect the childcare sector during this difficult time?

Mr Speaker: Let us have a brief answer from the Minister.

Vicky Ford [V]: The guidelines were first published on 26 March, and we will continue to work with the sector to provide clarity to ensure that it can access, as far as possible, every single set of Government support that is available at this time. We will continue to work on supporting this vital sector.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Covid-19: Hospices

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to support hospices during the covid-19 outbreak. [902188]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We are providing up to £200 million to hospices over the next three months to support their work alongside the NHS as part of the national response—by, for instance, providing spare bed capacity in community care to take pressure off hospitals, supporting vulnerable patients, and, of course, supporting those in need of palliative care. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that Sue Ryder, which runs one of his local hospices, received £5.9 million in April.

Paul Bristow [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. It is indeed great news that the Government are providing £200 million for those nearing the end of their lives. When does he expects hospices such as Thorpe Hall to receive that funding? In recognition of just how vital palliative care is, might we look to reform the way in which we commission palliative care when this crisis is over?

Matt Hancock: There are lots of things that we will need to learn when this crisis is over. The hospice system has always had a mixed model of funding—a very strong history of philanthropic support, as well as support and financial funding for the services it provides that the NHS commissions. The funding has started to flow. If there is a specific problem locally, I would like to know about it, and then we can get to the bottom of it.

Covid-19: Tests for Key Workers

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What progress he has made on ensuring that all key workers are able to access a covid-19 test. [902191]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We expanded testing to all symptomatic essential workers and members of their households last month. As capacity continues to increase, we have been able to go further still, with all those who have symptoms and who have to leave home to go to work—and members of their households—now able to access a test. This is all part of the overall testing strategy, with the 100,000 tests that are now available.

Sir Robert Neill [V]: Testing of staff and residents at care homes in my constituency is being delivered by referrals either through the Care Quality Commission or through the pilot partnership that has been set up between our hospitals trust and our clinical commissioning group. In relation to the CQC, will my right hon. Friend examine why test results are taking five to seven days to come back, rather than the estimated 72 hours? In relation to the pilot scheme, where tests are being delivered efficiently, why are care home managers given the names of residents who test positive but, for data protection reasons, not the names of staff who test positive? That is creating obvious uncertainty.

Matt Hancock: I am glad to see the roll-out of testing to care homes, and we are able to go further for both residents and staff. It is an incredibly important part of the response and one of the reasons why testing is so important. My hon. Friend raises two important issues of detail in the roll-out, and I will ensure that they are looked into.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): We need to be doing all we can to protect our key workers, especially those in healthcare. I welcome and note what the Secretary of State said about testing, but has he considered the study from Imperial suggesting that weekly screening of healthcare workers—testing them every week whether symptomatic or not—reduces their contribution to transmission by around 25% to 33%? Will he look at testing all healthcare staff whether they have symptoms or not?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The shadow Secretary of State has asked questions in a responsible and reasonable way, and I welcome his support for the test, track and trace pilot on the Isle of Wight that we announced yesterday. His question is quite right; we have piloted the testing of asymptomatic NHS staff in 16 trusts across the country. Those pilots have been successful, and we will be rolling them out further.

Covid-19: Vaccine Development

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): What progress has been made on the development of a covid-19 vaccine. [902195]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The development of a coronavirus vaccine is in its early stages but progressing rapidly. The Government have backed two promising vaccine candidates from the University of Oxford and Imperial College, and we are making over £45 million available to those teams—alongside the hundreds of millions that we are making available to the global vaccine search.

Mark Pritchard: I am grateful for the Secretary of State's response. The World Health Organisation has undoubtedly made mistakes over covid-19 and needs deep reforms, but this global pandemic requires a global response. How is the UK liaising with the WHO so that we work together globally to beat this virus?

Matt Hancock: We do work globally, and we do work together. As the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, we have committed £744 million to the global response to coronavirus. We are significant funders of the WHO, and I am grateful for its work. We are also a significant funder of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, which is leading the global search for a vaccine. In fact, we are making the largest contribution of any country in the world to the global search for a vaccine, and three of the top 10 vaccine candidates are being developed here in the UK.

Covid-19: Test, Track and Trace

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What plans the Government have to test, track and trace people with covid-19. [902199]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We are developing a new test, track and trace programme to help to control the spread of covid-19, and to be able to trace the virus better as it passes from person to person. This will bring together technology through an app, an extensive web of phone-based contact tracing and, of course, the testing needed

to underpin all that. The roll-out has already started on the Isle of Wight, and I pay tribute to and thank the Islanders for the enthusiasm with which they have taken up the pilot. I hope that we learn a lot from the roll-out, so that we can take those learnings and roll the programme out across the whole country.

Laura Trott [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I welcome the plans to introduce the contact-tracing app, but for it to be effective it will need to be rolled out to a large proportion of the population. What plans does the Secretary of State have to achieve that, and how will he alleviate privacy concerns?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. She is right to say that the more people who download the app, the more people will protect themselves, their families and their communities. The cross-party support for this test, track and trace programme is important, and right across this country people need to know that the app has privacy in its design. The data it holds is held on people's phones and it does not go to the Government, until of course someone needs to get a test, in which case of course they have to get in contact with the NHS. So privacy is there by design, there is cross-party support and, according to a very early poll, 80% of people on the Isle of Wight want to download it. These are good early signs and we will have a big communications campaign to explain to people the benefits of the test, track and trace programme as we roll it out across the country.

Mr Speaker: In welcoming Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, may I say thank you for what you and all the staff do in the NHS, saving lives? It is appreciated.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. If I may, I would like to start by saying a huge thank you, on behalf of us all in the Chamber today and all those watching, to our NHS and care staff, who are working so hard on the frontline.

Frontline workers like me have had to watch families break into pieces as we deliver the very worst of news to them: that those they love most in this world have died. The testing strategy has been non-existent. Community testing was scrapped, mass testing was slow to roll out and testing figures are now being manipulated. Does the Secretary of State commit to a minimum of 100,000 tests each day going forward? Does he acknowledge that many frontline workers feel that the Government's lack of testing has cost lives and is responsible for many families being unnecessarily torn apart in grief?

Matt Hancock: No, I do not. I welcome the hon. Lady to her post as part of the shadow Health team, and I think she might do well to take a leaf out of the shadow Secretary of State's book on tone. I am afraid that what she said is not true; there has been a rapid acceleration in testing in the past few months in this country, including getting to 100,000 tests a day. We have been entirely transparent on the way that has been measured throughout, and I have confidence that the rate will continue to rise. Currently, capacity is 108,000 a day, and we are working to build that higher.

Of course, we have been working very hard to make the testing capacity grow as fast as possible, and as more tests are available, so we are able to make them available to more people and test people right across the

NHS. I pay tribute, too, to the work of NHS and social care staff on the frontline; nothing should take away from the team spirit with which we approach this.

Mr Speaker: We go across to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: Test, track and trace is possible only with a mass testing programme, so I offer many congratulations to the Health Secretary on achieving such a challenging expansion in our testing capacity. He has always said that he follows the science in the decisions he takes, but does he appreciate that, Zoom or no Zoom, it is very difficult for us as MPs to scrutinise such decisions if he does not also publish the advice of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies that he receives at the same time as he makes those decisions?

Matt Hancock: We are making public the membership of SAGE and a lot of the science. I know that my right hon. Friend is also able to scrutinise the scientists before the Select Committee on Health and Social Care, as he and his team did again this morning. The overall approach of transparency, which has been a lodestar of the Government's response to this crisis, is important. Of course, different scientists have different views, and they make those plain, but, as he said, we are guided by the science in the decisions that we take, and that has been an important part of the response.

Covid-19: Community Hospitals

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If he will allocate urgent additional funding to community hospitals as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [902189]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar) [V]: Public safety remains the Government's top priority, and we have been clear that the NHS will get whatever funding it needs to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. As such, as a country, we have established a £14.5 billion coronavirus emergency response fund, with £6.6 billion going directly to the NHS. I know that my hon. and gallant Friend is a strong champion of community hospitals in his county. They are vital to our response to coronavirus and currently are managing well. I am not aware of any specific requests from his county; however, if additional urgent funding is required, we will of course consider that.

Richard Drax [V]: I am most grateful to the Minister for his answer. May I thank him and his team for the wonderful job they are doing? The main reason I asked the question is that beds at Portland Community Hospital had to move to Weymouth because of a shortage of trained staff. Can my hon. Friend assure my constituents that we will fill the thousands of nurse vacancies, thereby allowing community hospitals such as Portland to fulfil their proper function?

Edward Argar: Let me start by putting on the record my thanks to our amazing NHS and social care workforce at this time. As my hon. and gallant Friend is aware, the Government are committed to growing and supporting the NHS workforce to ensure that it continues to provide world-class health and care. We have set out our pledge

that we will deliver 50,000 more nurses in our NHS by 2025 through multiple workstreams, including retention and recruitment. Many of those nurses will operate in community hospitals, enabling them to continue providing that world-class care and support.

Covid-19: EU Procurement Schemes

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): For what reasons the Government did not join EU procurement schemes to help tackle covid-19. [902208]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar) [V]: The UK has confirmed that we will participate in the current joint EU procurement scheme on therapeutics for covid-19 that is soon to launch. Owing to an initial communication problem, the UK did not receive an invitation in time to join the previous four EU joint procurements. However, participating in those four initial joint procurement schemes would not have allowed us to do anything that we have not already been able to do for ourselves. We will consider participating in all other future schemes on a case-by-case basis and on the basis of public health requirements and needs.

Mr Bradshaw [V]: Whatever mistakes were made or opportunities missed in the past, on the day that the UK has overtaken Italy as the country with the worst death toll in Europe, what reassurance can the Minister give the public that decisions taken now and in the future will be driven entirely by the public interest and not distorted by anti-European dogma?

Edward Argar: I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is no suggestion of any decision having been influenced in the way that he suggests. Indeed, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office made it clear in his clarification to the Foreign Affairs Committee that this was not a political decision. I reiterate that we are open to participating in future schemes on the basis of public health requirements and on a case-by-case basis.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Operation Cygnus in October 2016 showed that the UK would struggle in a pandemic due to a lack of both ventilators and personal protective equipment for staff. Why did the Secretary of State not act on it?

Edward Argar: The Government did act in looking at all previous modelling and all previous exercises. That is why the UK was well prepared. Let me take the example of ventilators, which she mentioned. The UK has massively increased the number of ventilators available to our NHS, meaning that at no point thus far in this pandemic has there been a shortage of ventilators. I reiterate, returning to the original question, that participating in those four initial joint procurement schemes with the EU would not have allowed us to do anything we have not already been able to do for ourselves.

Social Care: Personal Protective Equipment

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of personal protective equipment for the social care workforce. [902190]

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the adequate supply of personal protective equipment to (a) the NHS and (b) social care facilities. [902200]

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the adequate supply of personal protective equipment to (a) the NHS and (b) social care facilities. [902204]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I would first like to place on record my thanks to everyone on the frontline, be they in a hospital or in social care, as well as those in less obvious places such as my community nurses, pharmacists and others who are working ceaselessly on the frontline. We are working round the clock to ensure that everyone across the NHS and care sector has the personal protective equipment that they need. To date, we have delivered more than 1.11 billion items of PPE. We are ensuring that PPE is delivered as quickly as possible to those on the frontline. We have delivered to over 58,000 health and care organisations, and we are working closely with industry, social care providers, the NHS, NHS Supply Chain and the Army to ensure that all our NHS and care staff can get the protection they need.

Sir Edward Davey [V]: I thank the Minister for that answer, but given how care homes have become a tragic focus in this pandemic, with so many staff and residents losing their lives, when will she be able to guarantee that every care home will have all the PPE they need? And why is the Clipper system, which is meant to supply PPE to the care sector, now one month late?

Jo Churchill: Every NHS and social care worker must have the protective equipment that they need. Clipper has been rolled out, and it is important that it is able to deliver the products that are ordered online. This is now being rolled out to more than 1,500 general practices and care home providers, and as it is piloted and stood up to more and more individual organisations, that will help that stream of work to ensure that people have the personal protective equipment they need. That is on top of the national supply disruption response—NSDR—line that people can ring in case of emergency, and this is also backed up by the wholesale distributors, where only last week 52 million more items were placed into that line as well.

Jacob Young [V]: Across Redcar and Cleveland, we have fantastic businesses such as Pendraken Miniatures and BC-FX, who have switched their manufacturing lines to making visors, the Materials Processing Institute, which has switched to making hundreds of bottles of hand sanitiser for Marie Curie nurses every week, and 15-year-old Daniel Sillett, who is using his 3D printer to make PPE for local care facilities such as Marske Hall. Will the Minister join me in commending those businesses and individuals as part of our national effort in overcoming this crisis?

Jo Churchill: I would indeed like to join my hon. Friend in congratulating them, and I congratulate him on the way he has just explained that this is the most enormous national effort, from large-scale businesses down to individuals such as Daniel, to whom we must

give our special thanks. This national effort—the way in which individuals and businesses have stepped forward, and the many offers from all the different suppliers—has been extraordinary. We are working with industry partners across the piece to make PPE. We are working with Ineos and Diageo to produce hand and hygiene products and to ensure that we get these to the frontline, using services such as Clipper. Thanks to the work we have already seen, we have seen novel products arrive on the frontline. Seven companies have now been contracted in the UK to make over 25 million items of PPE and to send some 6 million square metres of fabric to NHS Supply Chain.

Jonathan Gullis [V]: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), I too have local initiatives—including Scrubs for Stoke and the Heywood Academy—that have produced amazing amounts of PPE for our local health care sector. Can the Minister inform us what steps she is taking to ensure that staff in care homes—[Inaudible.]—and to enable people to make optimal use of PPE and minimise the transfer of infection from one client to the next?

Jo Churchill: I would like to pay tribute to businesses in my hon. Friend's area. I think the crux of his question was about making sure that people are receiving the appropriate infection control training in order to utilise PPE effectively. We publish guidance—including videos, which are easier to watch and immediately understand—on the appropriate PPE for health and careworkers, based on clinical expertise. The guidance has been written and reviewed by all four UK public health bodies and informed by NHS infection prevention and control experts. It is consistent with World Health Organisation—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we are going to have to speed up the answers.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I have listened carefully to the Minister's answers, but on the ground there are still serious problems. Maria, who is a careworker in the north-east, told me on Friday that she has only just received face masks and has to wear the same ones throughout the day. Kenzie in Leeds told me exactly the same thing: one mask, all day, even though one of the elderly ladies she cares for has coronavirus and cannot help coughing and spitting on her mask. With almost 8,000 deaths in care homes so far, what changes will the Minister make and what will she do differently to get a grip of this problem, which is still increasing, to help bring this terrible death rate down?

Jo Churchill: As I said, there are the three strands of guidance on making sure that the appropriate equipment is used in the appropriate place. We have also used the local resilience forums in order to ensure that individual care organisations can have a back-up of personal protective equipment so that people can use it in line with clinical guidance. I will contact the hon. Lady after this session, because I would like to ensure that the young lady she spoke about has seen that guidance, and the videos that accompany it, in order to make sure that she feels properly protected, which is the aim that we are all working for.

Covid-19: Dental Practices

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): What support the Government are providing to dental practices during the covid-19 outbreak. [902194]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): NHS England and NHS Improvement have published detailed guidance setting out the support for NHS dentistry during the pandemic. To minimise the spread of infection, routine dentistry is currently suspended. NHS practices are providing telephone advice and triage at urgent dental centres to patients with urgent needs. NHS dentists will receive their usual remuneration in full, or in part if they do part-NHS, part-private work. Dentists can also seek help via all the Treasury means for lost income.

Alec Shelbrooke [V]: My constituents in Elmet and Rothwell have reported difficulties in obtaining emergency dental care in Leeds. Will the Minister detail what actions her Department is taking when this specific issue comes up in, say, Leeds so that patients can access emergency care during the lockdown?

Jo Churchill: Of course. As of the week ending 30 April, there were two urgent dental care centres in the Leeds area to provide urgent dental treatment and care for patients on referral either from the patient's own dentist or from NHS 111. As with all urgent dental care centres, there is also a triage service that will give people advice, antibiotics or painkillers and then refer them through if clinical work is required. There are 308 urgent dental centres open across the country. I regularly talk to the chief dental officer and to the British Dental Association about the needs and requirements in the profession so that we can care for patients in the best way.

Covid-19: Health Inequalities

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of health inequalities on the prevalence of covid-19 in the general population. [902209]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): It is vital that we find out what groups are most at risk so that we can help protect them. That is why we have asked Public Health England to conduct a rapid review of the different

factors that might influence how someone is affected by the virus. Among other things, it will explore age, ethnicity and gender. As our deputy chief medical officer outlined yesterday, this is important but complex work.

Sarah Jones: I am sure the Minister would want to join me in paying tribute to the staff at Croydon University Hospital and those in our local community for the resilience, bravery and good grace they have shown during this crisis. Over 250 people have died in Croydon, and we are all thinking of their families and their loved ones who will be suffering so much. High levels of deaths in Croydon appear to be down to the underlying health of the population. Although of course it is early days in terms of analysing the data, it is clear that in Croydon covid has disproportionately affected people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Does the Minister agree that on early sight it looks like poorer people, often from BAME backgrounds, are being hardest hit by covid, and that we need to tackle the longer-term underlying health issues that have got us to this place of gross inequality?

Jo Churchill: It is so important that we do the research before we draw conclusions. Every death is a tragedy. Everybody who has died during this pandemic is somebody's mum, dad, brother, sister and therefore we owe it to them to give Public Health England and all those researching this area all the support we can, so that we do not rush to conclusions, but draw conclusions that will truly help us to address the pandemic and those who are most affected by it in the right way.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry that we did not get more questions in, but maybe we can speed up the teams next time and we will get through more.

We come to the urgent question to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I will follow the practice for substantive questions whereby I will call the Secretary of State to answer the question first. Before doing so, I have a short statement to make, which is relevant to this urgent question.

It has been widely reported that the Government will make a major announcement about the review of lockdown this Sunday. I consider this a matter of regret. It is important that the press is kept informed, but it is the duty of this House to hold the Government to account, not the media. Major Government announcements should be made first in the House and this is more important than ever during this time of crisis.

Covid-19 Update

12.30 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the Government's response to covid-19.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We have flattened the curve of this epidemic, ensured that the NHS is not overwhelmed and expanded testing capacity to over 100,000 tests a day. As a Government, we are working resolutely to defeat the coronavirus, and there are two important areas where I want to update the House today.

First, on the expansion of our work to test, track and trace, we have now built a national testing infrastructure of scale, and because we have this extra capacity, we will be delivering up to 30,000 tests a day to residents and staff in elderly care homes, making sure that symptomatic and asymptomatic staff and residents can all be tested. Our care system represents the best of us, supporting our loved ones with tenderness and dedication at their time of greatest need. Through this unprecedented expansion of testing, we can give them the certainty and confidence that high-quality testing can provide.

Secondly, we are working to build the resilience of the NHS. We currently have 3,387 spare critical care beds in the NHS and that does not include the capacity provided by our Nightingale hospitals, including the 460-bed Sunderland Nightingale, which opened earlier today. We should all be very proud that we built up the NHS so fast and that our collective national effort has helped to protect the NHS and flatten the curve. As a result, we are now able to start to restore some NHS services and we are in a position to be able to place the London Nightingale on stand-by. This is good news, because our NHS has not been overwhelmed by this crisis and remains open to those who need care, and that means that this nation's shared sacrifice is having an impact.

Throughout its time, this Chamber has borne witness to so much, and it has borne witness to the nation's resolve once more. I am delighted that the British people are well and truly rising to this incredibly difficult challenge.

Jonathan Ashworth: Our thoughts, as always, are with the loved ones of those who have lost someone to this awful disease. May we again pay tribute to our brave NHS and care staff? I say to the Secretary of State that clapping and campaigns for medals are appreciated, but does he agree that NHS and care workers deserve fair pay, mental health support and access to personal protective equipment? I am hearing reports that we may have problems with the stocks of sterile gowns. Could he update the House on that front or write to me if he is not able to do so today? We also rely on international staff, as he knows. Will he scrap the health surcharge that they have to pay? It seems particularly unfair at the best of times, but especially at this time.

We are tracking towards having one of the worst death rates in the world—we have seen the figures again today. I know that the Secretary of State said that we are through the peak, but can the same be said of

the care sector, given the number of deaths we have seen reported today in the care sector? He knows that we support lockdown and it is right that we engage in a debate about it. The strategic aim must be to suppress this virus, not simply to flatten its spread, in order to save lives and minimise harm. Testing, tracing and isolation is crucial.

Does he agree that we should be mobilising our expertise in local authority public health services, as well as other specialists such as environmental health officers, and our expertise in primary care? Would that not be a better route than outsourcing the call centre work to firms such as Serco? We support digital tools, but he will understand that there are questions about privacy. Will he undertake to publish a data protection impact assessment?

As we heard in Question Time, deprived areas have experienced covid mortality rates that are more than double those in less deprived areas. There are disproportionate mortality rates among black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. Does that not show that covid thrives on inequalities and that we need a funded strategy to support low-paid, deprived and marginalised communities, including by enforcing protections in the workplace when we transition out of this lockdown?

Can the Secretary of State comment on the remarks that were made in a Select Committee earlier by the chief scientific adviser, who said that we imported many cases from Italy and Spain early on in March? That was when events such as Liverpool v. Atletico Madrid were still going ahead. What advice will he be taking about testing at ports of entry and quarantine when we transition out of the lockdown?

Finally, we are building up a huge a backlog of unmet non-covid clinical need in the NHS. What resources will be available to deal with that, and how will we get the waiting list down? We do not want the lockdown to result in excess mortality and morbidity among those with non-covid conditions.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for his questions, and he is quite right to raise them. I will go through them as fast as I can and respond to them in turn. First, gown supply is improving and we have a better distribution system for PPE, on which we have been working incredibly hard under the leadership of Lord Paul Deighton. He has come in to help on PPE and made a significant improvement already.

The shadow Secretary of State asked about the number of deaths in the care sector. It is incredibly important that we protect those who live in social care settings and those who receive social care in their own homes. I am glad that in the data released by the Office for National Statistics this morning, the number of deaths in care homes was slightly lower, but it is still far too high and there is a huge amount of work still to do.

The shadow Secretary of State rightly asks about making sure that we suppress the virus. That is the goal—not just to flatten the peak, but to get the numbers right down. In doing so, our local authority public and environmental health teams will be absolutely vital, and he is right to draw attention to them. In this Chamber, we often rightly praise the NHS and social care staff, but I think this is a good moment for us to come together to praise our public health officials and environmental health officials in local authorities.

Finally, the shadow Secretary of State asked about non-covid needs, which are incredibly important. People who need treatment should get that treatment. We are opening up and reopening the NHS, and that includes any temporary closures, for instance of A&Es that need to reopen. I can think of one example in Chorley, Mr Speaker, which we are working hard to reopen as soon as possible, as the NHS reopens. I am happy to put that on record. It sometimes seems slightly unfair that you, as Speaker, cannot ask open constituency questions, but I know that that is something you have worked incredibly hard on, along with your colleagues in Lancashire.

Finally, I want to reiterate the point about levelling up. The Government's agenda of levelling up is unabated; in fact, it is strengthened by this crisis. There are many reasons for the disparate impacts of coronavirus on different groups. Public Health England work is urgently under way into, for instance, the impact on ethnic minority groups, the impact of obesity and deprivation, and the much greater impact of coronavirus on men than women. All those things need to be considered and looked into, and we need to level up our country once this crisis is over.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the comments from the Secretary of State. We now go over to Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) [V]: I ask if we can all recognise the loving care by social services staff and NHS staff, especially those who have to go on hot or cold visits to people's homes—not only the community nurses, dementia nurses and those who go to people with special needs, but the GPs and paramedics. Will the Secretary of State consider safer ways for those home visits, possibly using some of the offers of London black cabs, which can have a division between the driver and the clinician and also are much easier to clean down when necessary?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am happy to look into all different ways of having safe working practices within the NHS and more broadly. Within the NHS, infection control is a critical piece of work. My hon. Friend is right to raise the point that this is a matter not just for acute hospitals—where, of course, it is mission critical—but for all parts of the NHS, including pharmacies, which increasingly have screens to make sure that there is a lower impact of transmission from customers to staff.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: At least 140 health and care staff in the UK have lost their lives to covid-19, and we should pay tribute to them, but analysis of more than 100 of those tragic deaths has highlighted that there were not any among staff in critical care units, which are the most dangerous setting. Does the Secretary of State recognise that that shows the effectiveness of full PPE? He claims to always follow scientific advice, but NERVTAG, the new and emerging respiratory virus threats advisory group, advised him last June to add gowns to the stockpile, so why did he not do that? Why did Public Health England produce PPE guidelines for the whole UK that did not recommend gowns for staff looking after covid patients?

Matt Hancock: We are absolutely guided by the science. It is a very important principle of our overall response, and hence we upgraded the PPE guidelines a few weeks ago to include the use of gowns. The guidance is always

looked into as we learn more and more about the virus. The plans that we had were not plans for a particular virus, but for the threat of a pandemic. We have learned more and more about this virus, which is novel and only came into being December last year, hence, as the science changes, so the scientific advice to Ministers is updated, and Ministers update decisions.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con) [V]: At the start of this pandemic, with no effective drug treatment, the only way to save the lives of coronavirus patients has been to ensure that hospital treatment is available for all who need it, so I thank my right hon. Friend for overseeing such a massive increase in critical care bed capacity. We saw yesterday that the NHS Nightingale in London is not due to take any more patients. While some have oddly criticised that announcement, does my right hon. Friend agree that that should be viewed as nothing other than a success that shows how effective we have been in protecting our NHS?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am incredibly proud of the work that was done to put in place the Nightingale hospitals across the country. Most of them were put in place in under two weeks. The London Nightingale, which was open first, is the prime example of the whole team—the NHS, the private sector and the armed forces—all pulling together. It was a great accomplishment, but a greater accomplishment still is that it was never full and that this country has managed to flatten the curve. Now we are able to put it on standby, meaning that it will be physically there in case there is a second spike, but as an insurance policy, rather than as an active hospital. That is a very, very positive step that should be welcomed by all. I tend not to take much notice of some of the noises off, which sometimes criticise me for not having full enough hospitals and sometimes criticise me for not having enough people wanting test capacity. Frankly, we will get the capacity up and then hope we do not use it. That is the attitude we should take to the extra hospitals, and I pay tribute to everybody involved in the project.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: We will have to go across to Stuart Anderson.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con) [V]: We all know the importance of PPE during the outbreak, how difficult it is to get and the great lengths to which the Secretary of State is going to procure it. On weekly calls with New Cross Hospital and the City of Wolverhampton Council, the same point is at the forefront of our discussions: the consistency of the PPE deliveries. Will my right hon. Friend set out what plans are in place to ensure that what is promised arrives?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is right to ask that important question. Getting the distribution of PPE to the frontline is critical. It has been a huge operation; the head of the Army has called it the largest logistical operation that this country has seen in 40 years. It is challenging because there is a global shortage of supply. We are working to get that supply as effective as possible. It is undoubtedly improving, but there is an awful lot of work still to do.

[*Matt Hancock*]

Having the national shortage call centre—the phone line that anybody can call if a shortage is coming up—is an important part of the response. So, too, are the automated online deliveries for the smaller settings. But we continue day and night to try to do everything we can to improve the flow of PPE to the frontline.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Disabled people are worried about who is expected to provide PPE for personal carers. Many are finding it difficult to procure appropriate equipment—and when they can, they are finding that prices are inflated. What are the Government doing to ensure that disabled people are not left without adequate equipment, or out of pocket, when attempting to protect themselves and their carers?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is right that making sure that our whole social care system gets access to PPE is important. There is often a focus on PPE in hospitals and care homes, but on home visits, as she rightly raises, access to PPE is also vital.

There has been a global increase in the prices of PPE. The prices that the Government pay for PPE have increased a number of times over the course of this crisis. That is a feature of the global shortage of supply as the demand for PPE across the world has shot up. We are seeing that the world over. What I hope to do is bring on stream more and more domestic manufacturers of PPE, both to ensure that we get the quantity and to see whether we can stop the price rises happening.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) [V]: Elderly constituents of mine in Wantage and Didcot have been concerned by media reports suggesting that they will be forced to stay in their homes for an extended period. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that that is in fact not the case and that, through all his work on testing and the tracking and tracing app, he is working to make sure that we can all return to a normal life as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I would like to take this opportunity to set out the exact policy, which a few media outlets have got wrong in the past few days. We set out from the start, and clearly on the nhs.uk website, that broadly there are three groups of people when it comes to the strictures of the social distancing guidelines. There are people of working age who do not have underlying health conditions, who must follow the social distancing rules. There are those in groups that are, according to the science, more susceptible to this disease, including the over-70s and some with underlying health conditions, who we say are clinically vulnerable and must pay particular attention to the social distancing rules.

Then there is the group who are shielded. These are people with specific underlying health conditions who will have received a letter from the NHS. It is only to this last group that we have said, right from the start of social distancing, that they will need to stay away from people as much as is practically possible for 12 weeks. We know that that is a very significant impact and burden, hence we have written individually to those people; in many cases, they will have specific requirements because of their condition.

It is really important that people understand those three separate groups. I hope that that clears up for the House some of the confusion seen on the front pages of some of the newspapers.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: *The Sunday Times* this week had an extremely moving piece by photographer Stuart Franklin, featuring NHS workers and patients fighting the coronavirus at West Middlesex hospital, which is based in my constituency. The article demonstrated very clearly the emotional impact of the virus on frontline health and care staff as well as patients and their families, and we all know that post-traumatic stress syndrome will be a growing issue for many throughout and after this, so will the Government invest in both immediate and long-term mental health treatment for all those affected, and will they take into account that many, particularly health and care workers, are often reluctant to seek help?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point, and I agree with every word of the question. We are already investing in more support for the mental health of frontline workers, making sure that resources are available to all. Of course, at the moment there are other challenges to delivering that because of social distancing, but I commit to continuing and strengthening that over the long term. It is something that I have thought important throughout my time as Health Secretary; I pushed this agenda even before coronavirus, and now it is even more important, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady on it.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con) [V]: Across Watford, as a volunteer, I have seen first-hand the many inspirational frontline workers, ranging from pharmacists to hospital volunteers to GP receptionists to cleaners. Can the Secretary of State confirm that everyone—everyone—on the frontline will have the full support of the Government, so that nobody who works on the frontline is missed out as we continue our incredibly important fight against coronavirus?

Matt Hancock: Yes, it is a big team effort and all play their part. People have different roles, of course, and people on the frontline have been incredibly flexible in the roles that they play, but all play a critical part and all deserve our support.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: In order to test, trace and isolate, to keep people safe and save lives, testing must work properly and be widely and locally available, so I was astonished to hear that yesterday people in my constituency were being sent as far afield as Brighton when we have a testing site right here at the Rugby Football Union in Twickenham. Other key workers tested last week at Twickenham have had their tests lost and no one in the NHS can find them, and we are also hearing reports that people sent home testing kits have no return address to send their completed tests to, yet those tests are being counted. Will the Secretary of State please confirm how people are being prioritised for testing at their local sites, how many tests have been lost—both at drive-through sites and among those sent to people's homes—and when he thinks we will be doing enough testing to actually move to test, trace and isolate to keep people safe, as so many other countries have been successfully doing for several weeks now?

Matt Hancock: We now have one of the largest testing capabilities in the world; we are testing more people per day than Germany, and the whole country should be reassured by that fact. Of course there are individual examples of where the logistics go wrong; that is natural in any very large system. I would be very interested if the hon. Lady could send me the details of those specifics, and then we will look into them. But what I would say is that the availability of testing across the board is now huge. It is big enough to start the test, trace and track programme. We are piloting that, as the hon. Lady knows, in the Isle of Wight from today and then we will roll it out across the country.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: In an earlier answer, the Secretary of State kindly went through the definitions of all the different vulnerable groups. Definitions are really important, especially as we start to consider releasing the lockdown. When that point comes, will he be crystal clear about exactly who is entitled to do what and when and ensure that everyone in the public knows that?

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: Can the Secretary of State confirm that directors of public health and environmental health officers will not just be consulted but will be leading the delivery of community tracking and tracing efforts, given that that is what they have been trained to do? Can he reassure us that the Government will not repeat the mistakes they have made with drive-through testing centres and PPE supplies by outsourcing those critical tasks to private companies such as Serco, Sodexo and Deloitte, which, frankly, have proved that they are not up to the job?

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady on the first part of her question, but she is completely wrong on the second part. In the first part, she asked whether local public health officers and environmental health officers will be a critical part of test, track and trace, and the answer is yes, they will be vital. On the second part, she is completely wrong. There is no way that we could have delivered the testing programme without the unbelievable support, help and effort of private partners in the diagnostics industry and in delivery—companies such as Deloitte and Boots, which delivered that amazing expansion of the drive-through centres in such a short period. I pay tribute, hand on heart, to the work of every single person in that programme, whether they work in the private sector or the public sector—whether they work in the NHS, in the Department, for Boots or for Deloitte. Frankly, to try to divide people in that way suggests that she has missed the tone of where the country is right now.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): In order to get London back to work, we need safer public transport. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Mayor of London needs to provide more tube trains, to provide a safer service for Londoners?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do, because the more people are spaced out on public transport in terms of the distance between them, the safer that public transport will be. I hope that the Mayor of London is working extremely hard to have as full a service as possible, so that as few people as possible can be on each individual service.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC) [V]: Widespread testing and contact tracing will be essential to contain future outbreaks, and such a system will need to be operational before we move from full lockdown. In addition to the Isle of Wight trial, will the Secretary of State consider the work being undertaken by Ceredigion County Council, in collaboration with Hywel Dda University Health Board and Aberystwyth University, on a community testing and contact tracing system that could offer local solutions and expertise to complement any UK-wide infrastructure?

Matt Hancock: I am happy to look at any examples that are effective in reducing the spread of the virus. Of course, parts of this are devolved, and parts of it are the UK Government's responsibility. We have made available all the tools that we are developing at a UK level for devolved Governments to pick up. For instance, we have published the underlying source code behind the apps, so that people can have a look at it and suggest improvements or take it and use it in their own way.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: Many of my constituents with cancer understood when their treatment was deferred. They are now keen to resume it but nervous about going to hospital, in case they catch coronavirus. Can my right hon. Friend assure them that their treatments will resume and that it is safe for them to go to hospital?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I want cancer treatments to resume as soon as is safely possible. In some cases, it is clinically not advised to resume treatment because there is a spread of the virus in the community—for instance, treatments that reduce immunity to very low levels. There are other areas—for instance, some surgery—where we are able to restart. This is a very important part of the restart of the NHS. The message I would give to my hon. Friend's constituents is: if you are advised by your doctor to go to hospital, you should go to hospital, because they will have taken into account all the different risks and decided that that is the best advice to give. So if you are asked to go to hospital by your clinician, please do go.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: The Government chief scientific adviser said that if we could keep deaths below 20,000, we would have done well in this epidemic, yet the death toll now stands at a devastating 32,313. It is not about whether we can use international comparisons; this is the Government's own measure, so many are wondering how the Government can claim that their approach so far is a success. Is that not an insult to every family member who has lost a loved one, and does it not undermine public confidence that the Government are learning from their mistakes?

Matt Hancock: We are absolutely learning from everything that has happened, and constantly looking again, trying to make sure from the time we get up in the morning to the time we go to bed at night that we have the best possible response. That includes, for example, working across parties where cross-party work can help, as we have on the test, track and trace pilot on the Isle of Wight. That is the approach that we constantly take. Of course we look at all the information and the

[*Matt Hancock*]

data, but in that spirit the hon. Lady should acknowledge, I think, that the approach is a success: the curve is flattened and is now coming down, and—critically—the NHS was at no point overwhelmed. That was one of our priority goals right at the start, and it has been achieved at every point so far in this crisis. Of course there are always things we can improve, but I think we should also, rightly, study the things that have gone well.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, thanks to the magnificent response of the British people, including those in Stoke-on-Trent, we have prevented our NHS from being overwhelmed at any point during this crisis, so that it has been able to offer world-leading care to every single person who has needed it since the very first case?

Matt Hancock: Yes. This comes off the back of the previous question. Not more than a few weeks ago, many people were saying that we would not be able to get through this crisis without the NHS being overtopped and not having enough capacity to deal with the number of cases. Through a combination of the expansion of the NHS that we have overseen and the public doing their bit by following the social distancing rules, we have managed to avoid that outcome. Instead, at every point in the crisis, the NHS has been there to provide the care that is needed as much as it possibly can, as well as it possibly can, and it has not been overwhelmed. That is something that this country can always look back on.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) [V]: My inbox has been packed for days with questions from over-70-year-olds saying that they simply do not understand what the Government advice is. Is it that none of them should ever, whatever their medical circumstances and however healthy they are, leave the house for 12 weeks? When did the 12 weeks begin and when will the 12 weeks end, or is there going to be another 12 weeks? Further to that, I asked the Secretary of State on 3 February whether face masks worked, and at that time he was very sceptical about them. In the future, will he be advising people that we should all be wearing face masks on public transport, and if so, where are we going to get them?

Matt Hancock: I reiterate the point I made in response to earlier questions. I hope that in his response to all his constituents, the hon. Gentleman will send a link to the NHS website, where the answer to his question was set out extremely clearly right from the start. It is very clear that there are three groups of people. Those who have received a letter from the NHS saying that they must shield for 12 weeks are in that category; those who have not are not. I know that some media reports have stated otherwise, but I implore people to follow the guidance clearly set out on the NHS website, which the hon. Gentleman and any other Member who has questions about that should send to their constituents to inform them. It is a matter of our public duty. It is not a matter of political debate.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con) [V]: What provision has my right hon. Friend made for the visually impaired during covid-19?

Matt Hancock: Getting new Government guidance to the visually impaired is of course a challenge. It is something we have been working hard on. In the first instance, the first port of call should be primary care—somebody's GP or 111—if there are any queries. That is where I would point people in the first instance. It has been a challenge, because we have been making policy at speed, and writing and updating guidance at speed, but I would point those who are visually impaired to 111 and their GP if they have any questions.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The Trace Together app in Singapore has been downloaded by 17% of its population since it was introduced in March. What estimate has the Secretary of State made of the numbers that will be required to download NHS app, and have there been discussions about making it compulsory if not enough people do so?

Matt Hancock: The more people who download the app the better it will be and the more effective it will be in keeping people safe. However, even small numbers downloading it will help us to spot hotspots and so will bring some value. I was really delighted yesterday afternoon to hear from Isle of Wight Radio, which stated that 80% of people on the Isle of Wight in an early survey said that they wanted to download the app. That would be a terrific result. I pay tribute to the work of Isle of Wight Radio and the local press on the Isle of Wight, who have taken to Isle of Wight's important role in piloting this roll-out with enthusiasm. There is no numerical answer to the hon. Gentleman's question. The answer is that as many as possible will make us as safe as possible.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con) [V]: I welcome the launch of the test, track and trace app, but one of the apparent challenges is that those who could benefit from it the most, namely the elderly, may be those who are least likely to be able to access it because they do not have a smart phone. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the probable lower take-up by that honourable cohort?

Matt Hancock: We have looked into this very important question. Of course, test, track and trace is a system. The app is one part of it, but the human contact traces are an important part of the system, as is the advice we give to people to contact their own significant contacts themselves. The whole system has been designed knowing that a proportion of the population does not have a smart phone. There are many older people who do have smart phones. I am sure, for instance, that the shadow Secretary of State is probably sending a message to his parents right now on the smart phone he is using instead of listening to my hon. Friend's question. There is a serious point, which is that of course we have had to take that into account. It is another reason why the Isle of Wight is such a good place to trial it, because there are elderly residents on the Isle of Wight. We will work out and learn a lot from how effective that trial is.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab) [V]: It has become apparent that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are being disproportionately affected by covid-19. People in Erith and Thamesmead have also raised concerns about the disproportionate effects of covid-19 on disabled people, people from low social economic backgrounds, women

and children. Does the Secretary of State have plans to publish a report on the effects of covid-19 on people who fall under one or more protected characteristics?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we have today launched a piece of work by Public Health England to look into the disparities in the impact of covid-19. However, I will just pick the hon. Lady up on a couple of points from her question. The evidence shows quite clearly that the impact of covid-19 is lesser on children and lesser on women than it is on men. There is also growing evidence that obesity has a big impact. We have to look into all those considerations. We will listen to the scientists and the medics, and learn whatever lessons we can.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answers and congratulate him and all the hardworking staff in the NHS and carers on looking after us. Will he support my campaign to have a memorial placed at the National Arboretum at the heart of the country as a fitting way to commemorate the sad loss of essential workers to covid-19?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I would be very happy to discuss that suggestion with my hon. Friend. It is important that, as a nation, we remember and commemorate the sacrifice of those who have lost their lives while serving on the frontline of this war; it is a war in which we are all on the same side, and we should commemorate those who have given their lives in it.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP) [V]: The seven-day average number of new cases in the UK has now levelled out at 4,500, but it is not yet decreasing significantly. Can the Health Secretary tell us what the number of new daily cases must fall to before he believes that test, track and trace can prevent another peak if restrictions are eased?

Matt Hancock: One of the five tests that we have set out before the restrictions are eased is that the number of deaths should be falling consistently. Indeed, the Scottish Government's document includes a similar proposal, and we are working to ensure that the UK is as aligned as possible.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con) [V]: Does the Secretary of State agree with you, Mr Speaker, that changes to lockdown should be announced to Parliament first? He said earlier that transparency is the lodestar of Government policy. If that is correct, will he now release the findings of Exercise Cygnus and prove that that was not just a gesture, but is actually the real policy of the Government?

Matt Hancock: Exercise Cygnus was undertaken under my predecessor, and there are specific rules in Government around decisions over papers that were produced before one's time. I will take away that point.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con) [V]: There is some evidence that under-10s are at much lower risk of getting and transmitting the virus. If true, this would be a huge comfort, both to teachers and working parents. What evidence has the Secretary of State seen to that effect, and what work is being done to further explore this?

Matt Hancock: There is strong evidence that the under-10s are less likely to have symptoms of coronavirus, but unfortunately the evidence on the under-10s' transmission of coronavirus is mixed and there is not a conclusive scientific base on that yet.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: Is the Secretary of State content that the advice and guidance given to pregnant women working on the frontline of health and social care, on both safety and income, are sufficiently clear and consistent?

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the fruits of his tireless work, along with officials and others in the Government, including delivering mobile testing in Wycombe, but could he please tell us a little bit more about what he is doing to restore the full range and scale of elective surgery in the NHS, so that people with non-covid conditions can get their treatment back on track?

Matt Hancock: That is a really important point. It is critical, because the overall impact of coronavirus is not just the direct morbidity—the number of people who sadly die from coronavirus itself; there is also the wider impact, including those whose treatment has been delayed owing to the necessity of ensuring that the NHS was ready to cope with coronavirus, or because, for clinical reasons, it was important to delay the treatment because there is such a virulent virus at large. We are working very hard to restore treatments for non-covid reasons. That work has started. I was able to announce last week, for instance, that fertility treatment has restarted and cancer treatment is restarting, and other elective surgeries will restart as soon as it is safe to do so.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: I am in Orkney, where I have been receiving reports from category 2 key workers who have self-referred for a covid test through the gov.uk website and been directed to testing centres in Thurso, Elgin or even Peterhead, all of which would require a journey by ferry or plane. There is local provision and the option of postal testing, so will we get the website sorted, to allow people to get the information they need, rather than be left thinking that in order to get a test they first need to get a plane or a ferry?

Matt Hancock: I am glad that we sorted the broadband to Orkney, so that we could take the question. It is an important question and I will look into the specifics of it to make sure that our island communities get the appropriate response on the website. The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that we put the testing website together at remarkable pace and so in the first iteration we were not able to address this sort of important nuance for Orkney and other island communities, but I will take that away and look at it. He mentioned the answer in substance—to get the home testing kits working for Orkney—and I am sure that there is a way through.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con) [V]: The Royal Surrey County Hospital in Guildford, under excellent leadership and in partnership with our community, has proved to be resourceful and innovative, ensuring best

[Angela Richardson]

practice on patient care, safety for staff and the ability to continue treatment for patients presenting with non-covid-19 needs—feedback from those patients has been very positive. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to our NHS leaders and once again encourage those who need hospital appointments and urgent care to attend? Finally, will he give assurances that hospitals such as my local one, which are world-leading in cancer treatment, will be given the investment they need to ramp up diagnostics going forward?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I think we have all learned the importance of diagnostics during this crisis, if we did not know it already. I pay tribute to the Royal Surrey County Hospital, its leadership and the staff there, who have done such a magnificent job, including treating friends of mine for coronavirus. If anybody in Surrey gets a message from their doctor saying that they need to go to hospital, they must go. That is important right across the country—in Guildford and beyond.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: We still need to increase significantly the number of people being tested so that we can tackle the crisis. Companies such as Curative are supplying tens of thousands of saliva-only tests to the US military, but have faced road blocks in trying to supply in the UK. What is the Secretary of State going to do differently to improve the procurement of tests, so that companies that want to help can do so?

Matt Hancock: We are working with many, many companies on the expansion of testing, including new technologies. We have to be confident that the technologies are effective and work, because a test that gives a wrong result, and has too high a proportion of wrong results, can be worse than not having a test at all. I am not saying that that is the case in the specific individual example the hon. Gentleman gives—we are working with many companies on how the next generation of tests can be brought to bear—but it is important that we get this right as we ramp up testing. There is clearly a pressure to increase testing. Lyndon Johnson once said, “Politics is about ‘What have you done for me recently?’” It was only last Thursday that we hit the 100,000 target. I do not mind being urged to do yet more, but we have to do it using the right tests, in the right way.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) [V]: What prospect is there of moving to robust, multi-use personal protection equipment that can stand being decontaminated many times?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend, who probably has the most spectacular backdrop to any questioner in this session, is right to raise that issue. It is happening: the right personal protection equipment that can safely be decontaminated and reused is being decontaminated and reused. That is an important part of the solution to the challenge of getting the right PPE to the right people, right across the board. It does not work in all instances and first and foremost it has to be safe, but it is a part of the solution and my right hon. Friend is right to raise it.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: The British Medical Association, the Faculty of Public Health and the Royal College of Physicians have all advised the Government to suspend the fees for migrants accessing the NHS during the coronavirus pandemic, to ensure universal access to healthcare. We know that the charging regulations disproportionately affect black and minority ethnic people; given the impact of covid-19 on the wider BME community, will the Secretary of State now suspend the charging regulations?

Matt Hancock: The regulations are important because it is important that people make a fair contribution. The question has been raised in relation to staff in the NHS, and in many cases in that respect the NHS trusts themselves pay the extra, which is a contribution towards the running of the NHS. That is the approach we are taking.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State is aware of my concerns about the discharge from hospital into care homes of patients with covid symptoms. Can he reassure the House that there will not be such discharges—that covid-positive patients will not be discharged into covid-free care homes because of the risks that they might spread the infection to other residents?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend and I have been in discussions about this important issue. We have strengthened the rules on discharges to ensure that anybody being discharged from hospital into a care home gets tested and is then isolated ahead of the result of that test. If the test is negative, they can of course go into the home in the normal way; if the test is positive, that isolation must continue until they are through the virus and safe to go into the care home without taking coronavirus into the care home. I am glad to see in the latest numbers that the number of those who are dying from coronavirus in care homes is just starting to fall, but there is an awful lot more that we still need to do.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State said earlier that the tracing app would have privacy by design. It will be critical that there is a high degree of public confidence in the app if it is to work as he intends as part of efforts to trace the virus. What data protection will be put into place to ensure that the public are confident that this tool will be secure and that data cannot be misused?

Matt Hancock: The public can have confidence, not least because the data will be held on people’s own phone until they need to contact the NHS when, naturally, they will of course need to tell the NHS their identity in order to be tested. In that sense, privacy is there by design.

The wider point is that the app and the test, track and trace system will help to keep people safe. As I said yesterday when I launched the pilot in the Isle of Wight, people should download the app to protect the NHS and save lives. It is the civic duty of people on the Isle of Wight to do so, and it will be the civic duty of people throughout the country to do so. It has been designed with privacy at its heart. We are putting the source code on the internet so that people can see exactly what the app does. That reassurance, along with the motivation

that they are helping to protect themselves and their community, will, I hope, lead to an awful lot of people downloading the app. I certainly will.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Mr Speaker, further to your opening remarks at the beginning of this urgent question about new policy being announced by Government in the House and not to the media first, the Secretary of State side-stepped the question when it was put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), so I will try again. Does my right hon. Friend agree with Mr Speaker that statements of new Government policy should be made in this House first, and will he advise the Government to put off making the statement on Sunday until Monday and make a statement in the House?

Matt Hancock: The exact scheduling of any announcement is, of course, a matter that has to be considered across Government, but I will take away my hon. Friend's concerns and ensure that they are looked into.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: In better times, tens of thousands of people cross the land border in Ireland every day and, more generally, the UK and Ireland are committed to the common travel area. With regard to contact tracing apps, does the Secretary of State recognise the difficulties that will arise if the UK, including Northern Ireland, and Ireland use different systems, and will he undertake to work with the Irish Government to address any such operational issues?

Matt Hancock: We have considered all the different potential apps being used by different countries around the world. I am confident that any such concerns about international travel can easily be addressed, not least by the potential of someone having two different apps on their phone if they need to travel internationally.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend has proved himself to be a brilliant multi-tasker, so will he kindly turn some of his attention to a firm in my constituency that has access to a network of manufacturers in southern China that believes it can supply a million items of gowns, visors, masks and other PPE equipment per week if only someone from Government would get in touch? I am very happy to text him the details directly, but I have been trying for three weeks and still Government have not got in touch with this firm.

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course; if I get the details, I am very happy to do that. I would also be very happy to know where my right hon. Friend had his hair cut, because it is extraordinary. No one else has such smart hair. Everyone is looking increasingly bushy.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Dozens of dentists have got in touch with me, saying that the measures put in place are not protecting them and their practices. They take on a combination of private and NHS patients. Many are fearing bankruptcy and, ultimately, closure. This will leave NHS dentistry in an existential crisis. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that NHS dentistry survives the current crisis?

Matt Hancock: This is an incredibly important question. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is responsible for dentistry, is working very hard with the British Dental Association and others to make sure that dentists get the support that they need.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) [V]: Further to that question on dentistry, I have spoken to local dentists in my area and a number feel that they have the correct PPE and working conditions to be able to provide the sort of emergency dental care that many of their patients need. Can my right hon. Friend outline how we can move forward with dental practices in the same way as he has worked so hard in moving forward with the work that hospitals are able to do now, for which I would like to reiterate my thanks?

Matt Hancock: This is a really important point. I will write to my right hon. Friend with the proposed plans for reopening dentistry. Obviously, that has to be done in a safe way, and PPE is one important consideration. Dentistry by its nature requires close contact, and it can be an aerosol-generating procedure in certain circumstances, which makes it a higher risk to the dental practitioner—the dentist or nurse—and, in turn, to future patients, so we have to get this right. Emergency dentistry is available in dentistry hubs, which have been set up during the crisis. It is important to get this right, but it is also important to get dentistry back on its feet.

Mr Speaker: We now go across to Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and well done getting so far through the call list.

Progress notwithstanding, we are very much not out of the woods yet. Worryingly, the head of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has confirmed that the UK is among five European countries not making substantial progress on cutting the overall rate of infections. Is the Secretary of State concerned by that analysis? Can he reassure the House that we will take account of the European centre's data in any calculation about resuming normal activities and easing lockdown?

Matt Hancock: I have not seen the particular report that the hon. Gentleman refers to, but we take into account all data and considerations in making the decisions that we do.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: I have a local care home that, thankfully, is free from covid-19 at the moment. The manager there is trying to get all his staff tested, just to check that they are free from covid-19 too. Not all those staff have a car, so they are not able to travel the miles to the local mobile testing facility. Can the Secretary of State tell me the best way for that manager to get his staff tested so that they can continue to look after all their vulnerable residents in a safe way?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are rolling out testing to all care home residents and staff, symptomatic or asymptomatic, for elderly care homes. I announced that at the start of this urgent question. It is an important expansion of our testing now that we have built up the

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100,000 tests a day capability. We will do that in part through mobile testing units, which are delivered by the armed forces; the testing unit goes to the care home, and staff and residents alike can be tested at the care home rather than having to travel. Clearly, whether people have a car of their own or not, when we test a whole care home, taking the testing to the care home rather than having to take everybody from the care home to a drive-through centre is a much better way of doing it.

I am very grateful to the armed forces for the part they have played in making this capability available. Our armed forces have done an amazing job in this whole crisis. Right across the board, the armed forces have stepped up where we have needed them. They have played a critical part in testing capability; we would not have got to 100,000 tests a day without them. The example that my hon. Friend rightly raises is just one of the ways our armed forces are playing their part and doing their duty in this crisis.

Mr Speaker: We will now try to reconnect Yvette Cooper.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. The Health Secretary told me that he would make public the evidence behind the Government's repeatedly confirmed decision, in contrast with other countries, not to ask people arriving at our ports and airports to self-isolate. However, that evidence was not included in the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies papers published today, even though the papers say we were affected by many cases arriving or coming back from Italy and Spain. Surely, we need to see the evidence and scrutinise it in order to get border policy right. Why has it been withheld?

Matt Hancock: I will look into the question that the right hon. Lady raises.

1.33 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: Order. I suspend the House for 30 minutes, until 2.3 pm.

1.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.3 pm

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

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

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (5 MAY)

Motion made,

That—

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

Business	Timings	Remote division designation
Local Government: motion to approve the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Fire and Rescue Functions) (Amendment) Order 2020	Up to 90 minutes	None
Social Security: motion to approve the Employment Allowance (Increase of Maximum Amount) Regulations 2020	Up to 90 minutes	None

(2) At the conclusion of each debate, the Speaker shall put the Question on each of the motions on the Order Paper relating to the business listed in the table for that debate.—(*James Morris.*)

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

Local Government

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The Minister is asked to speak for no more than 20 minutes.

2.3 pm

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire) [V]: I beg to move,

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Fire and Rescue Functions) (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 9 March, be approved.

The purpose of this order is to improve the delivery of public services in Greater Manchester by driving greater collaboration and bolstering the accountability of how those functions are exercised. The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 allows, in certain areas of the UK, the devolution of a number of municipal functions. In 2017, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Fire and Rescue Functions) Order conferred responsibility for the management of the Greater Manchester fire and rescue authority on the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. Fire and rescue services therefore came under the authority of the directly elected Greater Manchester Mayor, and arrangements were introduced to oversee the operational discharge of functions, with the scrutiny of fire and rescue functions being added to the remit of the corporate issues and reform overview and scrutiny committee.

In 2017, police and crime commissioner functions were transferred to the Mayor, and the role of deputy Mayor for policing and crime was established. The exercise of police and crime commissioner functions is scrutinised by the police and crime panel. Devolution of the exercise of fire functions to the Mayor, in parallel with the devolution of the police and crime commissioner functions, has provided for greater direct accountability of both functions under one individual, and has allowed opportunities for strategic and joined-up thinking in the blue light sector in Greater Manchester.

In July 2018, the Mayor of Greater Manchester wrote to the Home Secretary to request further changes to the governance arrangements for fire and rescue functions within the GMCA. He sought authority to delegate the exercise of the majority of those functions to the deputy Mayor for policing and crime, and to amend the scrutiny functions of the existing police and crime panel to include scrutiny of fire and rescue functions. The then Home Secretary approved the Mayor's request in September 2018.

The order before the House today gives effect to the Mayor's request by amending the 2017 order. It brings the exercise of police and fire functions closer together by allowing for the exercise of all delegable fire and rescue functions by the deputy Mayor for crime and policing. Some non-delegable functions—namely, those listed under article 6 of the 2017 order—remain the sole responsibility of the Mayor. These include the hiring and firing of the chief fire officer, signing off the local risk plan, and approving the annual declaration of compliance with the fire and rescue national framework.

To ensure that there are appropriate scrutiny arrangements of the exercise of delegated functions, the order also extends the remit of the Greater Manchester police and crime panel to include scrutiny of the exercise of fire and rescue functions, whether they are exercised by the Mayor or by the deputy Mayor for policing and crime. To reflect its wider role, the panel will become known as the police, fire and crime panel. The order will

provide a clearer line of sight for the exercise of fire and rescue functions, with delegable functions being exercised by the deputy Mayor for policing and crime rather than by a committee. This will make it clearer to the public who is responsible for which decisions and bring further clarity to the governance process. It will also ensure that police and fire matters are scrutinised in the round by extending the role of the police and crime panel.

This brings similar scrutiny arrangements to fire as already exist for policing. Crucially, by bringing together oversight of policing and fire under the Deputy Mayor for policing and crime, it will also help to maximise the opportunities for innovative collaboration, foster the sharing of best practice, and ensure that strategic risks are reviewed across both services. The Kerslake report on the tragic Manchester Arena attack emphasised the need for greater collaboration between fire services and other public bodies. This order takes important steps to do just that.

Finally, I want to comment on the fantastic collaboration efforts taking place in Greater Manchester as part of the response to the covid-19 pandemic. I thank the incredible fire and policing personnel for everything they are doing in Greater Manchester and beyond. They have stepped up to volunteer to assist and protect their communities. It is right that we recognise the critical role they are playing in supporting the country's response to covid-19, and I pay tribute to them for the difference they are making at this time of need. They are a credit to themselves and to the services they work within.

2.10 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): We are living through extraordinary times. Covid-19 has dealt a great blow to our country—its health, its economy and its way of life—and we are mourning the loved ones we have lost. But in the midst of this crisis, we have seen countless acts of extraordinary resilience and bravery.

As usual, as the Minister just said, the fire service has been front and centre in this battle, answering our calls for help, driving ambulances, delivering personal protective equipment, helping to distribute food and even, I hear, delivering babies. The fire service is the most trusted of all our emergency services because it is always there when we need it, so it would not be right to begin this debate without paying tribute to the work of our firefighters across the UK. Yesterday was Firefighters Memorial Day. The minute's silence at midday was a moment to reflect on the more than 2,300 UK firefighters who have lost their lives in the line of duty. Each one of those tragic lives lost paints a stark picture of the realities faced by firefighters. They risk their lives every day to ensure the safety of each and every one of us.

We are here to debate the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Fire and Rescue Functions) (Amendment) Order 2020. The Labour party supports the order. It is nearly two years since the Greater Manchester Combined Authority asked to bring responsibility of fire and rescue services into the hands of the deputy mayor for policing and crime, with no particular reason for the delay, as far as I can see, and there is precedent elsewhere in England for this model.

This relatively straightforward order represents the gentle evolution of devolution. As Donald Dewar said at the opening of the Scottish Parliament, devolution is

[Sarah Jones]

not an end, but a “means to greater ends.” We should be constantly open to change, to better serve our local populations.

The order allows the Mayor to make arrangements for fire and rescue functions to be exercised by the deputy mayor for policing and crime, and amends the remit of the Greater Manchester police and crime panel to include scrutiny of the exercise of those fire and rescue functions in addition to their existing remit of police and crime commissioner functions. That allows the Greater Manchester police and crime panel to scrutinise the delivery of all the main functions of the deputy mayor for policing, fire and crime.

The order will build on the success of devolution that we have already seen in Greater Manchester. Under Andy Burnham, we have seen real action to tackle rough sleeping, real support for young people and the biggest investment in cycling and walking outside London. Devolution enables good local, joined-up and effective policy making.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the efforts of the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, his deputy mayor and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority for their recent work on fire and rescue services. Following the tragic fire at Grenfell, where 72 people lost their lives, they set up the Greater Manchester high-rise taskforce, chaired by Salford City Mayor Paul Dennett, to provide fire safety reassurance. They carried out proactive inspections of all high-rise residential premises to ensure that all buildings comply with fire safety regulations.

Greater Manchester has 78 high-rise buildings that have had to adapt interim safety measures because of serious fire safety deficiencies and slow Government action to support remediation. In late February, I watched Andy Burnham, City Mayor Dennett and other civic leaders and MPs from across the country join residents caught up in the cladding crisis at a rally on Parliament Square, calling for urgent action from the Government in the Budget. The Government listened, and the Chancellor announced the £1 billion building safety fund for the removal of dangerous cladding of all forms from high-rise buildings.

With thousands of leaseholders across the country still living in buildings wrapped in unsafe cladding, the focus must now be on completing remediation works as quickly as possible. We only need to briefly read the accounts of the Manchester Cladators to know the dire situations they face on a daily basis.

From blocks like Imperial Point in Salford Quays to Albion Works in central Manchester, the stories are painfully similar: lives put on hold as residents are trapped in unsafe buildings, unable to sell their properties, and living in constant emotional and financial distress. I do not want to rehearse all the arguments from last week’s Fire Safety Bill, but we know that there is much more to be done by the Government and that we must move faster. I press the Minister again to provide an update on the progress of the review and the costs that residents are incurring while paying for waking watches. Is this review looking into the whole costs of interim fire safety measures?

As the Fire Brigades Union said yesterday, each time a firefighter dies at work, we need to understand what led to their death and what could have been done to

prevent it. Yesterday we remembered the 2,300 firefighters who have died in service, but we must never accept their loss as inevitable. It is our duty to learn from every firefighter death and to fight for the improvements to operational practices that could save lives into the future. But that job has been immeasurably harder over the last decade, as we have seen brutal funding cuts.

After a decade of austerity, we have 11,000 fewer firefighters, so when fires sadly do occur, fire engines may answer the call without enough firefighters to tackle the blaze. That is not only dangerous for the public, but potentially deadly for firefighters too. We could not debate this order without considering the heavy hand of 10 years of cuts to our fire services in Greater Manchester and across the country. The landscape of complexity post Grenfell, with the enormous fire risk of so many buildings across the country, compounds an already difficult situation. Given the extent of the crisis in recent years and the number of individuals who live in unsafe buildings, we need a strong fire service to be ready to deal with what can perhaps be described as a ticking time bomb for as long as the cladding remains in place. Central Government funding for fire and rescue services in Greater Manchester has been decimated over the past decade; it has fallen by almost a third from £75.2 million in 2010 to £52.9 million now. Across the UK, between 2010 and 2016, the Government cut central funding to fire and rescue services by 28% in real terms, followed by a further cut of 15% by 2020. These cuts have led to a cut of 20% in the number of firefighters.

When a Grenfell Tower resident first called 999 just before 1 am on 14 June 2017, it was five minutes before a fire engine was at the scene and 13 minutes before the first firefighters entered the building. Equally, it was only a matter of minutes after the first call was made that fire services were on the scene of the fire at the student accommodation in Bolton in November last year. Clearly, when operating on such fine margins as the hazard of fire presents, fire services rely on rapid turnaround to be effective. It is shocking, then, to see that fire response times across Greater Manchester since 2010 have risen from seven minutes and 14 seconds to seven minutes and 20 seconds, with a rise of over 40 seconds across England. It may seem like only a matter of seconds, but with the fine margins that exist in fire and rescue situations, a rise in fire response times is unacceptable.

But this is no damning indictment of the fire service across central Manchester or anywhere else. No—it is far more a wrong that stems from a decade of successive Conservative Governments’ neglect of fire and rescue services. While funding has been cut, the number of firefighters across Greater Manchester has fallen by 29% since 2010—down from 1,923, to 1,368 in 2019. The number of operational appliances has fallen by 14% over the same period. The Mayor and deputy Mayor in Greater Manchester, and their teams, are doing their best in these circumstances—namely, with their pledge to bring in 108 new firefighters—but, despite their best efforts, there remains a gaping hole left by increasingly scarce central Government funds.

On Friday, we will celebrate VE day, marking the end of world war two. In the first 22 nights of air raids during the blitz, firefighters fought nearly 10,000 fires. According to Winston Churchill, the fire service “were a grand lot and their work must never be forgotten.” Well, the Opposition—and I am sure the Government—agree. With such extensive cuts across the past decade in

provisions for fire and rescue services, and with a far more precarious environment facing those services in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy, will the Minister tell us when the Government are going to begin to make fire and rescue services in Greater Manchester and across the rest of the country a priority? With firefighters risking their lives to save our lives, the bare minimum they can expect is a properly funded service. After a decade of cuts and a covid crisis where our firefighters have gone above and beyond, we must now see real change.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There will now be a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions. I hope that those who are contributing have a timing device available to them.

2.20 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I am very pleased to follow our excellent shadow Minister, and to be able to contribute briefly to today's debate on this statutory instrument. First, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I rent my constituency premises from the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, and I am proud to do so. As we have heard, yesterday was International Firefighters' Memorial Day, so I would like to begin by adding my tribute to the bravery of all our firefighters, past and present. As the shadow Minister said, firefighters have played a vital part in keeping people safe during the coronavirus crisis, but they also put their lives on the line all year round, and we are all grateful to them.

Although this is a piece of legislation with limited scope, it is a motion that will prove important for the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service and, perhaps more importantly, for the public it works so hard to protect. Good strategic oversight and governance of our emergency services is a key way of ensuring the safety of our communities and the effectiveness of our fire and rescue service in Manchester. It is essential that we have the best possible framework in place, along with proper funding, to ensure that the fire and rescue service is run as effectively as possible. We need the best possible means to hold to account those who manage the service, which is why I am supporting this legislation today.

In early 2018, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority carried out a review of its governance arrangements in the light of the first 12 months of the Mayor's term of office. As part of that, it undertook a review of the fire and rescue function, and it was important that that review included consideration of the issues identified in the Kerslake report, particularly in relation to the co-ordination and communication between the emergency services following the Manchester Arena bombing. It is important that we learn the lessons of that tragic incident.

That report made recommendations for the improvement of co-operation between the fire service and other emergency services. The GMCA agreed that it would be clearer and more transparent, and that it would provide more accountable leadership for the fire functions, if the Mayor were able to delegate those functions to the deputy Mayor for policing and crime, and for the scrutiny functions to sit with the police and crime panel, which would then become the police, fire and crime panel. This statutory instrument does those two things, and I am pleased to support it on that basis.

This is an expansion of the scrutiny panel's duties that I know the police and crime panel has been keen to achieve, not for its own sake but because it is keen to ensure real integration in how the services are run, and effective scrutiny of that integrated working. This will mean that there are clear lines of accountability to our excellent deputy Mayor. Allowing the Mayor to delegate fire and rescue functions to the deputy Mayor will enable her to accelerate the pace of change and to ensure that collaboration is implemented more effectively and that strategic risks are reviewed across both services. The changes will also provide a single point of contact for the public and ensure quicker decision making at the appropriate level, while ensuring delivery of the duty to collaborate. They will allow informed and rounded arrangements for prevention and a more co-ordinated response to manage the terror threat. As a result, I am confident that we can look forward to increased collaboration between the fire service and other emergency services, enabling them to act more efficiently and effectively in the services that they provide to the people of Greater Manchester. The issue is particularly important in the current context. The need for properly integrated services, maximising the efficiency of working between our blue light services, comes at a time when both the police and the fire and rescue authority in Greater Manchester are under huge pressure.

Ten years of austerity has hit the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service hard. Since 2010, it has seen more than £20 million per year removed from its budget. As we have heard, over that period the Government grant to the fire and rescue service has reduced from approximately £75 million to about £53 million—a decrease of almost 30%. On the ground, that means that the services have had to lose 16 fire engines since 2010, dropping from 66 to 50, a 24% reduction. According to figures from the FBU, it means that Greater Manchester lost 624 firefighters between 2010 and 2019.

All that has happened at a time when Greater Manchester's population is increasing; there was an increase of over 150,000 during the same period. At the same time, the built environment is becoming more complex and the fire service is facing additional pressures. Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, Greater Manchester formed the high-rise taskforce to try to prevent anything like that from happening in our region. As we have heard, it has been carrying out proactive inspections of all the high-rise blocks to ensure that fire safety regulations are being complied with and that people feel safe in their homes. But Greater Manchester still has 78 buildings that have adopted interim measures because of significant fire safety deficiencies. Making all those buildings safe is now an urgent task.

That is all happening now, and it is hard enough without coronavirus. But the impact of the current coronavirus crisis on local authority budgets will inevitably take its toll. We know that the 10 Greater Manchester authorities are forecasting £424 million of lost income as well as £169 million in extra costs as a result of coronavirus. Although the £170 million of funding announced by the Government is, of course, welcome, there are no Government commitments yet to fully reimburse the authorities for that lost income. Without that money, we may well have to see further cuts to our blue light services. There will inevitably be a significant negative impact on council tax collection, which poses a

[Jeff Smith]

risk to the police and fire budgets in future years, with collection fund deficits and implications around calculating the tax base.

In the short term, the Government really need to commit to fully reimbursing local authorities for their losses due to coronavirus. Local authorities are already struggling after years of being the hardest hit part of the public sector, and they simply cannot afford to be hit again. Longer term, when we are on the other side of the coronavirus crisis, I hope we will see the Government make an honest assessment of the levels of funding for Greater Manchester fire and rescue service and the police, and increased central funding to keep our people safe.

In this context, of course, it will take more than efficient governance to enable the fire and rescue service to continue keeping people safe—it will take proper investment in our blue light services as well. But effective and efficient governance is important, and enabling the high-level strategic overview and accountability to be integrated will help deliver efficiency and accountability to our service. On that basis, I welcome the legislation today as crucial to help improve our work and the work of the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service, and ultimately keep our communities in Greater Manchester safe.

2.27 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): First, I pay tribute to all the blue light services that serve us so well, year in, year out—particularly during this difficult time of the covid-19 crisis. I also pay tribute to Greater Manchester fire services, particularly those who went to the fire at the University of Bolton last year, and did such a good job in saving lives and protecting property.

I welcome the decision to bring forward this positive change, which brings the governance and scrutiny of the fire services in line with those of policing. That is to be welcomed. The Minister referenced the importance of a clear line of sight, and therefore scrutiny and accountability, of leadership when it comes to delivering on these services. Currently, that is also the responsibility of the Mayor; obviously, the deputy Mayor is taking that responsibility for policing at the moment, and she will have the additional responsibility for fire services as well.

We in Greater Manchester are in a difficult position. London has the Greater London Authority—a body of people who can publicly scrutinise and challenge the Mayor of London. It can publicly hold him to account over his decisions, good or bad.

In Greater Manchester, however, we do not have that. The responsibility to hold the Mayor and the combined authority to account sits between Westminster politicians, councillors and borough leaders. At the moment, that is not an effective system. I value the move we are debating today, but a question needs to be raised about the overall transparency and scrutiny of the Mayor of Greater Manchester. I am not suggesting that we ought to have a Greater London Authority-type Assembly, but we do need an effective mechanism to challenge the Mayor, and the decisions that he and his team make. To put that in a particular context, there have been major failings in the iOPS computer system, which is used by frontline police officers day in, day out. Those failings have created major problems for frontline police, putting them and people across Greater Manchester in danger,

but there has been no mechanism for the Mayor and his Deputy to be held directly to account in public. This is a good change, but further changes are required.

2.31 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to contribute to this important debate, not least because I have been a firm supporter of devolution in Greater Manchester, and indeed across England, for a considerable time.

First, I want to welcome the Minister of State to his place back in the Government. He has been in the Home Office since 13 February, but this is my first opportunity to welcome him back to the Government Front Bench. Of course, we used to spar across the Dispatch Box when he was the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. I know that, like me, he believes firmly in devolution, which is why I think there is a degree of consensus about the need for this important measure for Greater Manchester today. I also want to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) to her new role as the shadow Home Office Minister. I look forward to working alongside her from the Back Benches.

A day after International Firefighters Day, I want to pay tribute to all those dedicated firefighters, and other Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service staff, who work so hard week in, week out to keep people across Greater Manchester, the 10 boroughs that make up our county, safe. Along with so many other public services, they are doing an amazing job of keeping residents safe during the current coronavirus outbreak. They deserve wider acknowledgement for their tremendous work.

In turning to the substance of the statutory instrument before us today, it is important to keep in mind that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said, the origins of the measures lie in the Manchester Arena terrorist attack of 2017, one of the darkest days for Greater Manchester that I can remember in my 45 years of living here. As we know, the Kerslake report into the attack, which Mayor Andy Burnham commissioned, highlighted the importance of the fire and rescue service working more closely with other emergency services, in particular Greater Manchester police. I have always believed that one of the values of devolution is to prevent the disjointed system that has developed over a number of years and allow the more rounded, joined up delivery of public services.

I believe that the changes in the statutory instrument will help with that. They will give the deputy Mayor for policing and crime, Baroness Hughes of Stretford, a distinguished former Member of this House, the powers to ensure that that collaboration is at the heart of the relationship between our police and fire services. The changes—I disagree with the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green)—will improve the transparency and accountability of the management of both fire and police services in Greater Manchester by transforming the police and crime panel into the police, fire and crime panel. They will also provide an invaluable and important scrutiny function, which will improve the governance in our area.

It is right that the management of our fire and rescue service receives the same level of scrutiny as that of our police, but the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service is used to working in challenging circumstances, and not just when fighting fires. I firmly believe in

devolution, but it should never be used by Ministers to shield themselves from decisions taken in this House. As we have heard, since the Minister's party entered government we have seen funding cuts to the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service of more than £20 million a year, and these cuts have real consequences. Unfortunately, in Greater Manchester they have meant reduced services and lost jobs. As we have heard, Greater Manchester was served by 66 fire engines, but today the figure is just 50, which represents a reduction of almost a quarter of the fleet.

The challenges facing our fire services have not diminished in the past decade. On the contrary, Greater Manchester's fire service deals with all sorts of emergencies and crises, not the least of which has been the largest English wildfire in living memory, on the moors above Stalybridge, in the neighbouring constituency to mine, last year, and the huge blaze at The Cube student accommodation in Bolton, which the hon. Member for Bolton West mentioned. I do not believe that anybody taking part in this debate or listening at home will be happy that our fire service has been cut so severely, but services cannot continue to be provided at the same level when the Government reduce its budgets in the way they have.

Our councils, along with our emergency services, have really stepped up to help deal with the challenge of covid-19—they are on the frontline. So I was concerned to see the Communities Secretary appear to backtrack on compensating councils for all the additional expense of dealing with the crisis. That has to be undone; the promise to spend “whatever it takes”, with Government covering the costs, should be honoured.

In conclusion, I am very proud of our fire and rescue service in Greater Manchester, which does a fantastic job in incredibly difficult circumstances. In this period of Conservative Government, it has dealt with some of the more challenging emergencies, and it has risen to the challenge every single time, despite its funding being reduced. I say to the Minister that we cannot, and should not, try to keep our communities safe on the cheap. This statutory instrument is a good step in the right direction to improving accountability, transparency and, importantly, collaboration with other emergency services. Now let us give our firefighters the support they need—financial support, from Government.

2.38 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: As it was the fourth annual Firefighters Memorial Day yesterday, I wish to pay tribute to the life-saving work of all those who are part of our fire service and put their lives on the line for all of us on a daily basis. I also wish to thank Mayor Andy Burnham and the deputy mayor for the important work they have done on fire safety. It is now almost three years since the tragic Grenfell Tower fire, where 72 people lost their lives due to a combination of dangerous cladding and inadequate fire safety strategy. Despite the ongoing inquiry and the steps many councils have taken to improve fire safety, Greater Manchester continues to have 78 high-rise buildings that have had to adopt interim safety measures because of serious fire safety deficiencies and the Government's failure to act quickly enough, more than 1,000 days since the Grenfell tragedy. With people rightly concerned about the situation, many have taken matters into their own hands, by organising to demand immediate action by the Government.

For example, the Manchester Cladiators are a group of residents who formed last year to represent those in Greater Manchester who have been impacted by the cladding scandal, including by having the flammable aluminium composite material cladding that was used on Grenfell Tower. They have been campaigning tirelessly to make their voice heard amid continuing Government delays and indecision, and I take this opportunity to applaud them for the work they have done to keep this issue at the forefront of everyone's minds.

As for the Government, there is a reason they have been slow to act. Quite simply, it comes down to a decade of austerity. They have ravaged central funding to fire and rescue services across the UK. For example, between 2010 and 2016 alone, the Conservative Government slashed funding by 28% in real terms, and that was compounded by a further cut of 15% by 2020. That has had a crippling effect, resulting in 11,000 fewer fire service personnel, reducing the fire service's capacity by a staggering 20% and putting people's lives in further jeopardy. In Greater Manchester alone, in the past five years critical funding has fallen by more than 15%. In cash terms, that amounts to a cut of about £10 million that our service has had to absorb. Since 2010, there has been a one-third reduction.

It is not just reducing bureaucracy and red tape that is cutting the firefighters who battle blazes and save lives on a daily basis. In Greater Manchester, there are now 29% fewer firefighters, combined with a 14% reduction in life-saving fire equipment. The picture is truly bleak. Is it any wonder, therefore, that in 2018 the UK faced the highest number of fire-related fatalities in almost a decade, which directly correlated with the increasing cuts that the fire service has faced? Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham has attempted to mitigate that by committing to the recruitment of 108 firefighters, but even that only goes part of the way to redressing the balance and does not bring the levels up to what they were in 2010. In addition, central Government cuts have left Greater Manchester Combined Authority facing a situation where there is no escaping the fact that response times will be longer, putting more lives at risk.

At a time like this, we need to make sure that the past decade of austerity is reversed. It is completely unacceptable that in 2020, residents continue to live in housing that cannot protect them, while their fire services continue to face cuts that put them further at risk. The situation needs to be urgently addressed. As we have seen with the coronavirus crisis, underfunding key services leaves them vulnerable and ill equipped to handle further challenges. I call on the Government to do all they can immediately to reverse the year-on-year cuts, to provide adequate funding so that our fire service is fit for purpose and to ensure that all housing, including high-rise towers, is safe to live in.

2.42 pm

James Brokenshire [V]: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will respond to the debate. I appreciate the comments and contributions of Members from all parts of the House on the order and the broad support it has secured through all the contributions we have heard. It is right that so many people underlined the huge contribution, the service and the sacrifice that firefighters provide in Greater Manchester and across the country day in, day out, especially in the context of international Firefighters Memorial Day.

[James Brokenshire]

It is also worth again underlining the contribution that firefighters have made in the covid response. In Greater Manchester, more than 500 serving and retired fire service personnel are volunteering to assist the wider covid-19 response. That ranges from supporting wider frontline staff with the provision of PPE through to patient transfers and support for some of the most vulnerable. I take this opportunity to again thank Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service staff for the incredible work they are doing across the area and the difference that that is making.

A number of the contributions focused on the issue of funding, and I should highlight that overall fire and rescue authorities will receive around £2.3 billion in 2020-21. Fire and rescue services received an additional £20 million in the Budget, which will enable them to increase fire inspection and enforcement capability and to build capacity to respond precisely to the Grenfell Tower inquiry's findings. In 2020-21 Greater Manchester Combined Authority has a core spending power of £98.7 million, an increase of £2.9 million, or 3.1%, on 2019-20. Greater Manchester fire and rescue authority also held £42 million in total useable reserves when it transferred to the governance of the mayoral combined authority in 2017.

I also want to respond to the challenges and issues that have been highlighted on some of the real pressures arising from the current coronavirus pandemic. The Government have provided over £3.2 billion to local authorities to support their response to the pandemic; £1.6 billion was paid at the end of March, with a further £1.6 billion to be provided shortly, of which fire and rescue services will receive a 3% share.

Stand-alone fire and rescue authorities, including Greater Manchester fire, received £6.5 million of the £1.6 billion provided in March and will receive a further £28.5 million share of the additional £1.6 billion announced this month. County councils or unitary authorities with fire responsibilities have also received a share of the fire element of the £1.6 billion, but they will receive this as part of the wider allocation, reflecting the totality of their responsibilities. In addition, the Home Office has secured £6 million for a fire covid-19 contingency fund to support fire and rescue authorities that incur significant costs as a result of taking on additional duties during the coronavirus outbreak. We are working through the detail of how this will operate and are consulting the sector on it.

I turn now to points made in the contributions to the debate, first by the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who I wish well in his new role on the Back Benches. I know that he will be a firm champion for his constituents, and although we did not always agree in our often robust exchanges, I wish him well. They highlighted the Lord Kerslake review, and this order is important in taking that forward. Lord Kerslake's report into the tragic Manchester Arena attack emphasised the need for greater collaboration between the fire service and other public bodies. The review demonstrated the benefits of investing in collaborative partnership and emergency planning, and by bringing together the oversight of both fire and police services, this order will help to maximise the opportunities for innovative collaboration between policing and fire, and ensure that best practice is shared.

The hon. Members for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) highlighted the issue of combustible cladding, and after London, Manchester has the most buildings affected by unsafe cladding. We do understand the concerns of many leaseholders and building owners over the costs of remediation of this cladding. As we have heard, Greater Manchester has taken a proactive approach. It has established a high-rise taskforce to co-ordinate work across the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service and all boroughs in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. In practice the taskforce is led by the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service.

I want to highlight that nationally, we have made available in the Budget £1 billion to fund the removal of unsafe non-aluminium composite material cladding in 2020-21. This is in addition to the £600 million already made available to ensure the remediation of unsafe ACM cladding, but this Government funding does not absolve building owners of responsibility to ensure their buildings are safe. As I highlighted in the debate on the Fire Safety Bill last week, we want to underline the fact that remediation work can and should continue where it is safe to do, despite the current restrictions and challenges that we face. Building owners should consider all routes to meet costs, protecting leaseholders where they can, for example through warranties and recovering costs from contractors for incorrect or poor work. Colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have been driving forward this work and will continue to do so.

In the context of the governance issues and some of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), today's order will provide a clearer line of sight for the exercise of fire and rescue functions. It will make it clear to the public who was responsible for which decisions and help them to understand the Government's process. Importantly, it will also help to ensure that collaboration is implemented more efficiently and effectively by bringing those functions together, but that does not dilute the accountability of the Mayor, who remains subject to the scrutiny of the police and crime panel and is ultimately responsible for the functions. The panel has the power to scrutinise the Mayor. For instance, it may require the Mayor to attend a meeting, at reasonable notice, to answer any questions that appear to the panel to be necessary for it to be able to carry out its duties. Ultimately, too, it is the Mayor who remains accountable at the ballot box for both the actions that he has taken and the actions of the deputy Mayor for policing and crime.

Today's order confirms the request of the democratically elected Mayor of Greater Manchester as part of the devolution of powers and serves to clarify and improve governance arrangements for fire and rescue services in that great city. I firmly believe that the order serves the interests of the people of Greater Manchester. I welcome the support for the order, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Fire and Rescue Functions) (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 9 March, be approved.

2.51 pm

Sitting suspended (Order, this day.)

Social Security

4 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Minister Jesse Norman to move the motion. He is asked to speak for no more than 20 minutes.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I beg to move,

That the Employment Allowance (Increase of Maximum Amount) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 273), dated 11 March 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 10 March, be approved.

This draft legislation allows the Government to increase the employment allowance by one third, or £1,000, giving more than 1 million small and medium-sized businesses up to £4,000 off their employer national insurance contributions bills. Employers pay secondary class 1 national insurance contributions on their employees' earnings above the secondary threshold, which is set at £8,788 this year. Those contributions are charged at 13.8% and constitute the largest business tax by revenue in the UK.

The employment allowance was introduced in 2014 to help businesses with the costs of employment and to encourage them to grow and to hire more staff. It is claimed by more than 1 million employers in order to reduce their employer NICs bill by up to £4,000 per year. The Government recently restricted the employment allowance to smaller businesses with a national insurance contributions liability under £100,000, thereby ensuring that this valuable support is targeted at those who need it most.

At Budget, the Chancellor announced that we would deliver our commitment to increase the employment allowance for smaller businesses from £3,000 to £4,000 from April 2020. Businesses have been able to access that increased support from the start of the tax year. The draft regulations, if passed, will legislate for that increase to the employment allowance. More than half a million eligible businesses will benefit from the increase by up to £1,000. The Treasury expects the average gain from this measure to be about £850.

The Government are committed to supporting the UK's smallest and often most entrepreneurial businesses, and this measure achieves that. Some 95% of the businesses benefiting from this increase are small and microbusinesses. Increasing the employment allowance to £4,000 means that 65,000 more businesses will see their employer national insurance liabilities fall to zero. Since introducing the employment allowance in 2014, the Government will have taken around 650,000 of the UK's smallest businesses out of paying national insurance contributions entirely.

The Government are determined now more than ever to support people and businesses. At Budget, we increased the national living wage by 6.2% to £8.72 an hour. Along with increases to the income tax personal allowance and the national insurance primary threshold, that means an employee working full time on the national living wage is £5,200 better off today compared with April 2010.

However, we are aware that by supporting people at work through national living wage increases, we also increase cost for businesses. Increasing the employment allowance helps businesses to meet that cost. Businesses

will now be able to employ four rather than three full-time employees on the national living wage without paying any employer national insurance contributions.

This increase will cost more than £2.3 billion over this Parliament; it is a large tax measure. It should be noted that in just four years, the Government have doubled the value of the employment allowance. The draft regulations legislate for a Budget measure that is already helping more than half a million of our smallest businesses with the costs of employment and has been supported by the Federation of Small Businesses.

Before I conclude, let me welcome the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) to the Labour Front Bench. I enjoin him and all colleagues in the House to join me in supporting the draft regulations, which I commend to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister, Wes Streeting, who is asked to speak for no more than 15 minutes.

4.4 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a privilege to reply on behalf of the Opposition, and you will be relieved to know that I hope to speak for nowhere near as long as 15 minutes. My party has resolved to work constructively with the Government through the extraordinary and unprecedented challenges presented by the coronavirus. It is in that spirit that I address today's motion to approve the proposed increase in the employment allowance.

There is an air of unreality to our proceedings that extends beyond this empty Chamber and virtual Parliament to the substance of this afternoon's business. On Second Reading of the Finance Bill, my hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor observed that it felt as though the Bill had been written for a different age. I feel the same way when I look at today's motion on the employment allowance. This measure, which was announced in the Budget, increases the maximum amount of employment allowance from £3,000 to £4,000 for the new tax year, benefiting small and medium-sized businesses, charities and amateur sports clubs. It is expected to reduce the national insurance contribution bill to zero for around 65,000 businesses.

We recognise that the intention behind the measure is actively to enable small, growing enterprises to take on staff without incurring national insurance contribution liabilities, recognising that small businesses may need assistance to meet the costs of the welcome increase in the national minimum wage—it is described as a living wage, but it is perhaps almost a living wage. In ordinary times, we would welcome that, but for the businesses, charities and sports clubs that stand to benefit, these are the most extraordinary circumstances, just as they are for the whole country. For many of those organisations, this crisis is an existential one. Despite their best efforts, some of the businesses and charities that the Government intend to help will simply not exist by the end of the year. Of course, any measure that reduces their outgoings will be of some help, but, taken alone—or even as part of the package of support already announced by the Chancellor—this will not be enough to stop many businesses and charities going bust, so I urge the Financial Secretary and his colleagues in the Treasury to go further.

[*Wes Streeting*]

I turn first to the SMEs that stand to benefit from the proposed increase in the employment allowance. Small businesses form the backbone of the economy in communities such as mine across the country, and their survival through this crisis will form a crucial part of the recovery that we hope will follow. As we have heard, the Federation of Small Businesses has, as ever, done a sterling job of making sure that the pressures facing those businesses are well understood by Parliament. I take this opportunity to thank the FSB for all that it is doing while grappling with the challenges that coronavirus poses to its own operations and ways of working. Just last week, the FSB's Martin McTague told the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee:

"Most small businesses have gone into this crisis with very little in the way of cash reserves. The latest evidence is that about 30% operate with only two weeks of cash, so they are in a very vulnerable position trying to cope with this crisis."

That is why my right hon. Friend the shadow Business Secretary has called on the Government to introduce a second wave of business support, including an extension of the furlough scheme where necessary and greater flexibility to enable part-time working. The Chancellor has indicated that the Government will not allow a cliff-edge to form, so some clarity on how he plans to avoid that risk would be both timely and welcome for businesses that are already facing make-or-break decisions.

According to the Office for National Statistics, two thirds of companies have made use of the Government's furlough scheme, many of which are small businesses. Since the Chancellor is already considering how to unwind the scheme, can I ask the Financial Secretary what consideration the Treasury is giving to calls from the FSB and others to introduce some flexibility in the scheme to allow for part-time working? Many small businesses cannot afford to bring staff back full time to quote for work, generate new business, fulfil orders or keep back-office functions ticking along. A small business might want to furlough its staff for 80% of the time, but under the current rules that is not possible if it has just two or three staff.

A more flexible approach to furlough rules would give SMEs the flexibility they need, which the FSB has described as absolutely critical for survival and recovery. That is why my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition called for that flexibility as part of his attempt to build national consensus on the next phase of the coronavirus response. It would be reassuring to businesses if the Financial Secretary could give us some hope today that consensus on this issue can be achieved.

As the Financial Secretary will be aware, the sorts of businesses that the employment allowance is designed to benefit will benefit from the opening of the bounce back loan scheme. That is welcome, but some serious issues remain around the working of the CBIL scheme for SMEs. Many SMEs are reluctant to take on loans because of the concern that they will not be able to repay them on the terms on offer. What more will the Government do to ensure that cash is reaching the businesses that need it?

I shall turn now to the charities that stand to benefit from the proposed increase in the employer's allowance. For small charities, this will come as some relief. According to the survey conducted by the National Council for

Voluntary Organisations, the Institute of Fundraising and the Charity Finance Group, charities are reporting a projected loss of 48% on their voluntary income and a third being wiped off their total income, with 91% of those surveyed expecting to have their cash flow disrupted. Although the vast majority felt that they could play a role in responding to the coronavirus outbreak, 62% were anticipating reducing their charitable activity. So for the smaller charities that the employment allowance increase is designed to benefit, the financial challenge will be even more acute.

We recognise that the Government committed £750 million in support for the voluntary sector and that they provided match funding to "The Big Night In", but this support has failed to match the scale of the challenge facing our charities. The NCVO has calculated that a three-month lockdown would cost the sector £4.3 billion, which is six times the £750 million of support announced, so will the Financial Secretary tell us what more the Government plan to do to ensure that the charities eligible for the increase in the employment allowance still exist by the end of the year?

Since I have the Financial Secretary's ear this afternoon, and given that the opportunities to raise issues with the Government had become more limited by the constraints that are understandably in place as a result of the coronavirus, may I take this opportunity, with the brief indulgence of the Chair, to lay down a marker about the future of the social investment tax relief? SITR is the only tax break for investors in social enterprises and charities, and it would be damaging to lose it in the current climate, so may I ask the Financial Secretary if he will give serious consideration to calls for a time-limited two-year extension to the relief, so that the organisations that benefit from SITR can continue to leverage in philanthropy to benefit a wide range of good causes?

Returning to the issue of employment allowance, this measure is estimated to cost the Government £455 million in lost revenue for the current tax year, which makes it all the more important to ensure that the benefit of this increase is enjoyed by those who are genuinely eligible and for whom the increase is designed. The Financial Secretary will know that there have been concerns in the past that the employment allowance has been exploited by tax avoidance schemes using umbrella companies to avoid national insurance contribution liabilities. We know that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs included anti-avoidance measures in the allowance from launch, and made it clear through Spotlight 24 that attempted avoidance arrangements such as these, which seek to use artificial and contrived arrangements to gain an unintended advantage, do not work. However, these measures require enforcement. Given the significant cuts in resources that we have seen, including job losses and tax office closures under successive Conservative-led Governments in the past decade, can the Financial Secretary reassure the House that any such avoidance is being identified and that tax inspectors are taking appropriate action?

In conclusion, the increase in employment allowance may not have quite the impact that was intended when the policy was first announced, but in so far as it will provide a bit of extra help to small businesses and charities, we welcome it and will not be opposing the Government's motion. Our charities, small businesses and enterprises often represent the best of Britain and the beating heart of our local communities, and I hope

that this measure will provide some assistance to those going through tough times. Where the Government take the right action, they will find our support and co-operation, as they do this afternoon. Lives and livelihoods are at stake, and the Government must go further and faster to give small businesses and charities the backing they need to weather this crisis and play their part in building a better country in its aftermath.

4.14 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Like the shadow Minister, I do not intend to take anywhere near the quota of time on offer.

I thank the Minister for the motion. I dealt with him positively on the Roadchef Employee Benefits Trust issue and I hope we can continue to assist in progressing that matter. However, I must challenge him on his comments regarding the minimum wage. The minimum wage premium is not the real living wage. I encourage the UK Government to follow the Scottish Government's lead by engaging with business to encourage more employers to pay the real living wage, if they cannot make it the minimum wage, and to remove the age discrimination that means under-25s cannot earn the same as their older colleagues for doing the same job.

As this is my first virtual speech, let me thank all those in the House staff who have gone out of their way to make the virtual House of Commons work and allow colleagues to hold the British Government to account. That includes Mr Speaker, you Madam Deputy Speaker and your fellow Deputy Speakers. Having spent considerable time on a committee with the Leader of the House, the irony of its being this particular Leader of the House who is proving that remote participation and eventually electronic voting can work, is certainly not lost on me.

Regarding the regulations, it is a pleasure to be able to respond on behalf of the SNP. Colleagues will be relieved that I do not intend to speak for very long. The business before us is uncontentious. We of course welcome an increase in employment allowance, but would have liked to have seen it go further. That is not an opportunistic position that we take for the afternoon to nit-pick or find division where there is none; our manifesto committed us to an increase in the employment allowance from £3,000 to £6,000 per employer, per year. Of course, that was the manifesto that helped the SNP win 80% of the seats we contested in December's general election.

I welcome the shadow Minister to his place on the Opposition Front Bench. Like him, I encourage the UK Government to do more to assist small employers across the UK during the covid-19 crisis. The job retention scheme and business support schemes have massive gaps that so many of our constituents are falling through, and that is before we get on to the unsatisfactory self-employment scheme. I share the calls from the shadow Minister on bringing about flexibility to the furlough scheme. Something I would like to see on top of what he called for would be an appeals process, where an employer refusing to furlough a member of staff, leaving them without an income, can be challenged. The CBIL scheme is also not helping all those who need support. For many, incurring debt is just not an option. There needs to be much more in the way of grants available. Similarly, not all charities are covered in the third sector scheme, such as research-based charities, so I hope they will look at those areas again.

Short of the full powers of independence, we want the UK Government to devolve control of national insurance to Holyrood, so that the Scottish Government can use economic levers such as these measures to make decisions that support employers to create jobs. At the moment, our control over economic policy is very limited and largely rests with the UK Government, who take decisions that may favour other parts of the UK and may not be in Scotland's best interests.

We will also continue to oppose the UK Government's decision to restrict eligibility for employment allowance. In our view, it should cover all firms and all employers. The UK Government estimate that about 7% of all employers will no longer be eligible for the employment allowance. By removing this relief, they will be levying an additional £3,000 in tax on those employers.

In conclusion, we will not be forcing the regulations to a Division—I am sure that that will please those still testing remote electronic voting—but we would have liked the UK Government to have been more ambitious to support job creation by halting the eligibility restrictions and by expanding the relief that is available.

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

4.18 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the increase in employment allowance. Labour recognises that many businesses are facing severe difficulties at the moment and the proposed changes go some way to providing assistance to many struggling small and medium-sized enterprises.

The economic decisions we take now will determine the length of the recession we face going forward. The Government have provided a number of economic packages to support SMEs, many of which have just weeks of cash in reserve. The additional assistance will increase the maximum amount of employment allowance from £3,000 to £4,000 for the tax year 2020-21, which is expected to reduce about 65,000 businesses' national insurance contributions bill to nil.

My constituency of Liverpool, Riverside covers the city centre, with thousands of SMEs working across a number of sectors, including 4,500 digital and creative industries that employ 22,000 people and contribute £1.8 billion gross value added to the local economy. We are one of the fastest growing hubs in the country for digital companies, devising solutions for all sectors, including the health sector. The vast majority are micro-businesses, and many of them have been supported by our regional Federation of Small Businesses, which has consistently championed raising the employment allowance. It was a central ask in its "Back to Business" manifesto for the 2019 general election, supporting small businesses to cope with the increases in the national living wage. It will also assist half a million SMEs, raise wages and keep more people in work.

I have received a high volume of emails from businesses that are unable to access the support that has been made available. The funding is there to be used to ensure that we have a strong and robust economy to bounce back once restrictions are eased. It also needs to be

[Kim Johnson]

lasting, as we head into the next phase of the pandemic, with micro-businesses in particular looking to recover. I believe that some businesses are falling through the cracks, and the increase in the employment allowance will be of limited assistance to the many SMEs struggling to keep afloat during the covid-19 pandemic. While I welcome this statutory instrument to increase the employment allowance, I call on the Government to go further—to provide SMEs with the support they need to weather this crisis, and to investigate concerns about HMRC's ability to tackle tax avoidance effectively following tax office closures.

4.21 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a pleasure to be making my digital debut under your chairmanship this afternoon.

I welcome the change in employment allowance that the Minister has announced. It will obviously come as a massive boost to small businesses at this incredibly difficult time. I want to take the opportunity to raise the case of some of the groups, which have been contacting me, that have been missed out in the Government's plans of support during the coronavirus crisis. I welcome the Government's overall objective to support employment and people's household incomes during this time, but I think it is important to note that there are some groups that have been missed out.

The priority at this time should be support for the self-employed, particularly small limited companies in which individuals pay themselves by dividends. They have been cut off from all sources of support. I also have a lot of our constituents on regular short-term contracts—they go from contract to contract—who are paid through pay-as-you-earn, and they cannot take advantage of the furlough scheme, welcome as it is. I would like to hear more about the Government's plans for them.

I have been contacted by a lot of new starters who started jobs after 28 February and were not on their current company's payroll scheme at that time, so they have missed out on furlough. There are also the businesses that have been set up in the most recent tax year, which do not have turnover that they can demonstrate. I also have a lot of constituents whose average earnings have been more than £50,000, so they have missed out on self-employment schemes. I really want to hear more from the Government about what they are going to do to support those businesses and self-employed individuals, who have been working very hard to support their families and are now finding themselves in a really desperate situation.

I want to support what the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said about the job retention scheme. It is so important as the Government look at their furlough scheme, and obviously they will be reviewing it. What I want to call for is not just to extend it beyond June, but to make it more flexible so that businesses can furlough part of an employee—they could bring employees in for two days and furlough them for three days. It is going to be so important to businesses to have such flexibility as we emerge from the coronavirus crisis. I want to make that call today to the Government, as they are reviewing the situation, to support those entrepreneurs who are going to be leading us out of this

economic crisis and those people who are going to innovate to enable the changes we need to build a better society as we seek to move forward.

4.24 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute today on a matter that affects many charities, small companies and amateur clubs across my constituency and across Scotland. I place on record that I fully embrace these virtual proceedings, allowing us to look after the interests of our constituencies. The credit of course goes to the staff and officials behind the scenes who are pulling this all together for us.

I am speaking broadly in support of the motion as we in the SNP welcome an increase in the employment allowance. It is our desire to ensure that companies have the confidence to increase their workforce in what are uncertain times. However, I would like to have seen the increase go further still, and we will continue to oppose the UK Government's restrictions on employment allowance eligibility, which particularly hamper single-employee companies in my constituency. We back a rise in the employment allowance, but we also want a policy that covers all firms and organisations, such as the many charitable organisations, amateur sports clubs and companies right across my constituency and Scotland to which this allowance makes a real difference each and every year.

The increase in the maximum allowance of £4,000 a year is an improvement, and it is welcome, but we would like to see this increase further. Our election manifesto called for an increase to £6,000 a year. This was before the crisis that many organisations now face. The reality is that many of them may not survive to avail themselves of this allowance. The UK Government have also estimated that around 7% of all businesses will no longer be eligible. Removing this relief will cost affected employers up to an extra £3,000 per tax year.

Overarching all this, the SNP wants the UK Government to devolve control of national insurance to the Scottish Parliament, allowing us to make our own decisions on a tax that directly impacts our employers' ability to afford to create the new jobs that we need here in my constituency and all across Scotland. We support the measure and will not divide the House on this, but it could have gone further.

4.26 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: The increase in the employment allowance is of course a welcome step from the Government, but the new restrictions on eligibility for the allowance introduced in April are a real cause for concern for small businesses and charities in Oxford West and Abingdon, which are already struggling to cope during this economic crisis. We need to assess this allowance increase in that context and, in any case, the Government need to go further if this relief is going to have any real impact. And there is an elephant in the room that needs to be addressed: the ongoing plight of the self-employed.

The limitations introduced on the employment allowance last month, most notably the restriction of eligibility to those with secondary class 1 national insurance contribution liabilities of under £100,000, unfairly disadvantages charities. In many ways, this negates the positive increase in the allowance amount altogether. Many larger charities,

fearful of having to close due to a lack of financial support—such as the Children’s Air Ambulance in my constituency—may now be unable to claim this relief. Four thousand pounds may seem small fry, compared with the scale of the problems many are facing, but believe me, as they say, every little helps right now. That is why the Liberal Democrats are also calling for a dedicated grant for charities during this crisis.

There are charities in the care sector as well that I am concerned about. I spoke to many care homes in my constituency last Friday and they have urgent funding issues that need to be resolved, because they often have a disproportionately high employment spend compared with similarly sized SMEs, and they are at a disadvantage under these new rules. Now that the relief provided by the employment allowance needs to be counted by charities towards the state aid received, it is clear that more needs to be done. Will the Minister tell the House what is being done to fund charities properly at this time and what further relief might be available through the employment allowance?

To turn back to SMEs, for small businesses right now this increase in the employment allowance is of course welcome, but it is insignificant compared with the severe difficulties many find themselves in at the moment. I was on a Zoom call with a number of them right at the beginning of this crisis. They have been one week away from closure for many weeks and now is not the time to restrict which employers can access the employment allowance. It strikes me that the opportunity to temporarily relax those restrictions has been missed in this and any other statutory instrument to fix that.

With many businesses unable to operate right now, or operating from people’s homes, the Government need to make sure that they are covered by that allowance too.

I would like to take this opportunity to talk again about the self-employed. They are ineligible for the employment allowance because they pay class 2 and class 4 national insurance contributions. Time and again, the Government have thought about contractors and freelancers second, leaving them in the lurch or falling through cracks. I urge the Minister to investigate whether the employment allowance could be extended—even temporarily—to the self-employed, to provide some financial relief during this crisis.

We need to look at the statutory instrument in the whole context, not just within the limitations placed on the employment allowance. For charities, small businesses and freelancers alike, there is so much more that could be done to make the employment allowance and other relief measures go further. I thank the Government for what they have done, but I beg them to continue to go further.

4.30 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: The employment allowance, of course, was born during the years of the coalition to help small businesses, charities and sports clubs to take on their first employees. The Liberal Democrats are proud of our legacy and commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of entrepreneurs and small businesses. This has never been more important than it is now, so the increase is a welcome development and we are very happy to support it. However, it will be of use only to those businesses that are able to stay in business. Our challenge is to ensure that small businesses and charities are able to

stay afloat until we are out of lockdown, so that they can benefit from it. That is not a call to end or ease the lockdown soon; we have to be led by science and safety, not politics and impatience. My fear, though, is that the increase in the allowance could end up being the cherry on a cake that no longer exists. Put bluntly, it will be of no use to businesses that have gone to the wall.

The allowance increase, sadly, will have escaped the attention of many, given that it arrived just as the economy went into shock in the face of the covid-19 crisis. Here in the south lakes, that shock is being felt acutely. We are a community where volunteering is second nature, where small charities, community groups and sports clubs form the glue that binds us together, but for most, their income has disappeared, and Government support has not reached everyone. We are a community where one in four people work for themselves, hundreds of them new start-ups. Small employers, new employers and potential employers are the very people the employment allowance is there to help, and most of them have been closed or curtailed by the virus.

We claim to be the biggest visitor destination in the UK outside London, but the market squares, pubs, restaurants and hotels of the lakes and dales are still and silent. It is right that they are; we all know that the priority is to protect people, to save lives. The problem is that if hospitality and tourism are phased back into action in the autumn, the industry will have missed out on the business of the summer months that it relies on to get through the winter. If we do not provide long-term support for those businesses, we will be faced with tens of thousands of furloughed workers losing their jobs as soon as support ends. That will have a colossal impact on our communities in the south lakes and will push countless families into poverty.

I hope that Ministers share my determination to ensure that we keep businesses going now, so that employers are able to re-hire furloughed staff and to employ new staff after this is all over. For those in the tourism and hospitality business, that must mean committing to a 12-month funding settlement, to see them through to spring 2021. Anything less, and we will simply be delaying the collapse of hundreds of businesses until the autumn. I want those employers to be around to benefit from the raised employment allowance.

If you could live in a beautiful place like Cumbria and make a living, you just would. Well, thanks to improved broadband speeds, increasing numbers of people have done just that. We are one of the most entrepreneurial places in the country. Hundreds of people have set up their businesses here, underpinning our local communities. There has been an explosion in the number of new businesses based in spare bedrooms, on kitchen tables, in sheds or shared spaces. Often, these businesses do not expect to make much money—if any—in the first year or two; many work at a loss until the third or fourth year. Those are the very businesses that, until now, have not qualified for any support from Government during this crisis—those self-employed for less than a year, those working in shared spaces and those who work from home. Small B&Bs have also missed out. Many of these businesses have already had to close, leaving people’s dreams shattered and families experiencing desperate hardship and even destitution.

The announcement last weekend of a £617 million package for those who have fallen through the cracks is welcome, and I am grateful to Ministers for listening

[*Tim Farron*]

to us. But I confess that the details of this fund trouble me and my constituents. South Lakeland has such a large number of businesses hit, because of our reliance on tourism and hospitality, that the local council has distributed one of the largest hardship budgets in the country—£70 million, which is much more than places like Newcastle and Nottingham, with populations of three times our size. If this new money is divided out according to the size of population, South Lakeland will get about £2 million, which would leave hundreds of businesses with absolutely nothing. This announcement would, in that case, have given false hope.

I ask the Government to distribute on the basis of need and be willing to increase the sum available across the country if it turns out that people are missing out. I also ask for clarity on which businesses will be eligible for this support. For example, will it include those who are operating from home? I warmly welcome these regulations. We must do everything in our power to ensure that small employers survive this crisis, so that they are still around to use this money and create opportunities for others.

4.36 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I very much welcome the Minister's announcement today and the Government's commitment to it. I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak.

Initially, the employment allowance was set at £2,000 but was increased to £3,000 from April 2016. From April 2020, the allowance may only be claimed by employers with employers' national insurance contributions of below £100,000 in the previous tax year, a change announced in 2018. HMRC estimates that the annual cost of the allowance is around £2.2 billion.

I absolutely understand the reason for the inclusion of this measure in the Conservative party manifesto and the Minister's announcement today, but I am a wee bit concerned that we need to be doing more to help the small and medium-sized businesses that continue to employ large numbers of people across my constituency and the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In my constituency and across Northern Ireland, we probably have a higher per capita percentage of small and medium-sized businesses than the rest of the United Kingdom. I welcome this measure, but we need to ensure that these small and medium-sized businesses are able to return to the position they were in, so that they can give the opportunity of employment and wages and give the economy a bit of a kick-start.

I want to say an incredibly large thank you to Frances and her staff at my local social security office, who have helped many people and given advice during this crisis. It is important that their hands are not tied by a system that understands the rules but has no discretion to understand individual circumstances.

I welcome the help that will be coming for the many charities that we and many others contribute to. I think of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Cancer Care, Marie Curie, St John Ambulance and the Cancer Fund for Children here in Northern Ireland. All those charities have no or little fund raising at the moment. The moneys coming into them are direct donations. There may be other moneys coming

in, but there is no fund raising taking place. The help that the Government have offered charities is very welcome, but it will never bridge the gap for the incredibly large amounts of money that they are losing.

I was very happy with the Chancellor's decision to allow workers to be furloughed, although there will be no payment until June for the self-employed. I think also of self-employed directors—I asked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions a question about this yesterday, and I raise it again now—who put their profits back into the business, so do not have much in the way of savings. Unfortunately, they do not get the real benefits here that they could.

I put on record my thanks to the Government and to Ministers for all that they have done. They have reached out to many people. As elected representatives, we are made aware with each passing day of others who perhaps do not tick the box—who do not fit into a certain category—and I am thinking of them. We therefore bring those people to the attention of Ministers whenever the opportunity arises.

Many of us will be in receipt of a paper from Ian Geary of the Salvation Army referring to the report that has already been mentioned, entitled "Understanding Benefits and Mental Health". We cannot let this go by without reflecting—in a small way for this debate but in a big way for the individuals themselves—on the barriers that vulnerable groups experience, and on some of the multiple mental health challenges that they are facing. That paper emphasised that the aforementioned findings were collated before the current crisis, but it has highlighted the lack of resilience experienced by many people who need help at this moment.

Again, I welcome the provisions that we have today, which benefit the many who fall within the criteria, but there are others who perhaps fall just outside the criteria or outside the box-ticking exercise that Departments sometimes do. We need to identify and support vulnerable claimants. We need to help those with mental health issues. We need to support businesses and those self-employed people who cannot create the opportunity—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his speech but we now have to move on to the Minister.

4.41 pm

Jesse Norman: I thank all Members who have contributed to this very constructive debate for their support on this important measure.

I agree, in some respects, with the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) that there is a degree of unreality about this. Of course, as he will know, this measure legislates for change that is already in operation as from the Budget, and therefore does not reflect, is not designed to reflect, and cannot, in fact, in law reflect all the changes that have happened since then. I think he will also be aware that we have had several Budgets-worth of additional measures since then from the Treasury and from across Government.

It is worth saying that the air of unreality that the hon. Gentleman describes can also, in some respects, apply to some of the points that have been made in the debate. It vaguely reminds one of the famous "Monty Python" sketch, "What have the Romans ever done for

us?” Well, at the moment we have the coronavirus jobs retention scheme, the business interruption loan scheme, the self-employment scheme, statutory sickness pay, £750 million of charity support, grants, tax reliefs, billions of pounds to local authorities, and HMRC’s “time to pay” arrangement. That is an astonishing array of different packages. Of course, there may be people who are not, or not yet, able to benefit from them, or to benefit as much as they would like, but I think that everyone will be able to benefit from them in some regard, because that is how they are designed.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the social investment tax relief. As he will be aware, we have consulted on that. Interestingly, I have talked to some of the social investment tax relief organisations involved, and they concede that so far the relief has not been effective, so the question is really whether it would be more effective if it were continued. Of course, the Treasury continues to reflect on that matter, as it does with all taxes.

I share the view of the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) that we have had constructive interactions in the past, and I thank him very much for his speech. He asked whether the employment allowance could be extended to cover all employees; I think I am right in saying that 93% of all businesses, including those owned and run by charities, remain eligible for the employment allowance, so it is extremely comprehensive. The restriction to smaller companies reflects the point that £4,000 is a substantial amount for small and micro-businesses but not for much larger businesses with national insurance contributions payments of more than £100,000 a year.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) asked about the self-employed and dividends. She will be aware that dividends are a payment in return to capital ownership of a company, rather than as a matter of wages. Because of that, there is no available information as to who benefits and by how much and there is no clarity as to whether the dividends are in fact a form of wages or may have come from other activities of the business. It is of course right to focus on the issue if that is what her constituents are pressing her on, and we continue to think about the point.

The hon. Lady mentioned the £50,000 threshold for the self-employed; I think I am right in saying that on average, according to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, a self-employed business has to have had £200,000 of

revenue in order to have £50,000-worth of profit, so in most instances we are not talking about the most vulnerable people in society, who make up the groups that we are very much focused on assisting to the extent that we possibly can.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) asked about devolution. As he will be aware, the Smith commission made a clear recommendation that national insurance contributions should remain reserved. National insurance is, of course, a social security contribution, so there would be many interactions with entitlement to benefits and other impacts across other businesses and individuals. The UK Government have delivered on their promise to devolve increased income tax powers to Scotland; it remains up to the Scottish Government to decide what to do with their own tax policy, and they have begun measures—be it said not enormously wide-ranging ones—to change tax policy.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) made a point about charities. As I have suggested, the employment allowance covers an overwhelmingly large 93% of the businesses to which it is potentially applicable.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked about a 12-month funding settlement. As the Chancellor has acknowledged, in terms of the public purse the present situation is not sustainable. It is not a situation that people should want to sustain, not least because it may in due course have counterproductive economic effects. We in the Treasury, and across Government, are reflecting very hard on how we can emerge from this lockdown stronger and more unified as a country than ever. With that said, I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Employment Allowance (Increase of Maximum Amount) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 273), dated 11 March 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 10 March, be approved.

ADJOURNMENT

4. 47 pm

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

Written Statements

Tuesday 5 May 2020

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Covid-19 App

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Yesterday we launched the NHS covid-19 app (“the app”) for initial roll-out on the Isle of Wight over the next two weeks.

This is the first phase in the development and roll-out of a national “test and trace” programme which will bring together the app, expanded web and phone-based contact tracing, and swab testing for those with potential covid-19 symptoms. This is a vital part of our plans as we move towards the second phase in our battle against covid-19.

The app has been built by a team including world-leading doctors, scientists and tech experts. If someone installs the app, it will start logging the distance between their phone and other phones nearby that also have the app installed. If a person becomes unwell with symptoms of covid-19, they can report this through the app, which will then anonymously alert other app users that they have come into significant contact with over the previous few days and provide appropriate advice. The app, which takes full consideration of privacy and security, has already been tested in closed conditions at an RAF base.

This initial roll-out will provide valuable insights into how the public respond to and use the app and how we can improve it further. There will be no changes to social distancing measures during this initial roll-out phase.

Using the app is voluntary but the more residents who download the app, the more informed our national response will be. The Isle of Wight is leading the way for the UK, for which we thank them.

The more rapidly we can identify people at risk of infection and provide them with advice on what action they should take, the more effectively we can reduce the spread of the virus. The test and trace programme will play an increasingly important part in our wider strategy to save lives and protect the health and care system.

Further details of the national roll-out will be available soon.

[HCWS222]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Biometrics and Forensics Ethics Group: Annual Report

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) has today made the following written statement:

Today I am pleased to announce the publication of the second annual report of the Biometrics and Forensic Ethics Group. The group provides Ministers with independent advice on matters relating to data ethics and ethical issues in forensic science and biometrics.

I would like to thank the group for its strategic advice concerning the use and retention of biometric identifiers and for its advice on the development and testing of new biometric technologies.

The group has made four recommendations covering the testing and use of live facial recognition technologies by police forces; the design and implementation of data privacy impact assessments with the Home Office; and the use of familial DNA analysis results in assessing the value of genetic genealogy techniques for law enforcement.

In addition, the group continues to recommend a review of biometric retention and deletion schedules, particularly regarding custody images.

The Biometrics and Forensics Ethics Group annual report can be viewed on the website of the group at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/biometrics-and-forensics-ethics-group> and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS223]

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**not later than
Tuesday 12 May 2020**

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