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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 6 May 2020

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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.]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I would like to make a short statement. Last night I received a letter from the Chair of the Procedure Committee giving the Committee's views on a new system for remote Divisions in the House on a temporary basis. The Chair of the Committee notes that the Committee was satisfied with the assurances it has been given about the security of the system, following extensive testing by the Parliamentary Digital Service. I have also received confirmation that Parliament's Information Authority is content with the proposed system.

With that in mind, I believe we are now in a position to take this historic, yet temporary, next step to put remote voting into action. I am therefore authorising the use of this system of remote voting under paragraph (1) of the relevant temporary order. Further guidance will be made available, and I will make a further statement, before the first such Division. I remind colleagues that, as with other aspects of our current temporary arrangements, there may be some technical hitches as the new system beds in.

I would like to pay tribute to House staff, the Digital Service and the Committee for their work in making this possible and for working with Members and the Whips' Offices to help ensure that Members had the opportunity to test the system and understand how it operates.

I remind colleagues that a secret ballot is taking place online today for the Chairs of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Committee on Standards. The ballot will close at 2 pm. Members will have received an email to their main parliamentary email with a secure link to the ballot.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

LGBT Rights

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure that the UK remains a world leader for LGBT rights. [902288]

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure that the UK remains a world leader for LGBT rights. [902297]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): I am proud that we are one of the leading countries in the world for LGBT rights. The UK will host an international LGBT conference, chaired by Nick Herbert. The theme is "Safe to be me". It will focus on asking countries to tackle the persecution of LGBT people, including ending violence and discrimination.

Robert Largan [V]: The Government have a strong record on LGBT rights, especially the introduction of equal marriage, which I am proud to have campaigned for. We have come a long way, but there is still work to be done. Can my right hon. Friend tell me why a married monogamous gay couple living in High Peak cannot donate blood or plasma, including for the ongoing and vital covid-19 trial?

Elizabeth Truss: I appreciate that many gay and bisexual men want to contribute to the efforts to fight this virus. The rules that specify the conditions for donating blood are from the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs. I am taking up this matter with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to see what changes could be made.

Dehenna Davison [V]: We have seen numerous reports that the covid lockdown is having a disproportionately negative impact on the LGBT+ community, here in Bishop Auckland and right across our country, particularly with regard to mental health, domestic abuse and homelessness. With the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia coming up on 17 May, what are the Government doing to ensure that LGBT+ people are receiving the support needed throughout the covid crisis?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We are ensuring that LGBT people get proper support during the covid crisis, including health support. In March, I extended the contract of Dr Michael Brady as our national adviser on LGBT healthcare. He is instrumental in ensuring that support is provided for LGBT people during this pandemic.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) [V]: Owing to the coronavirus pandemic, gender identity clinics in England have had to reduce their services. While it is understandable that hospitals prioritise their services during this crisis, can the Minister assure the House that trans people will still be able to access the gender identity services they need during the crisis?

Elizabeth Truss: We absolutely want to ensure that all LGBT people are able to secure that support during the crisis. That is why we have extended the contract of Dr Michael Brady, and where we are able to provide those services we are ensuring that we do. I will follow up on the specific issue my hon. Friend raises with Dr Michael Brady to ensure that those services are available.

STEM Subjects

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the trends in the level of uptake of STEM subjects by girls. [902290]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): Since 2010, there has been a 31% increase in girls' entries to science, technology, engineering and maths A-levels in England, and a 34% increase in the number of women accepted on to full-time STEM undergraduate courses in the UK. Increasing the number of women in STEM industries is vital for our country's economic success and also for equality of opportunity.

Dean Russell [V]: In Watford we have incredible, inspirational women and girls across the area. Watford girls school, for example, does incredible work in this space. How are we supporting women, including those who are learning at school at the moment, into STEM roles, so that we can continue to showcase how Britain is playing a leading global role in science for all?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. It is still the case that women make up only 25% of those employed in manufacturing and 30% of those in information technology. We need more women in those fields to use their amazing talents. We are committed to removing the barriers to success for women and to celebrating those who have achieved, such as Ruth Amos of StairSteady, who has invented new areas of engineering, which we should continue to celebrate.

Equality of Opportunity

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure equality of opportunity for people throughout the UK. [902295]

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure equality of opportunity for people throughout the UK. [902303]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): As we turn the tide on covid-19, I want to ensure that the Cabinet Office equalities hub focuses on the evidence, and that everyone in the UK has their opportunity and does not face discrimination or barriers to success.

David Johnston [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for that statement. Does she agree that, although they are not in the Equality Act 2010, we should have a firm focus on social background and social mobility, so that it is not the school someone went to, the family they come from or the area they grew up in that determines their life chances?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are restructuring the equalities hub so that it covers areas such as social background and geography. It will put world-class analysis and research at its heart, and I am proud that both the Department for International Trade and the equalities hub were named among the top 75 employers by the social mobility employer index, which I know my hon. Friend established.

Caroline Ansell [V]: Education is of course a key driver of social mobility—people would expect me to say no less, as a teacher myself. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all the teachers and headteachers in Eastbourne, who are doing such a tremendous job looking after and educating the children of our key workers, particularly at Shinewater Primary School? Will she also outline what work the Equalities Office is doing with the Department for Education to ensure that those disadvantaged pupils in our schools do not suffer as a result of these very necessary school closures?

Mr Speaker: Order. Minister, can you pick out a question from that? We cannot continue like that; we have to get through the questions.

Elizabeth Truss: Let me put on the record my thanks to all the teachers across the country who are doing a brilliant job keeping our children educated using the latest technology. We are doing all we can to ensure that no child, whatever their background, is left behind during this crisis. We have already committed more than £100 million to boost remote learning, and we are funding access to IT devices and software, focused on the most disadvantaged.

Universal Basic Income

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits for social equality of introducing a universal basic income. [902289]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): A universal basic income is not the best way to deliver social equality because it is not targeted at those who need it most. In response to the covid-19 outbreak, the Government set out a substantial package of targeted measures to provide support to people affected by the coronavirus, which can be delivered quickly and effectively through existing systems.

Patrick Grady [V]: The issue is, though, that people are still falling through the cracks. Does the Minister not accept that, from an equalities perspective, the best way to stop that is to take a universal approach? That is why the First Minister of Scotland has said that, increasingly, a universal basic income is an idea whose time has come. Instead of rejecting it out of hand, will the Government not consult with devolved Administrations, the relevant all-party parliamentary group and other interested expert organisations to see how a guaranteed minimum income could be made to work?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that we disagree on this issue. While we are happy to continue the debate, the fact is that flat-rate payments make no allowance for additional help to cope with variable essential living costs, and fail to target those who need support, such as disabled people and lone parents. This universal way of providing support is not going to work well within our existing welfare system.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: I am interested in this outright dismissal of a universal basic income, and in how, where and when this decision was reached. Given that those who will benefit the most from a UBI, contrary to what the Minister said, are the

very people her Department is supposed to be fighting for, did she lose the argument or did she fail in her duty to advise her colleagues on what a difference a universal basic income could make to social equality?

Kemi Badenoch: I am not sure why the hon. Lady has chosen to take that stance. The fact is that many, many respected people think that a universal basic income is not what is right for this country. It lacks the flexibility to respond to changes in income—unlike universal credit—it is less redistributive, and it is certainly not something that we are considering at the moment.

Covid-19: BAME Communities

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle the disproportionate number of BAME deaths from covid-19. [902293]

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to tackle the disproportionate effect of the covid-19 outbreak on BAME communities. [902306]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): We are very concerned by reports of a disproportionate impact of covid-19 on ethnic minorities. It is important that we understand what is underpinning these disparities and that we have robust and accurate data to do so, in order to take effective action.

Ms Abbott [V]: The Minister will be aware that of the 17 doctors who have died from covid-19, 16 are from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. So will she be speaking to her ministerial colleagues in the Department of Health about the NHS surcharge for migrants? It cannot be right that NHS migrant workers, who are frequently BAME, pay twice for the NHS, first in taxation and then through the surcharge—and, increasingly, with their lives.

Kemi Badenoch: This is an issue that I have personally taken a keen interest in. It is one of the reasons we have commissioned Public Health England to review exactly what the impact is on ethnic minorities. Specifically on fees for migrants, migrants who are ordinarily resident in the UK already receive their NHS care for free. Many more are exempt from charges, including temporary migrants who pay the immigration health surcharge, and asylum seekers. However, it is important to note that we remain committed to fighting this virus, and that is why we changed our regulations in January to ensure that no overseas visitor or anyone living here would be charged for diagnosis of or treatment for covid.

Lilian Greenwood [V]: Dr Amir Burney of the Association of Pakistani Physicians of Northern Europe and Dr Kashif Chauhan of the Nottinghamshire Doctors Families Association have both written to me raising concerns about the safety of BAME medical staff. They tell me that their members are scared. NHS trusts have reported problems in moving at-risk BAME NHS staff away from the frontline of the crisis, despite calls from Public Health England to do so. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Health to ensure that the risk to BAME staff is properly assessed and their health and safety is properly protected?

Kemi Badenoch: The Public Health England review is going to look into this specific issue, but I must stress that we are working round the clock to protect everyone—absolutely everyone—on the frontline during this pandemic for as long as is required. NHS England has sent a letter to those running NHS care organisations recommending that employers should risk-assess staff as a precautionary measure to see if they are at greater risk and, if so, put other measures in place to protect them. That is something that will be going on around the country.

Mr Speaker: We go across to the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, Caroline Nokes.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: We heard on Monday from the Health Secretary, and my hon. Friend the Minister has reiterated it, about the importance of robust data. Is my hon. Friend confident that the right data is being collected at sufficient pace? Specifically, what input is the Government Equalities Office having into the work of Public Health England, and is she confident that we will find out not only why and how BAME communities are affected, but what needs to be done to protect them?

Kemi Badenoch: The Government Equalities Office is refocusing the equality hub. The race disparity unit, the GEO and the disability unit want to spend more time on research and data so that we can help to inform Government Departments on their activity. We want to become more evidence-led. The Public Health England review is going to fit in with this overall strategy. It will be analysing how different factors, including ethnicity, gender and age, can impact on people's health outcomes from covid-19. We are confident that this review will be able to analyse available data on health outcomes for NHS staff as well. We expect it to be published at the end of May.

Mr Speaker: May I welcome to her new position the shadow Secretary of State, Marsha de Cordova?

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The British Medical Association found that black, Asian and minority ethnic doctors have been pushed to the frontline of this covid-19 crisis and that almost two thirds of them have felt pressured to work without vital personal protective equipment. This comes amid reports that 72% of all NHS workers' deaths were of those from a BAME background. Finally, last week, Public Health England asked all NHS trusts to risk-assess their BAME staff and, where necessary, remove them from the frontline. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to monitor the impact of this new measure and ensure that no more workers are risking their lives to save lives?

Kemi Badenoch: This is something that we are keeping a close eye on. We are seeing a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities, as I mentioned before, but NHS England is the right body to make the decisions on how each and every care organisation should look after its staff. We are not calling for ethnic minority medical staff to be taken off the frontline, as that would disproportionately impact ethnic minority communities, but we are doing everything that we can to ensure that they are protected. With regard to PPE, this is something,

as I said earlier, that we have been working round the clock to deliver. We have had more than 1 billion items of PPE delivered to health organisations across the country, and we will continue to ensure that our frontline staff are very well protected.

Covid-19: Effect of School Closures

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effect of school closures in response to the covid-19 outbreak on the life chances of children from working-class backgrounds. [902296]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): We are doing everything we can to ensure that no child, whatever their background, falls behind due to coronavirus. We have already committed more than £100 million to boost remote learning, and we are funding access to IT devices and software focused on the most disadvantaged. It is worth remembering that schools continue to receive pupil premium funding worth around £2.4 billion annually, and that should help to support disadvantaged children during this period.

Mr Harper [V]: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but there is anecdotal evidence that school closures bear down more heavily on those from already disadvantaged backgrounds. As the Government are able to reopen schools, can we look at any measure that is necessary to enable children from more challenged backgrounds to catch up, including, if necessary, weekend and summer schools? Even if it is not possible to have schools opened fully during those periods, can we look at what we can do to help?

Kemi Badenoch: May I reassure my right hon. Friend that this is something that we are looking very closely at? We are working with partner organisations, exploring targeted support options for disadvantaged people while schools remain closed and in the summer break, and considering how best to support pupils to rapidly catch up when schools reopen. He should know that we have already taken prompt wide-ranging action to help schools and parents support all young people, publishing a list of online education resources for parents, launching a new online academy, and working with the BBC to create a package of TV and online materials to support learning at home.

BAME Covid-19 Review Taskforce

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If the Government will convene a cross-party taskforce to (a) oversee the BAME covid-19 review announced on 17 April 2020 and (b) monitor the implementation of actions arising from that review. [902301]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): As someone who is affected by this issue of ethnic minorities and the disproportionate impact they suffer from covid, I am glad to see that it is being taken seriously across the House. I am confident that both Parliament and the Health and Social Care Committee will have the opportunity to scrutinise the Government and hold them to account on this in due course, and this is where cross-party work will be most effective.

Layla Moran [V]: I and the Liberal Democrats welcome the review that Public Health England is undertaking. I thank the Minister for her response to my question. I hope it means that she will come to the House to make a statement when we finally have the outcome of that review, but there are some things that we can do right now to better understand the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on the BAME community. One of those would be to ask a question on ethnicity on the NHS coronavirus symptom checker, which would surely give us the data that the review needs. Will she commit to speaking to the Department of Health and Social Care on adding that question to the survey?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her letter on this issue in April; the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is aware of it, and I am sure she will receive a response from him in due course. It is important to remember that Public Health England is conducting an independent and expert-led review, and we trust Public Health England to collect the information appropriately, as it sees fit.

Covid-19: Impact on Women

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the covid-19 lockdown on women. [902302]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): Women are affected by the covid-19 lockdown in different ways. Women shoulder greater caring responsibilities and are balancing work with childcare. Some women need immediate access to reproductive and maternity services. They are often financially vulnerable, and financial vulnerability will be exacerbated by the lockdown. Every Government Department is playing its part in considering how the virus and the lockdown are affecting all vulnerable groups of people.

Mr Bone [V]: I thank the excellent Minister for that response. Does she agree that opening nurseries and schools for younger children, at least, would be of great benefit, particularly to women?

Kemi Badenoch: As a mother with three young children aged six, three and seven months, I assure the House that no one is looking forward to nurseries and primary schools opening more than me. Access to childcare is crucial to supporting mothers, particularly single mothers with young children, to return to work when it is possible, and we are working closely with the sector, but schools and other providers will remain closed, except for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, until the scientific advice indicates that it is the right time to reopen.

Covid-19: BAME and Working-class Communities

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the disproportionate effect of the covid-19 outbreak on (a) BAME and (b) working-class communities. [902307]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): Understanding the impacts on different groups and the factors underpinning them is extremely complex. It is

important that we have the right information on which to base our action, which is why, as I mentioned earlier, we have asked Public Health England to review covid-19 outcomes among different groups and to explore the reasons for disparities. It is also why the Government have taken numerous steps to protect those who would be most disadvantaged by this disease.

Chi Onwurah [V]: We do have some other information: according to Office for National Statistics figures, the coronavirus mortality rate in the most deprived areas, such as Elswick in Newcastle, is more than twice that in the least deprived areas—no doubt that is a consequence of health inequalities, which have risen sharply in the past 10 years—and those on lower incomes are more likely to be in frontline occupations. Now we have learned that the infection rate in the north-east is the highest in the country. What is the Minister doing to address the disproportionate impact of the virus on BAME and working-class communities?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady is right. We are increasingly worried about the number of deaths in deprived areas of the country. As she said, the rate of deaths in the most deprived areas was more than two times higher than in other places, but it is important to note that the underlying factors are extremely complex—these things may be related, but we do not have definitive evidence about the relationship between covid-19 and deaths in deprived areas. We are taking many steps to look after people from disadvantaged backgrounds and from working-class communities. We have protected people's incomes and jobs, supported businesses and looked at universal credit and statutory sick pay. We are doing every single thing we can to make sure that individuals and communities are protected, on the whole, from any adverse impact of the lockdown.

Covid-19: Domestic Abuse

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to help protect people living with abusive partners during the covid-19 lockdown. [902291]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the covid-19 lockdown on domestic abuse victims. [902292]

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to help protect people living with abusive partners during the covid-19 lockdown. [902298]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins) [V]: We know that lockdown can cause particular pressures for people who are living in abusive households, which is why the Home Office has launched an awareness campaign and published specific guidance on gov.uk setting out the support services available to victims. To ensure that these vital services can continue to support victims during lockdown, we have provided an additional £2 million of funding to bolster specialist helplines and websites. That is in addition to—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are going to have to go across to Simon Baynes.

Simon Baynes [V]: All domestic abuse is heartbreaking, but it is particularly so for children. What are the Government doing for children affected by domestic abuse in my constituency of Clwyd South, the rest of Wales and the rest of the UK?

Victoria Atkins [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this question. The Domestic Abuse Bill, which had its Second Reading last week, requires the domestic abuse commissioner to consider the impact of domestic abuse on children in her work. In addition, the Bill includes a new statutory duty on tier 1 local authorities in England to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children within safe accommodation. Last week, I announced £3.1 million in funding for specialist support for children affected by domestic abuse.

Chris Elmore [V]: I would like to press the Minister on what she is doing specifically in relation to older people who are victims of domestic abuse. Age UK has recently reported that, in 2019, more than 280,000 people aged between 60 and 74 experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales. Given Government advice both in Wales and across the UK on lockdown, it would be helpful to know what specific support she is providing for older people who are victims?

Victoria Atkins [V]: I thank the hon. Member for his question. As I say, the gov.uk website sets out the services that are available to victims of domestic abuse in these very troubling times, and of course helplines may be of particular use to older people who are not perhaps as familiar with online services as younger generations. In addition, we have announced £76 million in funding to help vulnerable people, with the Chancellor's £750 million charities fund, and that includes victims of domestic abuse. Of course, the Bill itself will help to—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have to go over to Marco Longhi.

Marco Longhi [V]: The Churches Housing Association of Dudley and District is a charity that provides support and housing to vulnerable people, including victims of domestic abuse. Does my hon. Friend agree that the recent announcement of £76 million to support such charities and the new priority need status allocated to victims who are seeking local housing will provide very real support to an extremely vulnerable group of people at this difficult time?

Victoria Atkins [V]: I agree with my hon. Friend that small and frontline charities play a vital role in supporting vulnerable people. That is why, on Saturday, the Communities Secretary announced a £76 million fund or package of support to ensure that the most vulnerable in society get the support they need during the pandemic.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Disabled women are three to four times more likely to face domestic abuse than non-disabled women, but accessible specialist services are most at risk during this coronavirus crisis; only one in 10 refuge spaces is accessible. As part of the work of the disability unit, will the Minister ensure that specialist funding for disabled domestic abuse victims is ring-fenced?

Victoria Atkins[V]: I thank the hon. Lady, and I welcome her to her position. We are very aware that disabled people face additional pressures when they are victims of domestic abuse, so certainly those considerations form part of the Government's plans to help the most vulnerable people in society during these very troubling times.

Mr Speaker: Order. This Friday marks the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. I know all hon. Members will be keen to mark this occasion, even in these exceptional circumstances. I will be marking the occasion with a wreath-laying ceremony in the House on Friday.

We now come to questions to the Prime Minister. I would like to welcome the Prime Minister back to his rightful place in the Chamber. The whole House and the whole country are delighted at his recovery, and I welcome him back to this elected House.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[902353] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 6 May.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Mr Speaker, thank you for your kind words. It is good to be back, even though I have been away for longer than I had intended. I would like to pay tribute today to the 107 NHS and 29 care workers and all those who have, sadly, died from coronavirus. I know that the sympathies of the House are with their family and friends. If I may, Mr Speaker, I would like to place on the record in this House my own thanks to all the staff at St Thomas' Hospital for the brilliant care that I received.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Simon Jupp [V]: First, I would like to welcome the Prime Minister back to where he belongs, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in congratulating him and his fiancée on the birth of their son, Wilfred.

On coronavirus, tourism is absolutely crucial to the economy of the south-west, including my constituency of East Devon. While I am currently asking visitors to come back later, once the lockdown has ended, I want to make sure that our vital tourism industry survives so that we can be open for business at the earliest opportunity. Can the Prime Minister assure me, my constituents and East Devon's tourism industry that further and flexible financial support is coming to protect this crucial industry?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed I can. I thank my hon. Friend for what he is doing to campaign for tourism in East Devon, and I can tell him that we are adding another £1.3 million to help the tourism industry in that area. Clearly, the priority of the Government and, I believe, of the whole House is now to suppress this disease further and, as we do that, to get our economy going again and to encourage tourism across our whole country and, of course, East Devon in particular.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I welcome the Prime Minister back to his place and say that it is good to see him back in Parliament? I am sure I speak for all of us when I say that, and although I have done this privately, I congratulate him and Carrie publicly on the birth of their son.

When the Prime Minister returned to work a week ago Monday, he said that many people were looking at the "apparent success" of the Government's approach, but yesterday we learned that, tragically, at least 29,427 people in the UK have now lost their lives to this dreadful virus. That is now the highest number in Europe and the second highest in the world. That is not success, or apparent success, so can the Prime Minister tell us: how on earth did it come to this?

The Prime Minister: First, of course every death is a tragedy and the right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to draw attention to the appalling statistics, not just in this country but around the world. In answer to his question, I would echo what we have heard from Professor David Spiegelhalter and others: at this stage I do not think that the international comparisons and the data are yet there to draw the conclusions that we want.

What I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman is that, at every stage, as we took the decisions that we did, we were governed by one overriding principle and aim, and that was to save lives and to protect our NHS. Of course there will be a time to look at what decisions we took and whether we could have taken different decisions, but I have absolutely no doubt that what the people of this country want us to do now is, as I have just said, to keep suppressing the disease and to begin the work of getting our country's economy back on its feet. I look forward to working with him and colleagues around the House to do just that.

Keir Starmer: The argument that international comparisons cannot be made, when the Government have for weeks been using slides such as the one I am holding to make international comparisons, really does not hold water. I am afraid that many people are concluding that the answer to my question is that the UK was slow into lockdown, slow on testing, slow on tracing and slow on the supply of protective equipment.

I want to go to yesterday's figures, which show that while, happily, it looks as though deaths in hospitals are falling, deaths in care homes continue to go up. At the press conference last night, the deputy chief scientific adviser said that

"what that shows us is that there is a real issue that we need to get to grips with about what is happening in care homes."

I could not agree more, but 12 weeks after the Health Secretary declared that we were in a health crisis, I have to ask the Prime Minister: why have the Government not got to grips with this already?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is quite right to look at the crisis in care homes, and he is absolutely right to say that there is an epidemic going on in care homes, which is something I bitterly regret. We have been working very hard for weeks to get it done, and a huge amount of effort has been made by literally tens of thousands of people to get the right PPE to care homes and to encourage

workers in care homes to understand what is needed. I can tell him that he is not right in what he just said about the state of the epidemic in care homes. If he looks at the figures in the last few days, he will see that there has been a palpable improvement. We must hope that that continues and we will ensure that it does continue.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that. I was using the slide the Government put up at their press conference last night, which sadly shows—I accept there is a lag to 24 April because of the reporting position—that deaths in care homes have been rising every time they have been reported by the Office for National Statistics. I have heard before, from the First Secretary, that the numbers were falling—he said that a week ago Sunday. That is not borne out by these slides. We will wait to see what the next slides bring.

On 30 April, the Government claimed success in meeting their 100,000 tests a day target. Since then, as the Prime Minister knows, the number has fallen back. On Monday, there were just 84,000 tests, and that meant 24,000 available tests were not used. What does the Prime Minister think was so special about 30 April that meant that testing that day was so high?

The Prime Minister: Actually, I think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman was right last week when he paid tribute to the amazing work of the NHS, the logistics team and everybody involved in getting up from 2,000 tests a day in March to 120,000 by the end of April. Yes, he is right that capacity currently exceeds demand. We are working on that. We are running at about 100,000 a day, but the ambition, clearly, is to get up to 200,000 a day by the end of this month, and then to go even higher. As he knows, and as the whole House will know, a fantastic testing regime is going to be absolutely critical to our long-term economic recovery.

Keir Starmer: I did pay tribute last week. I am glad the Prime Minister has now said that the target now is 200,000 tests a day by the end of this month. But, of course, just having a target is not a strategy. What is needed is testing, tracing and isolation—that is the strategy. Contact tracing was happening in the UK, but it was abandoned in mid-March. We were told at the time that this was because it was “not an appropriate mechanism”, but yesterday the deputy chief medical officer said that it was to do with testing capacity. Can the Prime Minister clarify the position for us? Why was contact tracing abandoned in mid-March and not restarted sooner?

The Prime Minister: As I think is readily apparent to everybody who has studied the situation, and I think the scientists would confirm, the difficulty in mid-March was that the tracing capacity that we had—it had been useful, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly says, in the containment phase of the epidemic—was no longer useful or relevant, since the transmission from individuals within the UK exceeded our capacity.

The value of the test, tracking and tracing operation that we are setting up now is that, as we come out of the epidemic, and as we get the new cases down, we will have a team that is genuinely able to track and trace hundreds of thousands of people across the country, and thereby drive down the epidemic. To put it in a nutshell,

it is easier to do now—now that we have built up the team on the way out—than it was as the epidemic took off. I think most people with common sense can see the particular difficulties that we had at the time.

Keir Starmer: I think the Prime Minister has confirmed it was a capacity problem. I wish the Government well on the tracking and tracing now, and on the app that is being trialled in the Isle of Wight. We all want that to succeed, and we will all support that in, hopefully, succeeding.

Let me turn to protective equipment, where, clearly, there are ongoing problems. Just this week, the British Medical Association survey said that 48% of doctors had to buy their protective equipment for themselves or rely on donations. That is clearly unacceptable. It is obvious that this problem will get even more acute if and when the Government ask people to return to work. We are clearly going to need a very robust national plan for protective equipment. Can the Prime Minister reassure the public that they will not be asked to return to work until that plan is in place?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I certainly can. I share the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s frustration about PPE, and the frustration that I think people have felt across the House and across the country. It has been enraging to see the difficulties that we have had in supplying PPE to those who need it, but I do pay tribute again to the work of hundreds of thousands of people involved in the logistics of supplying literally billions of items across the country in a timely way. There have been no national stock-outs of any PPE item, and we are now engaged in a massive plan to ramp up our domestic supply. The right hon. and learned Gentleman will be familiar with what Lord Deighton is now working on, so that—to get to his final question—we are able in the long term, and it may be the long term, to satisfy the domestic needs of this country. We will of course be setting out the details of that plan on Sunday.

Keir Starmer: I was going to come to the plan; I am grateful to the Prime Minister for that indication. As he knows, there are millions of people on furlough, and millions with children at home, struggling with caring responsibilities. If they are to return to work and their children are to return to school, they need reassurance—I think that we can all feel that—that it will be safe to do so, and that means that they need to know what the Government’s plan is for the next stage. Will the Prime Minister give them that reassurance by setting out his plan as he says he will, and will he come to this House on Monday to present that plan and answer questions from across the House?

The Prime Minister: I will, of course, undertake that there will be a statement to the House—as you, Mr Speaker, and the House would properly expect—about what we propose. I just want to explain to the House, as a courtesy, why it is happening on Sunday; I am sure that you would be interested to know that, Mr Speaker. The reason is very simple. We have to be sure that the data is going to support our ability to do this, but that data is coming in continuously over the next few days. We will want, if we possibly can, to get going with some of these measures on Monday, and I think it will be a good thing if people have an idea of what is coming the following day. That is why I think Sunday—the weekend—is

the best time to do it, but of course the House will be fully informed and will have the full opportunity to debate and interrogate me or the Government on that matter.

Mr Speaker: And hopefully in the future such statements will be made to the House first.

[902354] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Lockdown rules permit people to travel to work if their jobs cannot be done from home, but some have faced criticism and pressure not to do so, including from announcements on London Underground wrongly saying that they should not be on the system unless they are key workers. Will the Prime Minister ask the Mayor to restore public transport capacity in London so that my constituents can travel safely and we can keep as much of the economy going as possible?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that a crucial part of our success in getting transport to run safely will now be running a bigger and more expansive tube service so that people can observe social distancing. We will certainly be working with the Mayor to try to achieve that, although there must be—we will come to this on Sunday and next week—mitigations to help people who, for reasons of social distancing, cannot use mass transit. There will be a huge amount of planning going into helping people to get to work other than by mass transit. I hope that my right hon. Friend, as a former Transport Minister, will agree that this should be a new golden age for cycling.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister back to Parliament, and congratulate him and Carrie on the birth of their son Wilfred; I wish Wilfred every health and happiness.

The UK's confirmed death toll now stands at close to 30,000. It is officially the highest in Europe and the second highest in the entire world. Indeed, there are some estimates putting the figure even higher. In my own community of Skye, we have faced our own heartbreaking and devastating outbreak of covid-19 over the past few days. I do agree with the Prime Minister when he says that the worst thing that we could do now would be to ease up the lockdown too soon and allow a second peak of this deadly virus. To protect our citizens, the lockdown must remain in place for as long as it is needed. Given that many people might want to travel to, for example, the tourist areas during the better weather, will the Prime Minister join me in reminding everyone that non-essential travel is not permitted? Does he agree with me and the First Minister of Scotland that our approach should be led only by the best medical and scientific advice, not the politics of posturing?

The Prime Minister: Yes indeed. Actually, I think that the last few weeks have shown the ability of the Governments of all four nations to come together and to deliver very clear messages for our people, and I think the collaboration has been extremely helpful. I can say to the leader of the SNP that we will certainly be working with the Government in Scotland, as we will be working with the Opposition, with unions and with business, to make sure that we get the unlockdown plan completely right. What he says is absolute common sense: it would be an economic disaster for this country

if we were to pursue a relaxation of these measures now in such a way as to trigger a second spike. On that point I am in complete agreement with him.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for the Prime Minister's answer and I commit myself and my party, and my Government colleagues in Edinburgh, to working with him on that shared agenda. However, some of his own Ministers are not following his advice. Instead of working with the Scottish Government, the Secretary of State for Scotland has been making political arguments about the constitution, rather than scientific ones about saving lives. And he is not the only one. This is not the time for opportunistic politicking; this is the time when we all must work together, to protect our NHS and to save lives.

We anticipate that the Prime Minister will be making a televised address on Sunday concerning the easing of the lockdown. This cannot be undertaken without the full input and co-operation of all our devolved Governments. We must end this period of mixed messaging from the UK Government. Will the Prime Minister commit today that the substance of his address will be fully agreed with the devolved nations, so that all our Governments continue with this vital work of saving lives?

The Prime Minister: Yes. By the way, I forgot to thank the right hon. Gentleman and other colleagues for their kind words about Wilfred. I want to thank him for that; I forgot to say that, and I will be marked down if I don't. So thank you. Listen, I share the right hon. Gentleman's aims. We will do our level best to make sure that the outlines of this attract the widest possible consensus; I think that they can and ought to. I am delighted by his call for a prohibition on "political arguments about the constitution" and I think that would be warmly welcomed across this country.

[902356] **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) [V]: I add my welcome to the Prime Minister; it is great to see him back in his place. And I add my congratulations to him and Carrie on the birth of Wilfred.

My right hon. Friend knows that the oil and gas industry is suffering from a perfect storm at present, buffeted by the global oil price crash and the lockdown. This is a moment of real danger for the industry, with the prospect of tens of thousands of job losses unless action is taken. Action and investment by this Government over the past decade have of course been welcome, but more action is needed now to protect jobs, to ensure energy security and to ensure a future for the industry, which is key to delivering net zero by 2050. Can my right hon. Friend promise to bring forward the oil and gas sector deal as soon as possible, and commit the UK Government to investing in a transition park in the north-east of Scotland, ensuring a future for thousands of workers?

Mr Speaker: I think the Prime Minister has heard the question.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question and for all his campaigning for the oil and gas industry. The whole House will have heard the fervour and learning with which he speaks on that issue,

and I can assure him that our right hon. colleague the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is actively engaged right now in pursuing this with the sector trade association. I am sure he will want to take up progress with him.

[902355] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister back to his place, on my birthday.

Halton and Cheshire West and Chester councils, covering my constituency, have stepped up to the national challenge, providing essential services to vulnerable residents and businesses during this crisis. The Government promised to do whatever it takes to fully compensate those councils, and councils across the country, yet both are millions of pounds short of the costs so far—billions nationally. How will the Prime Minister fulfil that funding promise and not return to the dark days of austerity?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government have absolutely no intention of returning to the A-word, which I will not quote. That is not going to be our approach. We do not think that will be necessary. What I can tell him is that we have already put another £3.2 billion, as he knows, into supporting local authorities and supporting some of the most vulnerable throughout this difficult time. We will continue to make sure that funding gets through to those who need it, but the crucial thing, as colleagues across the House will understand, is that the more effectively we can suppress this virus and the faster we can restart our economy, the better our chances, as everybody knows, of getting the funding that we all need to the poorest and neediest in our society. That is the course that this Government is going to follow.

Mr Speaker: We go across to Rehman Chishti. Short questions please.

[902358] **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: Like other colleagues, I am absolutely delighted to see the Prime Minister back at the Dispatch Box. I congratulate him and Carrie on the birth of their child.

My constituent, Jackie Potter, recently lost her husband, Ashley, who was 64. The family would like to bury Ashley with a small church service, applying social distancing. If Ashley were to be cremated, that would happen, but as he is being buried, under current guidelines, that is not possible. Can this anomaly between burials and cremations be urgently addressed so that families of all faiths who want to bury their loved ones, applying social distancing and in a faith service, are able to do so?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I thank my hon. Friend, and I extend my deepest sympathies to the friends and family of his constituent, Ashley. We are asking councils to do exactly that—to help people to attend without breaching the rules on social distancing. I am sure that he would appreciate that we think that is the right balance to strike.

[902357] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) [V]: Undoubtedly the furlough scheme has prevented mass unemployment, but when companies such as BA use millions of pounds of public money to furlough their

staff at the same time as handing out redundancy notices, it is a kick in the teeth to those workers and the taxpayer. It is concerning that reports today suggest that the furlough scheme may be wound down after June. Would it not be an obscenity if, whether through employer decisions or Government inaction, those people whose jobs we have been trying to save end up redundant anyway?

Mr Speaker: Before the Prime Minister answers, will Members please ensure that they do not have political slogans behind them when they are speaking?

The Prime Minister: The furlough scheme has been one of the outstanding provisions that the Government have been able to put in. It has given huge numbers of people—more than 6 million people—in this country the security that they need. Obviously, we want to make sure that people continue to feel that security, but at the same time, we also want to enable people safely and securely to go back to work and earn their pay packets, as they want to do.

[902359] **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): Can I add my welcome and congratulations to my right hon. Friend? Does he agree with me that our further education and higher education institutions have a huge role to play in rebuilding our economy, particularly in supporting and retraining those who have lost their jobs? Has he considered what they might offer and, indeed, how we might incentivise them to offer the right qualifications in support, particularly for businesses and new entrepreneurs?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for all the work he does to champion the cause of education, particularly further education, on the Select Committee on Education. As he knows, the agenda of this Government remains unchanged: to unite and level up across our country with infrastructure, technology and education above all. That includes our world-leading universities, which are now formulating vaccines against this disease, further education and the skills that our economy is going to need so badly for a sustained economic recovery.

[902360] **Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP) [V]: Given that the Government are refusing even to discuss universal basic income, I was glad to see them at least recognise the need for an increase in universal credit entitlement. However, no such increase has been announced for employment and support allowance. Does the Prime Minister have plans for a similar increase in ESA, and if not, can he explain why he feels that people who are sick or have a disability require less support at this time?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, what we have done is remove the seven-day waiting time for ESA. I am glad that she pays tribute to the big increase in universal credit, with another £1,040 benefiting 4 million families across the country—a total investment of £7 billion. I think that what everybody wants to see is not just people taking universal credit but, as I have now said several times, a careful and sensible programme, attracting the widest possible support, that enables us to continue to suppress the disease right down while also allowing our economy to start up again.

[902362] **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I have been very impressed by how businesses and individuals across my constituency have been borrowing and lending devices so that children can learn at home during the pandemic, an initiative that will be significantly enhanced by the £100 million recently given by the Education Secretary. However, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who chairs the Education Committee, has suggested that, when schools return, a catch-up premium should be brought in to close the gap between those most disadvantaged and left behind and their better-off peers. In constituencies such as Barrow that would make all the difference as we rebuild, so will the Prime Minister commit to such a scheme?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate him on the way he represents his constituents in Barrow. He is exactly right. That is why, among other things, we are ensuring that there are extra computers and laptops for disadvantaged communities, while making sure that we supply them with more 4G routers, which are invaluable at this particularly difficult time. There will be more to come, because this Government will pursue our agenda of uniting and levelling up across the whole UK.

[902361] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP) [V]: Since the Government lowered their benefit cap threshold in 2015, it has been frozen, which essentially means a real-terms cut every year for those affected. The Child Poverty Action Group, the Resolution Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies are just some of the voices calling on the Government to remove the cap as part of their response to coronavirus. We know that 93% of households affected by the cap have children, and that ultimately it is those children who are losing out as a result of this policy, so will the Prime Minister do the right thing and scrap the cap?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman is asking for the cap on benefits to be lifted. As I have just told the House, already a total of £7 billion extra has gone into universal credit alone.

[902365] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con) [V]: These are very dark and difficult days, but may I highlight the amazing work being done by volunteers across the country to help others? In my constituency there are dedicated groups delivering groceries and prescriptions, from Stokenchurch to Edlesborough, and from Hughenden to Berryfields. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking them all, but will he also especially congratulate the organisers of Bernie the bus, which, while collecting food for the local food bank, plays very loud party music, bringing a real note of joy and happiness to local communities as it performs a valuable public service?

The Prime Minister: As a great believer in buses, and as a part-time manufacturer of them, I agree with my hon. Friend very strongly about the good work being done by Bernie the bus and all who support it and travel therein.

[902363] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has rightly recognised that council workers are the unsung heroes of this crisis and has promised to give local authorities the resources they need, but my city faces a gap of up to £55 million as a result of extra costs and lost income. Our communities bore the brunt of austerity. They cannot now carry the burden of coronavirus. Will the Prime Minister give all councils a cast-iron guarantee that they will not be asked to do so?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much. She is absolutely right, as anybody knows, to draw attention to the difficulties, the straitened circumstances, the pressures that local councils have been under. That is why we put the extra £3.2 billion in immediately to help them cope, and she should know, by the way, that Nottingham—her own city—has already had an extra £19 million to help deal with the pressures of coronavirus. Certainly, that is by no means the last of the support that we will be giving to our fantastic frontline council workers, who, as she rightly says, have borne so much of the brunt of this crisis.

Lifting the Lockdown: Workplace Safety

12.35 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) [V] (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make a statement on guidelines for workplace safety after the lifting of lockdown.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): We have made it clear that there are five tests that the Government will need to be satisfied of before we will consider it safe to adjust the current measures. As hon. Members will be aware, the Government are in the process of consulting with businesses, business representative organisations and trade unions on the issue of safer working in a covid-19 context. We want workers in our country to feel confident that they are returning to a safe workplace, so we are working with Public Health England, the Health and Safety Executive and 525 stakeholders in total in detail, the vast majority of which are represented across all parts of the United Kingdom. That includes nine unions and over 400 businesses.

We are grateful for all the feedback and the constructive way in which it has been provided. Our guidelines will be published in due course.

Andy McDonald: Last Sunday, the Government sent trade unions and businesses seven consultation documents outlining proposals for a return to workplaces. We all share a common objective of a safe return to work at the appropriate time that protects public health. However, when the Government's plans fall short, it is our duty to say so. Trade unions were given just 12 hours to respond. The documents were not shared with the Opposition and the proposals themselves are wholly inadequate.

No worker should have their life or the lives of their loved ones risked simply by going to work. This is a legal right, which held true before this crisis and, crucially, must not be cast aside now. The documents present measures to maintain safe workplaces, such as hand washing and social distancing, as being at the discretion of employers, when in fact they are requirements of the law. The Government must make this clear and inform workers and businesses of their respective rights and duties. I share the surprise of trade unions that the documents provide no recommendations on personal protective equipment, without which it is impossible to make judgments on safe working practices.

Critically, the proposals exclude workers. A safe return to work is a significant challenge that can be met only if Government and business work with staff. My ask of the Minister is that the Government now bring forward guidelines requiring specific covid-19 risk assessments for most businesses, and that assessments are made public and registered with the Health and Safety Executive. Given the lack of capacity for inspections, these assessments must be agreed with staff. In workplaces with trade unions, this can be done by health and safety reps. In those without them, the Government should enable trade unions to assist workforces in their sectors to elect or appoint a rep to be consulted and involved in the settling, implementation and enforcement of assessments.

Finally, workers need to have confidence and trust that the Government have got their back, so will the Minister confirm that employees will not be prejudiced in any way for drawing attention to safety failings in the workplace? This time, we are truly all in this together. I trust that my comments are received in the constructive spirit in which they are offered.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive way in which we began our relationship as our opposite numbers in a call we had last week. We have plenty of opportunity to work together to ensure the confidence that employers, employees and customers need as we begin to open up the economy. The guidelines that he was talking about are an early draft. There will continue to be plenty of opportunity for him to feed in, as there has been for those 400 businesses and nine trade unions, because this is not a finished process. We need to get into the technical detail to ensure that everybody has confidence.

In the same way that employees need that confidence, they should be able to discuss with their employers the steps they might take to make their workplaces safer, especially when we start to lift restrictions. Where workers still feel unsafe, they can contact the Health and Safety Executive or their local authority. Where employers are identified, action can be taken to ensure compliance with the relevant public health legislation and guidance.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con) [V]: I know that my hon. Friend's Department is undertaking a review of corporate governance and audit. Does he agree that, now more than ever, it is vital that the review puts the safety and financial security of employees at the heart of all businesses' obligations to their stakeholders?

Paul Scully: I am grateful for that question. As my right hon. Friend knows, we have had three independent reviews of various aspects of audit by John Kingman, the Competition and Markets Authority and Sir Donald Brydon. We are committed to acting on their recommendations, including by legislating to create a tougher, stronger regulator, as soon as parliamentary time allows. We are working on that and will publish our proposals in due course.

Mr Speaker: I now call Drew Hendry, who is asked to speak for no more than one minute.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: While the social and economic impact of this crisis cannot be overestimated, it is vital that all workplaces are reopened only when it is safe to do so. After all, they will only work if they have the confidence of workers. On 25 March, the Scottish Government and the STUC issued a joint statement making clear their shared fair work expectations. That naturally followed the Scottish Government's fair work approach, which has been developed in partnership with the unions over years. They are now looking forward to putting that into law, once Holyrood has the power to do so. Reports that the TUC cannot support the draft UK policies are therefore of great concern. In a spirit of collegiality, what consideration has the Minister given to following the Scottish Government's approach of ensuring that the guidance is consistent with fair work,

[Drew Hendry]

including that workplace rules be developed for specific environments, and not only by employers but by trade unions as well?

Paul Scully: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments. I agree with him that our message and our processes need to be as consistent as possible, not least for people across the UK, but also for the companies operating in each nation of the UK. That is why colleagues from my Department have regular conversations with the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Parliament. We must continue to work to get into the detail to give employees that confidence. We will continue to work through that with businesses, unions and others who are feeding in day to day, so that we can provide a consistent, robust line and give confidence, with examples of best practice from businesses that have remained open and from which we can learn.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con) [V]: Enabling people to go back to work safely is key to getting through this crisis. Safe working will inevitably be different for different businesses in different settings. Will the Minister do all he can to ensure that Government guidance focuses on general principles of social distancing and hygiene, and avoids being overly prescriptive, so that as many businesses as possible can reopen safely?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. She is absolutely right, and that is why we have consulted as widely as possible. We will continue to do so, because we need to ensure that all these guidelines give confidence to people in every type of workplace, in every part of the UK. It is also important to reiterate that many companies are still operating. We need to ensure that our economy stays open and working, so that we can bounce back as quickly possible, and those companies are already offering best practice for that.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: I have been speaking to lots of businesses over the past few days and they are all obviously very keen to get back to work as soon as possible, but their big concern is not only the safety of their staff but what liability the business would have to bear if one of those members of staff got sick despite their best efforts to ensure their safety. I would really like to hear what the Minister has to say to give businesses reassurance on that point.

Paul Scully: In the first instance, what I would say to the hon. Lady is that as well as employers working on that guidance and ensuring that they are offering a safe place, employees and workers need to know that they have the right and the opportunity to approach the Health and Safety Executive and local authorities to make sure that existing legislation and guidance are being followed.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: If we want businesses to come back, they need to survive. Small businesses that pay themselves through dividends are not pariahs; they operate entirely legally. Will my hon. Friend speak to the Treasury to make sure that these businesses survive, and can we look again at the

dividend issue, because many small businesses will not survive to allow their workers to come back next week if we do not?

Paul Scully: I am grateful for that comment. Clearly, the Government's first priority in all of this is saving lives, but livelihoods and making sure that businesses and jobs are retained and that we can bounce back is very important. I will certainly take that away. I know that the Treasury has always been keen to look at each step of the situation to ensure that we can come up with economic support as well as the health support that we have been discussing in this urgent question.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: Welcome to North Antrim, Mr Speaker. Can the Minister tell us what guidelines he and the Government will put in place to assist necessary workers and passengers travelling on airlines from Northern Ireland to London? What assistance will he put in place for air operators that are taking and making necessary flights to ensure that there are the necessary guidelines and protections in place for those workers?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Part of giving people the confidence to return to work is giving them the confidence to be able to travel to and from various parts of the UK to work, which is why this process will also look at transport, at opening schools and at those kind of things when the health guidance is appropriate.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]: We owe a huge debt of gratitude to all the people who have been working throughout the pandemic to allow us to stay at home. Many people in Wolverhampton are now nervous of returning to the workplace, especially those who share their home with a medically vulnerable person. Will special advice be given to employers on extra measures to be put in place so that these people can be confident that they continue to protect and shield vulnerable people?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the important issue of those people who are most vulnerable in this situation. The guidance already sets out the steps that individuals living with shielded and vulnerable people should take to keep them safe. Where the Health and Safety Executive identifies employers who are not taking appropriate action to ensure that workers in the shielded category can follow the NHS advice to self-isolate for the period specified, it will consider taking a range of actions to improve the control of risks in the workplace.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) [V]: Does the Minister agree that to prevent a second wave of covid-19, employees will have to be as safe as possible when they return to the workplace, that employers have a statutory obligation to achieve this and that they owe their employees a duty of care? How can asking employers merely to consider non-binding guidance possibly help them to achieve these legal obligations? Is he really saying that workplaces should continue to operate where safe working practices cannot be achieved? That is what his guidance seems to be saying.

Paul Scully: By consulting as many businesses, unions and representative organisations as we can, we have been able to work through the guidelines in our own times. Whereas at the beginning we were having to react to the closure of the economy, this timeline is for us so that we can be well prepared and give as few surprises to businesses as possible so they can plan. That is why we want to have a flexible situation so that they can prepare and operate a safe environment for their employees, but, as I mentioned before, employees can approach the Health and Safety Executive or their local authorities if they feel that they are not operating in a safe workplace.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: Sorry, but we will have to move on to Sharon Hodgson.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab) [V]: Does the Minister agree that a public information campaign is required before and during the easing of lockdown, to inform employees and employers of their respective rights and duties, and to give the public confidence in returning to work?

Paul Scully: Communication is so important in this. We have seen how effective the message about staying home and saving lives has been so far. What we must now do is work with businesses to ensure that they have fully communicated the message on safe guidelines for their workplaces. Similarly, we need to make it clear to employees, as we are now doing, that those who cannot work from home, unless they are in a business that has specifically been asked to close, can travel to work, but they need to be considerate about that and ensure that they work within the social distancing rules. Yes, communication is everything, and I think we all have a responsibility to get those messages across.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con) [V]: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that people are protected when they return to work? As we now move to this second phase, will the Government commit to providing clear and concise guidance to employers on how they can best protect their staff?

Paul Scully: The Government remain committed to supporting business during this unprecedented change. We are preparing for the next phase of tackling covid-19 in the ways I have outlined, and how we can lift the social distancing measures in a phased way, at the right time and guided by the science. We are involving Public Health England and the Health and Safety Executive to ensure that we have the latest guidance on which to base our planning.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: During the first two weeks of lockdown, I was contacted by many constituents who were fearful of speaking out against irresponsible employers in case doing so would get them the sack. Does the Minister understand why Frances O'Grady of the TUC has raised concerns that unless the Government shift their position and put this into law, bad bosses will continue to expose their workers to infection without fear of consequences? Will he work

with the TUC to put these concerns into law so that workers have their rights respected and their safety assured?

Paul Scully: I work with and speak to the trade unions on a regular basis—indeed, I will be speaking to TUC representatives later this afternoon—which is why we wanted to keep them involved in forming the guidelines, to represent their employees, because by working together we will give employees that confidence and get the message across to employers that social distancing within the workplace, where possible, is absolutely crucial if we are to open up the economy and return to whatever the new normal is.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con) [V]: The vast majority of businesses in my constituency and across the country want to do the right thing, and the right thing is to get back to business. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should encourage a return to work, of course safely? Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our country, and they deserve even more support now.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stand up for small businesses. This is why we have said that unless businesses are among those that were required to close, they can continue to operate so that they are in the best place to survive, bounce back and contribute to the UK's recovery from this situation. We need to ensure that we do that safely and that employers are acting responsibly, and that will be dealt with by involving as many people as we can in getting specific guidelines for each different workplace in each part of the UK and getting those messages across.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab) [V]: Supplies of PPE are still extremely tightly constrained. What are the Government doing to ensure that when employers start to buy face masks and other equipment to keep their employees safe, the price and supply of PPE will not be extremely distorted?

Paul Scully: We are working with supply chains in the UK and across the world to ensure that, with the huge demand for PPE in a number of different countries that are all suffering and working through the same situation together, we can be at the forefront of this. With the work being done by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and my colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, along with Lord Deighton, we will be able to ensure that the supply chains remain readily available, and in that way we can also work on fair pricing.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con) [V]: As my hon. Friend works with the Prime Minister on the comprehensive plan for the next phase of the response to coronavirus, can he assure me that we will continue to work with both Public Health England and the Health and Safety Executive to ensure that workplaces are safe, with a particular focus on complex workplaces such as construction sites? Our incredibly hard-working construction workers are having to go into work, and I want to ensure that they are safe on site.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is right to take the specific example of construction sites. Clearly, there are different types of site. Battersea power station, which I

[Paul Scully]

visited just before the restrictions were introduced, is a 40-acre site, so social distancing is easier there than on a far smaller, constrained site. That is why we are bringing together industry expertise, union expertise and business representatives to ensure we have guidance that fits as many different workplaces as possible, backed up by Public Health England and the Health and Safety Executive.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: Analysis from the TUC shows that workplace inspections have fallen by 70% and prosecutions by 82% over the past 10 years. We all want to get Britain back to work, so what guarantees can the Minister give that local government and the Health and Safety Executive will have the resources they need to ensure safe working practices?

Paul Scully: We will continue to talk to the Health and Safety Executive about the resources it needs. Local authorities have been working incredibly hard on local health issues and, in my experience—I have spoken to many of them—on providing financial support. That is why the Chancellor has been giving financial support, with a second round of £1.6 billion to support their functions. We will continue to review any support that we need to give.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: Does my hon. Friend agree that holiday parks, campsites and self-catering holiday accommodation are well suited to adhering to workplace safety arrangements and should be considered for phased and gradual reopening, to boost coastal and rural economies and provide people with the opportunity of a holiday in the UK?

Paul Scully: I am glad that my hon. Friend is standing up for coastal areas, which have been particularly badly affected. I get a lot of feedback from an economic point of view from the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors. We work closely with them and will continue to do so. I will ensure that we pay due attention to that advice, so that all coastal areas are as well looked after as possible.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: We know that it is vital to get the economy moving again, but this will be possible only when people have the confidence to return to work in the knowledge that their workplace is safe. Why did the Government propose non-binding guidance with zero enforcement mechanism? Does the Minister think that is sufficient to make people feel safe and confident enough to return to work?

Paul Scully: We are working on the guidance with a number of business representative organisations and with the trade unions, and when we complete that work,

we will publish it at the appropriate moment. The Health and Safety Executive will be right at the core of that work, in checking and in enforcing, and, as I have said, workers will be able to approach both the Health and Safety Executive and local authorities if they do not feel that the organisation within which they are working is adhering to that guidance.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con) [V]: Many of our essential workers are, of course, already in the workplace, for which we are hugely grateful. The Minister confirmed that we will learn from them, but can he also assure the House that we will manage any disruption to them as a result of other sectors going back to work, for instance in PPE and transport requirements?

Paul Scully: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will indeed look at all of this in the round to ensure that we can work out the different scenarios as people return to work. What we have at the moment is a very different situation from what we will have when restrictions start to be lifted, and that will be a very different situation from what it might be when the economy is fully open. We must understand that, and we will work with the people who are already working and with the business representative organisations that I mentioned earlier.

Mr Speaker: We will try to reconnect with Mike Wood down in Dudley. Mike Wood, I hope you are connected.

Mike Wood [V]: Second time lucky, Mr Speaker, although some would prefer me on mute, I am sure.

As the Minister will know, many of our workers have been working throughout this outbreak. As well as thanking them for all their efforts, will the Minister assure us that the Government are making sure that employers are aware of their responsibilities and are keeping their workers safe?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for giving me the opportunity to thank those people who have kept our economy going through this difficult time. We rightly say a massive thank you to our key workers—our emergency workers, and especially those in the NHS, but we must also thank those who have been feeding the country and supplying the shops, the delivery drivers, the construction workers, the warehouse operatives and the retailers who have been out there doing that crucial work. We must make sure, as I said earlier, that we can give employees coming back to the workplace the confidence that they are working in a safe environment. We will certainly be able to do that if we can continue to work with as many businesses, unions and organisations as possible. We need to get this right and get our message right that the economy can be opened and that we can get back to work.

Covid-19: International Response

Mr Speaker: I call the Secretary of State for International Development, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, who should speak for no more than 10 minutes.

1.3 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the UK's support for the global effort to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.

The world is now having to address the biggest threat that it has faced in decades: an invisible killer on a global scale. Here in the UK, communities across the country are united in their determination to beat it, making their own personal sacrifices by staying at home, protecting our NHS and saving lives.

There is a daunting outlook for countries in the developing world, simultaneously facing a health crisis, a humanitarian crisis and the risk of a protracted economic crisis leading to much greater hardship for years to come. The threat of famines, exacerbated by the worst locust plague for 70 years, fragile healthcare systems that enable the spread of the disease and economic disruptions risk a much longer and harder road back to recovery than for wealthy countries.

However, through the altruism of the British people and the expertise of our scientists and engineers, the UK is proudly playing a leading role in the global response. On Monday, together with other world leaders, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister co-hosted a virtual global coronavirus response pledging conference. He called on countries around the world to step up their efforts and work together on this, the

“most urgent shared endeavour of our lifetimes”.

World leaders responded, and some £6.5 billion was pledged for the covid-19 response, including the UK's own £388 million commitment for vaccines, tests and treatments. The UK is proud to stand with our international partners—this is a truly global effort, and the only way to fight this pandemic is together.

The UK is a development superpower, and we are also a scientific and medical world leader. This enables our response to this global pandemic to be greater than the sum of its parts. From Gloucestershire's Dr Edward Jenner, who laid the foundations for immunology, to our researchers who developed vaccines for measles and Ebola, the UK has led the scientific response to many global health challenges in the past. I am so proud to be able to say that UK-based scientists, such as those at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, are playing key roles in the global response to this deadly new virus. Scientists in Bedfordshire who developed rapid diagnostic devices to manage the recent Ebola outbreak, funded with taxpayers' money through UK aid, are using that expertise to develop new rapid diagnostic tests.

Researchers at Oxford University, funded through CEPI—the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations—are now progressing to clinical trials, with funding from the UK Government's vaccines taskforce, which is also funding a vaccine trial starting soon at Imperial College. In partnership with a British success story, AstraZeneca—one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies—our Oxford researchers are working towards

their vaccine being manufactured at scale. We know that any vaccine might prove to be the solution, so through our Department for International Development aid budget, the UK is the largest single contributor of any country to CEPI's international efforts to find a coronavirus vaccine. Through this fund, we are working to improve our understanding of the virus and to support scientists around the globe. CEPI is already backing nine potential vaccines.

The Foreign Secretary outlined at the launch of the World Health Organisation's access to covid-19 tools accelerator that the UK is proud to work with our international partners to ensure that new vaccines are accessible to everyone, as quickly as possible. No one will be safe until we are all safe. So we will need vaccines against this deadly disease, at home and abroad. Once a vaccine is found, delivering it globally will be the next big challenge. To help with that, we have invested the equivalent of £330 million a year for the next five years in GAVI, the global vaccine alliance that delivers vaccines in 68 of the poorest countries around the world. On 4 June, the UK will be hosting the global vaccine summit to co-ordinate international investment efforts for GAVI. Together with the announcement made by the Prime Minister on Monday, that is a combined additional investment in global health security that comes to more than £2 billion, helping combat the spread of disease. In investing globally, we are helping to protect our citizens—our families—from future waves of infection, and protecting our NHS.

The global pandemic is one part of the challenge facing the world. DFID's immediate coronavirus response to date amounts to £744 million. But this is on top of our work to pivot much of our existing work to provide health, humanitarian and economic support where it is needed most, as part of our response to these crises, with a health response that builds on the UK's long-standing record of supporting countries to prepare for and respond to large disease outbreaks, including as the third largest donor to the World Health Organisation. We are investing on the frontier of research into new rapid diagnostics and therapeutics that can detect and treat coronavirus. Working in partnership with Unilever, we have launched an innovative hand-washing campaign that will reach 1 billion people around the world—a major contribution to global sanitation and hygiene. With the support of British and international non-governmental organisations, and advice from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, we will reach one in seven people around the world with information on the most effective ways to stop the virus spreading and save lives.

We are also working to reduce the global economic impact of the virus by preventing its spread, protecting both the UK public and the stability of our economy. Last month, the UK, together with other G20 countries, announced a commitment to suspend debt service payments to the poorest countries until the end of 2020. This will create up to \$12 billion of additional fiscal space. DFID has also made up to £150 million available to the International Monetary Fund for debt relief. These measures will enable developing countries to direct greater domestic resources to their own healthcare efforts, helping to prevent the virus from spreading around the world. We are supporting developing country Governments to make proportionate, evidence-based trade-offs between containing the virus and maintaining open trade, so that

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essential goods and services, including critical medical and food supplies, can continue to move around the world. That supports developing countries, but it also means that British consumers will get the vital goods they need.

Covid-19 is a global pandemic. It does not respect national borders. Individual efforts will succeed only as part of a global response. The UK will continue to play a leading role in galvanising the most effective co-ordinated international action. In 2017, the scientific community in the UK proudly played a key role in the international response to the Ebola outbreak in west Africa. I am proud to update the House that we are doing so again.

We are using British expertise and funding to demonstrate leadership internationally. Recognising that needs will be great, we are doing whatever it takes to ensure that vaccines, treatments and technologies are available, to save lives and to support economies in the most vulnerable countries, and to help end the pandemic. That will help reduce the risk of the world being attacked by a second wave of infection. As the Prime Minister said on Monday:

“It’s humanity against the virus—we are in this together, and together we will prevail.”

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I now call Preet Kaur Gill, who has five minutes to respond.

1.11 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I would also like to offer my thanks to all those workers, both in the UK and across the world, who are on the frontline during this pandemic. In particular, I thank the women, who make up more than 70% of the global health workforce and provide unpaid and underpaid care in communities around the world.

Wherever we look, the virus has hit the poorest and most vulnerable hardest and has exacerbated existing inequalities. I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that ensuring that we have a strong, independent DFID is vital to overcoming the immediate emergency of the coronavirus while continuing to tackle global poverty, inequality and the climate crisis.

I support the Secretary of State’s commitment to the pledging event on Monday, which was hosted by the European Union and other partners. I welcome the UK’s commitment of £388 million. Can she tell the House how much of that is new, additional money? Without global collaboration, there is a risk of a scramble between countries, huge price hikes and restrictions on supply, which will all come at the expense of people’s lives. What steps is she taking to secure buy-in from those who did not attend the event and those who did not contribute, such as the United States and China?

Following the comments by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about an upside of being first to discover a vaccine, has the International Development Secretary explained to him that creating division and competition between nations will cost lives? Will she also detail the concrete conditions that the Government are attaching to public money going to researching and manufacturing tests, vaccines and medical tools for

covid-19, so that those who need access to that vital equipment and medicine are able to access it as quickly as possible wherever they are in the world?

I would also like to take this opportunity to raise the issue of shipments and distribution. Since the week of 22 March, UNICEF has reported a 70% to 80% reduction in planned vaccine shipments. With the huge increase in the cost of flights to deliver goods, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to get medical supplies to countries that are running out and to stop airline companies profiteering from the global pandemic?

I welcome the steps that the International Monetary Fund and the G20 have taken so far on debt relief. The Jubilee Debt Campaign estimates that bonds and other private external debt payments for 77 of the poorest countries will total at least \$9.4 billion from May to December 2020. With the UK playing its part as a key jurisdiction for international debt contracts, can the Secretary of State explain what legislative options she is exploring to protect countries from being crippled by private debt?

Coronavirus is not just a health emergency; it is an economic and social one too. These secondary impacts of the coronavirus risk doing untold damage to people’s lives. We already see large-scale food insecurity, increases in deaths due to other health problems such as HIV and malaria, and clampdowns on human rights. The Secretary of State mentioned pivoting resources towards covid-19. Does she agree that diverting resources risks a spike in problems in other areas, as we have already seen in the United Kingdom?

Finally, as we saw during the Ebola outbreak, trusted organisations rooted in communities will be crucial to delivering accurate public health messaging and WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—projects which save lives. There is no substitute for the unique experiences, relationships and specialisms of local and national civil society organisations. They will be vital to tackling the global pandemic. The latest Bond survey found that 52% of small NGOs have had to cut back on programming working across the global south, removing the lifesaving work they do. I am concerned by how little UK aid has gone to local organisations. Will the Secretary of State ensure that any new plan her Department is involved in, including any revised UN global humanitarian response plan, contains a genuine commitment to scaling up a locally led approach, including women and girls’ rights organisations, large and small INGOs, faith groups and trade unions? As ever, I am here to support and assist.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I will do my best to answer them all in turn.

On funding allocation, we have so far committed £276 million for resilience, with multinational organisations and UN appeals alongside the International Red Cross and the Unilever project. Some £380 million is focused on the vaccine, drugs and therapeutics space through CEPI, FIND—the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics—Wellcome and so on, alongside the economic response with the IMF commitment of £150 million and the Gavi investment, which will all be part of the delivery of the vaccine.

I was not aware of the UNICEF statistics on vaccine treatment numbers that the hon. Lady raised, so I will ask my officials to get in touch with her and look closely at that. I thank her for raising that issue with me today.

The event on Monday was co-ordinated by the EU and co-hosted by a number of leaders, including our own Prime Minister. It was a coalition of the willing: a gathering together of those, mostly European, nations who wanted to show their support and solidarity on the international front. We are working closely with the USA on vaccines and more widely on delivery. That continues separately. The USA's commitment is enormous, and not just internally. I was talking with the new United States Agency for International Development chief, John Barsa earlier in the week about how they are going to focus in the medium term on the substantial commitment the US always makes to supporting vulnerable countries. That will be an ongoing conversation and I think the commitment from USAID is unstinting in that space.

The hon. Lady raised the very important issue of how the conditions go with the funding we put in. That is why we have invested our funds through CEPI and FIND. Both organisations put their money into appropriate projects with an understanding and a contractual relationship that ensures that those scientific programmes will then be accessible to all. It is a really important and secure way—if that is the right way to describe it—of ensuring that UK taxpayers' money really does reach vulnerable countries when the technologies are discovered.

I completely agree with the hon. Lady on food insecurity. This is absolutely a critical question that we must not lose sight of as we are fighting this disease in the short term. The impact on the most vulnerable countries of food insecurity has not gone away. The threat of locust plagues in just one part of the globe is one critical function we need to get on top of. We are starting to see, as everyone looks up from their own domestic challenges, the great challenge that we have. If we do not support tackling all the other critical preventable death areas, we will find that we cannot tackle this disease. As I said earlier, no one is safe until we are all safe.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. She will be aware of the World Health Organisation, and there have been some criticisms of it. Do we agree with those criticisms, and are we reviewing the funding of the WHO?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for that really important question. I do not think anyone would suggest that the WHO is a perfect organisation, but it is an extraordinary organisation, because it has the legitimacy of pretty much every country on the planet. It is a profoundly experienced and wise organisation in all matters health, and it has the ability to reach and to support every country around the globe. We are one of its largest core funders, we have been for many years and we will continue that. There are always lessons to be learned, and in something like a global pandemic, we will no doubt be in a whole new territory of lessons to be learned and of understanding where countries and multilateral organisations were able to do well, but the reality is that the WHO is the central point—the central hub—and we will continue to support it absolutely throughout the crisis and to work, as we have in the past, to find ways to help it become a slicker, more effective organisation in the future.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement, and I welcome all measures taken to assist a multilateral international response to this crisis.

The warnings about the impact of covid-19 on the world's poorest, most vulnerable people have been clear: uncontrolled spread of the virus to fragile states and in refugee camps; a famine of biblical proportions and worldwide economic devastation, resulting in 30 years of the UK's international development work being undone. However, if we do not tackle covid everywhere, we face the prospect of the infection returning to the UK in a mutated form. What specific measures, beyond aid, are the Government taking to ensure that we tackle covid everywhere? For example, will postponing debt repayments for developing countries be extended beyond 2020, until we know that covid has been eradicated, and will private creditors and multilateral institutions be included in that? What specific public health expertise and medical equipment will be provided to developing countries, and how will wide-scale vaccination programmes be rolled out in countries in conflict, such as Yemen and Syria?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. He and I are very aligned in terms of the wider implications and the secondary impacts that we risk seeing unless we can be really forward thinking in supporting the weakest and most vulnerable countries.

The hon. Gentleman asked about debt relief and the work that has been pulled together by the World Bank and the IMF. We have been an integral part of the conversation, as an important member of those organisations. This is very much a rolling activity. Countries are working on building up country plans and sharing those with the World Bank to understand how, as a whole, the economic community can best support the countries we are talking about to move forward. To answer the question about 2020, there is not an answer as yet, because it is a continuing and rolling conversation with each country, led by the World Bank.

We are looking across our portfolio of programme activity, much of which is in the humanitarian space and in the refugee camps, to make sure that we can repurpose and refocus the work we are doing in the short term, so that we do all we can to get the best healthcare outcomes possible in each of those programme areas.

In terms of delivering vaccines, we are committed to investing in Gavi, because it has both the delivery programme and the respect of so many countries around the globe. Those countries in most conflict will challenge us all, but an organisation such as Gavi, with the support of other UN agencies, is the most effective chance we have to ensure that everybody is vaccinated.

Mr Speaker: We now go across to the Chair of the Select Committee. I call Sarah Champion.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: I welcome this statement, but, like the Secretary of State, I am terrified of the pandemic hitting the global south, not least because of the existing weaknesses in its healthcare. What is she doing to support UK NGO organisations to deliver their core work as well as covid-19 work, and is this the time for DFID to develop a global health strategy?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. DFID has, and has had, a very clear strategy, and we were working before the crisis hit on refreshing

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that and on thinking, over the next few years, how we want to direct the 0.7% that this country has committed to. That continues, perhaps in a more urgent and more focused way than it did before, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right that we must make sure that we think more broadly than just urgent healthcare on covid. The risk of the impacts of preventable deaths in other spheres is very great, unless our programming continues in those key spaces.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) [V]: The executive director of the World Food Programme recently told the Security Council that covid-19 would cause a famine “of biblical proportions”. This will not only cost lives in the immediate term, but—unless nutrition is considered as a central plank of the global covid-19 response—cause lifelong health problems for millions of young children. Will my right hon. Friend therefore commit to ensuring that DFID’s response to covid-19 has nutrition at its very core, to ensure that we do not leave this crisis and sleepwalk into another?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend is right that nutrition is critical to avoiding long-term negative impacts of covid-19 on child growth and development, so the UK remains committed to preventing and treating malnutrition as part of our commitment to ending the preventable deaths of mothers, newborns and children. We are working with partners and stakeholders to better understand, track and monitor the potential impact of covid on nutrition, and we are continuing to work closely with the Government of Japan to ensure that the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth summit secures new commitments to nutrition.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: The UN Secretary-General described covid-19 as “menacing the whole of humanity—and so the whole of humanity must fight back.”

Without an immediate global response, the world risks up to 1 billion people getting covid-19 infections, and millions of deaths in fragile states and developing countries. Time is running out. What further action—on top of what the Secretary of State has said—will the UK Government take to lead the global effort for a global economic and humanitarian response before the situation becomes catastrophic?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UN Secretary-General is right that this virus is a menace to the whole of humanity. The challenge that we all have—which is why it must be a global, international response—is to ensure that we all appreciate that sorting out our own domestic situations is only stage one of the process of dealing with and getting rid of the virus. We will continue to focus all our efforts on driving the programmes that DFID runs, and on working to get the most coherent and effective outputs from all the multilateral organisations of which we are a part.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: It is a delight to join you remotely, Mr Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend for all that her Department is doing internationally to support the international vaccine effort and all those in need. How is the Department ensuring that partner countries in receipt of UK aid to support

their response to the covid-19 pandemic are also abiding by their human rights obligations, especially at a time when lockdowns and public health measures, although necessary, give Governments a great deal of authority and power, which in some countries risk being deployed to support authoritarian objectives?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In many countries with weak governance or ongoing conflicts, covid-19 is raising social tensions and posing a challenge to peace processes and respect for human rights, so we are working alongside the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Promotion of human rights is a core part of DFID’s strategy, and that never changes. DFID is taking steps to ensure that both our immediate response to covid and our long-term recovery efforts do not exacerbate conflict, but instead help to build peace and improve governance.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: The closing of borders in many African countries not only means that it is very difficult to get humanitarian aid to refugee camps, where people are living in conditions of overcrowding and poor sanitation; it also means that tens of thousands of migrants are trapped at the borders, sometimes having been abandoned there by people smugglers, or stuck in transit camps. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that people in those conditions are being helped and are avoiding the risk of coronavirus?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The challenge of supporting those refugee camps and getting the relevant supplies in to them has been one that has challenged many as those borders closed in the immediate start of the crisis. We are supporting this through a number of international organisations, notably the International Committee of the Red Cross and UN agencies that still have the best access and safety routes in, to ensure that we do as much as we can to support those communities.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Across the globe, data is key to tackling covid-19. Will my right hon. Friend tell us of the help being given to Tanzania, in particular, where there have been accusations of false data, of night-time secret burials and of a cover-up of the true scale of the crisis?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. The challenge of misinformation and of supporting Governments to be honest and ask for the help they need to support them through their own communities’ crises is critically important, and we will reach out. I will take her point on Tanzania and ask the DFID team to look at that specifically, but the challenge is for all countries to know that we are all in this together and that sharing information and asking for the help they need is the right way forward, rather than trying to pretend that this is not happening.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) [V]: Office for National Statistics figures in the UK have shown that covid-19 hits the poorest the hardest, with mortality rates double those seen in more affluent areas. How much greater, then, is the danger in fragile countries that have nowhere near our healthcare capacity, tiny numbers of healthcare workers and much higher levels of vulnerability? Does the Secretary of State agree that this is not the time to defund the World Health Organisation, as President

Trump has done, but rather to ensure that it is properly funded to co-ordinate the fight against this pandemic and save millions of lives? Will she undertake to strengthen rather than undermine the institutions that lead international efforts to defeat this awful pandemic?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I agree that the challenge of understanding and being able to predict who are the most vulnerable groups in the more vulnerable countries is one that is taxing scientists. Even though the communities are perhaps younger, and the virus does not appear to attack young people, the threat of HIV and the risk of malnutrition can create enormous numbers of preventable deaths. There is a huge piece of work going on there. As I have said, the UK remains absolutely committed to the WHO, and I am working closely with all our UN agencies to ensure that we get the very best from them across the globe.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: If the UK is going to avoid future coronavirus pandemics, we are going to need to do a lot more to improve global biosecurity. What is the Department doing in respect of bushmeat and wet markets, whether they are in China or anywhere else in the world?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Conclusive evidence on the origin of the mode of transmission of covid-19 is not yet with us, but it is essential that strict food hygiene and health standards are met and we support the WHO's position that markets should close if those standards are not met. We welcome China's decision on 24 February to put in place a ban on the sale for food of all meat other than from livestock or poultry and to work towards a better place.

Mr Speaker: We now go across to a brief and virtual Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister has spoken well, and I thank her for her comments. I am heartened that we continue to meet our obligations. However, I stress the fact that there are projects that in December were sustained by thousands of pounds of support but have lost it all as people stop all outgoing non-essential direct debits. One project that I support is in Swaziland, and its children are supposed to be here right now singing in concerts in my constituency and around Northern Ireland, raising money to support the orphanage for the year that they have nothing for. What help can we deliver for projects that are not supported by the Government thus far but are in real dire need?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The challenge of fundraising for charities and organisations that have really great objectives and reach out to the most vulnerable is indeed a challenge, but I would refer anyone to Captain Moore's efforts. It

is possible to raise money in different and novel ways, and I encourage everyone out there to come up with brilliant new ideas to support the charities and causes they most believe in.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: I am very proud to co-chair the all-party group for Fairtrade, alongside the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). Earlier this year we welcomed a Fairtrade cocoa farmer from the Ivory Coast to Parliament. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House what her Department is doing to safeguard and support Fairtrade supply chains during this global covid pandemic?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We are engaging with businesses in the UK and developing countries to understand the challenges they are facing in protecting incomes and livelihoods and in ensuring that supply chains remain resilient. To tackle the factors driving covid-19-induced food insecurity and to keep farmers' supply chains open, we are repurposing programmes in agriculture, social protection and humanitarian assistance. In all of these we continue to put the poorest and most marginalised at the heart of our programmes to address the underlying causes of chronic hunger.

Mr Speaker: I will now suspend the sitting for 30 minutes, until 2.05 pm.

1.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.4 pm

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

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

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (6 MAY)

Motion made,

That—

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

Business	Timings	Remote division designation
Business Statement	Up to 30 minutes	None
Census: Motion to approve the draft Census (England and Wales) Order 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 Speaker declared the Question to be agreed to (Order (4), 22 April).

Business of the House

2.4 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 11 May will include:

MONDAY 11 MAY—Motion to approve the fourth report from the Committee on Standards, followed by a general debate on covid-19.

TUESDAY 12 MAY—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Early Release on Licence) Order 2020, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020, followed by a motion relating to the renewal of the temporary Standing Orders on hybrid proceedings.

WEDNESDAY 13 MAY—Remaining stages of the Agriculture Bill.

THURSDAY 14 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

FRIDAY 15 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 May will include:

MONDAY 18 MAY—Second Reading of a Bill.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Leader of the House, Valerie Vaz, who has five minutes.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement, which takes us up until 18 May. I think we have all adapted to the new way of working. I am still having difficulty in muting and unmuting. Mr Speaker, I do not know if that is something you want to carry over after we come out of this, so that you can mute and unmute us.

I want to start by thanking the team, digital services and everybody from the House staff for working on the remote voting. I voted three times, and all three times I was successful. Joanna Dodd was very helpful to me and a great support, so I want to thank her for her help. All we need now is a way to lobby Ministers virtually, and then I suppose we are done with virtual proceedings. But we do await the Procedure Committee's report on how the voting is taking place before we take it any further.

I think that Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions are on Monday. Nazanin is out, but she is not home, and Anoosheh and Kylie are still incarcerated. Could I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that we get a proper update on Monday? There is plenty of time to ring Tehran to ask if some clemency can be exercised for our dual nationals.

The public health advice at the start of covid-19 said that it affects our senior citizens, so it is quite surprising that our care homes are only now coming to the forefront. Actually, they have been at the brunt of most of the difficulties that are faced. Could I urge the Leader of the House to ensure that perhaps the mobile testing unit visits the care homes, because they are finding it difficult to get their tests? As care homes have said to me, they are almost forgotten, but they are there looking after people at the end of their life when their families cannot be there; they said they are the forgotten ones. Could he also guarantee that care home staff get their personal

protective equipment, and that they will be recognised equally with NHS staff; I am sure he will agree that they should be?

Could I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that there is a statement on the total number of beds that are available in the Nightingale hospitals? It is important for us to know for the next step whether there is capacity so that the NHS can withstand any changes. If the Government had released the 2016 pandemic Exercise Cygnus report—or at least its conclusions—it might have helped with the next stage.

I do not know whether the Leader of the House has seen the next stage from the Irish Government, but they have different sectors—community health; education and childcare; economic activity and work; cultural and social; transport and travel—and all that is going to be set out from 18 May until August. Each one of them has five stages, and it is all subject to the science advice.

It is a pity that the Prime Minister could not use the debate on Monday to come to the House to explain what the next stages are. The Leader of the House knows about the sovereignty of Parliament—he is constantly saying how important Parliament is—and, Mr Speaker, I am sure you will agree with me that that would have been more appropriate. In the meantime, could I ask that the Leader of the Opposition has sight, under Privy Council rules, of the strategy the Government are going to set out on Sunday?

Last week, I raised the fact—I know that it was difficult for people to hear me—that we are not getting responses from Secretaries of State. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Education. Could we have an urgent statement on the support that schools are getting in terms of PPE and the school voucher system? I understand that Wonde has offered its help to the Government, but that has been refused. This is really difficult, with some teachers parcelling up food because children are not able to access vouchers.

I would like the Leader of the House to ask the Health Secretary to apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Rosena Allin-Khan), the shadow Minister for Mental Health. How many times have members of the black, Asian and minority ethnic community and women heard that remark? To compare her to a white male, almost telling her to behave the same way as a white male, is totally unacceptable. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House asked him to apologise. She is on the frontline of the covid crisis, and she deserves an apology.

We are in a unique situation, but the whole country has shown great spirit and resilience—the same sort of spirit and resilience that we will be celebrating on Friday, to mark 75 years since VE Day. Let us remember those who sacrificed their lives—their spirit and resilience—so that we can live in peace. We will always remember them.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady is right to remember 8 May. I know that you, Mr Speaker, will be laying a wreath on behalf of the whole House to commemorate those in the service of the House—Members and non-Members alike—who died during the war. Commemorations will go on across the country, although obviously in a more limited way than would otherwise have happened. She is right that we will remember them.

The right hon. Lady mentions remote voting. I have a letter from the Chairman of the Procedure Committee—as do you, Mr Speaker—and I believe we will be able to vote remotely next week. I am glad to say that that is in place, and the testing seems to have worked reasonably well. Even I was able to do it, so it is relatively straightforward.

The right hon. Lady, as always, mentions Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I am glad to say that there are Foreign Office questions on Monday, and I will ensure that the Department is aware that this question will be raised and that some answer will be expected.

With regard to testing in care homes, obviously, what is going on in care homes is a matter of the greatest priority for the Government. The deaths that have taken place are a terrible sadness. Testing is being and has been extended. The Government's target of 100,000 was met last week. All patients discharged from hospital will be tested before going into care homes, so there are improvements taking place.

It is part of the success of the Government's strategy that the Nightingale hospitals have not been fully utilised. One of the main aims—and, indeed, one of the five tests set out by the Government—was that the NHS should be able to cope with the number of people who had to go into hospital, and that has happened.

The right hon. Lady asked for the next stage to be set out. The Prime Minister said earlier in Prime Minister's questions that a statement will be made on Sunday, so that people know for the beginning of the working week what the new procedures will be. With the House sitting as it currently is, for three days a week, that is perfectly reasonable in the circumstances, although I am aware—as are you, Mr Speaker—that the ministerial code expects statements to be made to the House in the first instance where possible. I am sure that the House will be kept fully up to date. The debate on Monday, which is the Government responding to requirements from the House—with requests coming to me in particular as Leader of the House—is a method of ensuring that the House is kept fully informed and can debate these issues.

I reiterate my thanks to the Opposition for the serious-minded way in which they have approached this crisis and the cross-party working that there has been, including with the Scottish National party. I hope that relations of that kind will continue. It is not for me to promise briefings outside the House of Commons—that is not my responsibility—but the good will and the positive contribution that has been made is very important.

I have no doubt that announcements will be made in relation to the opening of schools in due course. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt those, because I do not know what I would be pre-empting, so I would be making it up as I went along; I had better not do that. With regard to PPE, we will follow the advice, and the advice at the moment is that in school settings, PPE is not a requirement.

As regards the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, I think he is doing a simply magnificent job. We are very lucky to have somebody who has shown such personal commitment, effort and hard work in the job that he has done and in minimising and dealing with the effects of this terrible, unexpected and unprecedented crisis; I am not, therefore, going to ask him to apologise. In the cut and thrust of debate, people are entitled to say things and that is perfectly legitimate.

The right hon. Lady was right to say at the end of her contribution that the resilience we showed 75 years ago is what we are showing now.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con) [V]: The House authorities are indeed to be warmly congratulated on working at speed to get the hybrid system that we are using now up and running. I believe that, this morning, Mr Speaker authorised electronic voting, which is a welcome way to ensure that business can continue to be conducted. We must, though, emphasise the temporary nature of these measures and the unshakeable primacy of meeting, debating and voting in person. Will the Leader of the House therefore give some thought to a hybrid voting system to complement the hybrid Chamber system? Those present could vote in person, and there could be an expanded role for proxies and electronic voting for those who are absent.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and assure him that I, too, am looking forward to returning as soon as possible to the tried-and-tested means of a physical Parliament, which has significant advantages over a virtual Parliament. Although it has been necessary to begin to look for alternative solutions on a temporary basis to ensure that scrutiny can continue, it is intended only to be temporary. I am grateful to the Procedure Committee for its swift assessment of the House's voting system, but we want to get back to a fully physical voting system, not a hybrid system.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: May I commend our digital team for perfecting electronic voting? I am pleased that we now have a system of voting that is simple, safe and secure, and unlike the Leader of the House I look forward to it becoming a permanent aspect of our procedures.

A lot of disquiet has been expressed—including by you, Mr Speaker—that a major statement of Government policy in relation to the crisis should be made first to the press rather than to Parliament. I had expected that there might be something on today's Order Paper to indicate a Government statement on Monday. Will the Leader of the House confirm that there will indeed be such a statement to the House, and that it will be made by the Prime Minister himself?

Neil Ferguson's resignation shows the importance of the Government leading by example. At a time when we are obliging many in the population to endure the privations of lockdown, it seems very off-message for us to be talking about how we can get out of it. Will the Leader of the House tell us what actually requires the physical presence of MPs in the Parliament building? What is it that cannot be done remotely? I believe we should embrace the technological changes made necessary by this crisis and try to make them work better, not engage with them with stubborn resistance and insist that they are but temporary. To that end, I return to the point that I raised last week: we talk of a hybrid Parliament, but in fact what we have achieved is the ability for some to join the physical discussion in the Chamber remotely. The entire thing is still contingent on a physical meeting taking place in the Commons Chamber.

Surely it is now time to consider making use of the digital platform to allow a fully virtual sitting of Parliament. I know that our staff have the expertise and capability to make that happen. It would ensure that there are not

[Tommy Sheppard]

two classes of participant and that all Members—including you, Mr Speaker—are on a level playing field. Does the Leader of the House know of any reason why this cannot be done under the provisions currently agreed? If there is a reason as to why the current Standing Orders prohibit such an experiment, will he take the opportunity of the review scheduled for next Tuesday to introduce whatever changes are necessary to make this happen?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments with regard to the digital voting, and for the tribute he paid to the House staff for doing that. I re-emphasise its temporary nature. We have proceeded with almost unanimous consent to achieve a hybrid Parliament. We would not have done so had people thought this was a sleight of hand—a prestidigitation—to try to change our procedures on a permanent basis. It has been important to maintain the good will of all parliamentarians.

As regards the statement on Sunday, I think the Prime Minister's answer at Prime Minister's questions was the right one. Although the week starts on a Sunday, the business week starts on a Monday, therefore the announcement is being made in preparation for the business week on a Monday. It is therefore the right time to do it, but I can confirm that there will be a statement on Monday. [Interruption.] I notice some giggles in the Chamber, although, Mr Speaker, I am not sure I am meant to notice the giggles emanating from the Chair. It slightly surprises me, because I do not think there are any plans for the House to meet on Sunday.

As regards the hybridity of this Chamber, this House must lead by example. The Government have set out in their guidelines that those who cannot work from home are entitled to and ought to carry on working, especially those in crucial roles. To pretend our democracy is not crucial undermines and undervalues the whole purpose of our democracy. What goes on here—the holding to account and the legislation—is essential, and when we are asking other people to work and to go to their places of work, we should not be ones who are exempt from that. I am glad, therefore, that we have made a hybrid system work.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con) [V]: Can I thank my right hon. Friend for giving the assurance that there will be a statement on Monday, because that will enable Members to be able to ask questions on the statement, which they would not be able to do if it was just a mere introduction to a debate without the ability to intervene? May I also ask my right hon. Friend what he will do to ensure that the system of named day written questions works for the benefit of Back Benchers and their constituents? A host of named day questions are not being answered on time or at all, and I am sorry to say that the Department of Health and Social Care is the worst offender. One question that it has answered was from me, asking how many it had not answered. When that came in on Monday, it showed that figure to be more than 100, and I do not think any of those questions have been answered since, and a whole lot more are in the queue. Will my right hon. Friend do something to help us on that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: One of the reasons why everyone likes and admires my hon. Friend so much is that only he would think up the question of asking how many questions had not been answered. It is a splendid question that should be asked regularly, although most politicians might not be able to give an accurate answer. It is really important that written questions and named day questions are answered. I would, however, ask the House to have some sympathy for the Department of Health and Social Care under these very extraordinary circumstances. Whereas I would normally go in with all cudgels waving, I think with that particular Department under the current circumstances, a degree of latitude is allowable.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: Good afternoon from a bright and sunny Gateshead. The Backbench Business Committee would welcome any indication of whether Backbench Business debates will be included in the House business programme any time soon. If so, how much time is likely to be allocated to facilitate such debates?

We received and considered 10 new applications yesterday, all on different specific aspects of the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic. I realise that a general debate on the Government's response is to be scheduled for Monday, but there is a real appetite to discuss, debate and question particular aspects, such as the job retention furlough scheme, the impact on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, support for the tourism sector, universal basic income, support for families, mental health support for frontline workers, education of vulnerable children and the business interruption loan scheme. All those are requests that we have dealt with, and Members have a thirst for having those topics debated in detail and getting good responses from Ministers. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I remind all MPs that they can add their names as wanting to speak in debates on any application, whatever side of the argument they are on. The Committee wants party balance and both sides of the debate.

On the covid-19 response, could special consideration be given to making sure that domiciliary care workers who go from home to home to look after vulnerable people are tested? I am really concerned, and I think a lot of those domiciliary care workers are concerned, that they might not know they have covid-19 because of asymptomatic positives. That is an aspect of where precedence should, I believe, be given to care workers.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Anyone who now needs a test is able to get one, so I can give some comfort on domiciliary workers. As regards Backbench Business debates, I understand that the hon. Gentleman has also written to me. These debates are important and we want to get them back as soon as possible, but in the short term the priority has been scrutiny and legislation. The hybrid Chamber is not a perfect substitute for the normal Chamber and our normal working practices, and the technology and capacity does not yet facilitate Backbench Business debates; however, I think that it is a strong argument for our physical return. I do not know what the announcement will be on Sunday, but I do feel that Parliament has a leadership role in whatever is announced, and we should always be slightly ahead of what we are expecting the British public to do.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) [V]: It is unsurprising that the SNP should prefer the virtual world to the real world, Mr Speaker, but that is perhaps for another day. The Leader of the House, because he is a diligent constituency MP, will know the significance of horticulture for our economy. It provides some £1.5 billion for our national finances, yet it is in serious trouble in this crisis. The Horticultural Trades Association estimates that £200 million of perishable products will be lost unless action is taken quickly. Will the Leader of the House therefore arrange for a Minister to come to the House to speak about how the sector can be assisted, perhaps by an adjustment to the loans scheme, special grant funding and the reopening of garden centres with all the necessary precautions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is always my wish to facilitate my right hon. Friend, and I am glad to say that there will be Treasury questions on 18 May followed by Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on 19 May, when these important issues may be raised, but I recognise and agree with him that the horticultural sector is a crucial one.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) [V]: The idea that workers will hear the Prime Minister on Sunday and change what they were going to do on Monday, and that businesses up and down the land will suddenly be able to respond from Sunday to Monday morning is utterly preposterous. The reason the Prime Minister is making the statement on Sunday is that he wants to avoid the House of Commons. You, Mr Speaker, are quite right to have already told him off on that basis. I am begging the Leader of the House to please make sure that we have more time to ask questions of Government Ministers. At the moment, we end the day early and we are not sitting on Thursdays. Ministers are not coming to the Chamber enough to answer questions, which we have in bucketloads in our constituencies. In my own patch yesterday, we had a horrific incident where one man was murdered and three others were stabbed. We want to talk about the issues that are happening in our constituencies. We need to challenge the Government on these issues and we cannot if the Prime Minister will not even come to the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Well, the Prime Minister was in the House earlier on, but I accept what the hon. Gentleman is saying in that a virtual Parliament is not a substitute for the real Parliament. Apart from anything else, we are missing the constant chirruping from the hon. Gentleman.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Like me, the Leader of the House must have received many emails from constituents whose holidays have been cancelled and who save annually for just one holiday. Some travel companies are refusing refunds completely while others are offering refunds after 10 to 12 weeks. I know that Ministers are working on this with the industry, but may we have a statement on how we are going to protect our constituents' statutory rights?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, which, as he has said, has been a concern for many who made travel plans prior to the covid-19 outbreak. There has been no change to either the package travel regulations or EU regulation 261, so consumers retain

their right to request a refund. In line with existing legislation, the Government have been clear that if a consumer asks for a refund it must be paid. We recognise the challenges that businesses are facing in processing large volumes of such requests and the regulator is taking a balanced and proportionate approach to enforcement to help manage and mitigate covid-19 impacts. We have been clear, however, that it should not be unduly difficult for passengers to receive a refund and this should be done in a timely manner.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: Mr Speaker—*[Inaudible]*.

Mr Speaker: We now go across to Andrea Leadsom.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con) [V]: I would like to check with my right hon. Friend what consideration he gave to using the proxy voting for baby leave system for Members of Parliament to vote during this time as opposed to an electronic voting system. My grave concern is that if there are technical problems, Members of Parliament may not be able to vote in some very critical votes in the near future.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful for my right hon. Friend's question; she herself was such a distinguished Leader of the House. The issue is the technical problems one rather than the proxy one. The proxy vote would not necessarily have helped because it would have brought people to the House, we would have had Divisions, and that would not necessarily have solved the problem that we were trying to address. But there are measures in place for technical problems. A Member who is having difficulty voting on the Members' hub will be able to text or email the relevant House office leaving a telephone number. House staff will immediately call the Member back on that number and, once they have performed the necessary checks and are satisfied that it is indeed the Member, arrange for the Member's vote to be recorded.

More broadly, the changes that have been made to allow for the creation of a hybrid Parliament are strictly temporary and will last for only as long as a completely physical Parliament is impossible. Within that time, Mr Speaker, if you think that a Division is not working properly, you have the ability to stop the Division for it to be re-held at a later stage. In addition, people will always be able to check their vote because it is a public rather than a private vote.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Fifty per cent. of bed and breakfasts do not pay business rates, the events industry often does not pay business rates either because it uses outside spaces, and language schools are excluded from the Government's support for tourism. I have tried to raise this issue with Ministers directly in writing, but the Government have not reissued the document, "Government ministers and responsibilities", which lists the private and direct contacts for Ministers, since 11 October 2019, and we are ending up getting generic responses from civil servants. Will the Leader of the House make sure that that document is reissued to us, either publicly or privately, so that we can directly contact Ministers and their private offices rather than just the Department?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, which has recently been a matter of correspondence between the shadow Leader of the House and me. We hope to be able to reissue the list of email addresses that can be used by Members later today, but certainly within the next few days.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con) [V]: As a former small business owner, I understand how vital it is to get people who are furloughed back to work as soon as it is safe for them to do so in order to support the economy. A strong export market is particularly important for companies in my constituency such as Perkins and General Electric. May I therefore ask the Leader of the House when he could find time for discussing global supply chain resilience post this coronavirus lockdown?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue and for her characteristic championship of her constituency and its businesses. The Government are very aware of the importance of global supply chains. That is one of the reasons we have taken a decision to ensure that the supply chains between Great Britain and Northern Ireland are supported, for example. The Secretary of State for International Trade recently attended the G20 trade ministerial meeting, where she called for trade to keep flowing and the maintenance of the supply of essential goods and services during this unprecedented time. I also note that the crisis has demonstrated the excellent job that many have done in keeping supplies going, including supermarkets maintaining essential supplies that people rely on. There are understandable concerns about this issue, but it could be raised in the debate on Monday.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: I have a particularly harrowing case in my constituency: a young couple who had a taxi business,

Leanne and Fraser Gair. They now have no income whatsoever and have fallen through what I might call the floorboards of the safety net. Will the Leader of the House be kind enough to agree with me that it would be helpful if a Minister came to the House to outline to Members like me how we can speedily try to help these people, pick them up off the floor and get them going again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point. I think all of us as constituency MPs have businesses that we would like to provide more help to and that find they cannot apply for the scheme they want. The Treasury has made enormous strides to help people. There are Treasury questions on 18 May, when this matter can be raised. The schemes are enormous and widespread, but there are some who fall through the cracks.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I would like to thank the Speaker, my right hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) for all their work on electronic voting. Have we test-proofed the systems to ensure they are robust against cyber-interference?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The issue of cyber-security is indeed important. I can assure my hon. Friend that Mr Speaker has taken a personal and strong interest in this matter. The Procedure Committee has done a full assessment of the proceedings and confirmed that they are ready to deploy. We have taken proper advice from Government sources on cyber-security to ensure that the system is as robust as possible, but there is the final safeguard that Members' names are published. They are therefore able to check that their vote has been properly recorded, in the highly unlikely event of any cyber-attack.

Census

2.36 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I beg to move,

That items 2 (resident particulars), 5, 6 (visitor particulars), 10, 11, 13, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24 (demographic particulars), 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, 34, 36(d) (education and employment particulars), 41, 42, 43 (accommodation particulars), 45, 46 (additional particulars for individual returns) in Schedule 2, and items 1, 2, 3 and 4 in Schedule 3 to the draft Census (England and Wales) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 2 March, be approved.

It is a pleasure to join you for my first time in the Chamber under these hybrid arrangements, Mr Speaker.

The draft Order in Council was laid before both Houses on 2 March, under the provisions of the Census Act 1920. It provides for the 22nd census of England and Wales to take place on 21 March next year. It prescribes the date of the census, the people to be counted, the people responsible for making a census return and the information to be given in those returns. The draft order gives effect to the recommendations of the UK Statistics Authority and its executive arm, the Office for National Statistics, as set out in its December 2018 White Paper.

The primary aim of the census is to provide accurate data on the population, so the information that it provides includes people's characteristics, education, religion, ethnicity, working life and health. It gives decision makers in national and local government, as well as in community groups, charities and businesses, the opportunity to better serve communities and individuals in the UK. It enables a wide range of services and future planning to be supported.

The statutory instrument before us today is unusual, with a mixed procedure. It is principally subject to the draft negative procedure, but under the terms of the 1920 Act, some questions—those printed in italics in the draft order—may be included in the census only if they are approved by an affirmative resolution of both Houses. It is with those elements of the order that the motion before us is concerned. They include questions on health, education and national identity. If the House wishes to debate the census more broadly, I would of course be happy to try to answer hon. Members' questions, but would emphasise that the scope of the motion is somewhat narrow.

The draft order is the first stage of the secondary legislation necessary for a census to be held. The order covers England and Wales. Subject to the approval of this Order in Council, the Government will bring forward census regulations for England, which will set out the final questions and govern much of the operation of the census. Those regulations will describe the content and functionality of the online forms for this, the first predominantly online census. It will also contain copies of the corresponding paper questionnaires. Separate regulations for the census in Wales will be laid before the Welsh Parliament by the Welsh Government. Hon. and right hon. Members will be aware that the census order for Scotland has already been approved by the Scottish Parliament, and the census order for Northern Ireland has been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly. Together, these three statutory instruments allow for the 2021 census to take place on the same date across the United Kingdom.

Let me turn to the proposals for the census. The ONS's work has been informed by extensive consultation, research and engagement. The majority of questions will stay the same as in 2011 to ensure comparability of data between censuses. New questions or response options are only included after research and consultation that provide compelling evidence for their inclusion. For 2021, there will be new questions on past service in the armed forces, and new voluntary questions on sexual orientation and gender identity.

As I have mentioned briefly already, the 2021 census will be predominantly online, making it easier for people to take part when and how they want. Of course, help—including language support and paper forms—will be available for those who need it. Nobody will be missed out and everybody can identify as they wish. This will ensure that the 2021 census reflects the society we live in today, and that will enable national and local government, community groups, charities and businesses to better serve communities and individuals across the country.

Our aim is for the census to be the most inclusive ever, so the ONS will work with local groups and organisations across the country to raise awareness of the census, to promote the different response options and the new search-as-you-type functionality, and to support people in completing the census online or on paper. To be successful in its aims, the census relies on the willing support and participation of the public, on whose behalf the information is collected. With hon. Members' help and support to promote awareness of the census and its benefits in all our communities, the ONS can ensure that the '21 census provides reliable data that benefits all our constituents.

The census is unique in the insights that it provides into our nation and the data it provides to support policy making nationally and locally. Data from the census can inform a wide range of planning decisions, including on school places, hospital beds, GP and dental services, where to build houses and roads, and businesses' decisions on where and in what to invest. The census provides us with the opportunity to build a detailed and comprehensive picture of the nation.

At this point I will mention, as I am sure this will come up in the debate, that social distancing measures have of course meant that some national events have been postponed or cancelled. The 2021 census, which will be primarily online, is still nearly a year away, and the ONS is working to deliver it as planned, but we will continue to assess the situation and any implications for the census, including appropriate contingency measures, should they be needed.

Community engagement will very much go ahead and onwards from now, including with local government in all our areas, to help ensure that everybody can take part. To this end, dedicated staff on the ground will have a particular focus on hard-to-reach communities, which I know will be welcome to all Members. I commend the draft order to the House, and look forward to our debate.

2.42 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak for the Opposition Front Bench, supporting changes to make a more inclusive census that is fit for the 21st century.

[Cat Smith]

The census is an important tool for taking a snapshot of the country as it is today, useful for Government planning now and precious to the historians of the future, who will use this vast record of how we live our lives. Perhaps the most telling way in which this is a 21st-century census is the ambition that the majority of respondents will complete the census online. For many, this will make completing the census easier and collating the data faster. However, I urge the Minister not to forget those who are still digitally excluded.

This legislation will introduce new voluntary questions about gender identity and sexual orientation, allowing as yet unknown numbers of lesbian, gay and bisexual citizens, as well as those who have transitioned their gender identity, the chance to be recognised in official statistics. This is a huge step forward for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people of this country. It is not only symbolically important, but practically necessary. Information derived from the census helps to inform policy, plan services and distribute resources effectively to local government and health authorities. By building a clear picture of LGBT communities, resources can be targeted more effectively. I am proud of the progress that we are making on LGBT equality, which started under the previous Labour Government, by repealing the discriminatory section 28, introducing civil partnerships and equalising the age of consent. We are now seeing an LGBT-inclusive census for 2021.

Labour is proud to support the LGBT community, and our support has never wavered. Although this is not personally the Minister's responsibility, I cannot give up the opportunity to remind her that we are still waiting for her Government to publish the results of their consultation on reform of the outdated Gender Recognition Act 2004. I am sure that the House and the LGBT community, who will be following the progress made on the census today, would really appreciate an update from the Government for their reason in delaying reform of that Act.

With regard to statistics, the LGBT community is currently a hidden population. Although we do not have accurate data about the size of the community, we do know that it has been hit hard by a decade of Tory austerity, preventing the development of truly specialist LGBT services, and we know that homophobic and transphobic hate crimes are on the rise. Since 2014, offences against gay, lesbian and bisexual people have doubled, while offences against trans people have trebled. This analysis was released after two women were attacked on a bus in London last year for refusing to kiss in front of a group of men. That is just one example of LGBT hate crime that was recorded.

The position of LGBT homeless people warrants particular attention in this discussion, not least given the shocking statistic that up to 24% of the youth homeless population are from the LGBT community. I pay tribute to the Albert Kennedy Trust for its continued work in this area, but the unprecedented rise in homelessness under this Government is a national shame. I ask the Minister whether, when the census data eventually exposes the size of this community, which has been neglected for so long, the Government will finally provide the specialist LGBT services that are so desperately needed, including support for those who are homeless?

The Labour party fully supports the inclusion of a new question about armed forces personnel and veterans in the census. This will ensure that charities, public bodies and service providers will be able to meet the needs of this community. It is right and proper that those who have stood up and served our country are recognised and supported when they return to civilian life. Referring back to my earlier points on homelessness, it is a scandal that so many veterans find themselves street homeless.

If minority groups are represented in the census, they will have a better chance of receiving the resources they need. That is why we warmly welcome the inclusion of the Roma community in the 2021 census. The Roma are among the most disadvantaged people in the country and have poorer outcomes in key areas such as health and education. The community has faced overt discrimination and abuse for generations. Data about this community will hopefully lead to better resource allocation.

Last year, the Women and Equalities Committee released an eye-opening report, making a damning critique of the progress made in addressing inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. I challenge the Government to do more to improve the outcomes in education and health and to tackle discrimination and hate crime, as well as violence against women and girls. Today's inclusion of Roma in the next census is an important step in that, but will the Minister say more about what she hopes the Government will do, or what she believes they have done, to develop a clear and effective plan to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities?

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) hope to speak in this debate about the issues raised by the Sikh communities that they represent in this place. They will express how their constituents want to see the campaign for the inclusion of a Sikh tick box in the ethnic identity question raised in our discussions this afternoon. There is no doubt that policy decisions have overlooked the Sikh community in our country. Up-to-date statistics are few and far between, but the UK Sikh survey in 2016 found that almost one in five Sikhs had encountered discrimination in public places over a year, with Sikhs who wear religious iconography or clothing most likely to experience abuse. The report stated that the Government had

"systematically failed the minority Sikh community by not adequately responding to the disproportionate impact of racism and hate crime targeting Sikhs since 9/11."

A freedom of information request submitted by the Network of Sikh Organisations revealed that 28% of victims recorded under the Islamophobic hate crime category during 2015 were in fact non-Muslims. Indeed, in 2018 we saw a Sikh visitor to our Parliament racially attacked, with his turban ripped off while queuing for the security checks to enter Parliament. A lack of accurate data can mean that such anti-Sikh hate crimes are perhaps neglected, because many are inaccurately recorded. Indeed, evidence suggests that the census has historically underestimated the Sikh community in the UK. For example, Sikhs are believed to constitute just 1% of the London population, yet account for 5% of deaths among homeless men. Either the Sikh population

is higher than estimated, or the Sikh community has been disproportionately affected by homelessness. That point is especially pertinent in the context of the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on minority communities, including health and social care workers.

How does the Minister plan to address such inequalities while we lack the accurate data needed on the Sikh community? Does she recognise that the chronic statistical under-reporting of communities such as the Sikh community could allow discrimination to go unnoticed? Currently, only data collected under the ethnicity question in the census is used by public bodies for resource allocation and service planning decisions. We know that data collected under the optional question of religion would be more accurate in reflecting the Sikh community. The religion question should not be made compulsory, but what action could be taken to ensure that the census data collected on religion could be used by public bodies in the same way that data on ethnic groups is handled?

Lastly, will the Minister outline what action the Government are taking to ensure that the Sikh community does not remain statistically invisible to law and policy makers? It is clearer now more than ever that minority groups can no longer be left invisible to those responsible for making public policy decisions.

We do not want to see delay in the census, and we support the important changes in the legislation. I look forward to hearing the Minister's responses in her closing remarks.

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.

2.52 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Frankly, this measure is a slap in the face for the Sikh community, a community that has contributed so much to our country not only in recent years, but over the past couple of centuries of our joint history. As we know, this sizeable, dynamic community is contributing in business, the professions, the armed forces—we recorded last year the huge contribution and the vast number of deaths in world war one—politics, the media and medicine. Only a month or so ago, that was highlighted by the death of Manjeet Singh Riyat, the A&E leader at Royal Derby Hospital. Clearly, the Sikh community feel strongly about this: in the 2011 census, 83,000 ticked the box saying "Other" and wrote in, "Sikh".

Why does this matter? First, because Sikhs have been legally recognised as an ethnic group for nearly 40 years, since a House of Lords ruling in 1983. The ethnic group set question was only introduced in the 1991 census. At that time, the Office for National Statistics stated that it was introduced to help public bodies assess equal opportunities and develop anti-discrimination policies. Ethnic group data, not religious data, is what is used by public bodies to make decisions on the allocation of resources and the provision of public services. The Prime Minister's most recent race disparity audit indicated that there were 176 datasets spanning sectors from housing and education to employment, health and the criminal justice system, but no data on Sikhs. Effectively,

they are invisible. As the covid-19 crisis has shown, there has been no systematic collection of data on the number of Sikhs tested as positive or on the number who have tragically died, even though we are inquiring into the question of differentiation in different groups of health outcomes. Although they come to prominence when a key worker dies, nobody is actually properly collecting the data. Quite frankly, we either need to change the local practice of how this is assessed and how Departments work, or we need an additional box in the census. I would argue that one is probably quite a bit simpler than the other.

I am frankly still perplexed by the Government's stubbornness on this issue. It seems perverse of the Government to marginalise and ignore this important community and our society. The Minister mentioned bringing forward further orders on the census at a later stage, so I ask her, even at this late stage, to restore the Sikh community to their proper place in the census.

I will also touch on another matter: how we run the census in the first place. The Minister rightly indicated some improvements and changes, but fundamentally, the basic way of collecting the census remains unchanged over the last couple of centuries. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) said that this is a snapshot. It is, but as public bodies, we are still using data from 2011, and in many of our constituencies and right the way across the country, there have been very significant changes. Are we capturing that or is there a better way of doing this? Would it not be better now, in the modern age of technology, to look at, for example, creating a virtual national register and having up-to-date information undertaken by sampling and polling?

A whole number of areas are going to be changed by the coronavirus epidemic, including travel to work, work patterns and holiday patterns. A huge range of changes will take place, and we need to be able to capture those in real time. I therefore ask the Minister to look at that, and, by the way, there is an additional layer of her responsibilities where this would be an advantage: we could end up with a much more accurate and comprehensive electoral register, and do it much cheaper.

2.56 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister and her Department for the work that she has done on this subject so far. The House can probably tell by my accent that I am not actually Cornish-born. While many proud Cornishmen and women are Cornish by birth, some are Cornish by choice. I have adopted Cornwall as my home and Cornwall has adopted me, and I am grateful to live its abundant heritage, flamboyant culture and its unique way of life every day. It is not all sandy toes and salty kisses, but Cornwall is my family's home and roots for our daughter as she grows. As much as I love and care for Cornwall and the people I represent, I will never actually be Cornish and I certainly do not pretend to be. I was not born there. Instead, I consider this subject as objectively as possible and with a sense of fair play.

Recently, we celebrated the sixth anniversary of the recognition of the Cornish as a national minority through the framework convention for the protection of national minorities under the Council of Europe. When Cornwall received this recognition, the Government at the time

[*Cherilyn Mackrory*]

pledged that the Cornish would now be afforded “the same status” as the UK’s other Celtic people—the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish.

Since then, the Government and Cornwall Council have worked together to try to further the cause. I have no doubt that the inclusion of a Cornish tick box in the next census in 2021 would go a long way to our achieving the same status as our fellow Celts. This would mark a significant milestone in our journey as a national minority. I say with deep regret that the Cornish are the only national minority who would be denied a tick box if the present draft of the 2021 census is to be agreed, so there is more to do to ensure that the Cornish are treated in the same manner as the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish, despite the equal minority status.

I believe that there will be an option for people who identify as Cornish to tick the “Other” box. In the 2011 census, 83,966 people in Britain ticked the “Other” box and physically wrote “Cornish” as their national identity. Within Cornwall, that total was 73,220, or 14% of the total population. We can assume that many more thousands would have ticked the Cornish box had the option been available. By way of comparison, in the 2001 census, when there was no Welsh tick box, 14% of Welsh residents wrote the word “Welsh”. In 2011, when a tick box was available for the Welsh, the percentage who recorded themselves as Welsh rose to 67%. That clearly indicates that without a tick box, there is significant under-counting of an important national minority.

An education survey of schoolchildren in Cornwall showed that more than 50% of the children identified themselves as Cornish. Identifying as Cornish is a growing trend among our young people, rather than a dated one. The Cornish are proud in every sense of the word, and we must remember that there are thousands of Cornish men and women who do not live in Cornwall. It was once said that it was possible to find a Cornishman in every mine on earth. Although we can give only the Cornish people living here the opportunity to tick their box, I believe it is important that we make that an effortless and straightforward exercise.

The census is not just a tool for identity; as we know, it is much more than that. The census is a once-in-a-decade data collection exercise of epic proportions. It asks questions of all of us, our households and our homes. In completing it, we help to build a detailed snapshot of our society. Information from the census helps the Government and local authorities plan and fund our local services, such as health, education and highways. That helps to ensure that funds are allocated where they are most needed.

In a motion put to full council last year, all 123 elected members of Cornwall Council—at the time, that included me—voted in favour of supporting a Cornish tick box at the next census. Councillors from all political groups, along with the Cornish MPs, have campaigned for a tick box for many years. As a newly elected MP, I am probably rather late to this particular party. However, Cornwall’s minority status and how we quantify that is extremely important to Cornwall and the Cornish people, wherever they happen to live, and therefore it is important to me.

I look forward during my time in this place to working closely with my Cornish colleagues and Ministers to further this cause, to ensure that we meet the obligations

set out six years ago and demonstrate a positive commitment to Cornwall’s national identity and culture. Consideration of a tick box at the 2021 census would be a most welcome start.

3.1 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: First, I want to congratulate those in Wales, including my Plaid Cymru colleagues, who have campaigned hard for the right of Welsh people to identify as Asian Welsh or black Welsh in the ethnic question if they so desire. That reflects the reality in Wales today, and I am glad that the Welsh Government and the ONS have responded. I am, however, concerned that the census order does not reflect that change in the tick box options. Will the Minister therefore assure us that the census regulations, when they are laid before Parliament and in the Senedd, will reflect that change?

This will be the first predominantly digital census, which I welcome. However, I am concerned about the robustness of the process where there is poor internet or no internet at all, as is the case in much of rural Wales. Will the Minister therefore update us on the arrangements with community organisations to support people to access the census, and give us the number of those who will need digital support or may want a paper copy instead?

There are good census datasets, from the 19th century onwards, on the number, percentage, location and so on of Welsh speakers, but we have no information about Welsh speakers in other parts of the UK. In the 2001 census, some respondents in England were intrigued by question 17, which was marked “intentionally left blank”. That was because question 17 in Wales asked about the Welsh language ability of respondents—something that was not deemed to be required in England. However, the 2011 census showed that 507,000 people in England were Welsh-born. If 20% of those people speak Welsh, that is another 100,000 Welsh speakers on top of the 600,000 in Wales. That was a missed opportunity, because we have a target in Wales of increasing the number of Welsh speakers to 1 million. Will the Minister, even at this late stage, consider including a question on the Welsh language in the census in England?

Finally, I would like to add my voice and those of my Plaid Cymru colleagues to the call for a Cornish identity tick box, for which Cornish Members rightly make a strong case, as we have just heard. In 2001, as we heard, there was no option for a Welsh tick box, so handy little stickers the size of the tick box were produced by a person or persons unknown, allowing people to tick that box, even though it was not part of the official form. There was also a write-in option, and 14% of Welsh people wrote “Welsh” in the “Other” box. Does that mean that only 14% of people at the time in Wales identified themselves as Welsh? No, it was a fault with the question. In the following census, there was a tick box, and the percentage of self-identifying Welsh people shot up to 67%.

Enabling Cornish people to assert their national identity will not only allow them to feel represented, but give us a correct result as to the Cornish identity in 2021. Let me therefore conclude by saying *meur ras, or diolch yn fawr* in Welsh.

3.5 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: As I make my maiden virtual speech, some people will say that the last thing we should be worrying about at the moment is a national census. Well, I disagree. In all the circumstances, this is an excellent moment to decide how we best prepare for the census. An awful lot has happened to our country in the past 10 years, and the world has changed. Accordingly, it is more important than ever that we know precisely how many people actually live in the country. Is it 65 million, 70 million or 75 million? What is the number?

Stemming from that, we need to deal with an issue that has been dodged for so long: how many Members of Parliament should there be? I am not *au fait* with the Government's current thinking as to how many Members of the House of Lords there should be, but I was one of those colleagues who were content to see the number of Members of Parliament reduced from 650 to 600. When we get the accurate figures for the number of people living in this country, I would hope that all Members of Parliament would represent roughly the same number of people.

I would also like to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister a little more detail as to how the census will be conducted, what the penalties will be for failure to comply and over what period it will be carried out. We have heard from colleagues about the Sikh community being represented in the new questions. I would like to know the basis on which the new questions were included and who made the decisions. The more questions we include, and the more complicated the census becomes, the less accurate it will perhaps be.

Apparently, the Government are hoping that 70% of respondents will fill in the form online, and paper copies will be made available only on request. Surely, it would make more sense and be more cost-effective to send people both the paper copy and the online details. How many people—particularly the elderly and the vulnerable—still do not have access to a computer at home? Will there be a cost for people who request paper copies?

With that in mind, I would like to raise a further issue with regard to accessibility. What provisions are being made to ensure that the census is accessible to people who are blind or partially sighted? Will it be made available in large print, audio description or Braille? In addition, what provisions will be made for those for whom English is not their first language? Will the census be made available in other languages, and what languages will those be? While on the subject of accessibility, I would also like clarification of the special arrangements available to ensure that those who live in communal establishments rather than individual households are counted.

I note that consideration is being given to changing the question on long-term health and disabilities, and I would welcome some clarification on that. Will the census now make a distinction between mental and physical health, and what guidance will there be on answering the relevant question?

We need to think sharply about the purpose of this census. It is not to pry into people's lives, but to make sure that we understand and get a real sense of what we are as a country. Let me pluck out just one bit

of information: fair allocations of money in each area. Taking that into account, we need to encourage respondents to fill out the census online, so it will be more important than ever to ensure that individual personal data is secure. I therefore ask my hon. Friend the Minister: is there a robust system in place to ensure that no sensitive data is susceptible to cyber-attacks, and is there a contingency plan if a successful attack does happen?

There is no point in conducting what will inevitably be an expensive census unless we put the information to good use. That debate can perhaps wait for another time, but the evidence produced by the census will undoubtedly prove that Southend should be made a city.

3.10 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: I am delighted to speak in this debate because I have long waited for an opportunity to raise an issue that is very important to many of my Sikh constituents in Bedford and Kempston. In advance of the debate, Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh gurdwaras in Bedford and Kempston and local residents got in touch, asking me to make the case for the inclusion of a Sikh ethnicity tick box in the next census.

The ONS has considered changes to the ethnic group question, including the introduction of a Sikh tick box, but following research and consultation, it decided not to recommend implementing those changes. After a decade of many UK Sikhs making the case for Sikhism to be counted as a separate ethnic group, when it has been legally recognised as such for the last 40 years, that was very disappointing.

Sikhism is already an option under the religion question on the census, but Sikhs also identify as a religio-ethnic community, and many therefore wish it to be considered an ethnicity on the form. In the 2011 census, more than 83,000 Sikhs—or 20%—rejected the 18 existing ethnic tick boxes and chose instead to tick “Other” and write “Sikh”. Their preferred option is to include a Sikh tick box in the ethnic group question, in addition to the Sikh tick box in the religion question.

It is important to remember the reason behind this. This is not just a question of identity, but more about asserting a stake in society, which can be very difficult for minority groups. Ethnic groups specified in the census are used by public bodies for resource allocation, to inform policy development and make service planning decisions. Without a Sikh tick-box response option to the ethnicity question in the 2022 census, how can Sikhs be properly monitored by public bodies in the exercise of the public sector equality duty? Many Sikhs have campaigned for this so that action can be taken to address major issues such as bullying, intimidation and hate crimes against the community.

We do not even have an accurate count of the Sikh population in the UK because the optional box on religion is so poorly answered. While official data recorded the Sikh population in the UK at around 430,000 in the 2011 census, the real estimate is between 600,000 and 700,000. What is the point of collecting data if it is not accurate? That is vital, and not only because the point of the census is for public bodies, including the Government and local authorities, to formulate relevant policy and appropriate services. As covid-19 has exposed, it is about so much more. The high number of black, Asian

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

and minority ethnic deaths is now the subject of an official inquiry. If Sikhs are not identifying in accurate numbers under the religion census box—and we know that they are not—the Government do not know what proportion of Sikhs have tested positive for covid-19 or tragically died. Sikhs of course are represented across all ethnicities, but that highlights the importance of collecting data for a very relevant purpose.

This is more than a tick-box exercise. We are failing the Sikh community if they do not feel truly represented. The management committee of 112 gurdwaras, large and small, across the UK—with an official membership of more than 107,000 and an estimated congregation of 460,000—has asked the Government officially to recognise their religio-ethnic status. That is a lot of people in the minority community to ignore. It is time this Government officially acknowledged them.

3.15 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) (V): The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I wish to discuss the matter of a tick box for Cornish national identity.

There is no doubt about the historic identity of the Cornish. We have been around for more than 12,000 years and, along with our Welsh cousins, we are the most ancient people on this island. We have our own language, which is about 5,000 years old but is enjoying a revival. We have our own flag, patron saint and even our own party. The idea of Cornish as a national identity in its own right is not some ageing romantic notion; it is a belief that is alive, real and passionately held today—and growing.

The Cornish received a huge boost when, in 2014, the Council of Europe framework convention for the protection of national minorities officially recognised our identity. That was duly welcomed and embraced by the UK Government, who stated at that time that they would give the Cornish the same recognition as the other Celtic people of these islands—the Welsh, the Scottish and the Irish. It was a moment of celebration: at last, for the first time in centuries, the Cornish had been recognised by the UK Government. A sense of optimism was unleashed, the struggle was over: we had been recognised and told that we would be given equality of recognition.

However, that optimism proved to be misplaced. Far from the struggle being over, it has never felt more important, because having been granted that recognition, what is now important is that it is acted upon—that it actually comes to mean something, not just in words but with something tangible.

An advisory committee from the Council of Europe visited the UK in March 2016 to assess how the UK Government and other public bodies were complying with the articles of the framework convention. In early 2017, it published an opinion that was very critical of the UK Government and their failure to act on the articles of the convention. In the committee's report, one key proposal to address that shortcoming is to include in the 2021 census a Cornish tick box for national identity. It is hugely disappointing, and indeed frustrating, that we are here today and a tick box for the Cornish has not yet been included in the upcoming census.

It would be simple and straightforward to grant, and enable the Government to say that they had actually delivered something to recognise the Cornish.

However, the frustration has not been having to convince Ministers; we have been consistently told that we need to convince the ONS. From the numerous meetings and discussions that I and others have had with the ONS, it is clear that it sees this as a localised and minority issue. It has failed to recognise that there are hundreds of thousands of Cornish men and women living across the UK who wish to be able to register their nationality as Cornish.

I cannot say often enough that this is not about the geographical place of Cornwall; it is about the national identity of Cornish people, who are found living in all corners of the UK. I am sad to say that it appears that the ONS simply does not get this. It certainly feels as though the ONS was determined not to grant the tick box for Cornish national identity, whatever case was made, because every objection that it has raised to a tick box has been answered. We have demonstrated time and again the unique case for the Cornish, and it is a unique case—no other indigenous national people in these islands are able to make such a claim. We are the only indigenous national identity that is not recognised in that way.

Sadly, because of the circumstances that Parliament is currently operating in, we find ourselves unable to push this matter to a vote in order to amend the order. If we had been able to vote, I feel sure that one would have been called.

In winding up, I have two points to put to the Minister. First, we have been told that, in place of a tick box, a write-in option will be available for people to identify as Cornish, and that a campaign will be run to draw awareness to this, focused in Cornwall. But the Cornish diaspora are spread far and wide across this nation. In fact, more Cornish people live outside Cornwall than in it. Will the Minister therefore ensure that any such campaign is national and not limited to Cornwall?

Finally, the Government continue to have an obligation to give the Cornish equal recognition as the other Celtic people, so if not a tick box, what will the Government do to ensure that the Cornish are recognised as we rightly should be?

3.20 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) [V]: We live in a multicultural society that is full of self-expression, and a census provides a snapshot of that diversity. The questions in a census, therefore, are themselves important; if we do not ask the right ones, the picture of our country is distorted. Making sure that all people count is important.

On census night 1911, Emily Wilding Davison hid illegally in a broom cupboard in the Palace of Westminster, to ensure that a woman would be recorded as being in the House of Commons that night. Clearly, the contents of a census take on their own intrinsic value, which is another reason to ensure that we take care how the questions are worded and what responses they enable people to give. That is one of the reasons why the addition of questions about sexuality and gender identity are so important: it demonstrates that we regard sexual and gender identity as a core part of people's lives. For LGBTQ people, who often suffer so much discrimination, recognition in itself can mean a great deal.

Such care must also carry over to how members of the Government express themselves. I know that many Members were very concerned by the excluding comments of the Minister for Women and Equalities when she appeared before the Women and Equalities Committee. How politicians, as representatives of their constituents, use their language matters to the people they represent.

We should take care in how we word our questions. If different groups and people are not carefully consulted, we risk generating questions that people do not want to answer. For some communities, their religion is also how they express their ethnicity, and in order to be truly inclusive we must work to ensure that the census reflects that. If a large number of individuals from a particular community, such as the Sikh community, feel that filling in a free-text box is the only way to express their identity, then we have failed to be truly inclusive.

These questions of identity also matter practically. The census directly informs how Government go about delivering public services. One of the great benefits of the new questions on sexuality, gender identity and veterans is that, over the next decade, hopefully, we can ensure that those groups of people who have historically lacked support and provision can get the services they need. Having previously worked in military resettlement, I am pleased that the Government are recognising that community's contribution. The census will help to ensure that the public services we provide meet the duties under the Equality Act 2010, one of which is to eliminate discrimination. I wholeheartedly support that.

However, it seems strange to me that, while public service delivery is determined by the number of people in the census, for constituency boundaries we seem interested only in the number of people on the electoral roll. MPs provide a public service too—I think that is very obvious at this time. We are often the people our constituents turn to when all other public services have failed. It is electors who determine boundaries, but it should be the number of people who require services.

It is not just about the questions on the census; it is also about who answers them. Looking forward to the next steps in the process, it will be the census regulations that will deal with the operational practicalities. Although 2021 will be the first time that the vast majority of responses will be made online, the census has to capture everyone in our society. We must ensure that the most vulnerable in particular are represented. I would welcome representations from the Minister on how the census will reach deprived and disadvantaged communities and individuals, such as the homeless and rough sleepers.

It is good that the Office for National Statistics is considering British Sign Language support, alongside Braille, large-print and easy-read versions of the census. I would like to see such measures in the UK Government's daily covid briefings too.

According to the White Paper on the census regulations, at least 17,000 census field officers are being recruited to support those who cannot complete the census online. Of course, with the census taking place in March 2021, the covid-19 outbreak might continue to pose a particular challenge. It is certainly not unforeseeable that we will still be in this state of social distancing by next March. Can the Government confirm what steps they and the ONS are taking now to ensure that, if social distancing is still in place, the census can still reach people who are not able to take part in it online?

This census represents a huge commitment of resources. We must take every opportunity to ensure that the results returned are truly reflective of all corners of British society.

3.24 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab) [V]: I represent a large Sikh population in Erith and Thamesmead, and I am speaking in this debate today to represent their views on the inclusion of the Sikh ethnic tick box response in the census 2021. I agree with the comments of the shadow Minister for young people and voter engagement, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), along with my parliamentary colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). I also take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who have spent a significant number of years lobbying for the change, along with the Sikh community.

Approximately 6,000 people attend the Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh temple in Erith and Belvedere, which is in my constituency of Erith and Thamesmead. The committee of that temple is in full support of the inclusion of a Sikh ethnic tick box and feels that it is long overdue.

The ethnic group question on the census was introduced in 1991 to help public bodies to assess equal opportunities and develop anti-discrimination policies. The data is used by 40,000 public bodies to address their legal responsibilities under equalities legislation and to make decisions about the allocation of resources and the provision of public services. We can therefore conclude that, if Sikhs do not have an ethnic tick box option, their needs will not be properly monitored and assessed by public bodies. Just because discrimination is not properly monitored does not mean that it does not exist.

According to the UK Sikh survey 2016, almost one in five Sikhs have encountered discrimination in a public place. Sikhs have also reported discrimination in schools, in public and in the workplace and have failed to have their ethnicity properly recorded by the authorities. We can see the effects of the exclusion of a Sikh ethnic tick box currently in that there is no systematic collection of data on the number of Sikhs who have tested positive for, or tragically died from covid-19. That point has been echoed by a number of my colleagues.

There is a clear demand for the Sikh ethnic tick box option to be included in the census, not only from the Sikh community in my constituency, who have made it clear that they are in favour of it, but across the country. In the census 2011, more than 83,000 Sikhs, or 20%, rejected the eight existing ethnic tick boxes and chose instead to tick "other" and write "Sikh".

The all-party parliamentary group for British Sikhs carried out an independent survey of gurdwaras to assess public acceptability. All 112 gurdwaras surveyed were in favour of the option of a Sikh ethnic tick box. In 2018, it was concluded that a Sikh ethnic tick box would not be acceptable to a proportion of the Sikh population. That was based on 53 participants in six Sikh focus groups assembled in 2018. In the light of the most recent survey results, I join the Sikh Federation UK in asking whether Ministers appreciate that the management committees of 112 gurdwaras large and small across the

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

UK—with an official membership of more than 107,000 and an estimated congregation of more than 460,000—carry much more weight than 53 individual Sikhs in focus groups.

Sikhs have been legally recognised as an ethnic group for nearly 40 years, since the House of Lords ruling in 1983. As well as the need for the correct allocation of resources and support for Sikhs from public bodies, it is right that after 40 years Sikhs should be allowed the opportunity to identify their ethnicity. For those reasons, I support my Erith and Thamesmead constituents in their calls for there to be a Sikh ethnic tick box in the census 2021.

3.29 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare). Let me start by saying that I welcome the order. I am sure that there is almost universal support for a census. Although I support it, I am interested to know more about the decisions the Government have made in arriving at it.

The purpose of the order is simply to provide direction for next year's census on the population of England and Wales. It includes the date of the census, the area to be covered, what is required in the return, who is included and the particulars that may be requested and from whom. I remember my first census back when I was eight years old, and just how excited I got. I do not understand quite why, but I just appreciated the scale of this enormous exercise.

Given the fact that we have one coming up next year, we must recognise the importance of this data collection in giving some snapshot, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) said, of the nature of our society and the people that we are. For a nation and for the purposes of good governance, I have always believed this data to be of huge importance and believed in the value of the continuity of measurement decade after decade.

What is also important, beyond the standard information, is the ability to use the census to update it and ensure its relevance in relation to social and economic change. Ten years is a long time to wait for these changes, and I suggest that a few that are being proposed are long overdue, given that we are now in the third decade of the 21st century. Let me come to identity in a moment, but may I just say that it is good to see the addition of a new question capturing past service in the UK armed forces? It should go some way to recognising the lives of our fabulous forces personnel.

On identities, I want to support the addition of two new voluntary questions on sexual orientation and gender identity. At last, LGBTQ people will be acknowledged, and that is most welcome. However, I also see there will be the continuation, for those not included in the existing tick boxes, to allow that to be expressed through the write-in option on both paper and online questionnaires. Interestingly, for the first time, an additional response option of Roma will be included under the ethnic group question, which is also welcome. In addition, the national identity question allows respondents to record multiple identities across the tick boxes and write-in box. But

other than those changes, the proposed questions appear to be much as in the previous census 10 years ago.

Perhaps surprisingly, there has been no inclusion of a Sikh tick box, despite the House of Lords ruling in the *Mandla v. Dowell Lee* case of 1983 that Sikhs are an ethnic group, not simply a religion. The Sikh community is important to the UK in every sense, and I commend the speeches by my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Erith and Thamesmead. In my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, the community accounts for a significant and welcome share of our population and our community.

The Minister will be aware that there has been a long-running campaign by the Sikh Federation and, indeed, the whole British Sikh community for this change to be introduced. The concerns among the community, as has been widely shared this afternoon, are that, if Sikhs do not have a Sikh ethnic tick box response option, they will continue not to be properly monitored by public bodies and face possible discrimination in schools and the health sector, where there are known disparities, as well as in housing and across the public sector more generally. As has been evidenced in the current covid-19 crisis, there is no systematic collection of data on the number of Sikhs tested as positive or the number that, tragically, have died, despite the significant number who are actually working on our frontline.

I appreciate that this is a statutory instrument and is unamendable as such, so there will not be any opportunities to change the proposals. I simply want to ask the Minister why the decision was reached to exclude the Sikh identity as a tick box and what steps the Government will take to ensure the Sikh community is properly accounted for in data collection, ensuring the fair allocation of resources and provision of public services.

3.34 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: May I first declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief? I have been asked to raise an issue by a group of people within a religious minority—the Sikhs—as other Members have done, including the hon. Members for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare). I also want to thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who I call my friend, for all that she has done for the Sikhs over the years.

Sikhs have been legally recognised as an ethnic group for nearly 40 years, since the *Mandla v. Dowell-Lee* House of Lords ruling of 1983. The ONS has stated that the ethnic group question was introduced in 1991 to help public bodies to assess equal opportunities and to develop anti-discrimination policies—all good stuff. Census ethnic group categories are used by 40,000 public bodies to assess legal responsibilities under equalities legislation, so the group data—not the religious data—is used by public bodies to make decisions on the allocation of resources and provision of public services.

The Prime Minister's last race disparity audit indicated that there were 176 datasets spanning sectors from housing and education, to employment, health and the criminal justice system—but no data on Sikhs. What does this actually mean? Well, if Sikhs do not have a

Sikh ethnic tick-box response option, they will continue not to be properly monitored by public bodies, and to face potential discrimination in relation to schools, the health sector, where there are known disparities, housing and across the public sector.

The covid-19 crisis has shown that there is no systematic collection of data on the number of Sikhs tested as positive or the numbers who have tragically died. That means something to this group of people, it means something to me, and it should mean something to everyone in the House. In the 2011 census, more than 80,000 Sikhs—20%—rejected the 18 existing ethnic tick boxes and chose instead to tick “Other” and write “Sikh”. I believe that this provided the ONS with the strongest indication possible that Sikhs who completed the census form in 2011 did not find the ethnic tick boxes offered acceptable and wanted an additional Sikh ethnic tick box. It is clear that there must be change and I am asking for that change.

I have four questions for the Minister. Why was the May 2018 online quantitative survey—which had 1,412 responses and showed 93% support, from those who understood the question, for the inclusion of a Sikh ethnic tick box—not published and referred to the census White Paper of December 2018? Why was there no reference in the census White Paper and the associated equality impact assessment to research and modelling by the ONS that showed that more than 53,000 Sikhs—or 12%—were missed in the 2011 census? In the interests of data collection, honesty and evidence, this gap has to be addressed.

Do Ministers appreciate that the management committees of 112 large and small gurdwaras across the UK, with an official membership of over 107,000 and an estimated congregation—or a *sangat*—of over 460,000 should be considered, as well as 53 individual Sikhs in focus groups? Can the Minister explain why the ONS has requested and received the individual returns from the all-party parliamentary group for British Sikhs in August 2018, and yet, it would appear, has made no attempt to conduct any independent validation; and why the deputy national statistician appears to have kept no notes or minutes of meetings that he attended at gurdwaras to consult Sikhs?

I look to the Minister for an adequate, suitable and helpful response. I understand that some of my questions may not be answerable today, but I would appreciate a response. More than that, I would appreciate a change to include Sikhs in the census in their own right in order to ensure that they have protection against discrimination and the recognition that they rightly deserve. Better late than never.

3.38 pm

Chloe Smith: You will appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, that as I have so many answers to give I must ensure that I have all my papers in front of me. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in today’s debate for what was a thoughtful and helpful consideration of all the issues that pertain to the running of an exercise of this scale. I sympathise with the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who said that, as a younger version of himself, he marvelled at the scale of the census exercise. We can all appreciate that.

Let me turn to some of the questions raised by the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who spoke for the Labour party. She asked some questions about the Gender Recognition Act; I can confirm that the consultation response from the Government will be forthcoming before the summer recess. She also asked whether specialist LGBT support would flow from the census results; I assure her that the Government will look carefully at that. Furthermore, she asked whether there might be a support plan for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities following the data that we hope to collect from the census. I refer her to the plans announced last year by the noble Lord Bourne, who was then the Minister responsible in the Lords—which is to say that yes, we do intend to look at where greater support can be given.

Let me turn to the points that were raised about Sikh ethnicity—I shall then go on to discuss Cornish national identity and other points that I hope to be able to tick off for Members. On the point about Sikh ethnic identity, I reassure Members that in no way is either the ONS or the Government ignoring a community, tolerating discrimination or—to address some of the remarks made today—ignoring the possibility of there being a greater impact of covid-19 on black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. It would be very grave if the Government or the ONS were doing any of those things, and we are not doing them.

I recognise the passion with which people have spoken on this issue, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who is chair of the all-party group on British Sikhs, and other members of that all-party group who have campaigned on this matter for a long time. It is never a reflection of the ONS’s or the Government’s recognition of or respect for any ethnicity, religion or national identity if it does not have a tick-box response option on the census. That in itself answers a number of the points raised by Members today: not to have a tick box is no marker of discrimination or the ignoring of any particular community.

The content of the draft census order is informed by an extensive programme of research and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders carried out by the ONS, and it is necessary to prioritise what is included in the questionnaire. I remind the House of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess): 55 new tick boxes were requested for the ethnic group question alone—that gives a sense of the context—and each request has to be reviewed against a detailed set of prioritisation measures before the final recommendation is made.

As a result of that rigorous process, the only additional response option that has been included in the ethnic group question is Roma. It has to be found that there is a strong need for data and that no suitable alternative data or alternative sources are available to meet the need. The process is detailed by the ONS; I am giving some selected points from it. In the Roma case, a new tick box was found to be acceptable for those answering the census question.

Let me come back to the Sikh community. There will continue to be a specific Sikh response option in the census question on religion. Despite it being a voluntary question, the response rate on the religion question is very high, at more than 92%, and we are confident,

[Chloe Smith]

through the ONS, that religion data from the census will provide high-quality data for public bodies to inform service provision and equalities monitoring.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) said that we should either do one thing or another—that we should make things better or we should have a tick box. I assure him that we are making things better. The ONS recognises that data on religion is not routinely collected and that that is a source of concern for communities, so the ONS will use the new possibilities provided by the Digital Economy Act 2017 to address precisely that point. The ONS began by producing an analytical report on religion in February this year, and there is more work to come. I look forward to seeing it, as I know other Members will, too.

I should say, for members of the Sikh community, that people will continue to be able to record their ethnic group in the census however they wish, by recording it in the write-in boxes provided. An online functionality will assist people in doing that. With those reassurances, I hope it is clear that the ONS and the Government recognise the need for data on different communities; will provide a wide range of statistical outputs to meet their needs; will work with local authorities and public bodies to ensure the availability of that data; and will, given the innovations in this census, provide some of the best analysis that there may ever have been, to help them to better serve the different communities in their areas. Let me also offer reassurance at this stage that Public Health England has been asked to undertake a more detailed analysis into differences between ethnic groups in respect of covid-19.

Let me go on to the somewhat related challenges that have been put forward around Cornish national identity. Here I want to offer a further recognition, which is that the Government understand the points that have been made by Cornish Members today about the distinct culture and heritage of Cornwall and how important this is to the people of Cornwall, who are understandably very proud of their history. May I say—I hope I do not mangle the pronunciation—*meur ras* to those who have made those points here today? However, the ONS has found that the need for data on Cornish populations is localised and not strong enough, in the context of the many requests for new census questions, to justify the inclusion of Cornish national identity in the nationwide census.

The ONS is absolutely committed to working with Cornish MPs, Cornwall Council and others to meet its data needs through data gathered through the write-in option and will be promoting this in both the national and local census campaigns. I particularly want to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) that that will go beyond the boundaries of Cornwall and will be available anywhere across the country. The ONS will be marketing this work both nationally and locally, and will promote beyond Cornwall the ability to self-identify as Cornish, acknowledging the point that has been made about the Cornish diaspora. I hope that is helpful to hon. Members here today who have raised points about Cornwall.

Let me turn to the points that have been made—for example, by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West—about digital exclusion. Here I also offer some points about homelessness and the provisions for how

the census will be completed. The ONS will be working with various organisations to provide support to those who are offline for various reasons or finding it difficult to complete the census online. There will be additional help, including language support and paper forms. There is also an option of completion by telephone, which may be helpful in relation to my hon. Friend's point about those who are blind and partially sighted. The ONS will also employ community advisers with various relevant language skills, which I hope goes to his point about those with English as a second language. He also asked about communal establishments. They will be enumerated differently to households, as they were 10 years ago, so there will be a particular communal establishment questionnaire. He also asked what the penalties would be for failure to comply. Those penalties derive from the Census Act 1920, and failure to complete and return the questionnaire can attract a fine of up to £1,000.

I want to mention homelessness, which is an important topic here. It is important that rough sleepers and homeless people are included in the 2021 census. I know that we all appreciate the fact that rough sleepers, in particular, are a small, visible and very disadvantaged subgroup within the wider homeless population, so there are provisions to ensure that the ONS reaches homeless individuals by, for example, working with day centres and night shelters. It is finalising that approach, and I am confident that it will make more details available to the House, should that be wanted. Let me tick off the question of a risk of a cyber-attack, which my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West asked about. I can give him an assurance that the ONS has that plan in place, including having used the services of the National Cyber Security Centre to carry out a security review.

Let me now turn to some of the questions raised by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams). He asked a specific question on whether the final questionnaire would include the terms “Asian Welsh” and “black Welsh” in the high-level descriptions. I can confirm to him that that is occurring, following a point that was raised by the Welsh Government. We welcome the improvement of the census by that interaction, and I thank my colleagues in the Welsh Government for that.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about how those who speak Welsh outside Wales will be accommodated in this census.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Hear, hear!

Chloe Smith: I hear support for that from another Welsh colleague in the House. There are proposals for ensuring that those whose first language is Welsh, and those who have both English and Welsh as first languages, will be able to record that in the “main language” question, but perhaps it would make most sense for me to write to the hon. Gentleman to be clear about how else that issue will be accommodated throughout the questionnaire.

I think I am coming to the end of the questions that hon. Members raised with me, so I will now make a few general points before I commend this order to the House. As I said in my opening remarks, I hope that hon. Members will find it easy and rewarding to work with the Office for National Statistics in their communities and constituencies, and help constituents to respond to the census. I thank in advance right hon. and hon. Members

who I am sure will do that, as well as all those who have contributed to this debate. Given the quality of debate that we have had, I hope we have supported a high-quality census, which in turn will provide vital information for decision making in our society. The ONS has worked hard over a number of years to bring forward proposals that will work for the population of this country and give us the good quality data we need, and I hope I have provided those reassurances to the House today on its behalf. I have further tried to provide reassurances to the House about other Government actions regarding those topics that have been mentioned today.

It is essential that everybody is counted in the census next year, as that will provide policy makers and decision makers with the information they require to help target resources where they are most needed, as efficiently and effectively as possible. I am confident that this first predominantly online census will deliver that, and over time I look forward to bringing forward the remaining regulations. I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That items 2 (resident particulars), 5, 6 (visitor particulars), 10, 11, 13, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24 (demographic particulars), 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, 34, 36(d) (education and employment particulars), 41, 42, 43 (accommodation particulars), 45, 46 (additional particulars for individual returns) in Schedule 2, and items 1, 2, 3 and 4 in Schedule 3 to the draft Census (England and Wales) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 2 March, be approved.

Deputy Speaker's Statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am now able to announce the results of the ballots that have been held today for the election of new Chairs of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Committee on Standards.

In the ballot for Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, 544 votes were cast. The counting went to two rounds, and Darren Jones was elected Chair with 296 votes in the second round.

In the ballot for Chair of the Committee on Standards, 540 votes were cast, and Chris Bryant was elected Chair with 322 votes.

A breakdown of the results will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published online. Both Chairs will take up their posts immediately. I send hearty congratulations to them both.

ADJOURNMENT

3.54 pm

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

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