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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 11 May 2020

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SIXTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 676

EIGHTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2019-2021

House of Commons

Monday 11 May 2020

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Disabled People: Protection

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support and protect disabled people during the covid-19 outbreak. [902418]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): To provide greater financial security at this time, we have automatically extended by six months PIP—personal independent payment—awards for existing claimants that are due to be reviewed or reassessed and have suspended all face-to-face assessments of disability benefits for three months.

Craig Tracey [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately we have lost Craig Tracey. I call Vicky Foxcroft.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Disabled people are facing increased costs for food, medicine and personal protective equipment for carers, yet there has been no uplift in legacy benefits to match the £20 increase to universal credit and working tax credits. What steps is the Department taking to rectify this? I am aware that issues with the system have made this difficult to deliver at speed, but what is the Department doing to ensure that some of the most vulnerable members of our society are not left out of pocket during this crisis?

Justin Tomlinson: On behalf of the ministerial team, I would like to welcome the new shadow ministerial team. I look forward to working constructively with them.

In addition to the more than £1,000 increase to the universal credit standard rate, we have seen the annual benefit uprating of 1.7% across all our benefits. With disability benefits in particular, we have continued to make sure the gateway remains open, that claimants can have their assessments reviewed and that those with a terminal illness are being fast-tracked. We are doing all we can to get support to the most vulnerable people as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: We go back to Craig Tracey.

Craig Tracey [V]: Can the Minister give further guidance specifically on PIPs? I have been contacted by several constituents who are either looking to access them for the first time or due a reassessment. With face-to-face assessments understandably suspended due to the pandemic, will the Minister confirm what action the Department is taking to ensure that my constituents can access this vital support as quickly as possible?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is diligent in championing the issues that his constituents face. We have rightly continued to accept new claims; we are allowing reviews where claimants accept them, particularly where their condition may have deteriorated and they could be eligible for greater financial support; and we are prioritising terminally ill claimants. I know that that work has been very warmly welcomed by stakeholders.

Carer's Allowance

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the potential merits of increasing carer's allowance. [902428]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Government recognise and appreciate the vital role played by unpaid carers now more than ever. We have already made changes to the carer's allowance rules to reflect changes to patterns of care during the current emergency. Since 2010, the rate of carer's allowance has increased from £53.90 to £67.25 a week, meaning nearly an additional £700 a year for carers.

Munira Wilson [V]: My constituent, Natalie Hay, is a full-time unpaid carer for her son, who has Lyme disease and ME. She is entitled to that paltry £67 per week as long as she does not earn any more than £128 per week, but with the pandemic, she is having to shield her son and home-school two children and has lost all respite care and additional support, so a few hours' paid work is out of the question. She feels completely forgotten about by the Government. Does the Minister think it is possible to live on the equivalent of £1.91 per hour, and will he commit—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but that question was far too long.

Justin Tomlinson: Rightly, we target support at those most in need—those with low incomes—and they could, through universal credit, receive an additional £1,950 per year through the universal credit carer's element, plus the extra £1,040 universal credit standard rate increase, which is the equivalent of the jobseeker's allowance rate. I would encourage the claimant to look at all available support that they are entitled to.

Access-to-work Costs

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help ensure prompt payment of access to work costs during the covid-19 outbreak. [902431]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The access-to-work support has prioritised payments, including those to key workers, and where possible is making payments the same day. Key worker and new employee applications are being cleared urgently. Additionally, I am pleased to announce access-to-work recipients can now email claim forms as a reasonable adjustment.

Karin Smyth [V]: On 4 May, the Secretary of State assured the House that the Government would provide an automatic extension of PIP awards that are due to expire during the coronavirus virus pandemic. Can the Minister confirm that this extension applies to all claimants, including those who received an award following an appeal?

Justin Tomlinson: Obviously, PIP is different from access to work. There was an issue for those on fixed-term, short awards, but we have now addressed that, and those claimants will continue to get an automatic six months' extension if it is due in the next three months.

Universal Credit

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the operation of universal credit. [902422]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince) [V]: Since mid-March, we have processed around 2 million universal credit claims. Despite that surge, the system is standing up to the challenge and demonstrating that resilience is part of its design, with over 90% of new eligible claimants expected to be paid in full and on time. There is no way that the legacy benefit system would have been able to cope with such pressure.

Richard Graham [V]: I am grateful to all the jobcentres, and particularly the one in Gloucester, which has done a remarkable job of registering so many of my constituents. Some people discover when they register that they lose child tax credit before any new benefits are payable. What can my hon. Friend the Minister do to help provide our constituents with better tools to assess what will happen and whether they will be better or worse off when they first register for universal credit?

Will Quince [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for rightly praising DWP staff for the work they are doing. That issue has been raised by a number of colleagues, and I am looking at data and exploring options. We have been working closely with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to encourage people to check their eligibility before making a claim and ensure that tax credit claimants understand that when they have claimed UC, their tax credits will end, and they cannot return to legacy benefits.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: We believe that people need more support during this crisis, but we acknowledge and welcome the changes that the Government have made. Those include increasing the core amount of universal credit by £1,000 a year, but that rise is only for 12 months. If the Government believe that this level of support is necessary during lockdown, why do they believe that people will need less money when lockdown ends and the normal costs of living will apply? Surely it is inconceivable that anyone still unemployed by March next year could see their benefits being cut.

Will Quince [V]: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and welcome him to his new position. As he knows, we have announced measures that can be quickly and effectively put in place that will benefit as many disadvantaged families as possible who are currently facing financial disruption. We at the DWP have been under huge increased demand, and we have prioritised the safety and stability of our benefits system overall. All things of this nature will be kept under review, but at the moment, as he rightly points out, the funding has been secured for a 12-month period from Her Majesty's Treasury.

Mr Speaker: Can we speed up questions and answers, to help us get through the list? We now go over to Neil Gray in Scotland.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: The two areas of universal credit causing the greatest hardship are the five-week wait and the two-child cap—both need scrapping. Taking a UC advanced loan means that payments will be lower than the already impossible to live on levels, so why will the Government not look at the idea of making the advance loan a grant when a person has been confirmed as eligible for UC? That stops the fraud excuse. The only barrier is political will.

Will Quince [V]: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I have said, we have announced measures that can be quickly and effectively put in place that will benefit as many disadvantaged families as possible who are facing financial disruption. We are under huge increased demand, and I have had to prioritise the safety and stability of the benefits system overall and put that above any structural change. I will always prioritise ensuring that people get their money in full and on time, over and above system change.

Universal Credit: Five-week Wait

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of ending the five-week wait for universal credit during the covid-19 outbreak. [902423]

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of ending the five-week wait for universal credit during the covid-19 outbreak. [902443]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince) [V]: In these uncertain times, we would like to be absolutely clear that no claimant has to wait five weeks for a payment. Advances are available, enabling claimants faster access to their entitlement. Since mid-March, we have issued more than 700,000 advances to claimants who felt that they could not wait for their first routine payment, with the majority receiving money within 72 hours.

Sarah Jones [V]: In Croydon, all our food banks have seen a massive increase in demand. In fact, the number of food banks and soup kitchens has quadrupled in Croydon since the covid crisis began, with organisations such as the British Bangladeshi Society and the Fieldway Family Centre stepping up to the plate. One of the main reasons they cite for this need is the five-week wait for universal credit. What assessment has the Minister made of the number of people forced to use food banks because of that five-week wait? I ask him again: why can he not replace the emergency loan with a grant, so that people do not have to pile debt on debt?

Will Quince [V]: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. Over and above answers to previous questions, I would stress that non-repayable advances could not be implemented without significant development of the UC system and would require measures that have been previously announced to be deprioritised. In the light of current events and the huge pressure on our system, the Department's focus is firmly on ensuring that new and existing claimants continue to receive their payments on time. We do not have the capacity to look at that kind of structural system change.

Ian Byrne [V]: Over the past seven weeks, the demand on Liverpool's local welfare scheme for crisis payments for food and fuel has increased by 164% compared with this time last year. Will the Minister consider easing the plight of many living through this crisis by doubling child benefits and lifting the benefit cap, as requested by the Food Foundation?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We have increased the universal credit and working tax credit standard allowance by more than £1,000 a year, and we have increased local housing allowance rates, putting an average of £600 into people's pockets. On the benefit cap, it is important to stress that those with sustained work records may benefit from a nine-month grace period in relation to the cap. Exemptions continue to apply, and I feel many people would agree that the equivalent of £24,000—or £28,000 in London—is fair and reasonable.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: From the 1940s on, we had a social security system based on handwritten forms that was capable of making the first regular benefit payment within a few days of a person applying; now, after the Government have spent several hundred million pounds on what we were assured was agile technology, that job takes five weeks. That long delay is the main reason why people on universal credit are so much more likely to need a food bank than people on the legacy benefits. Surely the Minister must recognise that that problem must be fixed.

Will Quince: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, for his question. He knows that we introduced an agile, dynamic online system because the legacy benefits system, which was largely paper-based, was fraught with issues and errors. That is why we moved over. Notwithstanding the points that he has made, I stress that the previous, paper-based system, which relied on face-to-face contact, would not have coped in this situation. It is because of universal credit that we have been able to process more than 2 million claims since mid-March.

Food Banks

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): What recent discussions local officials of her Department have had with operators of food banks on referral of benefit claimants to food banks during the covid-19 outbreak. [902425]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince) [V]: Ministers and officials have had regular discussions with food bank providers and other stakeholders during this time. Flexibility and innovation in local jobcentre arrangements for signposting to food banks, within the parameters of the existing guidance, is encouraged during the covid-19 outbreak.

Derek Twigg [V]: [*Inaudible.*] In my constituency, the jobcentre is not referring people to the Widnes food bank. It is important that the Minister intervenes and ensures that referrals do take place so that the people who need help get it quickly.

Mr Speaker: Minister, did you get any of that?

Will Quince: I think I did, Mr Speaker. I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that jobcentres are working with local partners to signpost claimants to the support available in their local area. The Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network are putting in place appropriate solutions where food banks are in operation. I stress that local councils in England will be able to use funding from the new £500 million local hardship fund to provide further discretion to support vulnerable people.

Universal Credit

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that people with multiple and complex needs can access universal credit. [902427]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince) [V]: Dedicated DWP staff continue to be available in jobcentres throughout the country. For claimants with the most complex needs, if we are unable to help by phone or online, face-to-face support is still available. In addition to that, the Help to Claim service is undertaken on our behalf by Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland.

Danny Kruger [V]: I thank the Minister for that answer and congratulate him, the Department and the original designers of universal credit on their success in registering so many new claimants. As he knows, the original idea was for a universal support system, alongside UC, to help people with multiple and complex needs. Will the Minister consider reviving that idea to help the most vulnerable people and make the UC system work better?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I know that he shares my passion for supporting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society, who often have complex needs, which is exactly why we introduced Help to Claim to support people who need support to access the welfare system. It has been a huge success over the past year, helping more than 250,000 people. I am pleased to say that we have commissioned the service for a second year.

Vulnerable Children

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Education on support for vulnerable children during the covid-19 outbreak. [902429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince) [V]: I have regular discussions with the Minister for children and families, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and others on mitigating the effect of covid-19 on vulnerable groups. We are providing them with support as they implement the free school meals voucher system, and we have increased universal credit and working tax credit by more than £1,000 a year over the next 12 months, which will benefit more than 4 million households.

Robert Halfon [V]: Given that we know that nearly 90% of vulnerable children are not at school or learning and that there are new frontiers of vulnerabilities in

children suffering from possible domestic abuse and mental health issues, what further work, other than that which the Minister has mentioned, is the Department doing specifically with the Department for Education to help those children learn and to give them and their families proper financial support?

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. We are committed to ensuring the safety and protection of vulnerable children and young people, particularly during the current period, and that is why we have invested an extra £6.5 billion in our welfare system. I know that he has huge expertise in this area. In addition to my work with the Minister for children and families, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and others across Government, I would be very happy to work with him to explore other ways that he thinks we may be able to support vulnerable children.

Housing Allowance

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of levels of local housing allowance during the covid-19 outbreak. [902430]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince) [V]: In April, in response to covid-19, we introduced increased local housing allowance rates for housing benefit and universal credit claimants to the 30th percentile of local rents, providing additional support for private renters. This significant investment cost almost £1 billion and ensures that more than 1 million households will see an increase, on average, of £600 per year.

Navendu Mishra [V]: Thousands of families in Britain are at risk of being pushed into homelessness as a result of this crisis. What urgent steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the most vulnerable will not lose their homes as a result of the covid-19 outbreak, at a time when there is no option to find cheaper accommodation to move to?

Will Quince: Over and above the measures introduced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, we have increased universal credit and working tax credits by more than £1,000 a year, and increased the local housing allowance rates. In this respect, in southern Greater Manchester, which covers Stockport, the two-bedroom LHA has been increased by £76 a month—£900 a year—and the four-bedroom rate in the hon. Gentleman's constituency has increased by over £200 a month. That extra £6.5 billion going into our welfare system is supporting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society.

Economic Recovery

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): What steps her Department plans to take to support economic recovery after the covid-19 outbreak. [902420]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies) [V]: The Department for Work and Pensions is leading a joined-up approach across and beyond Government to address the unprecedented impacts of the covid-19 outbreak. This includes working with colleagues across Whitehall as well as employer representatives, think-tanks and others.

Shaun Bailey [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. The black country still remains the workshop of the United Kingdom, and nowhere exemplifies that more than the communities that I represent in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton. It is likely that many skilled workers in my constituency will need to be redeployed or reskilled as a result of this crisis, so what work will my hon. Friend be undertaking, alongside our west midlands Mayor, Andy Street, to ensure that communities such as mine are not left behind as a result of this crisis?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. My Department works closely with Mayors such as Andy Street on the devolution in skills deals. In the west midlands, we are also working with the combined authority on its local industrial strategy, skills advisory panel and innovation pilots. We are engaged with regional labour market issues and pressure points so that all regions and communities can benefit from the recovery.

Mr Speaker: May I welcome Seema Malhotra to her place as shadow Minister?

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Our economic recovery will depend much on public confidence, yet polling this morning found that almost half the population believe that the Prime Minister has gone too far. Many have deep concerns that they could put themselves and family members at risk if they cannot properly social distance when they return to work, and it is clear that the workforce and management must agree safe arrangements that people will trust. Will the Government adopt the TUC's proposals for employers to publish covid-secure risk assessments and urgently increase funding for the Health and Safety Executive, which the Minister knows has been cut by a third since 2010, to enforce these measures?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady and welcome her to her place. I am very interested to hear her policy priorities, ideas, thoughts and views, and I am keen to meet to discuss what the Department for Work and Pensions is doing. It is absolutely right that, as people look to return to work, we have published our plan—a cautious road map—this afternoon. We recognise that this is not a short-term crisis. I can tell her that our Secretary of State has been engaged in broader support for the HSE, which has done a magnificent job—

Mr Speaker: Order. Too long, Minister, far too long. We have to get through to the questions to the Secretary of State, which are coming further on in the order. Claire Coutinho is waiting with her substantive question. Can you please answer it?

Employment Support

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): What steps her Department plans to take to support employment after the covid-19 outbreak. [902421]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We have launched two key new websites, “Job help” and “Employer help”, to provide additional information tools and links to the DWP’s “Find a job” website, which has approximately 1.7 million users signed up and over

145,000 public and private sector employers registered. The DWP is currently considering a wide range of options on how best to support people back into work.

Claire Coutinho [V]: I commend Ministers and civil servants for the tremendous work they have done to get millions of people on-boarded over the last few weeks. What steps are being taken to get self-employed people, in particular, back on their feet in the next stage?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We have temporarily relaxed the minimum income floor to allow self-employed claimants to access UC at a more generous rate. Meanwhile, the Treasury’s self-employment income support scheme online service is available from 13 May, and the DWP is providing mentoring and business support through our new enterprise allowance programme. As the economy restarts, we will continue to keep under review how we can best support all of this cohort.

Workplace Safety

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that people who cannot work at home are able to work safely at their place of work during the covid-19 outbreak. [902424]

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that people who cannot work at home are able to work safely at their place of work during the covid-19 outbreak. [902426]

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that people who cannot work at home are able to work safely at their place of work during the covid-19 outbreak. [902434]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies) [V]: The Health and Safety Executive is involved in safer workplaces and, across Government, this work is being led by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The DWP has put a number of measures in place itself. We have closed jobcentres to the public; suspended appointments, except in exceptional circumstances; introduced social distancing, extensive communications and a route for staff to raise concerns; and deployed up to 15,000 laptops to allow people to work at home.

Alan Mak [V]: Trade bodies play a key role in helping businesses to comply with coronavirus workplace safety measures. What engagement has my hon. Friend had with the major trade bodies to keep workers safe?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that. It is vital that we work with trade bodies, which play a vital role in supporting businesses and ensuring the right messages reach employers within their sectors. In the last few weeks, I have been listening to and engaging with key stakeholders such as the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Chambers of Commerce, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and UKHospitality. One key theme in getting across the message is confidence for both employers and employees to be able to come back to work together.

Mr Speaker: We now go across to sunny Lancashire and Antony Higginbotham.

Antony Higginbotham [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is clear from the Government's publication today that many employers that closed initially, out of an abundance of caution, can actually stay open provided they can do so safely. I welcome the covid-secure guidance that is going to be published. Could the Minister set out how the covid-secure guidance will be publicised, and will there be a PR campaign to make sure that employers that can be open do open?

Mims Davies: As the Prime Minister announced yesterday, those who can return to work safely should do so, and I do encourage all employers and employees to use the safety at work guides due to be published later this week to help, support and inform decisions about safety in the workplace. Colleagues will have an opportunity to hear more from the Prime Minister when he makes his statement to the House shortly.

John Lamont [V]: Many employers and employees in my constituency in the Scottish borders are very keen to go back to work. They want to do so as safely as possible, so could the Minister outline what the Government are doing to foster good relations between employees and employers to allow that to happen, and also to allow them to adjust to the new normal way of working?

Mims Davies [V]: As I said previously, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is leading the way on safer workplaces. There are lots of opportunities to build relationships between employers, employees and trade unions as we open up the economy, and the guidelines will be published in due course. The Health and Safety Executive is an arms-length body of the DWP. It has been actively involved in each of the work strands in the sectors. Our Department takes an interest in recruitment, helping to build confidence so claimants can return to work or take up new employment.

Mr Speaker: That concludes what are referred to as questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The arrangements for hybrid proceedings allow Departments to reorder questions according to the answering Minister, but I do not believe that it was the House's expectation that this would lead to the Secretary of State not answering any questions and to important issues raised by Members from the Opposition parties being relegated to the bottom of the list. I will raise this matter with the Leader of the House, and I do not expect to see this repeated.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

British Citizens: Repatriation

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to repatriate (a) British citizens and (b) UK residents overseas during the covid-19 pandemic. [902369]

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): How many British citizens are awaiting repatriation as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. [902372]

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps he is taking to repatriate British nationals stranded overseas as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. [902379]

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to repatriate British nationals stranded overseas as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. [902384]

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help provide financial support to British nationals stranded overseas as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. [902386]

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to repatriate (a) British citizens and (b) UK residents overseas during the covid-19 pandemic. [902388]

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Government's response to British citizens stranded overseas as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. [902390]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): We estimate that over 1.3 million people have now returned to the UK from abroad on commercial routes. I can also tell the House that on the charter flights—the special arrangements—that we set up, over 30,000 British nationals have now returned on 141 flights chartered from 27 countries and territories.

Imran Hussain [V]: Many of my constituents who had their flights cancelled are facing considerable financial hardship as they are yet to see any refund for these flights or for hastily arranged alternative flights that were also cancelled. So will the Secretary of State guarantee that those whose flights have been cancelled will be refunded and that the Government will step in to make sure that this is the case?

Dominic Raab: We certainly share the concern expressed by the hon. Gentleman about flights that are cancelled. There is an onus on the operators to make sure that they can be reimbursed. Insurance can also kick in. In the last resort, there is also financial assistance that can be made available in the form of a loan, but of course that would have to be repaid on return.

Richard Drax [V]: Many of my constituents have said, "We've all been locked down but people have still been allowed to come into our country." Why is the quarantine about to be launched at airports being done now, and will it include arrivals by port and the channel tunnel?

Dominic Raab: The reason the measure is being introduced now is that the advice that we have always had is that there was little point, if any, in introducing quarantine at the border with the R level—the level of the prevalence of the virus—at a high level, particularly above R1. Now that it has come down, and is still coming down even further, it makes sense, as we reduce the level of coronavirus in the UK, to introduce the measure to stop reinfection coming in from people carrying it from abroad, particularly those who would not necessarily be showing symptoms. There will be

some flexibility in the detailed arrangements set out, but this will cover, in principle, all people coming in, whether it is to ports or to airports.

Mike Wood [V]: A number of my constituents were overseas when this pandemic struck and are now unable to get together the money they need to pay for new flights home. What action is my right hon. Friend's Department taking to financially support British nationals who are unable to get home and have no access to funds?

Dominic Raab: We have, in the first instance, worked with insurance companies to make sure that they extend travel policies by 60 days when emergency support is needed. I can also tell the House that the Foreign Office has introduced a special package to make sure that those who are stranded and cannot get back can receive support with food, accommodation and other essentials of up to £3,000 for individuals, £4,000 for a couple, and £5,000 for families. That is a last-resort option, but we are making sure that those who are hunkered down or stranded and cannot get back have the support that they need.

Nigel Mills [V]: I commend my right hon. Friend's Department for the efforts made to get people home, but can he update the House on progress in getting passengers and crew stranded on cruise ships home?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In March, when the Foreign Office changed its travel advice to advise against people travelling on cruises, we had more than 19,000 British passengers aboard 60 cruise ships. I can tell him that they have all now been brought home safely. There is still an outstanding issue with a number of UK crew on cruise ships around the world, but we are working with operators such as Royal Caribbean and Costa Atlantica to make sure they can get back as soon as possible.

Mrs Sheryll Murray [V]: I have a couple of constituents who were last heard of in the Philippines. They told me that they were struggling to afford the cost of repatriation flights to get home. What additional help can my right hon. Friend now offer them?

Dominic Raab: The Philippines has been a challenge, but I can reassure my hon. Friend that we managed to secure the return of over 600 British nationals on UK charter flights in April. I spoke to Foreign Minister Locsin at the end of March to secure those April flights. My hon. Friend will know that the Government of the Philippines suspended commercial flights earlier this month. They have resumed today. On the financial support that she referred to, in exceptional circumstances, as a last resort, there are loans available to enable UK nationals to return home on flights.

Dan Carden [V]: It is now clear that other European countries used emergency repatriation flights in parallel with commercial options to much greater success. The German Government chartered 30 times more of these flights by April than the UK Government, so it was the Foreign Secretary's decision early on to rely almost solely on commercial options to get people home that left so many British citizens stranded abroad for so long. So will he publish the official advice that he received on his decision, which led to so many British citizens being stranded abroad for so long?

Dominic Raab: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about any British nationals stranded abroad—Brits are a nation of travellers—but his comparison with Germany is not correct, because he is not including, as far as I understand it, all those who came back on commercial flights. We worked very hard with airlines, airports and foreign jurisdictions to enable that to happen. We have secured and helped to facilitate the return of 1.3 million British nationals on those commercial flights—50,000 from Australia, 15,000 from Pakistan, 7,000 from Indonesia and close to 4,000 from New Zealand.

Mike Hill [V]: I have constituents stuck in many countries, including Nigeria and Australia. The one in Nigeria says that he is No. 3,233 on the repatriation list, and only one of the Australian cases has reached home, at substantial personal cost. How can the Minister say that this is an adequate response?

Dominic Raab: In terms of Nigeria, we are concerned. It has been a challenge, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that over 1,700 British nationals have been repatriated to date, on seven charter flights, in addition to which a further flight came home on 8 May, and we will continue to do everything we can. Of course, he will know that all airports in Nigeria are currently closed to all international commercial flights until east of 4 June. That is the challenge we face, but we are doing everything we can.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) to the Dispatch Box.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker; I think that is the last time Chorley will be nice to Wigan in this place.

I thank the Minister for the weekly briefings that he has arranged for me and for his kind words on me taking office. It has enabled us to work together to bring many more Britons home. However, he will know that this is the sixth time that I have had to raise the lack of quarantine measures and the fact that the UK is one of the few countries with no specific policies in place for returning citizens. Thousands will be flying into the UK in the next few days from parts of the world where infection rates are rising and healthcare and testing are limited, on packed planes with no social distancing measures, and as of Wednesday many of them will be asked to go straight back to work. This really is absurd; so will he personally intervene to get a grip on this situation, not in a month, but now?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and welcome her to her position. I know that she has huge tenacity and will scrutinise everything that the Government are doing, but that she also looks forward to and enjoys engaging on a constructive basis; that will certainly be reciprocated on our side.

The crucial thing about the quarantine and self-isolation that the Prime Minister announced last night is that all the scientific evidence we received said there was little point in introducing it until we got the prevalence of the coronavirus and the level of transmission down. At that point, it does make sense to introduce it because of the risk of reinfection—or re-seeding, as it is sometimes referred to by the scientists—in the UK. I can reassure the hon. Lady that we have followed the scientific and medical advice at every step along the way.

Mr Speaker: We go to Scotland—to a clean-shaven Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: Well spotted, Mr Speaker. It is good to see everyone.

I echo the shadow Foreign Secretary's concern about the quarantine restrictions coming in. We need a lot more clarity on why they have not been brought in before now, and on what they are actually going to mean in practice for people who are making travel arrangements and for vulnerable people coming back and sharing concerns about their own health and the risk of passing the virus on to others. I would be grateful for more clarity on that.

Let me also pick up on the Foreign Secretary's comments about the repatriation efforts to date. Now, I would not say that nothing has happened, but we need to acknowledge that the FCO's response has been patchy and pretty stretched in parts. I have already called for an inquiry into this, so that we can learn lessons for the future. I think that we need to reiterate that point today, and would be grateful for an assurance that we will properly look at how the FCO has handled this situation. The expectations that were put upon the FCO by—

Mr Speaker: I think that the Foreign Secretary has got a grip of the question.

Dominic Raab: And the Foreign Office has got a grip of the problem as well. I take the hon. Gentleman's point. We have been stretched, and I think that that is the case for countries around the world. I talk to Foreign Ministers every day and every week, and we have had a shared challenge—but particularly with a great travelling nation like the United Kingdom. At the same time, working with those countries and with the airlines, we have returned 1.3 million Brits from abroad on commercial flights. We have now returned over 30,000 people on the charter flights that we have arranged. We have also got all those who were travelling on cruise ships back. The consular team at the Foreign Office and our networks around the world deserve great praise, but we take nothing for granted and are not complacent for a moment. We will keep up those efforts, with all the other scheduled flights and charter flights that we are looking into in order to return other stranded nationals.

Covid-19 Vaccine

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to support the development of a covid-19 vaccine (a) in the UK and (b) throughout the world. [902375]

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to support the development of a covid-19 vaccine (a) in the UK and (b) throughout the world. [902377]

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to support the development of a covid-19 vaccine (a) in the UK and (b) throughout the world. [902380]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The UK is playing a leading role in supporting global research and development efforts to find a vaccine, with

vaccine trials commenced in this country, and the UK leading internationally to find and distribute vaccines abroad.

Aaron Bell [V]: The Prime Minister acknowledged that, although there is an international race to find a vaccine, it is not a competition, and a breakthrough could come anywhere around the world, although one of the first likely candidates is the Oxford project. If the project is successful, that vaccine will be manufactured by a consortium including Cobra Biologics in my constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme, but I know that it is keen to produce enough not just for the UK, but to send around the world, especially to the many countries with no manufacturing capacity of their own. Could my right hon. Friend reassure me that we are coming to reciprocal understandings with other nations around the world to ensure that any vaccine, wherever it is produced, both reaches the UK swiftly and is made available on an international basis as soon as possible?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to spearhead the pursuit of a vaccine through the research that has been conducted in this country—and, if possible, manufacture it at the kind of scale that would deal not just with UK needs, but with those more broadly. Through the contributions that we are making to the Coronavirus Global Response Initiative, to CEPI and to the Gavi funding calls, we are the leading donor in the latest call for donations to ensure not only that we can provide vaccines for UK nationals here at home, but that those vaccines can be expanded, particularly to the most vulnerable countries abroad.

David Morris [V]: May I thank my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for his personal intervention, after a text to the Moroccan authorities at 11 o'clock at night led one of my constituents to return home to Morecambe? Does he agree that keeping commercial routes into the UK open is critical to ensuring that British nationals can continue to return home? These routes have been a vital connection for many of my constituents who were stuck abroad.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his tenacity and for raising the case of his constituents so swiftly. I am delighted and relieved that they have been able to get home. On his broader point, he is absolutely right. Yes, the charter flights are important—we have got more than 30,000 British nationals back on those flights—but we have had to work very hard to keep the airports and particularly the transit hubs open. As a result, we have managed to secure the return, safe and sound, of more than 1.3 million UK nationals on vital commercial flights.

Mr Speaker: Staying in the north-west, we go to Chris Green.

Chris Green [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Thanks in part to our leadership and our work with international partners on the Gavi programmes, we are in a leading position to collaborate on developing and manufacturing vaccines. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to take the same collaborative approach to developing and, crucially, manufacturing a vaccine to tackle covid-19?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are proud to be pioneering trials in this country to crack the issue of finding a vaccine. Of course, we need to leverage the manufacturing base we have here and our incredible pharmaceutical sector. We are proud that we co-hosted the coronavirus global response initiative on 4 May, and we will host the global vaccine summit on 4 June. On CEPI and Gavi, as I said, we are the largest donor to the recent calls for funding, and we will continue that international collaboration, which is so vital.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The UK's participation in the international pledging conference was extremely welcome, but it is deeply concerning that the USA was notable by its absence. Without US participation, the search for a vaccine will undeniably be slower and more lives will be lost, so can the Foreign Secretary reassure us that he or the Prime Minister asked the United States to attend? What was its reason for turning us down? What realistically does he think the UK can do to turn this situation around before not just the Gavi summit that he mentioned but the crunch G7 leaders summit in June?

Dominic Raab: The shadow Foreign Secretary raises an excellent point. This is a moment when we need to try to reduce political tensions and work collaboratively right across the world. On returns, I work with my Cuban opposite number, my Chinese opposite number and Foreign Ministers from around the world, and when it comes to finding the vaccine there is an even stronger impetus. We will keep making the case in the G7 and bilaterally, with the Americans and all the major countries, to try to get really strong international leadership, and of course we will continue to try to ensure that the coalition is as broad and deep as possible.

Mr Speaker: We are unable to connect Tom Tugendhat, so I call Minister James Duddridge to answer the substantive question tabled by Ruth Jones.

Zimbabwe

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe. [902368]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge) [V]: The humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe is bad. I had been an optimist on Zimbabwe post Mugabe, but things are bleak across the political, economic, social and humanitarian fronts. Her Majesty's Government stand ready to support, but only when we see genuine reform. Until then, we support the people of Zimbabwe with a £140 million development package, but, crucially, none of that money goes directly through the Government of Zimbabwe.

Ruth Jones [V]: I thank the Minister for that update. There are currently 7 million people in urban and rural areas of Zimbabwe in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, compared with only 5.5 million in August last year. What conversations has he had with the Zimbabwean Government to discuss their humanitarian needs?

James Duddridge: On Thursday I spoke to the Department for International Development head in Zimbabwe and our ambassador about the situation. They were very clear, as I am, that we need domestic reform in Zimbabwe as well as external international development.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran's regional activity. [902370]

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): We are concerned about Iran's destabilising regional activity. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps provides military and financial support for groups that include the Houthis and Hezbollah. Support for those groups is in contravention of UN Security Council resolutions and undermines prospects for regional stability. We have called on Iran to play a constructive role in the region, and Ministers and senior officials routinely raise concerns with Iranian counterparts and regional partners.

Robert Largan [V]: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is the nexus of Iran's destabilising activities, distributing funds and weapons in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. The revolutionary guard is already subject to UK sanctions, but does the Minister agree that full proscription should now be applied? Does he share my concerns that the expiration of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action arms embargo in October stands to enable the revolutionary guard to expand its murderous regional actions?

James Cleverly: We have long expressed our deeply held concerns about the de-stabilising activity of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I take into consideration the points my hon. Friend makes about its activity, but the UK Government do not routinely comment on organisations that they may proscribe. The proscription list is regularly reviewed and we will always take situations on the ground into consideration when we update it.

Covid-19: Israeli and Palestinian Authority Co-operation

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What recent reports he has received on Israeli co-operation with the Palestinian Authority in tackling covid-19. [902371]

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Israeli-Palestinian co-operation in tackling covid-19. [902373]

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): We welcome the ongoing co-operation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority towards tackling covid-19, a matter I was pleased to discuss directly with the Israeli ambassador to the UK and the Palestinian Prime Minister recently. UN agencies, the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority are working together to ensure essential medical supplies and staff reach the most vulnerable areas, including Gaza. We encourage continued positive interaction between Israel and the Palestinian authorities in their efforts to fight covid-19.

Stephen Crabb [V]: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the UN special co-ordinator for the middle east peace process recently praised the way the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority have been working together to tackle covid-19. Does he agree that that kind of practical co-operation—the building of trust and meeting shared challenges head on—is the way that peace will get built in the region? Will he step up his efforts to encourage genuine negotiations based on the two-state solution?

James Cleverly: In conversations I have had with both representatives of the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority I have praised the way they have worked together on this matter. I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend that international co-operation is the way that we, as the international community, will fight it. As the Prime Minister said at the coronavirus global response international pledging conference he co-hosted in May, the race for a vaccine is not a competition between countries, but the most urgent shared endeavour of our lifetime. If the attitudes we bring into fighting this disease can be more broadly applied, I think the world would be a better place.

Steve McCabe [V]: I thank the Minister for his comments. Will he join me in welcoming the news that Israel has approved a \$230 million advance payment to the Palestinian Authority, alongside coronavirus test kits, intensive care beds, ventilators, drugs and protective equipment? Is that not exactly the kind of behaviour we should welcome and encourage?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the points he makes. We have indeed commented positively to the Israeli Government on how they have worked with the Palestinian Authority. I made the same point to Palestinian Authority representatives on the way they have worked with the Israeli Government. It shows a pattern of co-operation that should be replicated. I hope it is a step towards building trust that will enable a sustainable peaceful solution to the situation in Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Mr Speaker: We are going to have to speed up the answers Minister, please. We now go across to welcome Wayne David to his new position.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As has been said, there is encouraging co-operation between Israelis and Palestinians with regard to covid-19. I am sure the Minister agrees that that highlights how wrong it is for a new Israeli Government to pursue a policy of illegal annexation of large parts of the west bank. What are the Government doing to mobilise international opinion against that annexation?

James Cleverly: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place, although it is virtual. The UK Government have expressed, both publicly and to the Government of Israel, our concerns about reports of annexation, which we have consistently said we oppose and could be detrimental to the chances of the peaceful, sustainable two-state solution that we should all be working towards.

Occupied Palestinian Territories

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What recent representations he has made to the Government of Israel on the proposed annexation of parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [902378]

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of Israel on the proposed annexation of parts of the West Bank. [902381]

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): The UK is deeply concerned about the reports that the new Israeli Government coalition have reached an agreement that may pave the way for annexation of parts of the west bank. Any unilateral move towards the annexation of parts of the west bank by Israel would be damaging to efforts to restart the peace process and contradictory to international law, and might make the chances of a sustainable two-state solution harder. We recently made clear our concerns at the UN Security Council remote meeting on the middle east peace process on 23 April.

Tommy Sheppard [V]: I appreciate the Minister's concern, but does he believe that the proposed annexation by Israel of the Palestinian territories would be illegal under international law? If so, does he think that the United Kingdom Government's response should be the same as it would be with other countries guilty of illegal annexation, such as Russia?

James Cleverly: Our long-standing position is that such a move would be contrary to international law. We continue to have a constructive relationship with both the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and we will continue to work towards a peaceful resolution that takes us to a sustainable two-state solution. That is our long-standing position, and we continue to work towards it.

Mr Betts [V]: I am pleased to hear the Minister condemn any proposed annexation of territories in the west bank by the Israeli Government. Will he go further and accept that such an annexation would render any future Palestinian state unviable, would destroy its geographical integrity, and as such would render a two-state solution obsolete? Is it not absolutely essential that the Government act now with others to stop the Israelis annexing territory in the way that they currently intend?

James Cleverly: As I said, our long-standing position is that we do not support the annexation of parts of the west bank, as doing so could make a sustainable two-state solution harder. We support actions by the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority that take us closer to a sustainable two-state solution, and we express our concerns about anything that might put that at risk.

Sino-British Joint Declaration

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect on the Sino-British Joint Declaration of recent actions by the Chinese Government in Hong Kong. [902374]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams) [V]: There have been a number of concerning recent developments in Hong Kong. As co-signatory of the joint declaration, the UK expects the mainland Chinese authorities to respect Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and the

rights and freedoms provided in that legally binding treaty. We are monitoring the situation very closely and will provide a full assessment of implementation of the joint declaration in six-monthly reports to Parliament.

Mr Carmichael [V]: Beijing's top political office in Hong Kong recently referred to pro-democracy protesters as a "political virus" and declared itself as being entitled to interfere in Hong Kong as it sees fit—clear breaches of the joint declaration. What plan do the Government have to help British national (overseas) passport holders in Hong Kong, should the deterioration of relations continue?

Nigel Adams: The Foreign Secretary commented in Parliament on 26 September that the status of British nationals overseas was

"part of the delicate balance"—[*Official Report*, 26 September 2019; Vol. 664, c. 865]—

in the negotiations that led to the Sino-British joint declaration. We believe that it would undermine the commitments made under the memorandum exchanged in connection with the joint declaration to change the arrangements regarding the status of BNOs, but we monitor the situation constantly. I know the right hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in the issue.

Speaker's Statement

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Before calling the Prime Minister to make a statement, I would like to make a statement of my own accord. I am aware of widespread concerns across the House about delays in Government Departments, and the Department of Health and Social Care in particular, responding to written questions and correspondence. I have received representations on this matter from the Procedure Committee and from Back Benchers across the House from Opposition parties.

Last Wednesday, the Leader of the House argued that a degree of latitude is allowable for the Department. However, the Secretary of State himself has referred repeatedly to the value of parliamentary scrutiny. Written questions and letters to Ministers are integral to such scrutiny. I accept that the Department of Health and Social Care faces many challenges, but I am sure that resources across Whitehall can be mobilised to support it in maintaining proper standards of accountability.

While I think it is right for me to call for improvements within the Government, I also make a plea to all hon. Members to be targeted and considered in the written questions that they table at this time, and to avoid swamping Departments with questions on a fast-moving situation that will be superseded before they can be answered.

I now call the Prime Minister, who should speak for no more than 10 minutes.

Covid-19: Strategy

3.31 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the next steps in our battle against coronavirus and how we can, with the utmost caution, gradually begin to rebuild our economy and reopen our society.

For the last two months, the British people have faced a grave threat with common sense, compassion and unflinching resolve. We have together observed the toughest restrictions on our freedoms in memory, changing our way of life on a scale unimaginable only months ago. All our efforts have been directed towards protecting our NHS and saving lives. Tragically, many families have lost loved ones before their time, and we share their grief, yet our shared effort has averted a still worse catastrophe, one that could have overwhelmed the NHS and claimed half a million lives.

Every day, dedicated doctors, nurses, social care workers, Army medics and more have risked their own lives in the service of others. They have helped to cut the reproduction rate from between 2.6 and 2.8 in April to between 0.5 and 0.9 today. The number of covid patients in hospital has fallen by over a third since Easter Sunday. Our armed forces joined the NHS to build new hospitals on timetables that were telescoped from years to weeks, almost doubling the number of critical care beds and ensuring that, since the end of March, at least a third have always been available.

Our challenge now is to find a way forward that preserves our hard-won gains while easing the burden of the lockdown. I will be candid with the House: this is a supremely difficult balance to strike. There could be no greater mistake than to jeopardise everything we have striven to achieve by proceeding too far and too fast. We will be driven not by hope or economic revival as an end in itself, but by data, science and public health.

The Government are today submitting to the House a plan that is conditional and dependent, as always, on the common sense and observance of the British people and on the continual reassessment of the data. That picture varies across the regions and home nations of the United Kingdom, requiring a flexible response. Different parts of the UK may need to stay in full lockdown longer, but any divergence should be only short term because, as Prime Minister of the UK, I am in no doubt that we must defeat this threat and face the challenge of recovery together.

Our progress will depend on meeting five essential tests: protecting the NHS; reducing both the daily death toll and the infection rate in a sustained way; ensuring that testing and personal protective equipment can meet future demand, which is a global problem, but one that we must fix; and avoiding a second peak that would overwhelm the NHS. A new UK-wide joint biosecurity centre will measure our progress with a five stage covid alert system.

The combined effect of our measures so far has been to prevent us from reaching level 5—a situation in which the NHS would have been overwhelmed—and hold us at level 4. Thanks to the hard work and sacrifice of the British people in following social distancing rules, we are now in a position where we can move in

stages to where I hope the scientific advice will tell us that we are down to level 3, but this will only happen if everyone continues to play their part, to stay alert and to follow the rules.

We must also deal with the epidemic in care homes, where a tragic number of the elderly and vulnerable have been lost, and while the situation is thankfully improving, there is a vast amount more to be done. Of course, we need a world-leading system for testing, tracking and tracing victims and their contact, so I am delighted that Baroness Harding, the chair of NHS Improvement, has agreed to take charge of a programme that will ultimately enable us to test hundreds of thousands of people every day.

All this means that we have begun our descent from the peak of the epidemic, but our journey has reached the most perilous moment, where a wrong move could be disastrous. So at this stage, we can go no further than to announce the first careful modification of our measures. Step 1 in moving towards covid alert level 3 involves a shift in emphasis that we can begin this week. Anyone who cannot work from home should be actively encouraged to go to work. Sectors that are allowed to be open should indeed be open, but subject to social distancing. These include food production, construction, manufacturing, logistics, distribution and scientific research. To support this, we are publishing guidance for businesses on how to make these workplaces safe and covid-secure.

People who are able to work from home should do so, as we have continually said, and people who cannot work from home should talk to their employers about returning this week and about the difficulties that they may or may not have. Obviously, anyone with covid symptoms, or who is in a household where someone else has symptoms, should self-isolate. We want everyone travelling to work to be safe, so people should continue to avoid public transport wherever possible, because we must maintain social distancing, which will inevitably limit capacity. Instead, people should drive or, better still, walk or cycle.

With more activity outside our homes, we would now advise people to wear a cloth face-covering in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not always possible and you are more likely to come into contact with people you do not normally meet. The reason is that face-coverings can help us to protect each other and reduce the spread of the disease, particularly if you have coronavirus-like symptoms. But I must stress that this does not mean wearing medical face masks—2R or FFP3—which must be reserved for people who need them.

We have all lived, so far, with onerous restrictions on outdoor spaces and exercise—[*Interruption.*] My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) interjects from a sedentary position. I know that he is a keen swimmer. Unfortunately we cannot do anything for swimming pools, but we can do something for lakes and the sea. This is where we can go significantly further, because there is a lower risk outdoors than indoors. So from Wednesday there will be no limits on the frequency of outdoor exercise people can take. You can now walk, sit and rest in parks, you can play sports and exercise, and you can do all these things with members of your own household, or with one other person from another household, provided you observe social distancing and remain two metres apart. I do

hope that that is clear. I am conscious that people will come back and ask questions in more detail, and I will be happy to answer them.

We shall increase the fines for the small minority who break the rules, starting at £100, but doubling with each infringement up to £3,600. You can drive as far as you like to reach an outdoor space, subject to the same rules and the laws and guidance of the devolved Administrations. I am sorry to say, however, that we shall continue to ask those who are clinically vulnerable, including pregnant women and people over 70, or those with pre-existing chronic conditions, to take particular care to minimise contact with those outside their households. We must continue to shield people who are extremely vulnerable. They should, I am afraid, remain at home and avoid any direct contact with others. I know that easing restrictions for the many will only increase the anguish of those who must remain shielded, so the Government will look at every possible way of supporting the most vulnerable.

All of our precautions will count for little if our country is reinfected from overseas, so I give notice that we shall introduce new restrictions at the UK border, requiring 14 days of self-isolation for international arrivals, while respecting our common travel area with Ireland. Every day, we shall monitor our progress, and if we stay on the downward slope, and the R remains below 1, then, and only then, will it become safe to go further and move to the second step. This will not happen until 1 June at the earliest, but we may then be in a position to start the phased reopening of shops; to return children to early years' settings, including nurseries and childminders; to return primary pupils to school in stages, giving priority to the youngest children in reception and year 1 and those in year 6 preparing for secondary school; and to enable secondary school pupils facing exams next year to get at least some time with their teachers. Our ambition, and I stress that this is conditional, is for all primary school pupils to return to the classroom for a month before the summer break.

To those ends, we are publishing guidance on how schools might reopen safely. Step 2 could also include allowing cultural and sporting events behind closed doors for broadcast, which I think would provide a much-needed boost to national morale. Nothing can substitute for human contact, so the Government have asked the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies when and how we can safely allow people to expand their household group to include one other household on a strictly reciprocal basis. [*Interruption.*] Mr Speaker, I am conscious that you want me to wind up—

Mr Speaker: I did say 10 minutes, and you have gone over it. Quickly.

The Prime Minister: I understand, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order for me to request that my interrogation continues a little bit longer in order for me to make all these points?

Finally, no earlier than July, we may be able to move to step 3, if and only if that is supported by the data and the best scientific advice. We would then aim to reopen some remaining businesses including, potentially, hospitality, cinemas and hairdressers, as well as places of worship and leisure facilities. This will depend on maintaining social distancing and new ways of providing services, so

[The Prime Minister]

we will phase and pilot any reopenings to ensure public safety. I must be clear again: if the data goes the wrong way and if the alert level begins to rise, we will have no hesitation in putting on the brakes and delaying or reintroducing measures locally, regionally or nationally.

Our struggle against this virus has placed our country under the kind of strain that will be remembered for generations, but so too will the response of the British people, from dedicated shopworkers keeping our supermarkets open and ingenious teachers finding new ways of inspiring their pupils, to the kindness of millions who have checked on their neighbours, delivered food to the elderly, or raised astonishing amounts for charity. In these and so many other ways, we are seeing the indomitable spirit of Britain.

Let me summarise by saying that people should stay alert by working from home if you possibly can, by limiting contact with others, by keeping your distance to two metres apart where possible and by washing your hands regularly. If you or anyone in your household has symptoms, you all need to self-isolate. If everyone stays alert and follows the rules, we can control the virus, keep the rate of infection down and keep the number of infections down. That is how we will be able to save lives and to save livelihoods as we begin to recover from coronavirus. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I say to the Leader of the Opposition that he can take a minute extra.

3.44 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of his statement, and for the advance copy of the Command Paper that his office sent through an hour or so ago. I also thank him for taking time to speak to me and to other Opposition leaders yesterday before his speech.

I start by acknowledging just how difficult are the decisions that now fall to be taken. We do recognise how difficult they are. At this time, the country needs clarity and reassurance, and both are in pretty short supply. The heart of the problem, it seems, is that the Prime Minister made a statement last night before the plan was written, or at least before it was finalised, and that has caused considerable confusion.

Yesterday afternoon, a No. 10 press release said:

“Anyone who can’t work from home, for instance those in construction and manufacturing, should be actively encouraged to go to work”.

It was understood from that that today was the start date, and that that was for construction and manufacturing. A few hours later, the Prime Minister made his statement, and there was no express reference to timeframe. Today, page 25 of the Command Paper states that these policy changes apply from Wednesday, and the list has been expanded from construction and manufacturing to other sectors. Now we have a start date of Wednesday and a wider range of sectors to go back to work on Wednesday; so far, so good.

One of the key issues is whether there will be guidelines in place to ensure the safety of the workforce. Those guidelines were being consulted on last Sunday, but they were vague

and had big gaps. Under protective equipment, it just said, “To be inserted” or, “To be added”. The document that I have now seen says that

“workplaces should follow the new ‘COVID-19 Secure’ guidelines”, which I assume are the same guidelines, as “soon as practicable”, but on page 22 the document states that they will be released later this week.

So, we know that some people are going back to work on Wednesday, but the guidelines have not been published and they will apparently be released later this week. I ask the Prime Minister: will the safety guidelines be ready for Wednesday? Realistically, that means tomorrow, if workplaces are to be ready for Wednesday morning. If not, is he seriously asking people to go back to work without the guidelines? Have the guidelines been agreed with businesses and trade unions, as was being attempted a week ago on Sunday, and do they apply only in England?

I turn to getting to work, which has been another issue of some concern. The Prime Minister said last night that people should not rely on public transport. The Command Paper, at page 26, says that

“the Government is working with public transport providers to bring services back towards pre-COVID-19 levels as quickly as possible”—

bringing services back to their old levels—and it says:

“Social distancing guidance on public transport must be followed rigorously”.

That means ramping up the service, with new guidelines for social distancing, but we learn from page 26 that unfortunately those guidelines are not ready; they are coming later in the week. Are they coming tomorrow, to be ready for Wednesday, or are they coming later in the week? If it is the latter, people will be using public transport and operators will be required to operate to guidelines that do not yet exist. Will that be for England only, and have those guidelines been agreed with the transport providers and the relevant trade unions?

I have one other point about work. There is a real concern, which the Prime Minister might be able to clarify, for those who have childcare responsibilities. With schools not going back until June—I understand the conditionality behind that—should those people go back to work on Wednesday, or not? They are in a quandary as to what to do.

I turn to international travel. Last night, the Prime Minister said in his speech that he proposed to impose quarantine on people coming into the country by air. Given that 100,000 people have arrived in the UK since the start of lockdown, why is that only being introduced now? Is it only for those arriving by air? The Command Paper now says that it is for “all international arrivals”. Does that mean all ports, and, again, is that for England or the UK? The Command Paper goes on to say that these “international travel measures”—the quarantine—will not come into force on Wednesday, unlike the other policy changes,

“but will be introduced as soon as possible”.

When is that going to be?

The Prime Minister said that we would be “driven by the science, the data and public health.”

What is the scientific evidence for the public health basis behind the measures that have been announced and the “Stay Alert” message?

Finally, the Prime Minister will know that there is not consensus on messaging or policy between the UK Government and those in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I know that is not something he wanted to see, but we are now in that position. That raises serious concerns and a real danger of divergence. Again, this is clear from the document that he provided to me an hour or so ago. Page 27 says that travel to outdoor spaces is now permitted “irrespective of distance”, but that we must

“respect the”—

different—

“rules in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland”.

Does that mean one could travel to the border but not, presumably, beyond it, where there are differences? That makes enforcement extremely difficult and clarity really difficult, so what can we do—what can he do—to make sure that we exit lockdown as one United Kingdom, just as we entered it?

There are lots of questions, but so far precious few answers. The country does need clarity on this and people need reassurance above all else. They need it in the next 48 hours, so can the Prime Minister now please provide that clarity?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for all the questions the right hon. and learned Gentleman has raised and for the spirit in which he has raised them. Let us be absolutely clear: what we are trying to do now—he was good enough to refer to it—is move from a situation in which the people of this country have had the overwhelming impression that there is a very clear and simple piece of advice that we all have to obey, which is, broadly speaking, “Stay at home”. The people of this country have, by and large, followed that advice, perhaps more emphatically, more thoroughly than many other populations around the world. Thanks to their efforts, we have made huge progress in fighting the disease—we have got the R down. We need now to begin to acknowledge the progress that has been made and to take the small, limited steps that we can with the R down where it is. That is what the Government are trying to do.

Clearly, when coming out of a message that is so gloriously simple as, “Stay at home”, there will inevitably be complexities that he has rightly alluded to.

Let me try to deal with some of the issues that the right hon. and learned Gentleman raised. What we are saying now is, “You should stay at home if you can, but go to work if you must—if your job does not allow you.” Plainly, he raised, properly, the issue of people who do not have the right childcare, and we will count on employers to be reasonable. If people cannot go to work because they cannot get the childcare that they need, plainly they are impeded from going to work, and they must be defended and protected on that basis. If their kids cannot yet go to school because the schools are not back, plainly they cannot go to work. I think that people with common sense—businesses and employers with common sense—do understand that, and it is incumbent on all of us to get that message across. One thing that was perhaps missing from his analysis was the simple fact that over the last couple of months plenty of businesses, from construction to manufacturing, and office businesses of all kinds, have been proceeding

and they have been working. They have been doing so in a way that respects social distancing and is as covid-compliant as possible.

To answer the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s specific questions about the timescale for the publications of our guidelines, we will be publishing the guidelines on places of employment tonight; transport will be out tomorrow.

We are being very, very consistent in what we have said throughout this period. At the very beginning, we said, “You should stay at home if you can, go to work if you must.” What has changed now is the emphasis and the encouragement we are giving people to follow the initial guidance of 23 March. He asks about what science it is going to be based on and how we have reached the conclusions that we have. As I said last night, and as I told the House, the R—the reproduction rate of the disease—is now between 0.5 and 0.9. It varies across the country, as he rightly says. That is why different approaches by the devolved Administrations are to be welcomed, where those are appropriate to their specific needs. Overall, and I think all leaders of the devolved Administrations would confirm this, there is a very strong desire to move forward as four nations together.

Perhaps I can sum up. We all share the strong view that people should stay at home if they can, and that remains the position. The steps we are taking today are modest, and entirely governed by the science. We hope—and this is entirely conditional—that we may be in a position to take further steps in the next few weeks. Given the complexity of what is being said, the right hon. gentleman raised a perfectly reasonable point about people moving across the border into Wales for recreational purposes, and there will be myriad other hypothetical situations that people can raise. But let us be clear: everybody understands what we are trying to do together. We are working together as a country to obey the social distancing rules, which everybody understands. The British people understand that this is the moment for the whole country to come together, obey those rules, and apply common sense in their application of them.

I have huge admiration for the way that the police have enforced the rules so far. I know that the British public will continue to help the police, and everybody, to enforce the rules, get the reproduction rate down, and get this disease even further under control, by continuing to apply good, solid, British common sense. That worked throughout phase 1, and I have no doubt that it will work in the second phase of the fight against the disease.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): First, may I thank the Prime Minister for the tremendous leadership of our nation during these times, and for his comprehensive statement today? Will he please outline his post-Brexit and post-covid economic plan to set our UK economy back on the right track in the coming decade? Does he agree that our priority must be to make plans now to boost domestic output in manufacturing and agriculture, so that we can reduce our reliance on imports, and support British business growth and job creation in constituencies such as Romford? We need a bold, free-enterprise agenda that is led, I believe, by a Prime Minister who I know will show the true bulldog spirit of this country, and take our nation back to prosperity and greater things in the future.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much, and I assure him that the spirit of Romford will certainly be actuating our approach. There is a huge difference between the way this Government have handled this crisis and what happened in 2008—a huge difference. The most important thing, of course, is that we decided to look after the livelihoods and job prospects of families across the country. We looked after people who are on low pay and modest incomes, in retail and hospitality, with our coronavirus job protection and furloughing scheme. We will ensure that this economy comes back strongly, and we will be uniting and levelling up across the entirety of the country.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: It is obvious that the past 24 hours have spread confusion, yet today the public desperately need to be given clarity. Lives are at risk, so political judgments and verdicts on this weekend's chaos will have to wait for another day. I respect the right of the Prime Minister to make judgments on the basis of his scientific advice. I hope he is right in the determinations he is making, and that, crucially, if evidence suggests an increase in the R-rate, he will be prepared to act accordingly.

We need to be guided by one clear understanding, which is that mixed messaging risks lives. In order urgently to re-establish clarity, I wish to ask the Prime Minister five specific questions, and I genuinely urge him to provide five clear answers.

For clarity, will the Prime Minister confirm that he accepts and respects that in the devolved nations, the advice clearly remains, “Stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives”, and that it is the legal right of all the First Ministers to set their approach for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

In terms of the new slogan, last night the Prime Minister said:

“I have consulted across the political spectrum, across all four nations of the UK.”

Can the Prime Minister therefore explain why his Government did not share his new slogan with the devolved Administrations, leaving them to learn of the change in the Sunday newspapers? Further to that, will he commit not to deploy this new slogan in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland unless the devolved Governments decide otherwise?

On quarantining following travel, when will these quarantine measures come into force, and can the Prime Minister confirm whether his own Transport Secretary has told airline industry leaders that if there are too many obstacles in implementing it, it may not even happen?

Finally, for ultimate clarity, will the Prime Minister reaffirm for the public and businesses in Scotland that the advice that they should follow will come directly from the Scottish Government, and is not the advice that he gave in last night's broadcast?

The Prime Minister: Quickly, the answers are: one—yes; two—I think “stay alert” is a valid piece of advice, and indeed, so is “stay at home if you can”. My answer to No. 4 is no, and I say to the right hon. Gentleman quite simply that I do think that the UK has been able, thanks to the co-operation I have had not just with hon. Members opposite, but across all four nations, to make

a huge amount of progress together. I think most people actually understand where we are in fighting this disease, and most people looking at the practical reality of the advice that we are giving today can see that overall, there is far, far more that unites the UK than divides it, though I know that there is always the political temptation to accentuate the divisions. That is not going to be the approach of this Government, and I do not believe it should be the approach that commends itself to parties across this House.

Mr Speaker: Can I urge Members to speed up their questions, and certainly the Prime Minister to speed up the replies?

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and his approach to starting to reopen the economy while keeping the virus under control. Testing and tracing is key to the way forward. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we could reduce the time taken to get test results back from the current five days to as little as 24 hours, it would make that approach even more effective?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is completely right: speed of turnaround is crucial in improving our testing. We have done 100,000 tests again yesterday, I am pleased to say, but clearly pace of turnaround is absolutely critical for getting up to where we need to be—200,000, as he knows, by the end of the month, and then a much more ambitious programme thereafter.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) [V]: Throughout this crisis, many of us have put party politics aside to support the national effort to defeat coronavirus and we want to keep doing that, not least because the British people have sacrificed so much already, but in return, the Government must be clear with the British people and reassure us that Ministers are following the science and the advice of independent experts. So will the Prime Minister confirm new reports that neither the chief medical officer nor the chief scientific adviser signed off yesterday's shift in the public health message from “Stay at home” to “Stay alert”?

The Prime Minister: That is not right.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: Many businesses restarting operations are unlikely to have order books full enough to sustain a full workforce for months after the end of formal restrictions. Will the Prime Minister look at how job support can be tapered rather than being withdrawn overnight, and how more flexibility can be added, such as being able to re-furlough for a week at a time to reflect a firm's workforce needs?

The Prime Minister: I think that the furloughing scheme has been one of the most remarkable features of the Government's response. It is unlike anything seen internationally, with 6.5 million people currently being supported. It is absolutely right that we should do it. I do not want to anticipate what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is going to say; the House will hear more about that tomorrow.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: I understand the sense of optimism that the Prime Minister wishes to convey, and I understand that people need hope, but we must not forget that more than 31,000 people are dead, so for the hundreds and thousands of grieving families this does not feel like victory in a fight.

There is now a three nations approach: Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all agree on policy and message. I mean this with no malice, but for the sake of clarity, can the Prime Minister confirm that on almost everything he has announced today he is acting as the Prime Minister of England?

The Prime Minister: No, I reject that completely, and I think that most people will know that what we are saying is very good advice for the entire population of the United Kingdom, though I perfectly respect the inflections and variations that may be necessary locally, regionally and nationally to reflect differences in those areas. There is a higher R rating in some parts of the country, and as we come out of the disease, we will be applying different measures in different places in order to get that R down locally, regionally and nationally.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking everyone who has saved lives by following Government guidance over the past seven weeks? However, constituents in Rutland and Melton have written to me about the few persistent offenders who continue to flout the rules. Will my right hon. Friend confirm how great the increase in the fines will be, and that this will act as a greater deterrent and serve to make clear that the danger from the virus has not yet passed?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that the starting point of the fines will be £100, which will be lowered to £50 if paid within 14 days, but it will go up and up and up, as I said earlier, to £3,600. We do not want to impose these fines—nobody wants to impose these fines. We do not want to add to the burdens on our wonderful police force. That is why I hope—and I know—that the British people will exercise their common sense.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. Can he assure the House that the Government will carefully manage the economy off the job retention scheme so that there is no cliff edge for the sectors he has mentioned? In hospitality and tourism, 16,000 people in Northern Ireland potentially face redundancy in a month's time. That has to be carefully managed. Will he also protect Northern Ireland airports from unfair competition in the Republic of Ireland?

The Prime Minister: We have made substantial provision for the protection of airports and other large businesses, with loans that the Government have made available. A question was asked earlier about the furloughing scheme. I can certainly assure the hon. Gentleman that the House will hear more about that from the Chancellor, and I have no desire to steal his thunder. I think the hon. Gentleman will accept that one of the most salient and important features of this country's response to this crisis so far is that we have looked after some of the lowest-paid people in our society—the hardest-working people—and we will continue to do so.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: A recent Centre for Cities report stated that the Crawley economy could be the worst affected anywhere in the United Kingdom, because of the significance of the aviation industry. Can the Prime Minister say a little more about the support that the Government will offer to what is a crucial sector not just to my local constituency but to the whole UK, as a global, island trading nation?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who has raised that with me personally on several occasions. Aviation is crucial for our country and our economy. The packages already available include Bank of England schemes for firms to raise capital, business interruption loan guarantee schemes and time-to-pay flexibilities with tax bills. We will do everything we can to make sure that we keep Britain flying and get Britain flying again in the way that it needs to, and get airports flourishing in the way that they need to. But first, as I am sure he will understand, we must devote our energies as a nation to beating this virus.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: The north-east has the highest coronavirus infection rate in the country and some of the highest levels of deprivation, with areas where coronavirus mortality is twice that in the least deprived areas. Now the Prime Minister is telling those who cannot work from home—mainly those in lower-paid, manual and people-facing jobs—to get back to work without transport, childcare, PPE or proper protections for workers in place, putting more risk on those already at risk. Will he say clearly that, first and foremost, everyone has a duty and a right to stay safe—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely, and I remind the hon. Lady of what I said to the Leader of the Opposition earlier—do not forget that many businesses have kept going throughout this crisis across many sectors. We are going to insist that businesses across this country look after their workers and are covid-secure and covid-compliant. The Health and Safety Executive will be enforcing that, and we will have spot inspections to make sure that businesses are keeping their employees safe. It will, of course, be open to employees who do not feel safe to raise that with not just their employers but the HSE as well.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) [V]: We all know that it will take a while yet, but eventually the UK will be free of covid-19. When that happens, what is my right hon. Friend's vision? Does he want to see a return to the old normal of pollution and crowded commuter trains, or does he see a better, cleaner future?

The Prime Minister: Out of this tragedy and this disaster, we hope that some changes and some opportunities will come. I certainly see a huge opportunity for cleaner, greener transport. The UK will continue its mission to be a net-zero nation by 2050—we know that we can do it. As the House will know, we have committed £2 billion to investing in cleaner transport, including walking and cycling.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab) [V]: Does the Prime Minister recognise that the covid crisis has exposed grotesque levels of inequality in our society? His statement yesterday has given carte blanche to many employers to

[Jeremy Corbyn]

try to force people to come back to work, without proper consideration of their health and safety and the dangers they will suffer in travelling to work. Does he recognise that, while the death rate is so high and the reinfection rate continues, his statement will probably make the situation worse, not better? Will he reconsider carefully and not lift the restrictions and the lockdown until it is absolutely clear that we have the corona crisis under control? It is affecting the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society the worst, and I believe his statement will make the inequalities in this country even worse at the centre of this crisis.

The Prime Minister: I reject that characterisation of what we are doing. We are effectively restating the position of 23 March, but with a change of emphasis, to make it clear that those who cannot work from home, in sectors such as construction and manufacturing, should go to work, provided that that work is going to be covid-compliant and covid-secure—the right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the vital issue of safety—and the transport to get those workers there is covid-secure and covid-compliant. We are publishing papers today and tomorrow about how we propose to do that. It is a small step forward, but I believe it is the right step forward. The country has made huge exertions to bring the R down and to get this virus under control. It is right now that we should make some small steps forward.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con) [V]: May I first thank the Prime Minister for his clear statement and for the support and guidance he has given us all across Rother Valley? It is clear that this Government are taking a balanced and pragmatic approach that ultimately will save lives. Can the Prime Minister confirm, however, that this plan is both dynamic and flexible enough to ensure that we can reopen different businesses at different times and in different locations, so that we can kick-start our economy as soon as possible, and that only with a strong economy can we have a strong NHS?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I congratulate him, by the way, on the birth of his daughter, Persephone—an appropriate names, perhaps, for a country beginning to take steps out from the darkness. As we take these steps, we will of course be flexible. As I said just now to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), we will make sure that, where there are local flare-ups, where we see the disease taking off again, we will not hesitate to put on the brakes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, however, that to have a strong NHS, as we must, we do and we will, we need a strong economy as well.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: Reports in the press say that the Prime Minister's Government are preparing to cut the rate of support under the furlough scheme by a quarter. Can he assure us that this is not the case and that his advice for people to return to work is not an excuse for reduced spending on public health?

The Prime Minister: I have. I have considerable respect for the press, but I would advise the hon. Member not to believe everything he reads about that matter until he has heard from the Chancellor, who, as I say, will be speaking to the House tomorrow about it.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and recognise the maximum caution he is taking in gradually lifting these restrictions. I have heard today from many constituents who are parents of school-age children. They are keen to return to work this week safely but will need help with looking after their families while schools remain closed. Can the Prime Minister outline what guidance the Government are giving to parents to help them with childcare?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point that I addressed earlier a couple of times. I want to stress again for the benefit of the House and country: if we can, we want to bring primary schools back at the beginning of next month—reception, year 1 and year 6—and then to have all primary school children getting at least a month of education before the holidays in July. I appreciate that in that process not everybody will be able to get their kids into school as fast as they would like in order to get back to work. There will be childcare needs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education will be setting out in further detail how we propose to help those with particular childcare needs, but I want to stress that if people cannot get the childcare they need to get to work, that is plainly an impediment on their ability to work, and their employer should recognise that.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: Hundreds are dying every day and we still do not have sufficient testing and tracing to measure and control the spread of infection, yet the Government are starting to relax lockdown in a haphazard and confusing manner. The Prime Minister continues to claim his strategy is a success, despite us having the highest death toll in Europe. Is it the Government's position that as long as the NHS can cope it is less important how many catch the virus and sadly die?

The Prime Minister: I must reject what the hon. Member said about relaxing the lockdown. We are not ending the lockdown. We have to be very clear with people that the measures remain in place. We are saying that they should look at the precise guidance that was given, which is that, if they must go to work—if their job means they must go to work—they should be actively encouraged to go to work, and we are setting out steps to allow them to do so. The other important change we are making this week relates to people's ability to exercise. In the next two steps, on 1 June and the beginning of July, we will be governed entirely by the science, and we will continue to work with Opposition parties and across all four nations as we go forward.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]: I fully support the cautious approach outlined by my right hon. Friend. He will be aware that many small businesses, such as guest houses, bars and restaurants, in Cleethorpes and other seaside resorts face considerable problems and will need continuing support. What assurance can he give that that will be forthcoming?

The Prime Minister: As somebody who, on at least a couple of occasions, has enjoyed the wonderful hospitality sector in my hon. Friend's constituency, I know how important and how vibrant it is. I remind him of what has been achieved so far to support the hospitality sector, with the coronavirus job retention scheme and

the furloughing scheme, which has been very important. The bounce-back loans have so far paid out £5 billion already. I do not want to anticipate what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will say about the furloughing scheme, but the House should expect, as I have said several times, more very shortly.

Mr Speaker: No. 19 withdrawn, so we go to Mary Robinson in Cheadle.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con) [V]: In Greater Manchester, while the curve is flattening, it is not clearly on a downward path, with an R rate that could be as high as 0.9. In view of that, what message would my right hon. Friend give to my constituents in terms of their alertness on the five-tier scale and does he agree that, for city regions such as Greater Manchester, a significant increase in testing and contact tracing is vital in controlling this virus as we begin to ease the restrictions?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right. That is why we are recruiting 18,000 trackers/tracers by the 18th of this month. They will conduct a huge operation to trace anybody who has been in contact with somebody who tests positive for the virus, which is, of course, why it is so vital, as she rightly says, to have a massive testing operation. That is being hugely scaled up, as I have told the House. Yesterday, we achieved 100,000 tests. We are going to go up to 200,000 by the end of the month. Testing, tracking and tracing will be absolutely integral to our ability finally to defeat this virus.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab) [V]: If there is to be a return to employment, it is absolutely dependent on safe public transport. As I understand the roadmap, face coverings are to be advisory and the wearing of them will not be enforced. Can I ask the Prime Minister for a one-word answer? Should—indeed, must—everybody travelling on London buses and tubes wear a face covering—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Lady said “should, or indeed must”. We are certainly not compelling people to wear face coverings. But plainly they can be of benefit to others primarily because they stop the aerosol transmission of droplets, which may contain infection. We can help each other, as I said in my introductory remarks, if we wear cloth face coverings in confined spaces such as on public transport, where we will come across people with whom we are not normally in contact, or in shops. We think that it is advisable to wear such cloth face coverings.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: Under step 2 on page 30, the guidance says that opening non-essential retail will not happen before 1 June, so what will my right hon. Friend do to make sure that banks expedite the applications for both the bounce-back loan and the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, which provide vital cash to ensure that both small and medium-sized businesses can survive through?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and perhaps I anticipated it by pointing out that the bounce-back scheme for loans of £50,000 has already paid out £5 billion. I am given to understand that some businesses that applied for the bounce-back loan got the cash in their accounts on the same day.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) [V]: I hope the Prime Minister will join me in thanking the civil service, particularly employees in HMRC and DWP who are processing payments. They deserve a reward, so will the Prime Minister follow the lead of the Scottish Government and have an interim above-inflation pay settlement and place a moratorium on job cuts and office closures?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to make any commitments now from the Dispatch Box on future pay settlements, but what I can say is that I am lost in admiration for the efforts of our civil servants, whether in DWP, HMRC or the Treasury. If we think about the furloughing scheme, everybody said it was impossible and far too complicated, and that we would never get that cash into people’s pockets, but they did it within four weeks. That is a fantastic tribute to the work of our civil service, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con) [V]: I thank the Prime Minister for his update on progress in testing and tracing this invisible killer, but can he confirm for the people of West Oxfordshire that the new systems we are putting in place will, in the fullness of time, be able to detect local flare-ups?

The Prime Minister: Yes indeed. The intention is that the covid alert system, in time, will be sufficiently sensitive and flexible to detect local flare-ups, so that, for instance, if the covid is detected in the water supply of a certain town or in a school in an area, steps can be taken on the spot to deal with that flare-up and measures taken to keep the R down locally as well as nationally.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: The Prime Minister claims to have devised a new stage of his plan having consulted across all four nations of the UK, yet the First Minister of Scotland claims that the first she saw of it was in the newspapers and the First Minister of Wales says that the UK Government only engage in fits and starts, while the First Minister of Northern Ireland is sticking to the original stay home message. Devolution does exist and we have it across the UK, so can the Prime Minister please explain what on earth is going on?

The Prime Minister: I think any impartial view of what the UK is doing will see that there is much more that unites our approach than divides it, although I note that of course it might seem attractive sometimes to accentuate the divisions. We fully respect and understand the necessity, where there are different rates of infection, sometimes to take a different approach, but I can also say to the hon. Lady that there has been intensive and very good communication between the Government and all the devolved Administrations throughout this period, and that will continue.

Mr Speaker: Question No. 26 has been withdrawn, so we go to Kate Green.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) [V]: No one should be expected to take up or return to a job that is not safe, so can the Prime Minister confirm that there is no intention of changing the relaxation of rules on benefits conditionality? Doing so could pressure people to attend unsafe and risky workplaces.

The Prime Minister: Of course, nobody should be penalised for doing the right thing and helping the whole country to defeat this virus.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Close to 90% of vulnerable children are not in education. Will my right hon. Friend support a catch-up premium, alongside a national education volunteer force of graduates, charities and retired teachers, to provide tuition and pastoral care to these left-behind pupils?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he does to campaign for vulnerable children and for education generally. We are working with the Education Endowment Foundation and other partners to see what we can do to support the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children. He will know, of course, that under the existing measures, vulnerable children can now go to school. I thank all the teachers who are currently teaching them, as they are also teaching at least some of the children of key workers.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Perivale, Greenford and Northolt tube stations in my constituency have twice the London average of construction workers living nearby. Although their employers may have been asked to consider staggering start and finish times to reduce pressure on public transport, the Business Minister confirmed to me that this is not mandated by Government guidance. To keep my constituents and others safe, will the Prime Minister now instruct site managers to stagger their operating times and have the Government take responsibility for making sure this happens?

The Prime Minister: We will of course be issuing our guidance on covid-secure workplaces, as I have said several times already. We are also working with Transport for London, a body that the hon. Gentleman and I know well, to ensure that people on TfL are kept safe and that we have social distancing on the tube. Of course, people will instinctively say, “That’s going to be very, very difficult.” Yes, it is going to be very difficult. It will mean very substantial reductions in capacity, but we must do it to make it work—to make sure that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents can get safely to work.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: I am grateful that the Prime Minister is working closely with the Welsh Government to design a four-nations approach to ending the coronavirus lockdown. This is so important for my constituents in Brecon and Radnorshire, who share a border with England. Does he agree that, while the R number continues to vary across the country, restrictions in Wales remain the same, and the changes he announced last night are not a green light for tourism or for people to travel to their second homes in Wales?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely, and I am grateful. This is why it is so important that we should try to get as much clarity as possible. I hope that the House does understand that when you are making changes of this complexity, the messaging is crucial, but it is also difficult, and my hon. Friend is completely right. We do not want to see people—let me repeat: we do not want to see people—travelling to another home for a holiday or to a second home. That is not what this is about; this is about allowing people the pleasure and the exercise of going to places—parks, national parks, places of outstanding beauty—and taking advantage of the open air.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con) [V]: Just a few days ago, my father, Jim, died of coronavirus in hospital. He did not catch the virus in the community; he caught it in the hospital when he went in for another illness. As the Prime Minister quite rightly tries to reduce the spreading of the virus in communities and care homes, will he also do whatever he can to try to stop the spreading of the virus in hospitals?

The Prime Minister: I am so sorry to hear about my hon. Friend’s father, and I am sure the whole House joins with me in extending him our sincerest condolences. The point that he makes about care homes is also, I am afraid, a very important one. It will be no consolation to those who have lost friends and relatives in care homes during the current epidemic, but the numbers are very substantially coming down now. The numbers of deaths in care homes are very substantially coming down. But where he is totally right is that we cannot make progress as a nation on the steps that we have outlined—the further steps that we have outlined: step 2, step 3—unless we crack these twin epidemics both in care homes and in the NHS. I have been very clear on that both last night and today in the House, and I hope that the House understands that.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: The Prime Minister has set out five tests that underpin the alert system, but there is one big problem. While the Government have told us how many pieces of PPE they have procured, how many tests they have undertaken and how many temporary hospital beds they have created, to date they have not once told Members or the public how those numbers compare with what we actually need. Will the Prime Minister report to the House openly and regularly on both sets of data—what we have and what we need—and also set out how those metrics will inform his decision—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for getting me to my feet faster.

The hon. Lady raises a very important point. I will try to give the House more details of what we are doing, but I can tell her that so far, in spite of all the difficulties that I know people have experienced with PPE, it is the case that we have had no national stock outs or absolute shortages of any item of PPE. We are continuing to turn the situation round and to get billions of items to where they need to go.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) [V]: The phased approach of the Government to protect public safety is obviously correct, but we are now faced with perhaps the biggest recession in hundreds of years and an unparalleled increase in the public sector. Will the Prime Minister ensure that, whereas in the past these increases were often accompanied by waste, fraud and incompetence at the expense of the taxpayer, he puts the most effective public accounts controls in place to protect the taxpayer? To pay for all this, will he ensure that we get Britain back to work and, where it is possible to have social distancing, that people are encouraged to work?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and of course we will have effective accounting of the investments that we are making to protect the public—the furloughing scheme

and all the many other expenditures we are obliged to make—but I think my right hon. Friend will also understand that the biggest single economic risk we face at the moment is the risk that the virus should surge back again and trigger a second spike. That is why we all need to work together, as I am sure everybody understands, to continue to depress the R, keep the virus under control and stay alert.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government originally said that the Government would fund councils for whatever they needed to get communities through the covid crisis, but he now says they will fund only the things the Government have specifically asked councils to do. Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Borough Council have both received less than half of what they have spent so far, despite having one of the worst outbreaks in the country and already having lost two thirds of their Government funding in the last 10 years. Will the Prime Minister undertake to reimburse them the full costs of covid, as promised at the start of this outbreak?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, we have invested £3.2 billion extra in supporting local councils. I will take away what she says about Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Council and take it up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said yesterday:

“Stay alert will mean stay alert by staying home as much as possible”.

However, this morning, the Prime Minister’s deputy, the Foreign Secretary, said that people can travel as far as they want for exercise and can meet other people in public places if they use some common sense. Can the Prime Minister tell me what “stay alert” actually means? Where is the common sense in no longer keeping our families and communities safe by staying at home, protecting the NHS and saving lives?

The Prime Minister: I think it will be perfectly obvious to the House what we are trying to do and what we are saying by “stay alert”. We are emphasising the importance of those who cannot work from home going to work, provided that their workplaces are covid secure and that they observe the rules of social distancing on public transport or however they go to work. That is what staying alert means. It is going to be absolutely vital. Staying alert is going to be absolutely vital to our continued success in beating this virus. I think the British public understand exactly what we are trying to do, and I know that they can rise again to this challenge.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con) [V]: Loughborough University is responsible for producing some of our very best athletes and engineers. Unfortunately, their training and studies have been disrupted. The university is campus based, with all facilities on site. It would like to bring back some student athletes to train, and its engineers to attend concentrated lab work sessions, all while maintaining social distancing on campus and isolation from the wider community. Will the Prime

Minister work with universities to help them provide students with access to vital facilities to enable them to safely continue their studies and training?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is yes. I know Loughborough University well; it is an outstanding university, and I thank my hon. Friend for championing it. We will work with Loughborough and across the sector to see what we can do, in the way that she describes, while maintaining social distancing—and we can do it.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: People are worried about going back to work, about their safety and about infecting their loved ones. They do not understand why guidelines were not published before they were told to go back to work, and the Prime Minister’s ambiguity and lack of clarity have just made matters worse. Will he take on board the concerns voiced by unions, workers and employers? Will he tell us how he will enforce those guidelines to keep people safe? Will he say how workers will be able to voice their concerns about their safety at work?

The Prime Minister: This country has made huge progress in the last two months, and thanks to our collective efforts we have got the R down below one. Now is the time to make small, calibrated changes, respectful always of the science and the risk of a second spike. That is why we are emphasising that if you must go to work and cannot work from home, you should do so, provided—the hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to this—that your workplace is covid secure, and that you observe the rules on social distancing. We are publishing further guidance on that. It is common sense, and I think the British people understand what we are trying to do. I think they also understand that this is the right time to begin those modest steps.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: The Prime Minister is right to highlight above all else the need to avoid a second spike. A concern that I am receiving, from both individual constituents and businesses, is that the reopening of primary schools could present a significant threat, both in the classroom and at the school gate. Will the Prime Minister assure the House that he and his Government will do all they can to address those worries before allowing primary schools to reopen?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and I should stress that we have made the announcement only about primary schools. We have guidance from our scientists and our medical officers, and we think we could get to that stage on 1 June, but I stress that it is all conditional; it is all provisional. We must continue to drive down the R. We must continue our fight against the coronavirus. We will be publishing guidance about safety in schools, and about how parents, teachers and children can use and go to schools with confidence. There will be change—the environment will be different in our school settings—but that does not mean that they should be closed down forever. If we can make progress, we will be gradually restarting in June.

4.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

5.11 pm

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

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

Business of the House

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Mr Speaker, with permission, I should like to make a short business statement. Today's general debate on covid-19 has understandably generated a significant amount of interest from Members wishing to participate. With that in mind, and to allow more Members to take part, tomorrow will now be a continuation of the general debate on covid-19 followed by a motion relating to the extension of the temporary standing orders. Wednesday will be the remaining stages of the Agriculture Bill. I shall also make a further business statement on Wednesday.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. I appreciate that there needs to be more discussion about covid-19. I have a couple of questions for him. There are two statements tomorrow: one on covid and business and one on transport and users. Will the Leader of the House also facilitate a statement on covid and care homes? Secondly, there are two very important statutory instruments that have been moved. When is the Leader likely to get those statutory instruments back before the House? Otherwise, I support the statement.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are trying to provide as many statements as is reasonably possible. There was one by the Prime Minister earlier, and there will be one from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and one from the Department for Transport tomorrow, so we are running through a pattern of statements. The Health Secretary has been very good at keeping the House up to date on matters that fall within his Department. I am sure we will continue to be kept up to date on all these matters.

As regards the two SIs, there is no date for them at the moment, but the one relating to Northern Ireland has to be brought before the House in due course, because of the requirements of the Act under which it falls.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: The events of the past 24 hours must surely have brought home to the Prime Minister the benefits of seeking to engage Parliament, rather than using staged media events to take forward the Government's response to the current crisis. Had he done that, we might not now be in a situation where the public health message in most of the UK has been compromised and confused.

There is, however, also an onus on Parliament to improve the way we receive and debate Government proposals. I welcome this decision to extend the general debate, but the Leader will know that, even with this, there will still be a great number of Members who would want to contribute and who are unable to do so. My plea is not only that we devote more time for Parliament to discuss the Government's response, but that we do so in a more joined-up way. Tomorrow, our business comprises two statements, one urgent question and one debate, all on the same subject. For the most part, Members will only be able to ask questions and not comment on or discuss the Government's proposals. The public must be wondering why we do things in such

an apparently haphazard and unstructured way. It is repetitive and inefficient, and it hinders the ability of Parliament to scrutinise the Executive.

Given that our world has turned upside down and that we have changed so dramatically the way we conduct our proceedings, is it not time to alter our rules of debate, to allow the Government to outline their proposals and for those to be debated with urgency? We will discuss the extension of emergency Standing Orders tomorrow. I ask the Leader of the House to consider at that time ways in which we can better debate and agree the most important steps in responding to the crisis.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would not agree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the last 24 hours. What the Government have set out is extraordinarily clear and sensible. As we move out of lockdown, inevitably we are trusting people more to make judgments for themselves. It is, of its nature, less prescriptive than the lockdown had to be, and there is a great deal of clarity within that.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the way we debate things. That is why we are so keen to get back to a physical Parliament rather than a hybrid Parliament—because the flexibility of a physical Parliament allows for the interventions, the cut and thrust of debate and the natural progression of discussion from statements through to business around statutes being introduced that make Parliament so effective and such a good place for scrutiny and legislative procedures. I commend to hon. and right hon. Members alike the excellent article by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) setting out why, to her surprise, a hybrid Parliament has not been as satisfactory as the real deal. I am keen that we should get back to the real deal as soon as possible.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (11 MAY)

Motion made,

That—

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

Business	Timings	Remote division designation
Personal Statement	Up to 10 minutes	None
Standards: motion to approve the Fourth Report of the Committee on Standards	Up to 20 minutes	None
General debate: Covid-19	Up to 90 minutes; suspension; up to two hours	Remote division
Motions in the name of the Chair of the Committee of Selection	No debate	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.—(*Maria Caulfield.*)

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

Mr Speaker: As the Leader of the House announced in the business statement, the main debate today will continue tomorrow. As the motion just agreed to requires me to put the Question at the end of the debate, I can announce that my determination is that there will be no Division on the Question today. I expect to put the Question today and for it to be negated on the voices. A motion in the same terms will be moved formally when the debate resumes tomorrow, but it will be a single debate for all other purposes.

I call the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) to make a personal statement.

Personal Statement

5.17 pm

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be aware that the Committee on Standards last week published a report following an inquiry into the use of parliamentary stationery for the purpose of a communication with my constituents. This mail-out was sent to some of my constituents in April 2019. I accept that this constituency mail-out did not conform with the rules set by the House. I also accept that it was inappropriate for me to have insisted on a reference of the case to the Committee when I had already acknowledged that I was in breach of the rules and when I had been informed by the commissioner that the Committee was not the body with which to raise a possible change to the rules.

The Commissioner for Standards herself has recognised that this breach was at the “less serious end of the spectrum”.

As I expressed in my representations throughout the inquiry, I believe the rules in question to be in need of updating, to reflect the fact that combining different communications into one single letter can save money and staff time.

None the less, I am sorry for the length of time that this investigation has taken and accept that at the time, I acted outside the current House rules. I am therefore today taking the earliest opportunity to offer the House my apology both for the initial breach of the rules and for insisting on an unnecessary reference to the Committee, thereby extending the length of the inquiry. I undertake to reimburse the House for the relevant costs of my mailing, which the commissioner has assessed at £4,865.55.

Standards

5.19 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That this House—

(1) approves the Fourth Report of the Committee on Standards (HC 212);

(2) endorses the recommendations in paragraphs 36 and 37; and

(3) accordingly suspends Conor Burns from the service of the House for a period of seven days, beginning on Tuesday 12 May.

Today's motion follows the publication of the Committee on Standards' fourth report of this Session on the conduct of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). The report was agreed by the Standards Committee following a comprehensive process of investigation and consideration, and was published on Monday 4 May. The Government have sought to schedule a debate as quickly as possible, as is the usual practice.

The matter before us today has been investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and now reported on by the Committee on Standards. I thank the commissioner, Kathryn Stone, for her work, and the members of the Committee for producing this report. In particular, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for her service as Chairman of the Committee on Standards over nearly two years, which she has done with distinction. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on his appointment as the new Chairman. He is a great understander of Parliament and author of books on Parliament, and will, I think, do the job with considerable skill.

It is always regrettable when a motion such as this is before the House, and it is not a duty that I, as Leader of the House, take any pleasure in. However, the Committee has found against my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West. This motion approves the Committee's report and proposes that my right hon. Friend be suspended from the service of the House for seven days and that he should apologise in writing to the House and to the complainant, as I understand he has already done.

I would like to record my thanks to my right hon. Friend for his service to Her Majesty's Government and for the steps he has taken throughout his career to drive and maintain the UK's interests overseas. I have no doubt that he will continue to add value to this Government and to his constituents in Bournemouth West from the Back Benches.

I conclude by reiterating my thanks to the Parliament Commissioner for Standards and to the Committee on Standards for their work. I commend this motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: I now call the shadow Leader of the House, Valerie Vaz, who is asked to speak for no more than five minutes.

5.21 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion. I, too, welcome the new Chair of the Standards Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

I agree with the Leader of the House's statement on the right hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). A Back Bencher at the time of the incident, the right hon. Member has accepted that he made a rash and inappropriate action, for which he has paid a price, in the middle of trade negotiations. He has been asked to apologise in writing to the House for his breaches of the code of conduct by way of a letter to you, Mr Speaker, and to the complainant. He has agreed to that, and I understand from the Leader of the House that he has already done so. In those circumstances, I agree with the statement made by the Leader of the House.

Mr Speaker: I also thank the previous Chair of the Standards Committee for the way in which she has conducted that role over the past two years, and welcome the new Chair, Mr Chris Bryant, who is asked to speak for no more than five minutes.

5.22 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who has been a magnificent Chair of the Standards Committee for several years. Whether I am able to fill her shoes, others will be able to determine, not I.

I am enormously grateful to the Leader of the House for being able to bring forward this motion as soon as possible. I should point out, though, that I was not involved in preparing this report nor in hearing any of the evidence; it was the previous Committee that came to its set of conclusions. Consequently, I am, in the main, merely going to reiterate the points that have already been made, but in the words of the report itself. The Committee concluded:

“Like the Commissioner, we are persuaded by the evidence that”
the right hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns)

“used his parliamentary position in an attempt to intimidate a member of the public into doing as”

the right hon. Member

“wished in a dispute relating to purely private family interests which had no connection with”

the right hon. Member's

“parliamentary duties.”

Consequently, the Committee recommended that the right hon. Member for Bournemouth West

“should be suspended from the service of the House for seven days. This penalty reflects our view that the abuse of privilege for personal or family gain cannot be viewed as anything but a serious failure to uphold the values and principles of the House of Commons Code of Conduct”.

As the Leader of the House said, the Committee also recommended that the right hon. Member

“should apologise in writing to the House for his breaches of the Code of Conduct by way of a letter to”

you,

“Mr Speaker, and that he should apologise in writing to the complainant as the injured party.”

I have seen copies of both of those letters, as indeed I think you have, Mr Speaker, and I am sure the Committee will be satisfied with the way the right hon. Member for Bournemouth West has fulfilled those obligations.

As the Leader of the House said, it is of course entirely regrettable when such moments occur, but it is important that the House can uphold its code of conduct and take action when it thinks it necessary. I am entirely convinced that the report produced by the Committee and the Commissioner is fully in line with the highest standards that the House would expect of the Committee.

Mr Speaker: I can confirm that I have received the letter. I call the Leader of the House to reply to the debate for no more than five minutes.

5.25 pm

Mr Rees-Mogg: It falls only for me to thank the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for their contributions and their endorsement of what I said when I moved the motion, and to record my regret that today's events have proved necessary.

Question put and agreed to.

Covid-19

Mr Speaker: We now come to the general debate on covid-19. I call Minister Penny Mordaunt to move the motion. I ask her to speak for no more than 12 minutes.

5.25 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Covid-19.

We gather here today in the midst of a very great darkness that has descended upon our nation, and not just our nation—all nations. It has been by far the biggest challenge we have faced in a generation. We knew it was coming, but not when and not what its clinical characteristics would be. We trained to face it. How we have all responded to it has been a defining moment for us as individuals and as a nation. We have all been involved. We had no choice about dealing with it, but we had a choice about how we did so.

In the past few weeks, the darkness that has engulfed us all has been emotional, economic and extensive, but it has been illuminated by a million points of light: the response from the British people has been immense. People in all our communities have performed selfless, heroic acts—stoic, disciplined, kind—from now Colonel Tom to our health and care workers, our scientific and tech community, businesses, those who came out of retirement, critical workers, volunteers and the public who through their resolve have reduced the rate of infection and sent this virus into decline.

People have faced this crisis with personal courage and often good cheer, and I pay tribute to their resilience with pride. This virus called forth the question of who we are, and that question was answered—for families, for parents, for children, for communities, for the nation. It illuminated our values and our strengths: we chose to prioritise lives; we chose to support businesses and jobs; so many stepped up and volunteered; we pull together in times of crisis; we have seen the validation of a devolved but national health service that is free at the point of use and not linked to employment—our NHS. It has shown what we believe in and how much we value the actions of so many who are taking on a greater share of the risk to protect us all and defeat the virus, including, I am very proud to say, some Members of this House of Commons working in health or as first responders. When united in a national effort, the British people are a powerful force.

The virus has also shown a fragility: the structural and funding complexity of social care; the invisibility of some of those in care settings and mental health, of those with learning or behavioural disabilities, as well as older people; the lack of resilience in supplies of equipment when faced with a crisis of global proportions; the obstacles to providing support to some of our most entrepreneurial people; and the challenges of getting the world working together when nations are also focused at home.

This debate offers us parliamentarians the opportunity not just to scrutinise what has happened and the next steps in our response, but to discuss how we can continue to improve our resilience and adapt to what will be fundamental changes in the way we live our lives. This is, without doubt, an inflection point for our country

[Penny Mordaunt]

and for the world, and we all need to rise to those challenges. We all have a role to play in finding solutions and answers.

This debate affords us the opportunity to remember and mourn all those who have lost their lives to this disease, and to think of those who are grieving without comfort—in some cases, without having said goodbye. The reported death toll stands at 31,855 souls. Our thoughts, too, must be with those who have survived covid but whose health has been impaired as a consequence, and to acknowledge those who have had to put their treatment and therapy for other conditions on hold because the NHS would not have been able to cope unless they did so. The full cost of that sacrifice has yet to be counted.

In particular, it is right that we acknowledge all those working in health and care who have succumbed to the disease. In full knowledge of the risks, they chose to work on the frontline to save lives, give comfort to others and provide care to those in their charge. The metaphor of this pandemic as a war against coronavirus has been used, and the courage and duty demonstrated by all those working with those who are infected is the same as going into battle. Many will have seen their friends fall ill. Some will have seen their colleagues die. And they will have headed back into the danger zone, day after day. I know that there will be disagreements during the course of this debate, but I also know that every Member of this House will want to express their gratitude and humility in the face of such service, and all will agree that, despite the difficulties, we must ensure that all frontline workers in this crisis have the equipment that they need to keep them safe. We are all aware of the challenges and of the efforts being made, but that is irrelevant. We must, and we will, do what is necessary.

I also want to thank the volunteers who have stood up to help care and health services. This include individuals who are facing the prospect of losing their job, financial hardship or worries about relatives. Instead of devoting themselves to their own needs or those of their families, they have gone into care homes, medical wards and Nightingale hospitals to serve their communities—often having to separate from their own loved ones to do so. Over 3 million additional volunteers stepped up.

We should also thank the critical workers who have carried on so that we could all be fed, protected and provided for: those in the supermarket and the store; the police and fire services; post office workers; public transport workers; cleaners; prison officers; refuse collectors; pharmacists; teachers; nursery workers; public servants, especially those in the resilience forums; and, of course, our armed forces, who have delivered aid to those being shielded, brought testing to communities, and provided planning expertise at every level of this response and in every local resilience forum in the land—all while carrying out their other duties to protect the nation. They have taken risks for all our sakes.

In the past few months we have seen so many people and organisations rally: from the businesses that adapted so swiftly to meet the needs of the nation, expanding services, altering their production lines and generously donating equipment and expertise; to the others who managed to keep their businesses going throughout this

ordeal in order that they could provide for our families and support our public services. We must remember that without the wealth they generate, we cannot fund the services that we all rely on.

We have been right to provide an unprecedented level of support to retain jobs and help cash flow, with 25,000 loans, half a million firms furloughing workers, and 600,000 grants. We as a Government and all of us as citizens must do all that we can to get Britain back to work and start the recovery, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has set out.

We have seen charities, faced with their fundraising plans in tatters, lead the local response and, of course, the public have followed the requests of the chief medical officer by staying at home. It has been tough, especially for those in cramped housing with no gardens, but they have done it, and thanks to them R is now below 1. In the next phase of the response, we must all continue to demonstrate that resolve.

In all the steps and all the issues that colleagues will raise in this debate, we will be more successful if we tackle them together, across party lines and across the Administrations of the United Kingdom, as we continue to do, with international co-operation, and across all sectors—public, private and the third sector—no longer deterred by dogma, just pulling together and focusing on what needs to be done.

In that spirit, opening this debate affords me an opportunity to thank all Members of this House who joined the Cabinet Office daily calls at the start of the pandemic. They were cross-party and they were constructive. We helped each other to help our constituents, shared our ideas, cut down workloads and supported each other. The information gathered on personal protective equipment, care homes, businesses and operational matters was incredibly helpful to every Department.

We should continue to work together not only to tackle the challenges but to seize the opportunities to tackle problems that were previously almost impossible. For example, since the start of this crisis, 90% of rough sleepers are now in accommodation. They are safe and secure. There will never be a better opportunity to wrap the services that those individuals need around them while we deal with the crisis, so we must.

These are dark times, but they are also illuminating times. We have reminded ourselves, as a country, what we can do when we are united in a mission. Millions of us chose not to curse the dark but to light a candle. The British people have given us a beacon of hope in the days ahead.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I now call Rachel Reeves, who is asked to speak for no more than 10 minutes.

5.37 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for that thoughtful opening speech. We all need the Government to get this right. Labour has been clear: we will always put the national interest first. We will support the Government when they get it right but challenge them to do more when that is needed.

We all know how hard lockdown has been, especially for those who fear for their jobs and their businesses; the elderly; the lonely; and those living with an abusive partner or carer. At the moment, most grandparents

want nothing more than to be able to hug their grandchildren. Thousands of people are missing out on the chance to say goodbye or even to hold the hand of the person they love in a care home. The same applies to the ambiguous situation relating to funerals and cremations, which is causing enormous pain and distress to so many families. It is in depriving us of these poignant moments—opportunities to hug, to hold and to say goodbye—that the impact of the virus causes the most distress.

There are so many profound social costs, and it all has to be balanced with the huge challenges and risks faced by people working in health and social care. We all want the Government to get this right, but, frankly, the Government's response in the past 24 hours has been a shambles. Last Thursday, the Government's briefings to newspapers led to headlines proclaiming that we could look forward to "Happy Monday" and "Lockdown Freedom", the day before a sunny bank holiday weekend. When I saw those headlines, I recalled the world war two poster in my history class at secondary school that said, "Careless talk costs lives". I wonder sometimes whether the Government pause to contemplate the health impacts of some of their briefings and statements.

Last night's statement by the Prime Minister was a chance to provide some clarity about the situation, but it obscured as much as it revealed. This morning, the Foreign Secretary told "Today" programme listeners that they were free to see both their parents at the same time. Almost immediately afterwards, it was clarified that people may see only one parent at a time. The Foreign Secretary then told Sky News that people should return to work from Wednesday, but the press release issued by Downing Street alongside the Prime Minister's statement clearly stated that people should be encouraged to return to work from Monday. If senior members of the Cabinet struggle to follow the advice, what are the rest of us meant to do?

A four-nation strategy is essential to ensure a coherent and consistent message. It has served us well so far, so why is England now pursuing a different strategy from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales? If someone lives in Bristol but works in Cardiff, should they be going to work? What about if someone lives in Berwick but works in Edinburgh?

When it comes to Northern Ireland, the Government must also consider cross-border co-operation. Northern Ireland is unique in that it shares a land border with the Republic, so close co-operation with the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly is vital to ensure a joined-up approach to effectively combating the virus, particularly with regard to contact tracing. The UK has the highest death toll in Europe. That calls for greater care, not greater risks.

The most substantive change in Government advice today is that workers who cannot work from home should return to work. We want workers to earn an income and businesses to thrive, but for that to happen, workers need to know that they and their families will be safe. Businesses want that knowledge and security as well.

Let us be clear that the biggest risk to our economic security and recovery would be decisions that led to a second peak of the virus, so it is deeply worrying that workers were asked last night to return to work today with no guidelines published with regard to safety in

the workplace. If someone has been told to return to work, but lives with a partner with a pre-existing condition or an elderly parent, what are they meant to do?

What if someone has a school-age child but is now expected by the Government and their employer to return to work without the childcare to be able to do that? Can people still be furloughed? Is that at their employer's discretion? If people cannot work through no fault of their own, will they be required to go on to statutory sick pay?

Who will assess whether a workplace is sufficiently safe? Is it up to the individual employee? I refer the Minister to section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, which permits an individual employee not to return to work without risk of detriment if they reasonably believe that adequate safety measures are not in place. I hope that employers and Ministers will protect those rights.

Meanwhile, workers are told to avoid public transport if possible, but for millions of people in the UK, it is not possible to get to work any other way but by public transport. We have already seen bus drivers in London lose their lives to covid-19. People need to know that they can go to work without endangering themselves, or indeed others. If we are to balance concern for the economy with concern for public health, the Government should bring unions, business leaders and scientists together to develop a national safety standard. The safety of workers and their families is not, and can never be, an optional extra.

It is vital that the furlough scheme continues to support workers, including enabling people to work part time, particularly if businesses are unable to operate at full capacity. We need to hear more from Ministers about ongoing support until the time is right to operate at full capacity for some of the hardest-hit sectors, such as hospitality and travel. We need to support areas such as our coastal communities, which are so dependent on tourism.

The impact of the virus exposes deep inequalities in our society. The poorest areas of the country have been hardest hit. Lower earners are most exposed while the better-off are insulated from the biggest threats. Of the bottom 50% of earners, just one in 10 can work from home. At the top, it is five times that.

This crisis has shown who the real key workers are, from NHS staff to care workers, supermarket workers, cleaners, delivery drivers and bus drivers. They are often underpaid, under-appreciated and undervalued, and they have been asked to put their lives at risk while keeping others safe. Now, more working people who do manual jobs in manufacturing, food processing and construction are being asked to risk their health, and that of their family, while those doing office jobs, which are often better paid, can work from home and face fewer risks.

Black and minority ethnic Britons are disproportionately at risk. We know that black Britons are four times more likely to die from this virus compared with white people. We need a public inquiry into that, which Baroness Lawrence called for today, and we need urgent action to protect the most vulnerable from this virus. Coronavirus did not cause those inequalities, but it has thrown a sharp light on them. We must not let them deepen even further.

[Rachel Reeves]

In our care homes the spread of the virus continues and the death toll is still too high. Half of workers in care homes earn less than a real living wage, and a quarter are on zero-hours contracts. Many have died. Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister reported that 29 care workers have died since the start of this crisis, but data from the Office for National Statistics show that there were 131 coronavirus-related deaths among social care workers up to 20 April. According to the National Care Forum, just one in five care workers with symptoms have been tested, and they still lack priority testing for coronavirus. Those who dedicate their lives to caring for others, and who care for the sick and the dying whose relatives cannot be with them, are being left without adequate protection, and we are only beginning to know the real cost.

One reason why the lockdown rules are causing so much worry is that new infections and deaths are still at higher levels than when we went into lockdown. The test and trace strategy is still a mess. MPs from across the House will have constituents who have been waiting for well over 48 hours to get their results, and some who have been waiting for more than a week. We see reports of tests having to be flown to the United States because we lack the capacity here. How did we get into that position? Without a test, trace, and isolate strategy it is almost impossible to identify a new spike in infections, or to do anything about it. The Government need to sort that out. Relaxing lockdown will work only if it is sorted out.

At some point we will come through to the other side of this virus, and we will go about rebuilding our lives, our communities, and our economy. The recovery will not be easy, and it will require boldness and imagination to build something better. The contribution of the British public and all our key workers has been immense, but the crisis has revealed huge injustices and inequalities. We deserve a fairer country—that will be Labour’s mission, and I hope it will be the Government’s mission too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. There will now be a four-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches. As ever, I advise Members who are speaking from home and do not have the benefit of the clock in the Chamber to have some other method of ensuring that they do not exceed four minutes. It is amazing how many people cannot add on four, but I know that does not apply to Mr Mel Stride.

5.48 pm

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) [V]: Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker. May I begin by associating myself with the very poignant and moving remarks made by those on both Front Benches about those who have sadly lost their lives to this devastating virus, and with the appreciation that they showed to those who have helped so much and are on the frontline?

I will address my remarks specifically to some of the economic issues around covid-19, not least the inevitable withdrawal of some of the Government’s support for businesses as we come out of lockdown. I do not say “inevitable” because the Government were not right to introduce the scheme in the first place—the Chancellor did entirely the right thing, and came in

with the scale and pace to support business—but in the longer term, the amount of spend involved in such measures is simply unsustainable.

For example, the furlough scheme is costing as much on an ongoing basis as the funding of the national health service. Before coronavirus, Governments agonised over whether we could spend another 1%, 2% or 3% on the national health service, but here we are spending the equivalent of 100% on furloughing 25% of all workers in the United Kingdom.

I want to focus for a moment on how we might unwind the furlough scheme most productively and effectively. First, we should seek to taper it away, from 80% down to 60% and then to 40% and so on, to smooth our exit. Secondly, it is particularly important that employers should contribute to the cost of furlough beyond the end of June, because many of those with staff currently on furlough are not having to pay them and have no intention, in the medium term at least, of bringing them back in to their business. Thirdly, we need to encourage part-time working within the furlough scheme, where possible.

Finally, the Chancellor should look very closely at targeting support, not just in respect of the furlough but in respect of the other support that the Government are providing. There are at least three categories of businesses in our economy at the moment. There are those that will survive without any additional support through this crisis. Indeed, there is a small minority of businesses whose business model has actually thrived under our current circumstances. They clearly do not warrant support. Secondly, there are companies that, in the medium term, can be bridged out of the current crisis, through the provision of support. That is where a particular focus must lie. Thirdly, there are those businesses whose business model is such that, under the new economy of social distancing and before a vaccine arrives, they are, sadly, going to struggle to survive even if they are given support. I urge the Chancellor to take the courageous and difficult decisions on targeting at business and sector level, to make sure that the Treasury’s finite resources are used productively to support jobs and the economy as we emerge on the other side.

We also need to start talking about the plan beyond coronavirus, even though that may seem some way away. We need to talk about growth and how we are going to support consumer expenditure in particular, given that consumers do not feel like spending and may have increased their savings during this crisis. Temporary tax incentives, such as a time-limited VAT break, may be good in that regard. Finally, as I stick within my four minutes, business indebtedness will have increased. We need the Government to look at how some of that debt can be turned into equity, so that businesses can focus on investing and creating jobs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. I now call, to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party, Dr Philippa Whitford, whom I ask to speak for no more than 10 minutes.

5.52 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: I would first like to express my sympathy for all those who have lost a loved one to covid during this epidemic,

and to pay tribute to the millions of healthcare staff, key workers and volunteers who have shown that community spirit is alive and well.

Unfortunately, the foundation of this crisis has been 10 years in the making. A decade of Government austerity has taken its toll on health and social care services in England and, through cuts to devolved budgets, right across the UK. The pandemic is unprecedented in our lifetimes and poses a real challenge for every single Government on the planet, but it has been No. 1 on the risk register in the UK for more than 10 years.

In early February, the Government claimed to be fully prepared, yet more than three months on, they are still failing to supply sufficient PPE to protect their healthcare staff. Moreover, testing and contact tracing are still not fully up and running, yet they are lifting the current restrictions. In 2016, Exercise Cygnus highlighted the lack of PPE and ventilators, yet there has been a 40% reduction in the value of the stockpile. The management of it was outsourced to a private company, and we hear that 45% of items in the stockpile are out of date, including 80% of respirator masks. Last June, the new and emerging respiratory virus threats advisory group advised the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to add gowns to the stockpile. Why was that not done? Is that why Public Health England guidelines, which were issued to all four nations, did not include gowns for staff in covid-positive wards outwith intensive care? Two hundred healthcare staff have died. We need to pay tribute to them, but it should not have happened. None of them were from intensive care units, the most dangerous setting, which shows that full PPE actually works. But now we hear that even ICU doctors in England report struggling to get gowns. There is no point in joining the Thursday clap for carers if you are not willing to protect staff. The excuse for the lack of gowns is that the stockpile was only planned for an influenza pandemic. This is a civil contingency measure, so why would you plan for only one virus? It is not as if this is the first coronavirus outbreak. We had the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in 2002 and the middle east respiratory syndrome outbreak in 2014, and they were both much more lethal.

The Prime Minister set five tests for easing lockdown. The Government clearly are not yet meeting No. 4. Scotland's NHS has had central procurement and logistics for years and has its own stockpile, but the challenge for all Governments is achieving ongoing supply in the presence of high global demand. Yet the overseas offices of the Department for International Trade have apparently been advised not to assist the Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish Governments in PPE procurement. Provision of PPE is a devolved responsibility. Why would the UK Government want to undermine those Governments' efforts to protect the patients and staff in devolved health services?

The Secretary of State for Health prides himself on having ramped up testing to 100,000 on 30 April, but that was only by counting 40,000 tests that were, as we say, "in the post". I wonder if they are counted again when they come back in. The level, sadly, has not been maintained. One issue being reported is delays in getting results back. It is also the case that the result is not always reported back to the GP or the hospital if it is a staff member. It is not just about how many tests. The World Health Organisation advises that testing, contact

tracing and isolation is critical to breaking the chains of infection and controlling the epidemic. Unfortunately, in February, that just was not in place and we ended up with the lockdown as an emergency measure because we could not identify who we should isolate.

Understanding easing the lockdown involves difficult decisions, but we need to be aware that the virus has not changed. We hear all the time about the mystical R number guiding the way out of lockdown, but it is an estimate of how many people are infected by each person with the virus. It has three components: the ease of transmission from one person to another; how long a person is infectious; and how many contacts they have during that time. Ease of transmission is a balance between the infectiousness of the virus and the susceptibility of the population. Covid-19 is very infectious and, as a new virus, the population had no immunity. We can reduce transmission through the personal hygiene measures—I would just emphasise that that should include not shaking hands—but 50% of the spread is asymptomatic and that is the reason to advise the use of face coverings to reduce droplet spread from people without symptoms.

The way to decrease susceptibility is with a vaccine, but that will take time. In early March, the Government seemed to get side-tracked over the idea of herd immunity. I was chair of the all-party group on vaccinations for all and I totally understand the aim of herd immunity, but it is usually achieved with an effective and safe vaccine, not by letting a dangerous disease just rip through the population, especially when we have no proof of how long any covid immunity would last. The duration of infectiousness is about five to seven days and we cannot change that, but one of the problems is that covid patients seem to become infectious about two days before symptoms.

Finally, there is the number of contacts. That is the key thing we can manipulate in one of two ways: either by isolating everyone in a lockdown, which is a blunderbuss approach because we could not identify who we should be isolating; or by isolating just cases and their contacts, so they have no contact with others. That requires strong public health teams to provide testing, tracing and isolation of every single case to control the spread. That should be put in place during lockdown, while people have relatively few contacts, and before lifting restrictions.

The Prime Minister set out a roadmap last night for easing lockdown in England if five tests are met. No. 3 is a sustained fall in new cases, but the UK is still hovering over 4,000 new cases a day, and that is just the ones that are proven by a test. No. 4 is the secure provision of testing and PPE, and neither of those criteria has been met. Telling people to go out to work is not a baby step, especially without clear workplace and transport safety measures—we only have to look at photographs of London transport this morning to see that. If the Prime Minister had wanted more people to leave home, I gently suggest that a "Stay apart" message might have been a bit more helpful. Crucially, local public health teams must be in place to monitor the impact of any changes so that they can spot early warning signs of a local outbreak and take action, and that is not the case.

None of the devolved nations is ready to come out of lockdown. In Scotland, the number of cases is falling, but we do not consider it low enough to be sure that there is no risk of a rise in infections. I know that the

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

political decisions on the next steps are difficult, and I do not underestimate the mental, social and economic impact of lockdown or the misery it is causing. However, a second surge of covid cases would lead to many more deaths and put us right back to square one.

6.1 pm

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: I support the Government's caution about lifting lockdown, and I commend the Prime Minister for being honest about the complex choices we face.

I want to focus my comments on the quality of scientific advice received by Ministers. It is now clear that a major blind spot in the approach taken in Europe and America was our focus on pandemic flu rather than pandemic coronaviruses, such as SARS or MERS. Asian countries took a different path. As a result, Korea has had no more than nine deaths on any one day, Singapore is on just 20 deaths in total and Taiwan is on just seven.

The failure to look at what those countries were doing at the outset will rank as one of the biggest failures of scientific advice to Ministers in our lifetimes. One can understand the reluctance to look at a totalitarian regime such as China, when it dangerously covered up the existence of the virus at the outset. But why, when the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies was modelling possible responses in January, did it look only at the extremes of total lockdown or mitigated herd immunity, rather than at the middle way of test, track and trace that was being pursued by the Asian democracies?

That failure led directly to another, namely the advice to stop community testing on 12 March. That meant that we had no idea where the virus was, while countries such as Germany continued community testing and saved many lives as a result. A lack of interest in community testing led to another failure at the start of March. Even though infections were doubling every five days, SAGE advised Ministers against lockdown and advised them to continue with events such as the Cheltenham festival and the Liverpool champions league match. That meant that infections soon grew to a point where traditional contact tracing could not cope.

Of course Ministers have to take responsibility for their decisions. They have a duty to challenge and probe any advice, but their decisions are shaped by that advice. In that context, it would be totally wrong to blame individuals. Sir Patrick Vallance and Professor Chris Whitty are outstanding scientists and any Government would be lucky to have their advice. At fault is a systemic failure caused by the secrecy that surrounds everything that SAGE does. Because its advice is not published, it cannot be subjected to scientific challenge. Nor is parliamentary scrutiny possible, even when a Government say they are following the science.

Until last week, we were not even allowed to know who sat on SAGE. We used to have similar secrecy over the interest rate advice that was given to the Chancellor. In 1997, the Bank of England was made operationally independent, lines of accountability were clarified and advice was made transparent. Since then, inflation has not troubled the British economy. Had SAGE's advice been published in January, an army of scientists from our universities could have challenged why test, track

and trace was not being modelled. They could have demanded a ramp-up of testing and challenged the behavioural assumptions that delayed lockdown. We cannot know for certain, but the result may well have been better subsequent advice and many lives saved.

British science is world-beating because we have always championed inventiveness and encouraged challenge, so let us sweep aside the secrecy that surrounds SAGE and publish what it recommends, including dissenting views. In that way, we will harness the robust exchange of ideas, which has always been one of our greatest national strengths, and, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, come out of this crisis wiser and stronger.

6.5 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow such a powerful speech. I want to make two interconnected points. The first is that in post-industrial communities, such as the mining villages I represent, many former workers suffer from chronic underlying conditions—years of damaged lungs. They and their families are entitled to compensation for these industrial diseases, but the virus attacks older men with pre-existing conditions. If, sadly, tragedy then occurs, it is essential that medics ensure the death certificate records both the virus and the underlying industrial disease. The miners and the workers in similar heavy industries created the wealth of our country—we owe them.

My second point is that covid has revealed how deeply divided our country has been and how damaging austerity was. It is clear that the people upon whom we depend the most, the nation's heroes, its key workers, are those who suffered the most under austerity, yet they went to work every day, and still do, driven by selfless hard work and dedication, a sense of community and solidarity, and the ethos of care and responsibility. The average key worker is paid less in our country than other employees. I am thinking of the delivery drivers, posties, nurses, shopkeepers, teachers, lab technicians, food retailers, farmers, binmen, carers, police officers, doctors and all those others who have held our society together through this crisis. It is wrong that their incomes were held back, the services that they provide were cut and our social cohesion itself was damaged, leaving us exposed to risk from the pandemic. Yet when the crisis hit, they were there, without hesitation, ready for the challenge that the virus posed, just as the miners, steelworkers and shipbuilders were in another time.

Working-class people emerge as the heroes in this crisis, although they are often poorly paid, with mortality rates among the highest. Let us remember that men in low-skilled jobs are four times more likely to die from the virus than those in professional occupations. People are already talking about finding an exit strategy from the lockdown, and we do need to lift our eyes to the horizon, but it is not acceptable—the Government appeared to envisage this yesterday—to drive poorer people back to work in conditions dictated purely by their employers, perhaps risking their health while their white-collar neighbours in more professional occupations remain at home safe. Workers need to get back to work, but they need unions, working alongside managers, to determine whether the workplace is safe enough before they go back.

After the virus, we need a new economic and social settlement, one that puts health, not wealth, at the centre of our concerns and agrees that there should be

no return to austerity. We need a rebuilt NHS, adequate care services, properly funded universal public services, fair wages and an end to grotesque inequality. The efforts of millions of people and the spirits of all those who fell during this crisis serving our country must hang over this House of Commons in quiet reproach for the shameless failures of the past decade. We must respond to their whispered demand for a better way, and we must resolve that their sacrifice will not have been for nothing.

6.8 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I do not set out to be a discordant voice, and I have at least some agreement with my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), but we are always told that the Government's policy is a consequence of the best scientific advice. Well, the one thing the Government are certainly not short of—the one commodity not in short supply—is scientific advice. The question is: which are the siren voices? Which is the duff advice, and which is the best advice? I am not qualified to judge. I want an answer to a specific question: to what extent is the lockdown and this cautious plan for the lifting of it a consequence of advice from Professor Neil Ferguson and his modelling at Imperial College London? He has recently released the code for his modelling to very significant peer criticism. Again, I am not qualified to judge its robustness. What I can say as a layman, however, is that he has form. In the past, he has predicted the most blood-curdling of death tolls, which never materialised.

There is no question but that the lockdown has inflicted significant additional damage to that which the pandemic has done to our economy. It will be costly and lasting. Whether it was done on the best advice, there is no question but that it was done for the best of motives—the motive of saving life—but the diminution of economic activity and employment itself takes a very heavy toll on life.

6.11 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): This would be a difficult situation for any Government, but there are questions that must be answered and lessons that must be learned if we are to come out of lockdown safely. The large number of fatalities in this country was not inevitable. My heart goes out to those who have suffered a loss. The Government have made a religion of cuts and non-intervention, which led them to delay the decision to go into lockdown. Why did we ignore the warnings from other countries ahead of us in the epidemic? In Italy, lockdown began on 9 March; in Spain, it began on 15 March; in France, it began on 16 March. We finally entered lockdown on 23 March. Only Italy had more deaths at lockdown than the UK.

The lack of urgency was repeated over PPE and testing. We hear of frontline staff terrified of going to work without appropriate PPE. As late as 13 March, covid-19 guidance for care homes was issued. It stated that facemasks do not need to be worn in residential settings, and stressed:

“It remains very unlikely that people receiving care in a care home or the community will become infected.”

That guidance was not changed until 2 April—10 days after lockdown. Why was it not changed earlier? How has it contributed to the epidemic in care homes?

There is a worldwide PPE shortage, yet we hear even now of companies in the UK offering to supply PPE and being ignored by the Government. Why did the Government not act earlier to set up a secure supply structure here at home?

On testing, we have had announcement after announcement. On 18 March, the Prime Minister announced that we had a target of 25,000 tests per day. That was not reached for more than five weeks. On 25 March, he said that testing will “hopefully very soon” reach 250,000 per day. On 29 March, the Health Secretary tweeted, “We’ve reached 10,000,” but that was not correct. On 2 April, the Health Secretary announced that we will reach

“100,000 tests per day by the end of this month.”

That was achieved by sending 40,000 tests out in the post, and the 100,000 target has been missed every day since. This is more about media management than giving the public solid facts.

This far into the crisis, why are we sending tests to the USA? Why have we ignored the laboratories around the country in hospitals, universities and the private sector, many of which said they were geared up to answer the call to help that never came? The Prime Minister has changed the message to be alert, but it is the Government who must stay alert. Without an effective and efficient tracking and tracing system, this is a reckless move. It has already caused confusion. People were given 12 hours' notice to go back to work today, but the detailed guidance is not being published until today, with some further guidance due tomorrow.

Too slow to lock down and secure the supply of PPE and testing; too rushed to end the lockdown in a coherent and planned way; the performance of the people has been superior to the Government's. The Government must improve if we are to keep people safe as we come out of this crisis.

6.15 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The Government took decisive action to protect the public, but as we consider our phased exit from lockdown, we must also consider the impact on UK businesses and workers. Specifically, I would like to speak to the experiences of the digital, culture, media and sport sectors.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport accounts for less than 1% of Government spending, yet these sectors account for almost a quarter of the UK economy. Ensuring the integrity of the economy therefore means giving businesses in the DCMS sectors the support they need to deal with the challenges of covid-19. Whether in the arts, sports, media or tourism, these sectors punch well above their weight and enrich the lives of people in this country every single day. They are also the sectors that are disproportionately impacted by lockdown and social distancing measures.

Heavily regulated industries, such as financial services these days, have much more interaction with Government and the Treasury than most businesses in the DCMS sectors. Ordinarily, that is an advantage. These businesses are often small, operating for the most part without Government intervention, and many survive on tight margins, with surprisingly complex and diverse operations. When it comes to knowing how to help them in troubled times, however, that poses a challenge, with what I have to say is a lack of comprehension on the part of the Treasury.

[Julian Knight]

The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which I chair, is currently conducting an inquiry into the impact of covid-19 on the DCMS space. Already we have seen that the Government support, although welcome, is not reaching some of the freelancers and organisations that are desperate for assistance. Too often they fall between the bureaucratic cracks riven by the Treasury, which is more used to dealing with banks than bands and with accountants rather than actors.

Charities in particular are suffering. The best of British good will can be seen in our charitable sector and the more than 160,000 diverse charities across the country, which in normal times work to fundraise extensively. That is now largely impossible, and charities report that they are struggling. A shortfall of almost £4 billion over a quarter has been cited as the likely black hole that they face.

The Government's £750 million package for charities is helpful to those working on the covid frontline, but most charities, despite doing exceptionally valuable work, without which our communities would face significant struggles, are not working specifically on the covid frontline. They still have bills to pay and are facing the same collapsing revenues. Many still have statutory requirements to keep working. To further complicate matters, charities that have furloughed staff find that those staff are unable to volunteer for them, despite being able to volunteer for other charities. If furloughed staff could volunteer for their own organisations, with regulatory oversight, that would go a significant way towards ensuring the survival of many.

For that reason, the DCMS Committee has been calling for a separate coronavirus job retention scheme to be established specifically to meet the needs of organisations and individuals in the charity and voluntary sectors, and that substantial notice be given on phasing out furloughing support to avoid a cliff edge, which is an issue for many other parts of the UK economy. The charitable sector has also called for a stabilisation fund to provide certainty to organisations at this unprecedented time, which we also support as a Committee. We ask that consideration be given to the sums that the sector says it needs and that further clarity be given about how the £750 million earmarked so far can actually be claimed.

Charities help us and our communities when we need support. Without them, public services would be inundated. We must now support them in their hour of need, so that they can continue with their vital work.

6.19 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to all our key workers. They are the best of us, and I hope that we will repay their courage and dedication to our country.

I have heard from parents and schools that they have experienced issues with the free school meal voucher scheme. Many either have not received those vouchers or have been unable to redeem them, despite the scheme having been launched more than six weeks ago. Edenred, the contractor, has processed just 20% of the £234 million budget of the scheme, which has only a few weeks left.

At Firth Park Academy, a secondary school in Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, 488 students—almost 40% of all students—are eligible for the scheme. As of last week, none of those children had received or been able to redeem their vouchers. A primary school in my constituency has had similar issues. It waited such a long time for the vouchers to come through and was so concerned about pupil welfare that it spent £3,000 to secure vouchers itself.

Schools have tried repeatedly to contract Edenred, with one even offering staff to help process applications. *Schools Week* reported that Edenred was aware of the vast scale of the task at hand when it tendered for the contract, making it more baffling that it was so unprepared. Urgent intervention is needed to address this gross injustice and ensure that none of those eligible for free school meals goes hungry any longer.

I also want to highlight the challenges faced by women during and after the covid-19 outbreak. Women make up a huge proportion of those in care and nursing roles—those at the frontline of this crisis. We have seen that even as those women battle to provide care under the hardest circumstances, their pay is often among the lowest in society. I have also heard from many women who work in the childcare sector. They have become increasingly concerned about the future of their employment, particularly following the withdrawal of funding that was initially promised to childcare providers by the Government. That not only concerns those employed in that sector but adds to the pressure on key workers, who may now fear they will be left without childcare.

Many care and childcare providers face bankruptcy as costs rise, leaving these women fearing for their own economic future. Assurances must be given that no woman should lose her job due to the covid-19 pandemic. The true impact of this crisis cannot be fully understood until the Government have undertaken a comprehensive gender impact assessment to ensure that women are not left behind as a result of the economic impact of the covid-19 outbreak.

My constituent, Lisa Fish, is classed as a vulnerable person. Her family have taken all the steps to shield her from the virus. The Prime Minister's statement last night offered them no clarity, but it did cause them extreme distress. It is essential that the Government make their intentions crystal clear so that the public fully understand what is expected of them and to ensure that we keep people safe. This virus is not of our making, but it is within our power to respond in a way that protects the most vulnerable in our society.

6.23 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I want to make three brief points. First, I welcome the Prime Minister's statements last night and here today. For me, this is about making a balanced assessment of risk and learning to live with risk while exercising our judgment and—as the Prime Minister put it very well—good, old-fashioned British common sense about how our actions could impact our society and, yes, the NHS.

I have to say that I am saddened by the different emphasis from different parts of the UK overnight, but nations will exit lockdown at different speeds, as the infection rate varies. That is fine; it is called devolution. If we could not cope with difference within the United Kingdom, we should not have gone down the road of

devolution in the first place. Having questions and stress testing a political decision is right. That is our job here on the Back Benches. Constantly picking for political advantage, and having what I suspect is a far worse argument in public than in private, is not.

Secondly, on the help offered, there has been a herculean effort on behalf of the Government on the furlough scheme and the self-employed help scheme. I welcome the fact that the latter is there as a safety blanket for over 90% of self-employed workers. However, that is not the case for those new to self-employment. I have a constituent who was made redundant less than a year ago and who put all his redundancy money into his new business. He is a wealth creator, but he is not eligible. If people are earning over the £50,000 profit limit—not a huge amount of money in many parts of the country—they are not eligible. Equally, if someone is the director of a limited company, they are not eligible. I understand that it is difficult, and as I have said to the Chancellor in this House before, the answer may be inelegant, but there has to be an answer. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is not averse to taking back what it thinks has been wrongly claimed. We need to get help to people now.

On the furlough scheme, I have to say that if we are to avoid the cliff edge as it draws to the end of its natural life, in its original form anyway, flexibility has to be the key—flexibility on the percentage paid perhaps, but only if that goes hand in hand with flexibility on the “no work while furloughed” rule; and flexibility on sectors, too, if the Treasury goes down that route. For instance, a food manufacturer in my constituency whose principal customers are classed as hospitality would be stuck between a rock and a hard place if the furlough scheme were withdrawn for manufacturing only. Flexibility must surely see the furlough scheme extended to hospitality businesses and their suppliers in that example. The Prime Minister hinted today about a statement from the Chancellor tomorrow on the furlough scheme, and I will be listening carefully.

Finally, the Royal Hampshire County Hospital is in my constituency, one of Florence Nightingale's original hospitals, and I cannot praise it enough. The leadership, under Alex Whitfield, and staff there—many are my constituents—have just gone, as always, above and beyond. We, the local MPs, have a weekly call with the acute sector, primary care, the commissioners and the director of public health for Hampshire, and they keep us beautifully updated on the work that they are doing. The progress on delayed discharge in my hospital has been nothing short of remarkable. My trust is down to single figures on its delayed discharge numbers, and that is unheard of. Why? Because we have flattened the division between the decision making and the money trail within the NHS. We must not, we cannot go back: if it is to be health and social care, we cannot go back. On cancer, we must remember the people who have not presented to the NHS during this pause. We do not want to ditch the 75% ambition on cancer in the long-term plan.

6.27 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I first associate myself with the sincerely meant comments from those on both Front Benches about the devastating loss of life and about the incredible work of our NHS and social care workers?

I believe that we should take a precautionary approach given the evidence at the moment, and that the “stay at home” message being used by Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland is the right one. It is a matter of deep regret to me that the Prime Minister has now confused that. If my Facebook Live sessions are anything to go by—I hold them every night with my constituents in Cardiff South and Penarth—the Prime Minister's statement last night was about as clear as mud. It led to more questions than answers, and I fear it is going to lead to more infections and more anxiety.

The Prime Minister today tried to brush off the concerns expressed by those in Wales as “hypothetical”. No, they are practical reality, and the concerns of my constituents and many others. Like many constituents across this country, mine are trying to do the right thing, and they need clarity, precision and detail, not bluff and bluster. They are asking questions. What if I live in Wales, but work in England or on both sides of the border? Can home moves go across the border? What about schools? They are hearing the message about 1 June, but that does not apply in Wales; schools are not going to reopen on 1 June. There are differences in the safety rules: in Wales, 2 metres in workplaces is in the regulations; in England, it is not. Many other outstanding questions are not being answered, such as whether furlough will be extended to fields that are shut down for longer, and indeed the question about support for new starters. We need co-operation between the nations, but that means Cobra meeting, and it means conversations between the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of the devolved nations. I understand that Cobra is now meeting just twice a month in its full format. Surely that is not good enough.

I will now turn to a second major issue, borders and quarantine. I am afraid that yet again we have seen utter confusion from the Prime Minister, for future travellers, for airlines and for other transport providers. There is no clarity on when or how these measures are coming in or on the scientific basis for any of the specifics, such as the French exception, which seems to be easily circumvented. We need a workable practical plan if these measures are needed for public health, which I believe they are, but the big question is: why were they not introduced before? Home Office figures released to me and the Home Affairs Committee show that 18.1 million people entered this country between 1 January and 23 March, and I understand that more than 100,000 have entered the country since the lockdown was instituted on 23 March. Out of all those, just 273 individuals on four flights were subject to formal quarantine measures. Three of the flights were from Wuhan and one was from Tokyo and contained passengers from the Diamond Princess. So if these measures are important—and I believe they are—why are we waiting for them? Why have we not got a date for them to be introduced, and why were they not introduced before?

We need to understand the scientific basis if we are to understand what has been going on and how these decisions were taken. We have received a letter today that has been published by the chief scientific adviser to the Home Office. It talks about a 0.5% prevalence in the population and about a one in 1,000 prevalence globally, but that simply does not add up. If there is a one in 1,000 prevalence globally, that means that 18,100 of the 18.1 million individuals who entered this country without

[Stephen Doughty]

so much as a whiff of hand sanitiser were potentially infected. We have only to look at the R rate, which the Prime Minister said potentially stood at 2.8 in April, to understand how many people they could have infected. This applies even to those transiting places such as Heathrow, where they will have encountered other passengers, border staff and others without PPE and without provisions.

The chief scientific adviser to the Government, Sir Patrick Vallance, said on 5 May that

“the UK got many, many different imports of the virus from many different places...So we see a big influx of cases, probably from Italy and Spain...in early March seeded right the way across the country.”

So was it incompetence? Was it confusion? Was it a conscious decision? Or did we just give up? We need to understand how these decisions were taken, and on what scientific basis.

6.31 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con) [V]: Our country is divided between those who are deeply fearful of covid-19 and those who are deeply fearful of the continued lockdown. Of course, the right priority is to save lives, but there is no doubt that my constituents are sending many contrasting messages. Some have lost family to the virus; others are exhausted from working on the frontline. Some are so lonely that they would rather take their chances and break the lockdown. Some entrepreneurs are seeing years of hard work and effort disappearing before their very eyes. So the task is huge, and I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Cabinet on their efforts to respond to the coronavirus. They face a precarious balancing act: safeguarding people's lives versus protecting their livelihoods.

In the short time available today, I want to raise our eyes above the current crisis for a moment and to think about what the lockdown experience can teach us about the way forward in rebuilding our lives and our economy. There are two potential big wins. The first is to make flexible work the gold standard for the future. The second is to lead the world in building a green economy. Coronavirus has required us to adapt almost overnight to new ways of working, particularly working from home. For some, it is difficult to juggle young children, poor broadband or just loneliness, but for others it has been truly liberating, and the question is whether employers can make these new freedoms permanent. Likewise, many have been working part time or flexible hours to accommodate social distancing. Has this worked for them, and it is a better way forward for all of us?

Even before coronavirus hit, the employment rights Bill, which was in the Queen's Speech, promised to enshrine the UK's status as the best place in the world to work by encouraging flexible working as standard. In my view, working from home through flexible hours or job-sharing arrangements will not only increase quality of life but boost productivity and increase the diversity of our workforce. The past few weeks have been tough for UK businesses. Many of them will need to adapt or die, but amid the stress of the time we are living in, lockdown also points to a great new opportunity.

Staying home has cleaned the air, reduced the smog and enabled our planet to breathe. Today, there are 450,000 green collar jobs in the UK, and, if we play our

cards right, this could be 2 million or more by 2013, with the prospect of new skills and the levelling up of prosperity right across the country. That is what we will need to get Britain back to work and to provide employment for those whose jobs are lost. There is huge potential for British innovators to create a green tech sector to rival the size and capacity of today's UK financial services. Our challenge will be to ramp up the success that we have already seen in this new industrial revolution, offering new opportunities for growth and jobs, exports and global leadership.

In conclusion, the challenge right now is to balance the need to save lives with the need to protect livelihoods, but a brighter future can emerge from this time of trouble—one that properly values a good work-life balance and one that leads the world in clean growth and green technology for the benefit of us all.

6.35 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: I want to echo the many important points that have been made about the enormity of the situation that we are dealing with and our gratitude to those fighting it on all our behalves. Certainly, the crisis has underlined what is important, which is our sense of what it is to be human and a neighbour, and not just GDP, profit or many of the things that we discuss more regularly to measure those things.

I want to focus on some of the particular issues relating to Northern Ireland, which has to manage the challenges and the opportunities of devolution and our constitutional settlement, taking into account the fact that we have two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. I am not sure that that principle of devolution was reflected in the Prime Minister's statement last night. I understand that his comments were confusing to many in England, but they were certainly so to those in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which have each correctly been choosing their own path through this crisis relating to their own circumstances. I am concerned that the devolved institutions were told about that messaging change last night rather than actively consulted on it, and I hope that the Government will look at how they can use existing structures to ensure that there is proper consultation with the devolved regions before making such a dramatic change.

Members presumably know about the meandering 310 mile border on the island of Ireland and the tens of thousands of people who cross it every day in the course of their life and work. I know that some Members, and certainly the Government, would like to give the impression that the issue of Brexit is done and dusted, but, unfortunately, we are still living with the sword of Damocles hanging over us in the form of either a border in the Irish sea or the spectre of a border on the island of Ireland if the Ireland protocol is not honoured. I am afraid that we see very few signs of good faith in work towards implementation of that, which was scheduled to be in place by next month. I want to remind Members what an enormous breach of good faith it would be if we end up with a border because of a no-deal scenario due to the growing pressures of the pandemic on an already very ambitious negotiating timeframe. I know of no business that wants to choose between its EU market and its market in Britain, but I do know of many who fear that ideological Brexiters in the Cabinet will use the

cover of the disruption to the economy from covid to mask the damage of Brexit on the economy, and I am afraid that that would be a fatal blow in Northern Ireland.

I should also say that if we were worried about managing goods and services on the island of Ireland, I am afraid that that will be nothing to the challenge of managing an invisible virus on the island of Ireland, and it will be tragic if we do not put in place data sharing protocols that will allow us to manage that flow of people on that porous border, because we must treat the island as one epidemiological unit, and, certainly, an unresolved frontier between the EU and the UK in eight months will be devastating to that aim.

Members have spoken about the phenomenal effort of communities and many small businesses in the past eight weeks. I am sure that it is not lost on Members, even those on the Government Benches, that it was not the free market that was the saviour and protector of people during this pandemic. I hope that everyone has learned the lessons of the financial crash and know that austerity cannot be the answer as we recover from this. The past eight weeks have also laid out clearly how many people have been living precariously, how threadbare public services have been allowed to become and many of the systemic failures in our welfare system. I know that other Members will be receiving correspondence about those issues.

I just want to finish by saying how—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady has exceeded her four minutes.

6.40 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): May I start by welcoming very much the powerful speech from my right hon. Friend the Minister, the statement from the Prime Minister earlier and the plan published today, which I most certainly support?

I want to highlight the Nightingale hospitals. The construction and operation of them has been extraordinary—far better and far more impressive than anything we saw in Wuhan—and we need to be extremely proud of what we have achieved in respect of that part of our response. They may not have been used greatly, but as is pointed out in page 46 of the plan, we may very well have to come back here again, because this will not be the last pandemic and we need to be preparing for the next one. While I hope very much that Nightingale will not be used during this particular pandemic, we need to ensure that what we have learnt through the process on this and many, many facets of the response are not forgotten or shelved, but are there ready to be used in the future, because I fear we are going to have to come back to this again, and maybe again. It is all part of resilience and recognising that the No. 1 threat to this country is not Russia or terrorism—it is pandemic. We need to be alive to that and to prepare for it.

I very much welcome the appointment of Baroness Harding to be our tsar for test, track and trace. I sound a cautionary note, though: many of us who are potential NHS returnees have not been impressed by outsourcing. I know that this has all been done at a rush and that the options open to Ministers are very limited, but we need to be careful about choosing trusted partners with a track record of service in the public sector and make sure that we do not put up with second best.

Let me ask the Minister about the scientific basis for quarantine. It is traditional to quarantine people who are coming from high-risk countries, not those coming to high-risk countries, and we need to be selective about who we quarantine. Otherwise, it will simply completely close down our aviation industry—it will kill business stone dead—and I am afraid that it is going to hamper our economic recovery.

I am also very cautious about the R value. It is interesting, important and always beguiling, of course, to focus on a number that we can dish up on a daily basis, but it can confuse the picture. The Robert Koch Institute in Germany has been clear about this: it is a useful index but it is only one of several. I am more interested in the number of new cases a day. That particular figure has been declining but not as fast as modelling has predicted. We must expend all our energy on driving that down and make sure that we do not expend all our energy on chasing R, because I suspect that R varies greatly among communities and regions of this country, and settings in particular. It is very important to understand, as others have pointed out, that it may vary greatly among the nations of this United Kingdom. We should not let our politics get in the way of making sure that we address the pandemic in different parts of the country in ways that are suited to where we are with the virus in those settings.

I ask the Minister to focus very heavily on what is going on in care settings right now. That is actually where the action is, in terms of this dreadful virus. That is where the Government need to be focusing all their attention right now, to make sure that we drive down R at a granular level in those settings, and in so doing deal with R across our United Kingdom.

6.44 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) [V]: If a week is a long time in politics, it is forever in coronavirus, where things change half-hourly. Isolation has brought communities closer together. A hybrid Parliament is better than no Parliament. Given how multi-dimensional covid is, a general debate is welcome, but we need solutions. What began as a health crisis now signals the most serious economic recession on record and touches every aspect of life. We follow the science, but what scientist dreamt up the subliminal “Stay alert” slogan? New terms bring new casework.

Social distancing is reportedly being broken in workplaces, including on the HS2 construction site at Old Oak. The Government must engage with unions, residents and contractors to resolve a situation where residential streets in NW10 have become a dust bowl, with an airborne killer virus on the loose.

Catastrophising is never useful, but neither is empty spin, which is why yesterday felt like such an anti-climax. An address so devoid of facts could not even be fact-checked. “Protect the NHS” has been dropped, an element that was necessitated by a decade of underfunding. Carers who change incontinence pads, turn the elderly and keep them company and who have so long been under-appreciated get a clap every Thursday, but a pay rise is needed as well for all key workers.

At the other end of the age scale, there is a mistaken belief that schools are shut. In Ealing, all of them have remained open—even over Easter—to provide lessons

[Dr Rupa Huq]

and lunches for the kids of key workers and for those at risk, as well as online working for those who are not. As the National Education Union's five tests set out, schools should only fully reopen when pupils' families and staff think it is safe to do so.

Health and safety is not meddlesome when lives are at risk, yet the budgets of the HSE and councils have been slashed. The Government's Operation Cygnus pandemic planning exercise in 2016 concluded that the UK lacked ICU beds, ventilators and PPE, but action was never taken. Mistakes have been made. We were slow to lock down, and the way the missed test target was expanded to cover those sent out in the post and the death figures have been adjusted to include care home fatalities reminds me of the 1980 "seasonally adjusted" unemployment figures. But many matters can still be rectified.

Cameron famously said, "we're all in this together".

Sadly, ONS data demonstrates that you are four times more likely to die if you are BME. The Opposition have launched an inquiry, led by Baroness Lawrence, while the Government put their fingers in their ears. You are also more likely to die of covid-19 as a London bus driver than as an NHS staffer. Ranjith drove the 92 to Ealing Hospital for years before dying in Ealing Hospital, lacking the PPE needed in a mobile Petri dish that was only deep-cleaned once daily as it left the garage for a long day. Precautions must be put in place, with the coronavirus life insurance scheme extended to transport workers who have paid with their lives to keep our country going in the pandemic.

The Chancellor's support schemes and furloughing have been welcomed by all sides, and it is wrong to talk of winding them up when they need extending for many who fall through the cracks of their requirements. The Government must act to stop the coronavirus job retention scheme being used by British Airways as a cover for a company restructure and forced redundancies.

Since 2015, I have lived through parliamentary drama—Jo Cox's murder, referendum, terrorist attack, Grenfell, Brexit, illegal Prorogation. Every time our society and the economy suffer shocks of this magnitude, we are told that we cannot return to the broken system of before. It is imperative that this time, it is for real.

6.48 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con) [V]: At the outset, we should all acknowledge just how difficult and complex the task of responding to this virus is, and therefore I commend the Prime Minister on his caution and the approach he is taking to easing the restrictions. Last night, he committed yet again to an increase in testing, to reinforce the health messages.

I welcome, as others have, the appointment of Baroness Harding. It seems to me that she has tasks in three timescales. The first is to ensure that there are more tracers and that we employ those tracers we have committed to employ. Secondly, the test response times, which have been of differing quality and speed, need to be speeded up. Into the medium term, this country will be greatly served by having much more widespread temperature screening, followed by more immediate access to antigen

tests. As we have seen with the Prime Minister's ambition to increase testing, as the capacity increases, we must look to a much wider group of people who are eligible for testing—obviously, after key workers, including those in the NHS.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) was right; when this is all over, integration of social care and health is going to be key. That ambition was set out in the Government's long-term plan. When this is over, the Government must go back to that long-term plan, commit to integrating social care and healthcare operationally, and look at new ways of financing social care, for this crisis has shown that there will be increasing and new demands on the social care system.

The continuation of restrictions on our normal way of life is welcome, as it is keeping the virus under control, but the initiation and continuation of those restrictions are undoubtedly causing anxiety for many about jobs and livelihoods, including for many businesses. The Chancellor's comprehensive economic package has been necessarily and understandably focused on the key costs of property and wages, but the Government will obviously be looking to wind down that support package. We must do that cautiously, as we are doing with easing the restrictions on health. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester has also pointed out, the job retention scheme has done much to prevent widespread unemployment, and as we look to wind it down we need to do so in a tapered and measured way—for example, by moving from 80:20 to 50:50, or by decreasing the number of employees continued in furlough.

The other big cost is obviously property. Many sectors have had virtually no income during coronavirus, and yet have had no help with their business rates relief. Even at this late stage, I have been contacted by dentists, osteopaths, physios, veterinary surgeons, providers of shared office space, suppliers to hospitality, financial advisers, retail premises and language schools in my constituency, to name just a few. Some of those businesses need help now. If we want a vibrant economy and society after coronavirus, I would urge the Government—even as they think about reviewing the support and winding it down—to remember those businesses and offer an extension of that support.

6.51 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) [V]: May I, on behalf of my party, express our sympathies to those who have lost loved ones during this health crisis, and to those in the health service who have, manfully and womanfully, worked hard to ensure that lives are saved?

We welcome the Government's measures, and the announcements made in the Chamber today and by the Prime Minister last night. It is, of course, very difficult to balance the economic needs of the country with the imperative to safeguard people's health. With hindsight, many people might criticise some of the things that the Government have done, but I believe that the decisions that were taken have had success in reducing the death toll and helping many businesses to survive, and we welcome many of the measures to be introduced.

I believe that dealing with the virus and how we get out of lockdown should be approached on a UK-wide basis. Of course there are going to be different nuances and conditions in different regions of the United Kingdom. For example, in Northern Ireland we have a different

school year from other parts of the United Kingdom, so some of the education measures may well be different. The peak of the virus is also different in different regions, so that may lead to different timings. Nevertheless, a UK-wide approach is important.

A number of Members have already mentioned the fact that we share a common border with the Irish Republic. Surprisingly, despite the Good Friday agreement and the emphasis that the Irish Government have placed on it, at every step of this crisis they have not consulted the Administration in Stormont. When they had the lockdown, they did not consult. When they relaxed some of their measures, they did not consult. They are even taking a different approach to quarantining people who come in from outside Ireland and would eventually finish up in the United Kingdom. I think it is important that we have a UK-wide approach. We appreciate the co-operation that there has been on a weekly basis with the Administration in Stormont by Westminster.

Looking forward is the important thing, because many businesses are concerned about what happens when the lockdown stops and this situation finishes. We see a number of issues. First, there has to be no cliff edge, but a tapering of the job retention scheme, which has been so vital to ensuring that workers have some money on which they can live and that employers do not have to lay off vital workers and then have to recruit them again.

Secondly, various sectors of the economy have been hit far more than others. Tourism in Northern Ireland is an important sector of the economy, and it will take some time for it to ramp up. It is important that we look at sectoral support.

Thirdly, many companies have already taken on additional debt through the bounce back loans and the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, but they are debt-heavy, and there needs to be some reconsideration of how that leverage is reduced and debt replaced with equity. The banks have an important role to play in that, and I hope the Government will work with the banks. It is important that we work our way out of this together. I will finish, because I see you are rising to your feet, Madam Deputy Speaker.

6.56 pm

More than 90 minutes having elapsed since the commencement of hybrid proceedings, the Deputy Speaker brought them to a conclusion (Order, this day).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I suspend the House for 30 minutes, until 7.26 pm.

On resuming—

7.26 pm

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this important debate. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General for her tireless work in pulling together so many different strands of Government activity during the covid-19 crisis. We are very grateful.

I want to talk about the amazing community activity happening in South Derbyshire, as part of the local response to covid-19: our wonderful CVS, which has helped to co-ordinate volunteers across South Derbyshire, making sure that people do not run out of food or

medicine and are not lonely; our wonderful individuals, such as Stephen Greaves and Andrew Astle; the teachers at Granville and Pingle Schools, who, as volunteers, have been making face visors with 3-D printers; and the Wood children of Melbourne, who made up and sold quizzes—all of whom have been raising funds for the local medical charities.

But against the good news of that great community spirit—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We can hear you. Please carry on.

Mrs Wheeler: But against the good news of that great community spirit, we have had the tragic news of over 19 people dying locally from covid-19. That number includes Eileen Landers of Swadlincote, a lady who worked tirelessly for decades at Burton Hospital on the housekeeping staff. Our thoughts and prayers are with all the South Derbyshire families who have lost loved ones to this dreadful virus.

That brings me to my ask of the Paymaster General, representing the Cabinet Office. I am asking for support from the Cabinet Office for my campaign to have a memorial placed at the National Arboretum, at the heart of the country, as a fitting way to commemorate the sad loss of essential key workers to covid-19. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has agreed to support the campaign. I am now looking at the Cabinet Office as another sponsor to help to co-ordinate all the different sectors of essential workers involved, whether in healthcare or transport, wherever they are across our nation. They carried on working when this virus was at the highest level. They gave their lives to keep our hospitals open, keep food in the shops and get people to work.

I am also calling on the relevant trade unions to get involved to help to raise public subscriptions to pay for the memorial. I am grateful to my local newspapers, the *Burton Mail* and the *Derby Telegraph*, for supporting the campaign, as well as the *Daily Express*, my colleagues in Parliament who are supporting the campaign and, finally, the good people of the South Derbyshire and Burton area who have contacted me with support. I also thank Brell Ewart of Whitehouse Construction Ltd of Derby, who, as part of a donation, has offered to install the memorial free of charge, an incredibly generous offer to help to kick-start the campaign.

As I know there are many MPs who wish to speak, I will wrap up my contribution by thanking Ministers, civil servants, local government officers, volunteers, shop workers, farmers and, of course, key workers for everything they have done for us at home here in South Derbyshire and nationally. The fight is not yet over, but this human endeavour is an excellent example of how when life is bad, good can come out of it. I, for one, am proud of the response from the Government and the country to this dreadful virus.

7.30 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con) [V]: My contribution today will also be mostly one of thanks. I thank my constituents in Clacton, who on the whole have acted responsibly and stayed home. I thank the local police and the district commander, Lily Benbow. They have

[Giles Watling]

been out on patrol regularly to enforce the lockdown restrictions. They have found a receptive and understanding populace, and they have seldom needed to step in. They are aware that they police by consent, and they still have that consent. For their work, both now and in normal times, our police officers will always have my sincere thanks.

Of course, I thank those on the medical frontline who continue to make significant sacrifices for us all. Because of their hard work locally here in Clacton we have not exceeded NHS capacity, despite the scale of this crisis. Over the last two weeks I have been in touch with local care homes, which have reported that they are coping well. They have protected a significant part of our populace. The residents and the staff have been the difference here, and they have my thanks.

For those who do not know, my constituency has one of the largest populations of retired residents, many of whom live in care homes. We are, and I include myself in this, quite elderly. This makes the Clacton constituency, and many others like it, vulnerable. We face the threat of someone thoughtlessly bringing infection into our area, which could have a disproportionately devastating effect on our population, so I ask: “Please, don’t come rushing to our coast until we have determined that the danger to our vulnerable population has passed.” Believe me, I understand the desire to come to a place as beautiful as ours, and we will welcome all with open arms when the time is right.

I put on record my thanks to Essex County Council and Tendring District Council, who have done so much to support local businesses and provide support for the vulnerable population. Tendring District Council saw an absolute army of volunteers step forward, and residents should be proud of the way in which they have come together to support our community. Of course, there are many unsung heroes, from the people who go out to do their job to keep everything going, to the people who go out to help their neighbours do their shopping. We must not forget them when we come to commemorate those who have steered us through this outbreak.

Now that we are slowly and conditionally lifting the lockdown, we must be mindful of the support that certain sectors need. The tourism sector continues to struggle. It was one of the first sectors to be impacted, and it is vital to our economy in Clacton. Nationally, tourism supports 3.1 million jobs and contributes billions to the economy. We must do all we can to support this important industry. For the Clacton constituency, this is imperative. Our coastal districts have suffered decline over recent years, even without the malign influence of covid-19, so I ask Ministers not to oversee further decline now. The Government must step in to help the tourism industry get back on its feet.

Given my background in the performing arts and my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for theatre, it is no surprise that I ask the Government properly to support theatre as we lift the lockdown. The very nature of the theatrical experience means that the sector will probably be one of the last to be released. Theatre has, since the time of Shakespeare, been one of the UK’s greatest offers to the world, with significant benefits to the wider economy, English being globally the most widely spoken language.

The creative arts contribute so much to the UK economy, and I have written to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Prime Minister, supported by colleagues from the all-party group, to make the case for better supporting theatres. A further letter will follow with evidence from theatres themselves, setting out in greater detail the support that they need. It is crucial that the Government take these recommendations into consideration, because two key industries—tourism and theatre—are now at risk—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry, but we have to move on.

7.34 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)[V]: History will judge us by how we treat the most vulnerable and poorest in our society during this pandemic. Today, the Office for National Statistics revealed that the lowest paid people are disproportionately more likely to die from covid, and among them, careworkers are twice as likely to die, compared with NHS workers. We know that there have been at least 6,600 deaths in care homes since the start of this pandemic, and it has become clear that the social care sector has been something of an afterthought in the Government’s pandemic planning. The Prime Minister has acknowledged that there is an epidemic in care homes, and we must not forget the hundreds of thousands of people who receive care in their own homes, some of whom will have died from covid and will be lost in the community statistics. We are talking about individuals of all ages who may be frail, have complex conditions, and significant needs. We are talking about staff who are often forced to work on the national minimum wage, and with zero-hours contracts and only statutory sick pay.

On 11 March I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care whether he would be issuing personal protective equipment to social care workers, he said

“we are taking that into account”.

Staggeringly, it took until 15 April and thousands of deaths before he announced a plan to tackle coronavirus in the social care sector, including measures for getting PPE to providers. In the meantime, councils and providers struggled every day to get hold of it. With domiciliary care staff visiting many different households in a day, and residential care staff often working in more than one setting, that delay in getting vital equipment to the frontline has undoubtedly cost lives. What assurances can the Minister provide that all social care providers now have access to the protective equipment they need to keep their staff and clients safe?

It is welcome that provision has been expanded to ensure that all those working and residing in care homes are able to access testing. On 23 March, I raised in the House the dangers of discharging patients from hospitals into care homes without testing, but policy change came far too late. The long delay in access to testing enabled the virus to enter care homes with a lethal impact, spreading like wildfire. It has been reported that some care staff do not wish to take a test because they are concerned about the financial impact of taking time off work. Statutory sick pay is simply not enough to survive on, and it must be addressed urgently.

We must not overlook the impact of the crisis on the wellbeing of care staff, many of whom are experiencing things they have never been trained for. Some fear that they are being blamed for the spread of the virus, and some that they may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder at a later date. What measures will be available to support their mental health?

It is right that we champion the NHS and, in the words of the Chancellor, give it “whatever it needs” to cope with coronavirus, but we must do the same for social care. We know that the extra funds granted to local authorities do not go anywhere near far enough. For too long, social care has been a poor relation to the NHS, and reform has been kicked into the long grass time and again. This crisis has brought into sharp relief just how important social care is in enabling the NHS to function well. It has also brought into sharp relief the many problems facing the sector. The covid crisis will precipitate many long-term changes in policy, and first and foremost among the areas for change must be social care.

7.38 pm

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. Last time I spoke on this subject in the House, I called on the Government to start moving away from an excessive dependence on arbitrary rules, and to recognise that the public have played an important role in the progress so far, by demonstrating responsibility and complying voluntarily. My key call was that we should take that as a reason to move towards trusting people more, and an expectation that we can rely more on common sense and people’s own sense of responsibility. I am therefore delighted to see the new change of emphasis and new messaging, which I think is an important move back towards trusting people and relying on the common sense and responsibility that we have seen so far. The revised guidance to start the process of getting people back to work is also welcome, although it has to be said that it is really a restatement of the original guidance. It has always been the Government’s position that work should continue, but that people should work at home where possible.

It is important that we are seeing a shift, however, towards more encouragement to get people out to work and more freedom for people to engage in outdoor pursuits that are essentially safe. Angling, tennis, bowls and walks in the country will all bring hope and make people healthier in the future. As that happens, there is more responsibility for all of us—for employers to ensure that workplaces are as safe as they can be, for providers of public transport to make sure that transport is clean and that people can be as distant as possible, and for all of us to take sensible precautions through handwashing, distancing and, where appropriate, face-covering.

The aviation industry is a subject of enormous importance to my constituents, as we are so close to Manchester airport. That sector has been hit harder than any and is likely, because of its nature, to suffer pain and damage for longer than most other sectors. We have already seen thousands of jobs go in the aviation sector. The news of the proposed 14-day quarantine period for returning passengers is a hammer blow for the industry and threatens many more hundreds of

thousands of jobs. If it looks like more than a temporary and selective measure, the result will be devastation for the industry and for the many jobs that depend on it.

Many questions need to be answered about the quarantine proposal, such as what medical and scientific advice underlies it and why it should be in place for all or nearly all countries, apart from, apparently, France and the common travel area, including Ireland. Surely, at least, it should not apply to lower-risk countries with lower rates of infection or no infection, even if it has to apply to others.

As airlines and airports start to plan for a return to travel, I call on the Government to explore, as a matter of urgency, a testing regime that might be used instead, so that somebody could be tested shortly before flying and come straight through, or be tested at the airport on arrival and get an expedited test result. If that can be done, it will bring some hope to those beleaguered industries and the many thousands of people who work in them.

7.42 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: Representing, as I do, the borough with the highest age-adjusted covid-19 mortality rate in the country, I will focus on just one point, which is families with leave to remain in the UK but no recourse to public funds. They are law-abiding, hard-working families. They are carers, cooks, cleaners and cab drivers in modestly paid but important roles. They have permission to work and are complying with the rules, but for many of them, as for others, their work stopped when the crisis began.

Many are not eligible for the job retention or self-employment schemes. Others in that position can claim universal credit, but those with no recourse to public funds are not allowed to obtain an income in that way. Many have children who were born in the UK. Some have children who are UK nationals. Being unable to claim any benefits may be manageable when work is available, but in the current circumstances, it is not.

The Home Office, inexplicably, will not say how many people we are talking about, but last week, drawing on the University of Oxford’s Migration Observatory, the Children’s Society reported that there are more than 1 million people with leave to remain but no recourse to public funds, including at least 100,000 children. It has been suggested that the £500 million emergency fund for local authorities can help those families, but not according to the ministerial guidance for the fund. The guidance states that the fund is to increase council tax support, which families with no recourse to public funds cannot apply for, and that any left over can go towards local welfare assistance schemes that some councils run. A written answer from the Home Office last week confirmed that people with no recourse to public funds are ineligible for help from local welfare assistance schemes. Families with children can apply for help under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 from their council, but it is hard to find and can be very modest indeed. The Children’s Society report quotes one council that pays £3.10 per person per day. In households without children, even that is not available. Some who should self-isolate because they have symptoms have no choice but to work and endanger others, because they cannot otherwise get any income at all.

[Stephen Timms]

It cannot be right to deny any possibility of an income to people who have broken no rules and whose contribution we have all benefited from for years. I plead with Ministers to suspend the no recourse to public funds condition for families for the duration of this crisis. The High Court, as it happens, struck it down in an important case last week. Those arguments will continue, but for the duration of this crisis, on moral and on public health grounds, no recourse to public funds must be suspended.

7.46 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Government's support for businesses in Shropshire, Telford and The Wrekin, and commend Secretaries of State from different Departments for their speed and flexibility in getting many schemes off the ground. I am also conscious that, of course, at some point in the future all of this will need to be paid for. In that regard, I ask Ministers that they do not tax the surviving businesses that I believe will actually help economic recovery in this country. Yes, borrowing and fiscal stimulus can and should play a role in bearing down on any recession, but ultimately it is incentive and reward through bespoke tax cuts that will revive the economy and reduce the nation's debt once this virus has passed. In my view, increasing taxes on sole traders and small businesses, if the Government were so tempted, would be self-defeating and counterproductive.

Again, I welcome the Government's furlough scheme and commend the Chancellor for the speed with which he and his Department, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and HMRC and DWP staff have responded. It has been first class. However, I have concerns that the Government could be paying the wage bills of thousands of companies that are still making considerable profits, perhaps waiting until the end of the furlough scheme only to make their staff redundant. I also have concerns that the various schemes, particularly the furlough scheme and some of the business schemes, could be open to significant fraud. Further, the Government have said that they will do whatever it takes. Of course that offers huge reassurance to my constituents and to millions up and down the country, but I also hope that means what is realistic, what is proportionate, and, ultimately, what is affordable.

On local government, I commend the Government for the financial support—nearly £30 million of new funding—they have given to Shropshire Council and to Telford and Wrekin Council. However, may I ask that that funding is also cascaded down to town and parish councils, which are also under pressure? The Shropshire Association of Local Councils is absolutely right to ask that the Government consider relaxing regulations around the use of capital receipts and consider extending business rate relief for councils that run markets, car parks and sporting venues. Can I also ask the Minister if the Government will move quickly on issuing guidance on how to administer the discretionary business grant, which is absolutely vital to many local businesses in my constituency?

On quarantine, Shropshire relies very heavily on tourism—not just UK tourism but international tourism—and many jobs rely on it as well. If this measure is to go ahead, may I appeal to the Government to ensure that it

is reviewed on a regular basis, perhaps every two weeks, and that there is a sunset clause so that it will be removed as quickly as possible?

Ultimately, may I stand in support of the Prime Minister in saying that the Government should always be led by data and the science, and with public health in mind?

7.50 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con) [V]: May I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General for her opening remarks?

Over recent weeks, the Government have announced some of the most generous and comprehensive support packages in the world, providing security and support to many individuals and businesses who need it most during these really difficult times. Across Keighley and Ilkley, many hard-working businesses, including small and medium-sized organisations, have been given the comfort by Government that they can furlough staff, reduce their overheads, and have an injection of cash grants and the ability to access a package of Government-backed and guaranteed loans. Those self-employed who meet the thresholds also have access to funds.

Throughout this crisis, Treasury Ministers have been swift to respond and have kept their ears and eyes open to listen to Members in this place when examples and scenarios have been brought forward of businesses that have fallen through the gap. I know that the bounce-back loan has been a very welcome addition to many small and medium-sized businesses across Keighley and Ilkley. The financial support, coupled with deregulation, that the Government have provided has been unprecedented and will place those businesses in the best position possible to try to kick-start productivity and reignite their service offering when circumstances permit. However, there are still some larger charitable tourism attractions that are unfortunately not eligible for business grant money and do still need an extra bit of support to ensure that they can survive once the lockdown is over—for example, Keighley and Worth Valley railway in my constituency, which helps to drive the wider local economy. I would be grateful if the Treasury team could explore any additional support mechanisms to help charitable tourism organisations.

Charitable organisations such as Age UK, the Dementia Friendly Keighley group, Project 6 and the Salvation Army, among many others, are doing a brilliant job in helping the most vulnerable, but this sector is particularly hard hit, with many struggling to fundraise during the ongoing restrictions. I very much welcome the Chancellor's injection of financial support into the charitable sector, which will help our hospices, such as our much-loved Sue Ryder Manorlands hospice in Oxenhope. The arms of Government have stretched wide and far to protect as many as possible, and I thank the Prime Minister for all the support to date. However, in going forward, we need to look to the next stage with caution and flexibility, which will be key in any financial support mechanisms to ensure that the charitable organisations helping our most vulnerable, and our entrepreneurs and hard-working businesses and individuals, can come out successfully on the other side.

Over the past few weeks, the one thing that has shone out more than anything else is the way in which communities across Keighley and Ilkley have come together to help

others in our hour of need. Many teams of volunteers have gone above and beyond to help the most vulnerable in society, including the Keighley and Shipley Family Hub, the Silsden Emergency Planning Group, the Ilkley Coronavirus Response Group, and the Hainworth Wood Community Centre. All these organisations, along with many other dedicated individuals, have acted selflessly to help others during this time of crisis. Our critical workers—postal workers, refuse collectors, teachers, supermarket staff and many others—have carried out their duties with immense dedication to keep our communities going, but also to help in our collective fight against this terrible virus.

I would like to conclude by thanking our fantastic NHS staff at Airedale General Hospital, and our GPs and carers across Keighley and Ilkley who are right at the forefront, caring for our loved ones. We shall be ever indebted to them.

7.54 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab) [V]: Each death brings unimaginable pain to families, and my heart sinks when I learn of the passing of constituents such as the wonderful Dorothy Clark MBE, from Greatham—my thoughts are with all the families. On the covid-19 wards and the intensive care units operated by the North Tees and Hartlepool Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, however, miracles are happening every day; thanks to the tireless efforts of our frontline NHS workers, lives are being saved and families are being reunited with their loved ones. I pay tribute to all our key workers, who keep us all going—they are all heroes. Those working in our hospitals, ambulances and care settings, putting themselves in direct risk to care for others, rightly deserve our highest praise. I am thinking of people such as my good friend Tony Traynor, a paramedic, who was admitted to hospital with covid-19 and is now, thankfully, at home recovering.

At the beginning of lockdown, and for weeks after, the shocking lack of PPE, the movement of non-tested patients out of hospitals into care homes and the appalling lack of tests themselves made the situation even worse. As of last Saturday, 154 frontline and social care workers had, sadly, died from this terrible virus. As we know from the Turkish PPE consignment fiasco and the Government's persistent failure to achieve their daily target of 100,000 tests, we are still not getting it right and we continue to fall short of the mark. Our country has the second highest death rate in the world and, while we are past the peak in most places, the number of deaths in care homes is rising. That is not a record or situation we can or should be proud of. In addition, we are not past our peak in Hartlepool; we are behind the national trend, and our death and infection rates are still rising. To date, we thankfully remain bottom of the table in the north-east, but our rates are accelerating upwards. My concern is that any relaxation of the lockdown will have an adverse impact on my constituents and undermine their efforts to suppress the virus and keep rates down.

As with every MP, my mailbox has been full of covid queries since day one of the lockdown, and people remain worried. The Prime Minister's statement yesterday has added to the confusion, particularly about returning to work. Thankfully, the return to work order has been delayed until Wednesday, rather than being implemented

as of today, but the same problems apply in respect of people returning to work: how are they going to get there if public transport is to be limited? Will their workplaces be safe? Will the necessary measures be put in place? What childcare issues will arise because schools and nurseries remain closed? What about the issue of social distancing in the workplace? We all want to see an end to the lockdown, to return to work safely and to get back to normal, but not at any cost, and certainly not at the risk of the virus spreading further. For my constituents, the Prime Minister's statement has raised more questions than it has answered. He is acting too early in his encouragement, and he is acting in the interests of the economy, rather than of public health.

7.58 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): When an inquiry takes place into the covid pandemic, I fear that its most painful conclusions will relate to what has happened in care homes. I urge the Government to continue to place the highest priority on stopping the spread of the virus in care homes. That is crucial, both to protect the frail, elderly people who are most at risk and to prevent care homes from acting as infection hotspots, which could revive the virus in the wider population. There is, I am afraid, worrying evidence from Wuhan and Italy that it was in care homes and other healthcare settings that the epidemic was first amplified. It is disturbing to think that, in the early stages of the crisis here, understandable decisions to discharge patients from hospital to make way for the expected surge in covid patients may have had the unintended consequence of sending people in hospital who had asymptomatic covid back to their care home to spread the infection to others.

If we are to get on top of this crisis, we must ensure that no patient is discharged from hospital into a care home unless they have been tested and do not have covid. No one should go into any care home if they are covid-positive. I raised that with Ministers some weeks ago after I was sent a Sky News report in which a care home manager from Devon described admitting covid-positive patients as

“importing death into care homes.”

Yet only a few days ago, I saw a letter from Sutton Council indicating that there are still attempts to place people with covid in care homes. That has to stop.

Every person should be tested before they are admitted to a care home whether they come from the community or from a hospital, and whether they have symptoms or not. Care home staff must also be regularly and routinely tested. If we maintain rigorous control of the virus in hospital and care settings, including through routine, regular testing of staff, patients and residents, day in, day out, that should enable us not only to save lives but to lift lockdown measures more quickly for the rest of us.

It is urgent that we do lift those measures. The Office for Budget Responsibility has predicted a contraction in our economy bigger than anything for 300 years. The Government's support package for businesses, jobs and livelihoods is a more far-reaching intervention in our economy than anything implemented outside wartime. It has staved off economic catastrophe, and I thank the Government for the support they have given to so many

[Theresa Villiers]

jobs and businesses in Chipping Barnet. We must maintain that support as long as we can, but it is sustainable only for a limited period.

Today's announcements on the economy take us in the right direction, but we need to move more quickly if we are to wake the economy from the medically induced coma it has been placed in. The only long-term solution is to release the economy from lockdown and to get Britain back to work as soon as it is safe to do so. I urge the Government to do that.

8.2 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on her contribution. The devastating effect of covid-19 on care homes is being felt in Blaenau Gwent and across the world. A quarter of New York's fatalities happened in care homes, 200 people died in just one care home in Italy, and in England, a full 16% of covid-19 deaths have happened in care homes. This is clearly a far-reaching issue. Today, though, I want to talk about a local tragedy in my constituency.

Blaenau Gwent has one of the highest numbers of coronavirus cases per head in Wales. A brave care home staff member contacted me to say that, early on in this crisis, their care home had inadequate PPE. It was also reported that a resident showing symptoms of covid-19 was discharged back from hospital and allowed access to communal spaces. I have sought confirmation of that from the health authority, but the exact situation remains unclear. Altogether, 16 residents have died.

My question is, were the processes in place so that care homes could deal with this crisis? We knew that the coronavirus would hit the elderly and the vulnerable hardest, and that those in care homes were most at risk. More should have been done at the start of the outbreak to protect residents and staff.

This has been a dreadful time for my constituents, for care home residents, their relatives and hard-working staff. Almost daily, I have been raising my concerns on this one issue with a range of local decision makers. Those decision makers have been pulled in 101 different directions. I know they are doing their very best, but the truth is that health officials have had a focus on the NHS and we have been playing catch-up with care homes. Social care is a vital sector, but we have not been treating it that way.

This crisis has revealed to me that we need to mend the broken structures of accountability. We need fast action to shield those who are most vulnerable and daily updates on deaths in individual care homes. There must be an open discussion about the issues that respects the rights of residents and the needs of staff. We need to build something better.

I end by paying tribute to our care workers across the country who are putting their lives on the line. I have been lucky enough to visit many care homes over the years. At their core, they are places of love. Those cared for are more than residents; they are like family. For the homes, coronavirus deaths are not just numbers; they are painful losses. It is vital that we ensure that tragedies of this scale are never allowed to happen again.

8.6 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): In the dark, our first instinct is to search for light. In pandemics such as this, data is light. How many people have the virus? How quickly is it spreading? What kinds of people have contracted it? How old are they? What other conditions do they have? Where do they live? Where do they work? What symptoms do they experience? Do they perhaps have no symptoms? The only reliable source of data to illuminate those essential questions comes from testing.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Ministers at the Dispatch Box used to speak of the leadership of British scientists in helping to develop tests for the presence of the virus, yet while countries such as South Korea immediately introduced high levels of testing in 79 laboratories across the country, the UK took a deliberately different approach. In evidence to the Science and Technology Committee, Public Health England said that it had considered the South Korean model, but rejected it. The alternative course that we followed saw not only a low number of tests, but a number that was falling at a point in March when the spread of the disease in this country was rampant.

We have had an extensive debate about whether 100,000 tests a day is the target. It is worth remembering that, on 10 March, only 1,215 tests were carried out—fewer than two for each parliamentary constituency represented in this House. Tests were rationed, community testing was abandoned and tests were restricted to hospital patients. We turned off the light on being able to see the detailed nature of the course of the infection in this country. The Government's chief scientific adviser told my Select Committee that that was a mistake.

Testing capacity was taken as a given, as an operational constraint. Social distancing measures advised by SAGE were predicated on that low level of testing capacity. Rather than strategy driving testing capacity, the lack of testing capacity drove strategy. It was not until the personal initiative of the Secretary of State that testing increased to the level that other countries had had for many weeks.

A lack of testing has caused a lack of data, which has meant that too many of our policy decisions have been taken with a self-imposed blindfold. It is vital that the lesson is learned that we need to get ahead of need, not trail behind it in the various decisions that are to come, yet there are still some signs that that has not been fully recognised. The excellent national statistician Sir Ian Diamond told my Committee last Thursday that the major study of the prevalence of the virus that he is now conducting was commissioned not in January, February or March, but on 17 April. The failure to get ahead of the need for testing has deprived us of the information that we need to make well-informed decisions about not just the health of individuals—such as those in care homes to whom the previous two speakers have referred eloquently—but the reproduction and infection rates within population groups. This leads to later and cruder decisions than we could take if we had better data. That must be remedied so that in future, decisions can be taken not in the dark but with all the information that we need to make choices that represent a detailed knowledge of the situation in which we find ourselves.

8.10 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: At times of crisis, the Opposition should be constructive, but we must also tell the truth. The truth is that the Government's handling of the crisis has been a disaster. The public inquiry that will inevitably happen will have no shortage of material to consider: how 10 years of austerity left the NHS struggling to meet normal levels of demand, let alone cope with a pandemic; how chronic fragmentation under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 has in essence contributed to dangerous delays and disorganisation; how learnings from Exercise Cygnus were covered up and—worse—ignored.

Of course, no Government facing challenges of this magnitude will ever get every decision right, but we have to understand how, at every point in this unfolding crisis, this Government have made the wrong judgment calls, and their unforced errors have cost lives. This is not about having the benefit of hindsight; it is about wilfully choosing to ignore the evidence in front of us, and about British exceptionalism leading Ministers to believe that their way is always best. We should not wait for an inquiry after the event to learn lessons from such a disastrous approach, because getting answers now can help to save lives today.

In particular, the new track-and-trace operation must learn from the weakness of current top-down, centralised control. It must be driven at local level, not contracted out to remote private sector companies, with directors of public health and environmental health officers leading the delivery of a decentralised, community-based operation.

Too many of the Chancellor's economic support schemes are failing businesses, and in my Brighton constituency they are desperate. For example, the self-employed scheme should include small business owners who take their incomes in dividends; allow flexibility for those who combine pay-as-you-earn with freelance work; and stop discriminating against new start-ups and women who have taken time out in the past three years for maternity leave and childcare.

Businesses need reassurance that the job retention scheme will continue for as long as needed and that the 80% furlough rate will not be reduced any time soon. As talk starts about opening up the economy again, it is even more vital that furloughing be made more flexible by allowing short-hours working so that businesses can prepare and by tapering its withdrawal to avoid cliff edges. That is critical for sectors such as tourism and hospitality, which are a key part of my Brighton constituency.

The coronavirus pandemic has turned the world upside down, exposing major weaknesses in our economy and deep-seated inequalities in society, with the most vulnerable hit the hardest. But what we do next could change everything. As the world recovers, we have a chance to reset the clock and build back better than before. If we do not, we risk leaping out of the covid frying pan into the climate change fire. There should be no going back to normal, because normal was intolerable for far too many people, as well as trashing the environment and nature.

It is vital that the recovery plan decarbonises the economy in a way that also tackles grotesque levels of inequality. A transformative green new deal could create hundreds of thousands of new, decent jobs. Let us harness

people's growing recognition of the importance of clean air and green spaces and combine it with a new realisation that when the Government choose to, they can spend at speed and scale. We should look at evidence that green recovery packages deliver far higher returns than conventional stimulus spending. Programmes such as mass home insulation, thereby reducing emissions and fuel bills, would create jobs throughout the country.

Let us resolve that there should be no unconditional handouts of public money to prop up carbon-intensive industries; instead, funds should be used to support workers and restructure industries to bring them into line with the Paris climate commitments. Finally, we need to listen to the scientists who warned for years that deforestation and the exploitation of wild species have created a perfect storm for the spillover of diseases from wildlife to people and, having listened, we must act.

8.14 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con) [V]: It is always a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). May I commend in the strongest possible terms the speech that has just been made by the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who has given the best analysis I have heard today of the mistakes we have made? While I am at it, I also commend the Chairman of the Health and Social Care Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who made a similarly incisive speech earlier.

We should be honest: most of the western nations have handled this crisis badly. They have made mistakes, mostly in being late to control the virus—not all of them; some are different. For example, Greece, perhaps surprisingly, has controlled it much better than many of the others. It has about 15 deaths per million of the population versus us at about 477 at the moment. Those mistakes have cost thousands, if not tens of thousands of lives. A primary mistake, as pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells, was the failure to test, track, trace and contain from the very beginning.

I would like to speak, in the brief time I have, about what we did once the disease took hold, because I think there are also potential mistakes there. The Government adopted a slogan—"protect the NHS, save lives"—which we all, including myself, took to enthusiastically and enthusiastically signed up to. My question for the Minister when she winds up is: did the strategy we pursued in good faith to protect the national health service exacerbate, in some respects, the death rate?

In addition to the lockdown, we did four things to protect the NHS and to protect it from being overwhelmed by the pressure on it. First off, we asked people with the illness to self-isolate at home and come to hospital only when the symptoms got really bad. When they did exactly this—exactly the same thing—in New York City, some of the doctors noticed that the patients were arriving in emergency too late, frankly, to be rescued. Their disease had advanced too fast, although they could have been cured earlier. My first question is: did that strategy cost lives?

The second question is: we applied triage on the basis of the so-called frailty index so that people who got a poor score on the frailty index were simply put on

[Mr David Davis]

palliative care, again partly to protect intensive care unit capacity, so did that strategy cost lives? Two Members—my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith)—have already raised the question of care homes. We discharged patients from hospital early, when some of them still had this disease, into care homes, with the consequences that we have heard in graphic terms already. Did that strategy cost lives?

The final thing we did to protect capacity was that we cancelled operations for other illnesses—cancer and other illnesses—and that almost undoubtedly cost lives. We can see it in the excess mortality rates. Indeed, Britain holds the highest place in Europe, equal with Spain I am afraid, for the highest excess mortality over this period, so the combined effect of these strategies has to be looked at very carefully indeed. Bear in mind that throughout this time our intensive care unit capacity was used only to 81%. That is normal for this time of year. The Nightingale hospitals stood almost empty, and now only 30% of ICU capacity is being taken up by covid-19 patients. Did we get this balance wrong? Did we, at the cost of lives, just give ourselves empty beds, rather than doing the best thing for the patients the NHS is there to look after? That is not the fault of the staff of the NHS; it is a question of whether the strategy was the wrong one to pursue once we were where we were.

I finish by coming back to the point made by the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee. The best way to protect both the NHS and the lives of our citizens is the approach taken by other countries, and that is to use testing, tracking and tracing to isolate the illness as well as to bring it down. The Prime Minister talked about the R number; that is just an average. The R number in my constituency, a rural area, is lower than that for a care home. We must put all the resources—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. We have to leave it there, I am sorry. I remind everybody that the wind-ups are not tonight but at the conclusion of the debate tomorrow.

8.19 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: I agree with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and others about how much we have sadly lost by not following the South Korea example on testing. We must be ready to follow the best examples from all over the world in the second phase.

In just a few short weeks, tens of thousands of people in the UK have died as a result of covid-19. It is unbearable to think of so many families grieving and in pain. Those who have died or have suffered most are more likely to be poor, more likely to be black, Asian or minority ethnic, and more likely to be working-class men. At a higher risk are the cleaners, security guards, hospital porters, nursing assistants and, most of all, care workers—people who had to keep going during the crisis. That makes it even more important to get protection in the workplace now, as low-paid workers are more likely than professional workers to be asked by the Government to go back into the workplace.

Our key workers have been heroic and should be rewarded, and so too have our communities. In our towns, we have set up hubs of volunteers to help with shopping and food parcels, and we have run a community book programme to deliver books to kids. I want to say a massive thank you to Paul, Denise, David, Lorna, Cath, Saney, Michelle, Ash and many more who have done that.

There is much more that we need to do to prevent a second peak. First, we need clearer messages and answers. Half an announcement yesterday, before the regulations and guidance were in place, has caused considerable confusion. In a public health crisis, confusion can cost lives and put the police in an impossible position over what to enforce.

Secondly, I agree that more action is needed in social care, where the virus is still spreading. We should prevent any patients with covid-19 from being moved from hospital back into care homes. They should stay in hospital or dedicated intermediate care. We need higher standards of PPE, higher pay and sick pay in care homes.

I want to mention two other things that have come up before the Home Affairs Committee. The Home Office has rightly promised a free visa extension for foreign national doctors and nurses, and, if they tragically die from covid-19, a guarantee that their families can remain, but it has not done so for NHS porters and cleaners, who scrub the door handles, floors and sinks in the covid wards, or for care workers, whose lives are at the greatest risk. That is not fair.

Finally, on international travel, other countries introduced self-isolation rules or screening many weeks or months ago. The UK unusually did not. Our Select Committee has been asking for the science behind that since early April, but those SAGE papers have not been published. If the Government now recognise that those measures are needed to prevent the spread, it makes no sense to wait many more weeks before bringing them in.

We need greater transparency if we are to get decisions right, greater clarity so that everyone knows what is going on, and greater determination to tackle the hardest problems we face. We have a long road yet to travel, and we have to do this together.

8.23 pm

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]: Wolverhampton was one of the first places to feel the impact of covid-19, as New Cross Hospital in my constituency had to cope with many of the UK's earliest cases. I commend the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust and all the NHS staff in Wolverhampton who reacted and adapted so quickly and have given such outstanding care to patients from Wolverhampton and the wider region.

I also pay tribute to all those working in care homes and adult social care, who have worked to support our most vulnerable people. One of the cruellest effects of this virus is that residents of care homes and shielded people are kept apart from their families and loved ones. It is important that they know they are not forgotten. Every effort should be made to support the staff who are innovating and keeping them in touch with their families throughout this crisis.

Sadly, many families in Wolverhampton have lost someone they loved, and my sympathies go out to those who are currently struggling to grieve without the comfort of a traditional funeral service. Next year, I think we will see many memorial events in our city. The newly formed Wolverhampton Caribbean Community Memorial Trust is already planning a weekend event, and I am sure that a lot of other groups will follow its initiative. Coming together to mourn the loss of a loved one and celebrate their life is an important part of the grieving process. Many of my constituents would like a national event next year so that we can remember the victims of coronavirus, and I would support that request so that we can join together as a nation in an act of remembrance.

Amid such heartache, this crisis has brought out the best in so many people. I want to thank all the volunteers who have worked to help their neighbours throughout the crisis. Small food banks have sprung up at the Ashmore Inn pub and at the Women and Families Resource Centre in Park Village. There is also an amazing lady organising craft boxes for children who are having to stay at home, often with no outdoor space. Church groups, gurdwaras and mosques are all raising money and delivering practical help in the community. Their selflessness and kindness are incredible; they are the best of Wolverhampton.

As we take our first small steps out of lockdown, my thoughts turn to businesses and workers in my constituency. Unemployment was already high in Wolverhampton North East, and our local high streets were struggling. I know that the Government are still determined to level up across our country, and I hope that extra consideration and thought will be given to constituencies such as mine, where the economic effects of covid-19 will hit hard. I thank the Chancellor for the wide range of measures to support businesses and self-employed people at this time. I would like to join colleagues and our West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, in calling for flexibility to come off the furlough scheme and for ongoing support. Some sections will have to wait many months before their business returns to normal. I am grateful to our Mayor for his determination to fight for business in the Black Country and to help our economic recovery across the west midlands. I would also ask local people to get out and support our businesses as soon as they safely reopen. I have been immensely proud of the people of Wolverhampton over the past few weeks. We will get through this crisis because of their kindness, resilience and determination. This is a time not for politics but for pragmatism. To everyone who has come together to help our city: thank you.

8.27 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker, and a special hello from the Hebrides. I wish all Members overseas who are partaking in the debate well. It is of course an important debate that is taking place in a Parliament of the Union, although virtually for some of us who are not there. It is the UK Union Parliament but it is certainly not for our nation. That is a term that is often lazily used at Westminster, but last night when the Prime Minister spoke, the region in question was certainly England. In our nation, the First Minister of Scotland was very clear: stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives. Just what the Prime Minister of Westminster meant when he said that we should stay alert for a virus

that is measured in nanometres is quite another matter altogether. Certainly there seemed to be confusion, listening in, and this has given Scots a real, tangible taste of the benefits of independence. We see that independence today in our health policy.

The truth of the matter, however, is that we should be continuing with lockdown because we have to continue with lockdown. Unfortunately, the seven weeks of lockdown have to a large extent been wasted, because the testing policy, instead of being one of test, trace and isolate has been one of test, find and ignore. It has been obsessed with daily targets and the media have not questioned the why. It is a policy that has spurned many opportunities to track and stop the virus. We should have been hunting the virus, not waiting for it to come among us all. The policy was to test the symptomatic, but only those who had been symptomatic for 48 hours. It has been clear from many other countries, especially those such as Iceland and the Faroes, which have a great record in fighting the virus, that 80% to 85% of covid-19 carriers are asymptomatic. They are the ones who will unwittingly be spreading covid-19 among the population. I am grateful to the Faroese Health Minister—the former Prime Minister, the esteemed Kaj Leo Holm Johannesen—for his information, support and offers of testing to the Scottish islands to help us to get test, trace and isolate on the go a number of weeks ago, rather than the situation that we were in, with seven weeks of lockdown during which we found people but did not go on to test others in their household. That has been a wasted opportunity.

The other important area we need to consider is finance, especially given the divergence within the United Kingdom due to English politicians taking an independent approach. Of course, I support the independence of England—the sooner it happens, the better—but only wish that in this instance it had been done with greater thought. The Treasury, which has underpinned health policy up to now, should continue to underpin the health policies of all the nations of the UK. Treasury support should not be kicked away when the health policy of England dictates that it is no longer required in England. Treasury support should be there to help the health policies of all across the UK. That is what Unionism should mean, and I would expect Unionists to support that and not to be followerists, taking instructions without making representation. We have to make sure that the welfare of everyone is looked after, especially when Governments are having to make choices and take steps for public health.

In Na h-Eileanan an Iar, test, trace and isolate has begun, but with so few cases it has not got properly started yet. Surely we should be using our new capacity, which is underutilised, to search for the asymptomatic. Thankfully, we have had no cases for a number of weeks, but we have to remain in lockdown due to a lack of knowledge and having to make decisions based on the lack of a proper testing system.

I hope that the UK has learned a lot. The UK has certainly learned that it is not exceptional and that it can be as vulnerable as anywhere else—more so when not following best practice and trying to reinvent the wheel. In contrast to what is commonly viewed as a debacle south of the border, we in Scotland have tasted what an independent health policy is like. We just need

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

to taste independence in every other policy area. As Iceland, the Faroes and smaller nations such as Scotland have shown, smaller nations fight epidemics better. Incidentally, they do economic recoveries better as well—and that, of course, will be the next step.

8.31 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): When the public inquiry reports after being able to properly consider these events, there will be an almost irresistible urge to blame. That can only be natural, for we will as a nation feel grief—grief for those we have lost, grief for the things we have hitherto taken for granted, and grief for lost futures. The inquiry will demand papers, examine plans, ask awkward questions and reveal uncomfortable truths. There will be admissions, denials and rebuttals, claim and counterclaim, good days for some, bad days for others. There will be tales of heroism, and records of blunder. There will be examples of those who did not make reply, those who should have perhaps reasoned why, and, above it all, the lingering ghosts of those who simply did and died.

The findings of the inquiry will not be phrased poetically. They will be categoric. I will wait for them and accept them, and we will all learn from them. The findings will put aside examples of hindsight-itis, which grow as the real pandemic subsides. Those who say they do not wish to play politics but then subtly do so will be able to deal in the facts, rather than propagate speculation. We will know who knew what and when, from whence this virus came, and myriad hows and whys will find their answer. We know it on reasonable authority that judgment is never quite so harsh upon the admission of responsibility, but perhaps most painfully of all there may be some answers we may never know.

There are some people for whom our Prime Minister will never do anything right, but he is the Prime Minister and they are not. He knows that to govern is to choose. There are invidious choices ahead, and we need the Government to be fully engaged with the concerns and suggestions of wider society. They must also be engaged with this House, and I am sorry to say that this format of a virtual Parliament does not allow for it. As we ask our constituents to return to their place of work, with understandable anxieties and adaptations, so we must lead by example and return to ours.

Through effective scrutiny we will get better government, for there are many candid friends of the Government in this House who want them to succeed on behalf of our entire nation. However, just as the Prime Minister and Ministers must exercise their judgment carefully and clearly, it is also for everyone to play a part in exercising our judgment, rather than entirely abdicating responsibility to the state. Although the state intervention has been great and necessary, it will be our individual patience, good sense and, above all, humanity that will see us through.

Much has been made of the slogan used to convey the Government's message. Supposedly clever people scoff and feign confusion. Well, we can argue about this weekend's communication strategy and wish it were better, but ultimately we must have greater confidence in the judgment of the public.

8.35 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: I thank the people of Rotherham for following the lockdown rules, and for proactively helping the people in our town who are vulnerable; you have shown real community spirit and I am proud to represent you.

Tonight, however, I will speak as Chair of the Select Committee on International Development, as we are currently conducting an inquiry into the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in developing countries. There have been some clear and consistent messages. First, the ability to prevent infections in the global south is simply not there. How is it possible to maintain social distancing in a refugee camp or at a food distribution point? In Bangladesh, for example, 850,000 Rohingya refugees live in just 26 sq km. Secondly, healthcare systems in so many areas have been destroyed, like in Syria or Yemen, or are vastly under-resourced, like in Mali, with its single ventilator for the entire country. Thirdly, the economic impact has been immediate in the global south. This alone is estimated to have undone the development work of the last 30 years.

The consensus in our evidence to date is as follows. The coronavirus pandemic is emerging across the global south, with no country being safe. The outbreak is likely to peak in the next two or three months. The direct challenge of the disease and the seriousness of its effect on children will be exacerbated where there are existing illnesses, other morbidities and poor nutrition, as well as a weak health system and infrastructure. For example, it is estimated that only 51% of health centres in Yemen are fully functional. In north-east Syria, no district can even meet the basic emergency threshold of 10 hospital beds per 10,000 population. In north-east Nigeria, vaccine coverage is only 8% in some areas, and 2.7 million women and children need nutritional support.

The preventive measures that we have adopted in the UK will obviously be challenging, if not impossible, in crowded settlements such as refugee camps. Other illnesses are likely to embed, as existing health services are crowded out or avoided. Traditional vaccine provision, maternal and neonatal health, and basic public health—nutrition and hygiene advice, in particular—will be at risk. Where lockdown is being used as a preventive measure, our evidence makes it clear that the stress that this can impose, alongside the threat of family illness and loss of income, all place disproportionate risk on women and children. Lockdown-related domestic violence has been evidenced everywhere. Child abuse is likely to increase. The Committee received evidence that child marriage and child sexual exploitation, including via the internet, could be used by some to mitigate losses of income from a lockdown economy.

Food security continues to be a major concern, particularly in Africa and the middle east. Public trust and social cohesion are worsening across some countries, with increasing protests against Governments. The threat of successful radicalisation and recruitment by extremist organisations seems inevitable in the face of rising unemployment and deprivation. There have also been reports of very negative sentiments about the role of international NGOs and foreigners in relation to the spread of the disease.

I have welcomed the UK's response to the emergence of coronavirus in the global south. However, in our evidence, NGOs considered the £20 million allocated by

the Department for International Development for them to tackle covid-19 to be insufficient. There is also a consistent message that multilateral organisations are not reactive enough to disburse funds to frontline delivery in these urgent situations. I urge the Government to allow UK NGOs more flexibility in how they already use their existing funding. The UK's response—totalled at £744 million—is weighted strongly towards the allocation of official development assistance funding for the development of a vaccine, so it is concerning that the Government have yet to enact safeguards or place conditions on the use of the funding to ensure—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am terribly sorry, Sarah, but we have to leave it there.

8.39 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con) [V]: First, I want to thank all the frontline staff, especially those in South West Hertfordshire. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and the further guidance issued today. Across the country and in my constituency, people will welcome this road map and the light at the end of the tunnel. I congratulate all Government Departments for their Herculean efforts to deal with this unprecedented global pandemic. In my view, the continual evolution of national policies based on data is the correct method, and I look forward to the easing of the lockdown restrictions as soon as it is safe.

I want to focus on what the new normal may look like. My party and this Government had already committed to extensive investment in broadband, and this pandemic has shown at first hand how it should now be regarded as an essential utility. I look forward to working with ministerial colleagues to achieving that as soon as practicable.

The ability of the national health service to adapt to a totally different healthcare system using remote diagnosis could fundamentally change how our NHS works. This should be regarded as an opportunity and not a threat. The technological industrial revolution is using the pandemic as a catalyst for significant innovation—something we in this House should all engage in, to seek the opportunities that a global Britain offers.

As you may know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I regard myself as a globalist and an optimist. This pandemic has shown British ingenuity at its best—the world-class teams working to find a vaccine, the two-week construction of the Nightingale hospitals and the national effort made by businesses of whatever size for the greater national good. The community spirit across South West Hertfordshire has reinforced my belief that we will get through this. From the door-to-door deliveries in Croxley Green, to supermarket attendants going that little bit further to help vulnerable customers, to the large food bank donations in Tring, people are pulling together. At Tring School, two staff members, Miss Jones and Miss Corney, have donated their time and efforts to make 1,000 visors for Stoke Mandeville Hospital and 43 other organisations. My one desire is that the care shown for our neighbours and those in need continues into more normal times.

As a Conservative, I have always believed in the safety net, and many in this pandemic are having to rely on it. I will continue to be a critical friend as we progress through this pandemic, but I want to take this opportunity

to acknowledge the excellent work done to date. I ask my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General to discuss any plans she has to use the public's good will, time and generosity in the form of volunteer co-ordination, and to join me in thanking those in my constituency and around the country who have stepped up to help their fellow countrymen and women in these challenging times.

8.42 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab) [V]: I could have addressed many issues in this speech, among them the grief in my own community, the plight of child nurseries that face bankruptcy, small businesses that do not qualify for any support, individuals who have been caught between jobs and are not being furloughed, the hunger of children across the country because the Government refuse to issue school meal vouchers during the Whitsun holidays, or the fear of families with relatives in care homes. But I have opted to talk specifically about health, because of the disproportionate effect the coronavirus has on communities like mine. I pay tribute to all the key workers who look after us every day.

As we know, covid-19 is a respiratory virus that affects the lungs and airways. That is why lung health is an integral part of how we tackle this virus now and respond to the ongoing effects it can have on a person's lung health. The majority of deaths from covid-19 in the UK have occurred among people with pre-existing conditions. Data from the UK covid symptom tracker app shows that smokers are more likely to report common covid symptoms, and smokers who contract coronavirus are more likely to experience severe symptoms.

Prior to this crisis, I regularly called on the Government to do more when it came to lung health—to reverse the cuts and fund public health properly, to have better tobacco control and to tackle health inequalities. As colleagues may know, there is a 20-year average life expectancy gap within my Stockton North constituency. Men living in the town centre ward can expect to live 20 years fewer than a man living in Wynyard. While there are other health challenges, much of that health inequality is down to lung health and the Government's failure to tackle it head on. Investing properly in tobacco control and smoking cessation services would achieve the Government's ambition of a smoke-free England by 2030 and reduce health inequalities, but more importantly, it could lift over 1 million people out of poverty, including 250,000 children.

There has been much talk about how long the coronavirus could be around and whether it could mutate and reinfect. I am not a scientist, so I, like the vast majority of people, cannot answer those questions. But we cannot take a gamble with people's health and their lives. If someone is more likely to die from covid-19 with a pre-existing condition, we need to tackle the root causes of pre-existing conditions. That means tackling health issues in areas like mine—the areas with the poorest communities. Smoking cessation is an excellent place to start. I hope that the Government will see it as not just appropriate but necessary to restore all funding for services that help people to stop smoking. When households stop spending money on tobacco, it can lift them out of poverty and increase the disposable income available to spend on local communities rather than lining the pockets of transnational tobacco firms, but the services need to

[Alex Cunningham]

be there to support people to quit smoking. A polluter charge on tobacco companies would go a long way to funding those services, so will the Minister commit to introducing this charge to provide a sustainable source of funding for tobacco control?

We need to give lung health the attention that it desperately needs, not just during the coronavirus crisis but afterwards, because we do not know whether this will happen again and we need to be ready. Improving the health of those with the shortest life expectancy is part of the answer. We need to be working on prevention so that if this happens again, we are ready and we will know that we will have saved lives simply by looking after their lung health now.

8.46 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I begin by thanking all those key workers in North Somerset who keep our essential services moving, all the voluntary groups who have kept our communities healthy and all those who have maintained the Government guidelines, keeping one another safe.

Even at this point in the pandemic, there are a few points worth making about the medicine. In a pandemic with a new virus, where there is no vaccine and no cure, most of the population are likely to become infected over time. A lockdown, the likes of which we have had in the United Kingdom, can reduce the peak death rate, history will suggest, by up to 50%, and it will reduce the excess mortality rate over time, but not to such a great extent. It is worth us keeping that in mind as we look forward to future steps.

We do not know how this virus will behave. It is not influenza, and therefore influenza modelling may not be the most appropriate. It may be seasonal. There may be winter peaks that recur, but there may not. It may disappear as SARS did, for example, or have sporadic cases, as MERS had, but the virus is likely to remain, evolve and mutate, so this is not a war. The virus will not surrender. There will be no VC day, so my advice to politicians, the media and commentators alike is to take Basil Fawlty's advice and "don't mention the war". It gives a false perspective for the public in understanding the likely course that this pandemic will take.

If the virus will spread widely through the population in the course of this illness, the great unknown is what proportion of the population have already been infected and may have been asymptomatic. There are studies in other countries—they are not yet published or not yet peer-reviewed, so it is not evidence that we can readily use—that suggest that in some populations, the asymptomatic proportion of the population can be quite high. We will know that only if we are able to introduce a programme of widespread antibody testing, because the current programme of PCR—polymerase chain reaction—testing will diminish in effectiveness as we are able to detect less of the virus. We therefore need an antibody programme that tells us how many in the population have been infected over time. I urge my colleagues on the Front Bench to speed up, where possible, the rolling out of antibody testing, because it will be key in the longer term to understanding the spread of the illness, our ability to control it and our

ability to set free those who will have been cocooned for some time as a consequence of the measures that we have already taken.

How successful we will be in dealing with this particular viral outbreak will be a long-term judgment. We need to be patient, because there are no immediate answers here or anywhere else. We will need to wait to see the level of excess global deaths before we are able to determine whether, in closing down parts of the global economy, we have actually overreacted as a global community to the emergence of a new virus. That will be crucial for our future activities, because we cannot afford to close down the global economy every time we have a new virus emerging, and, if we are not willing to do that, we must develop international protocols that will give us an idea of how we manage, in the globalised era, something that will not respect borders however much we in governmental structures wish that it would.

8.51 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: In opening, let me send my heartfelt condolences to all those who have lost family members at this difficult time. The complications of isolation make bereavement more challenging, and I pray that all can find peace, as they work through their pain of loss.

Again and again, we are struck by the professionalism, care, compassion, courage, commitment and love of our NHS and care staff. They have gone beyond their duty to serve us, as have so many frontline workers, ensuring that the nation is fed, supported and cared for. I know, in York, of the sacrifices that have been made by so many and thank all workers and volunteers for each act of kindness that they have shown during this crisis.

I want to raise one issue on the behalf of those workers before moving to my main contribution. In November 2014, following the Francis report into the serious issues uncovered at Mid Staffordshire hospital, the duty of candour was introduced. If healthcare workers are to be safe, we need to ensure that there is a place where all can safely raise concerns, and that those concerns are responded to. The duty should extend to all. I know that concerns have been raised by careworkers in my constituency and yet they have not been addressed. Access to PPE is one such example. Employers, local resilience forums and, yes, Government need to be honest in their response to the challenges that are presented, and mitigation must be put in place to protect workers.

Last night, the nation was thrown into confusion, but I believe the Prime Minister was clear: he was shifting risk from the state to individuals and businesses. That is unacceptable when dealing with such a dangerous virus. Today, I want to raise two major issues missing from the Government's strategy. To mitigate the worst aspects of the pandemic, we need better data and we need a risk analysis. The data is scant and the risk analysis absent. As covid-19 will be prevalent until a vaccine is administered, the right data needs collecting now.

I have two brief examples. We receive hospital mortality figures and, latterly, figures for care homes. However, if we are looking into infection control, it is not the location of death that is important, but the location of infection. How many covid-positive hospital admissions originate from care homes, how many have been infected

in hospitals, and then how have many died? Clearly, infection data, not just mortality data, must be shared. We need data to expose where risk resides. How do the infections and deaths of so many people align with protected characteristics and underlying health conditions? If they do align, with which ones, and what about socioeconomic circumstances? Data needs to be granulated, so that risk is understood and mitigated.

Secondly, where is the risk register? Today, I am calling on the Government to publish a risk register. Unless there is a full risk analysis of all the risks, how can we balance them and put appropriate mitigation in place? Without a risk register, how can anyone scientifically scrutinise the Government? Every Department, every local authority, every statutory body and every employer must produce a risk analysis not only on the basis of health but, importantly, on the basis of the economy. Each decision must also be accompanied by an equality impact assessment. Had that been the Government's approach, we would never have seen the austerity measures that stripped our NHS of vital resources such as PPE and staff, and all the gross inequalities demonstrated in the mortality statistics. We would not have seen the mistakes that have occurred over the past few weeks, with gaps in the economic package causing severe hardship. We would not have had last night's announcement. We need an evidence-based approach to decision making, and we need this crucial information published now. I call on the Government to put data and a risk analysis in the public domain.

8.54 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con) [V]: I will hit a different tone to start. I want to congratulate the Chancellor on his rapid actions to underpin employment across our economy and to support the worst-affected businesses. It was a huge package delivered very quickly and very necessarily.

It is also true, however, that there are a number of businesses that are not formally required to close but which have been unable to continue trading because of social distancing guidelines set out by their professional bodies or regulators. This is despite the fact that they are formally listed by the core Government rules as being able to continue to trade. Dentists, vets, physiotherapists and many similar professions have seen all their income disappear. I ask the Government to ensure that local authorities have complete discretion over the remaining allocated funds for business support to target such individual businesses that may not fit the textbook but have been particularly badly affected. In addition, there are self-employed groups, including the directors of small companies and those on short-term PAYE contracts, for example, in the media and entertainment industries, for whom the impact of the virus will be long-lasting. Will the Government therefore consider whether there are any other ways of easing the impact on them?

I am concerned that many of the professional bodies and agencies putting the overall principles of the lockdown into guidance for businesses have erred heavily—and, to be honest, sometimes unnecessarily—on the side of caution in drawing up those guidelines. That has an impact on business, the income of professionals and employment. For example, why can local vets not carry on working as normal, with PPE, as long as pet owners socially distance while they wait for their pets? If emergency

physiotherapy and dentistry is allowed with appropriate protections, why can routine work not start again? One example I came across in the past few days is that dog walking businesses are having to stop their work because for safety reasons the guidance does not allow dogs from different households to be mixed; the dogs in the park on a Saturday have not quite worked out the need for social distance between households. People are losing their livelihoods because of that. We need common sense, not excessive risk aversion.

From an international perspective, we already know the possible link between the virus and the trade in wildlife. We also know that much of that trade is illegal, shipping animals such as pangolins from other parts of the world to wet markets in Asia. This is not the first time that a virus is suspected to have made the jump between animals and human beings in the environment of wet markets. This really has to be the moment in which there is a concerted international effort to bring to an end that illegal trade, and to bring to an end the practice of wet markets, which have potentially such significant impacts on the health of the humans who use those markets and, as we now see, around the world.

There is another issue. With tourism around the world on lockdown, this is also a time when conservation in Africa and the battle against that illegal wildlife trade faces an existential crisis, leaving a gaping hole for poachers and illegal traders. I urge the Government to channel more of our international aid budget to support vital conservation projects, in particular projects that protect species from poaching, and defend the species that are most at risk from the collapse of local economies in Africa.

These are momentous times. I pay a huge tribute to the key workers in my constituency, particularly at Epsom Hospital, who have done such an incredible job in the past few weeks. I think the Government should take credit for much of what they have done. There are challenges, there are things we will not get right and there is more to do, but we have to win through, get our economy back on the road and defeat the virus.

8.58 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is the first responsibility of Government to keep people safe and during this crisis that responsibility is acute. What the Government say and do each day has profound consequences, whether that is being too slow with lockdown measures and PPE, or creating confusion with ill-considered announcements.

If lockdown measures are to be eased, it is critical that the Government keep the rate of infection as low as possible. In their plan published today, they acknowledge the role that mass testing and contact tracing play in suppressing transmission, but we have been a long way from the comprehensive, effective and, as the Prime Minister put it, world-leading system we need. The plan mentions targets of 100,000 tests a day last month and 200,000 tests a day this month, yet there has not been a single day in May when the number of people tested has been above 70,000. The plan also mentions a role for local authority public health services, but it feels far too much like an afterthought. The Government have focused all their energy on a new national call centre, rather than listening to local authorities, experts, and MPs, who have implored them to put local teams at the heart

[James Murray]

of those efforts. The Government plan also mentions controlling the outbreak in care homes. The importance of that cannot be overstated, as this Government's failure to protect people who live and work in care homes is fast becoming one of their greatest failings of the covid-19 crisis so far.

Last week, my team and I spoke to care homes across my constituency. One care worker told us how traumatic it had been for their colleagues to lose so many residents. They told us that they would usually expect to suffer around three deaths a year in their home, but that they have lost twice as many people in a single fortnight of this crisis. The people we spoke to were deeply upset with the Government and with the lack of recognition for care, and they felt that they had been in a crisis for far longer than since coronavirus. One worker said to us that their colleagues were tired and upset, but that they had been for years. That is the truth at the heart of this crisis.

This outbreak has laid bare the deep-seated inequalities in our country. It is hitting those people hardest who cannot work from home, such as low-paid care staff, hospital cleaners and bus drivers. It is hitting hardest those who do not have a decent home, such as those living with overcrowding or sofa-surfing and those who are homeless.

Once we get through the immediate crisis, we must not let the Government forget those workers who are risking everything to keep the country safe. We must not forget those receiving care who are paying such a dreadful price, trade unions that are playing a crucial role in protecting people's jobs, BAME communities, who are suffering more than anyone else, and councils and local volunteers who are getting food delivered to those who need it most. When we begin to emerge from this crisis, making our economy work for people who do the essential jobs in society, building a new generation of council housing, and ending the austerity that has caused so much harm to our public services, will be more important than ever.

9.2 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con) [V]: Let me start by thanking all the staff at Burnley hospital, and our carers, for their incredible dedication, as well as the volunteers of Burnley Together, and other groups who continue to support those who need it most. Through this period we have seen the incredible fortitude and generosity of the British people, and businesses up and down the country, including in my constituency, have stepped forward and played their part in manufacturing what we need.

One sector that has been particularly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic is the travel sector. Airlines have seen their business models collapse, and I warmly welcome the action taken by the Government so far, which has undoubtedly saved millions of businesses and jobs. I ask that they keep an open mind about any additional support for airlines that might be required, and look at measures provided in the United States as an example.

When travel restrictions are lifted and the global economy starts to tick over once more, this country will rely on the trade deals currently being negotiated by the International Trade Secretary in order to bounce back.

For that to work, we must have the links needed to keep goods and people moving. I mention the travel sector to talk not only about airlines, but about the wider supply chain. As many Members of the House will know, Burnley and Padiham make up one of the northern areas at the centre of advanced engineering and manufacturing, supplying the components needed to build aircraft, and the engines that power them. Sadly, one of the largest local employers in my constituency has just announced more than 200 job losses, reflecting the deteriorating outlook for the aviation sector over the medium term, with airlines holding on to their existing fleet. Those jobs are high skilled, highly paid, and vital to keeping the UK at the cutting edge of manufacturing and engineering. They are jobs that Burnley, which had a higher claimant count than the national average before this crisis, desperately needs.

My ask to the Government is for any policy decisions that could have unintended consequences to be considered holistically. The 14-day quarantine for international arrivals will definitely have some merit for some countries for a short period, and the Government have my support. As a blanket policy, however, it will only kick the aviation sector when it is already down. The job losses that could follow will ripple through the entire supply chain.

With a clear, sustainable strategy of test, track and trace, such measures can be limited to dealing with an initial spike or specific hotspot areas, and not as a long-term solution. For test, track and trace to be effective, though, we need to get testing to a sufficiently significant scale, in terms of both the number of tests available and the number of test centres that exist to deliver them. That is how we can ensure that capacity is always hit. I encourage all Members to read South Korea's playbook on how it flattened the curve there and developed a test, track and trace system. There, testing is done not only en masse, but also in small K-Walk-Thru booths, rapidly increasing how many people can get tested because it can be done closer to home. That is a model that could also be deployed in airports.

For track and trace, the development and deployment of the NHS app will be critical, and it can easily be mandated at entry ports to the country, to help to ensure that our approach is sustainable in the long term. I know that the Government are looking at both options for the tracing app, with the one currently being trialled reliant on a central database instead of taking a decentralised approach. There are benefits and drawbacks to both, but whichever method is chosen, it is vital that it is chosen quickly, because any delay in selecting a model and getting the app out there, or any change further down the line, will only delay when we can start to adapt to our own new norm.

Let me finish by paying tribute to the enormous amount of support already put in place by—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry, Antony, we have to leave it there.

9.6 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC) [V]: Diolch, Mr Deputy Speaker. Let me begin by reflecting for a moment on those who have sadly lost their lives to covid-19. I extend my sincere condolences to the families and friends who have lost loved ones. One of the most moving scenes of

the past few weeks has been the custom of standing on doorsteps to bid farewell to loved ones as the funeral procession progresses through towns and villages. I cannot think of a more solemn reminder of the importance of protecting people's lives in this pandemic. I believe that this must, first and foremost, be the priority of any Government.

The impact that lockdown is having on the mental well-being of so many, especially those who live alone, should not be underestimated, but I do not think that anyone will disagree that it was necessary. In Wales, people are still asked to stay at home in order to save lives. These restrictions will remain in place for at least the next three weeks, but many constituents have contacted me overnight to convey their serious concerns about the impact that an easing of lockdown restrictions in other parts of the UK might have on Ceredigion. In particular, their concerns have centred on the suggestion made by the Prime Minister that, from this Wednesday, people in England may drive to outdoor open spaces, irrespective of distance.

Although the change applies to England alone, it is understandable that people are worried that this distinction will not be widely understood. After all, such concerns are well founded. During the UK-wide lockdown, we sadly witnessed a significant number of individuals attempting to travel to Ceredigion and other parts of west Wales, contrary to official advice. As such, the UK Government have a responsibility to emphasise, in all their public announcements and interviews to the press over the coming days, that travel restrictions remain in place in Wales for at least the next few weeks.

I would like to associate myself with the arguments made by other hon. Members that the Government should ensure that economic support measures are extended to cover the period of covid-19 restrictions and are adapted to be more flexible, particularly for sectors such as tourism and agriculture, which depend on such seasonal demand.

Others, including the hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham), have made valuable contributions this evening about the importance of establishing an intensive testing, tracking and contact tracing regime, in the mould of that implemented in South Korea, so that we can detect, track, isolate and treat new cases quickly and effectively. I would like to end by associating myself with those arguments and paying tribute to the work conducted by Ceredigion County Council, in collaboration with Hywel Dda university health board and Aberystwyth University, on community testing and contact tracing. This work offers a solution by which lockdown restrictions can be lifted safely and in a way that gives our communities confidence. Until such a strategy is in place, however, we must act with caution, to protect lives as much as possible.

9.9 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)
[V]: I should like to start by praising the Prime Minister for the leadership he has shown throughout this crisis, despite having suffered from the virus himself. I believe the whole country is grateful to him for all his efforts.

We should also be really thankful for our tremendous NHS staff, care workers and other medical professionals, who are on the frontline in this fight against covid-19. Their skills, commitment and dedication are an inspiration to us all. We should also thank all the other key workers

in our society for their work at this difficult and challenging time. I particularly thank those workers in my area of south-east London.

We are in unprecedented times and the Government have been proactive and responsive to the many issues that our nation faces. It is a national tragedy that so many lives have been lost to this terrible virus, particularly in care homes, which were not a priority early enough. Matters of testing and PPE provision will also need to be examined. There are many and varied questions that will need to be raised, nationally and internationally, in due course. Today is not the day for such questions, however, as I believe that at this stage, we need to be constructive, not partisan, and look forward.

The response to the crisis has brought out the best of Britain. Our people have risen to the challenge. That is particularly true in my borough of Bexley. At this stage, we need to be discussing the road map for the future. Therefore, I welcomed the Prime Minister's announcement on Sunday of cautious, careful and pragmatic progress to start to get the country out of lockdown. I think that the "stay alert" slogan is good and that the promised road map being dependent, of course, on people's actions is the right approach now.

Many people are concerned about the impact of the virus on the economy and the future. Many businesses in my constituency are worried about the future and there are real economic concerns. That is why the measures from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of Exchequer have been warmly welcomed. The huge and unprecedented programme of support for workers, businesses, jobs, the economy and the self-employed has been good news in a time of sadness and bad news. A too-early relaxation of Government measures could cause further damage and an even longer period of social distancing, but we must get the economy going again by opening up shops and businesses, getting people spending and working, and getting to some sort of new normality.

From communications that I have had with businesses across my area of Bexley, I know that the Government support is much appreciated, particularly the furloughing of staff and the coronavirus grant funding, which have been vital in keeping businesses afloat even if they are not operational at this time. In fact, a survey of local small and medium-sized enterprises and other businesses by McBrides Chartered Accountants in Sidcup revealed that without the current Government measures to support them, a quarter of businesses would not have survived the lockdown, and more than two thirds would have been forced to lay off staff. That shows how important the Government's actions have been in protecting businesses and livelihoods.

Of course, those measures cannot continue forever, and we look forward to the Chancellor's new proposals shortly. I hope that he will taper the furlough scheme rather than remove it completely, because it has been such a lifeline. He has been brilliant in his approach and understanding, and in the policies that he has put forward to help the economic future of the country and the current business problems.

We must look to the future and start up our economy, but it is vital that we do it in a measured manner, to give businesses, employees and consumers confidence that they are in a safe environment. In conclusion, there will

[*Sir David Evennett*]

be many lessons to be learned, and we can highlight areas such as care homes, testing and PPE where things could and should have been done better—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry, but we have to leave it there and move on under pressure of time. I call Margaret Ferrier.

9.13 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP) [V]: I express my condolences to those who have lost their lives to covid-19. It is easy to forget amid the daily statistical reports that behind each number is a person who was loved by their family and friends and was an irreplaceable part of the local community. I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to the efforts of key workers in my constituency, who are helping to save lives and keep essential services running. From nurses to delivery drivers, they are all heroes in my eyes, and I am continually impressed by the way that they have adapted and continue to adapt in challenging circumstances.

In times of national crisis, our choice of words matters. We need to provide clear and consistent information to the public about what we are asking them to do and why. It is regrettable that the “stay alert” slogan for England was briefed to the media before MPs and that no consultation with the devolved Governments took place beforehand. On a basic level, the “stay alert” message can be interpreted as an end to lockdown and as throwing caution to the wind, which could have disastrous consequences for public health. The threat of a second wave remains very real, and the infection rate could move upwards rapidly again. We only need to look at Germany to observe the consequences of lifting lockdown too soon. Now is not the time for caveat and nuance in tackling coronavirus. We need a clear and unambiguous approach like that taken by the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to reinforce the clear message to stay at home.

Lockdown has not been an easy decision to implement, and it does not come without cost. It has taken its toll on our constituents, and we are all anxious for their wellbeing. We know that businesses are struggling right now, and we want to support them to survive in the months ahead and rebuild over the longer term. From hairdressers to shops and everything in between, they need stability now in order to prepare for the post-coronavirus economy.

Just as with the lockdown measures, we must not rush into winding down the job retention schemes that give businesses security now. Indeed, we must look at options for extending those schemes for sectors that may struggle to reopen with social distancing. No country is going to avoid the economic impact of coronavirus, but the question comes down to whether recovery puts the wellbeing of society first or tries to carry on as if nothing has happened. We risk creating another lost generation if we do not learn from the innovations that have been born out of necessity during this crisis.

Flexibility in policy making will be crucial in adapting to the challenges of our post-coronavirus future. That is as true when approaching the question of easing lockdown measures as it is with many other aspects of Government policy. A unitary, one-size-fits-all approach has not always

been the most desirable approach to managing the crisis. To take just one example, France has designed its exit strategy on the basis of levels of infection. The areas of highest infection continue with more restrictions, while areas of low infection see more relaxed measures.

To conclude, the reality is that we will be living with coronavirus for some time to come. We owe it to our constituents to be honest about the challenges that that will bring and how we can help them to navigate the new normal. Judging by the messy and unclear manner in which the UK Government changed their coronavirus advice, I am unconvinced that they will bring forward the kind of innovative thinking we need to build a sustainable, long-term recovery from coronavirus across these islands.

9.17 pm

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. During the pandemic, many have turned to their MP for help, and so far nearly 800 cases have been brought to me by constituents. That has proven to be a challenge at times—especially while I have been struggling with covid symptoms myself—but it has been rewarding to assist so many people. I thank all who have joined me in working around the clock to provide responses. I must also thank key workers at this immensely challenging time and pay tribute to all who have volunteered to help their communities.

I welcome the generous package that the Government have introduced to support individuals and businesses. A great number of my constituents have expressed their thanks for these schemes, and I would like to add my own thanks for the hard work that has been undertaken by Ministers, officials and industry representatives to construct these programmes.

In such difficult times as these, a united approach across our country is vital, and regrettably, much of my time over the last several weeks has been spent dealing with confusion and anxiety where that has not been the case. It started with national guidance to seek coronavirus advice via the 111 service, when no such service existed in north Wales. Soon afterwards, the Welsh Government were in such a rush to announce the closure of schools in advance of the UK Government that they did so without the initial mention of provision for vulnerable children and those of key workers. Following this, the very successful GoodSAM scheme, which recruited volunteers, was not embraced by the Welsh Government, with far fewer volunteers being registered in Wales as a result. While the UK Government ploughed on with their plans for the Nightingale hospitals, precious little appeared to be under way in north Wales. Following work with the health board, three temporary Rainbow hospitals are now available, and mercifully they have not been required as yet.

Perhaps one of the greatest issues in my mailbag has been the difficulty of obtaining supermarket delivery slots, because the Welsh Government were initially unable to provide supermarkets with electronic lists of shielded patients. To compound matters, the online form for registering as a vulnerable person would not accept applications from Wales. Shielding letters were greatly delayed in comparison with the situation in England. It then emerged that the 80,000 shielding letters sent out by the Welsh Government included 13,000 that were

sent to the wrong addresses. Only a week ago, a shocking further 21,000 recipients were identified. A survey by Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation found that while 10% of its respondents from Wales had received a shielding letter, this rose to an average of 17% in the rest of the UK. I still have many constituents yet to receive a shielding letter, such as Eleri Humphreys from Rhuddlan. It is my belief that the dispatch process of shielding letters highlights critical failures in the IT systems in use in NHS Wales, which contribute towards poor performance of the system on a daily basis.

As covid testing has been ramped up in England, the Welsh Government failed to match that, with access to testing still unavailable to many groups. It is now belatedly available to some care homes. The online booking portal available in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland does not function in Wales, and until just days ago, all tests carried out in north Wales were being sent on a several-hour trip to Cardiff for processing, when sending them to the Alderley Park “mega-lab” would have reduced lab transfer times to as little as an hour. Most recently, it was revealed that poor communication between the health board in north Wales and Public Health Wales had resulted in a failure to report all of its 84 coronavirus-related deaths over the—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We appear to have lost James, but thank you very much for your contribution. Let us move now to our final speaker, Dan Jarvis.

9.21 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: In South Yorkshire, where I am also the Mayor, the coronavirus has infected more than 4,500 people and, tragically, killed 576 people. My thoughts are with all of those who have suffered and lost, and those who are doing so much to keep our people safe and our society functioning. I will always seek to work constructively with the Government, but we do have a duty to test their policies and to hold them to account. One of their most crucial tasks is to keep the confidence of the British people, and without clarity, we will fail. So I have four immediate concerns.

The first is that “Stay alert” is vague compared with “Stay at home”. I am glad that the Prime Minister provided more detail today, but many people will still be confused, and confusion risks contagion. Secondly, we cannot ask people to go back to work if they cannot get there safely. Social distancing means much lower capacity on our public transport systems, and a switch to cars would mean instant gridlock. That means that getting people to walk and cycle is central to easing the lockdown. To be fair, the Government seem to understand that, but we urgently need to translate that into action together.

Thirdly, we cannot force people back to an unsafe workplace. The Government must monitor and support businesses to implement rigorous protective measures, in close collaboration with employees and unions. Until that is done, those workers should remain furloughed. Fourthly, the Government must be careful not to create suspicion, justified or not, that they are motivated by any concern other than fighting the disease. Things such as testing targets that are met just on the one day needed to avoid negative headlines inevitably undermine that vital public trust; this is no time for politics as

usual. So the Government must be utterly transparent about the data, the advice they are getting and the compromises they are choosing. There must be a clear line between the science and the political decisions based on it. That applies right across the UK, and the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority has led in supporting and informing local communities and businesses, in getting them the help they need and in championing their concerns at Westminster. We have kept our businesses and our light rail system running. We have lined up our local industries to supply PPE to the NHS, and we are developing a recovery plan that truly reflects local needs, but the Government must bring us in to the heart of their response, and fund and empower us accordingly.

Finally, that response must also serve a wider purpose. We clearly need massive—[*Inaudible.*] This is the moment for a green new deal, for fixing our crumbling infrastructure and for addressing the unacceptable inequality between our regions and nations. History will not forgive us if, as after 2008, we make such sacrifices only to see inequality grow and the planet burn ever warmer. For all our sakes, the legacy we aim for now must not be a return to the status quo; it must be a national renewal.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Apologies to those who were not called today; they will be on tomorrow’s list, and they will be called.

9.26 pm

Two hours having elapsed since the resumption of proceedings on the motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Question (Order, this day).

Question negatived.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Ordered,

That Dame Margaret Beckett, Sarah Champion, Yvette Cooper, Mr Tobias Ellwood, Richard Graham, Darren Jones, Alicia Kearns, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Sir Robert Neill, Bob Stewart and Tom Tugendhat be nominated to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 6 to 18 together.

Ordered,

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

That Peter Kyle, Pat McFadden and Anna McMorrin be discharged from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Judith Cummins, Ruth Jones and Charlotte Nichols be added.

DEFENCE

That Wayne David and Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese be discharged from the Defence Committee and Mr Kevan Jones and Derek Twigg be added.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

That Jo Stevens be discharged from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Alex Davies-Jones be added.

EDUCATION

That Fleur Anderson and Lucy Powell be discharged from the Education Committee and Dawn Butler and Kim Johnson be added.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

That Mr Toby Perkins be discharged from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Ian Byrne be added.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

That Chris Elmore and Ian Murray be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and that Neil Coyle and Claudia Webbe be added.

FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

That Matthew Pennycook be discharged from the Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union and Mr Barry Sheerman be added.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

That James Murray be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Barbara Keeley be added.

HOME AFFAIRS

That Janet Daby, Stephen Doughty and Holly Lynch be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Ms Diane Abbott, Andrew Gwynne and Dame Diana Johnson be added.

JUSTICE

That Ellie Reeves and Ms Marie Rimmer be discharged from the Justice Committee and Paula Barker and Richard Burgon be added.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

That Chi Onwurah be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Dawn Butler be added.

TREASURY

That Liz Kendall and Alison McGovern be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Mike Hill and Siobhain McDonagh be added.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

That Rosie Duffield be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Bell Ribeiro-Addy be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

ADJOURNMENT

9.26 pm

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

Written Statements

Monday 11 May 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Bounce-back Loans Scheme

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention the details of the new bounce-back loans scheme (BBLS).

The bounce-back loans scheme was launched on 4 May, and is facilitated by the Government owned British Business Bank and delivered through its delivery partners. Lenders offer term loans of between £2,000 and £50,000 to support small businesses that are affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

The scheme is available on a temporary basis for an initial period of six months and can be extended as required. The key parameters of the scheme are as follows:

BBLS will provide term loans only for a term of six years, with businesses able to access loans equivalent to 25 per cent of their turnover from £2,000 up to a maximum loan size of £50,000. The interest rate will be standardised across all lenders and fixed at 2.5 per cent. There will be no fees for borrowers to access the scheme.

The percentage of net (post-recovery) losses for each loan that is guaranteed by the Government will be 100 per cent, with no cap on gross Government liability at the level of the lender's whole BBLS portfolio. Personal guarantees are not permitted, although some personal assets could be claimed as part of recovery from sole traders. Sole traders' principal private residence and vehicle may never be claimed as part of recovery.

A Government grant, "the business interruption payment", will be provided for the benefit of businesses, equal to the interest incurred on the facility for the first twelve months. Businesses will not be required to make any repayments on capital during the first twelve months of the facility.

The Government will be subject to a new contingent liability as a result of the bounce back loans scheme, and I will be laying a Departmental minute today containing a description of the liability undertaken.

For more information on this and other support for business, please go to <https://www.businesssupport.gov.uk/> [HCWS224]

Businesses: Safe Working Guidance

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): The Government today published new guidance to help UK employers get their businesses back up and running and workplaces operating as safely as possible.

The new guidance covers eight workplace settings from outdoor environments and construction sites to factories and takeaways and sets out practical steps for businesses.

The Government have consulted approximately 250 stakeholders in preparing the guidance. It has been developed with input from firms, unions, industry bodies and the devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and in consultation with Public Health England (PHE) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), to develop best practice on the safest ways of working across the economy, providing people with the confidence they need to return to work.

The guidance applies to businesses currently open. This also includes guidance for shops which we believe may be in a position to begin a phased re-opening at the earliest from the 1 June. Guidance for other sectors that are not currently open will be developed and published ahead of those establishments opening to give those businesses time to plan. The Government will also shortly set up taskforces to work with these sectors to develop safe ways for them to open at the earliest point at which it is safe to do so, as well as pilot re-openings to test businesses' ability to adopt the guidelines.

As part of today's announcement, the Government have made available up to an extra £14 million for the HSE, equivalent to an increase of 10% of their budget, for extra call centre employees, inspectors and equipment if needed.

The guidance is available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

[HCWS225]

Petition

Monday 11 May 2020

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Funding for flood defences in Prestolee, Bolton

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Riverside Drive in Prestolee, Bolton, suffered a serious flood on 26 December 2015, and a second serious flood on 9 February 2020. Both of these floods cause significant loss of property. Residents' personal belongings have been destroyed, and their homes and vehicles have been wrecked, causing absolute misery and distress as well as financial hardship. Significant distress was caused to residents at time of the floods, and many have suffered ongoing anxiety, leading to wider issues of mental health. Following the first flood, the Environment Agency propose the construction of flood defences to prevent a recurrence of the devastation. However, the Government has not yet provided the funding required and 5 years after the first flood, no flood defences have yet been installed. With the ever increasing impact of climate change and increasing rainfall, the problem of flooding in this area will not go away and will only get worse. Flood defences are urgently needed to prevent further loss of property and risk to life.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to provide the full funding required for installing flood defences at Prestolee as a matter of urgency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Yasmin Qureshi, *Official Report*, 4 March 2020, Vol. 672, c. 952.]

[P002562]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):

Thank you very much for sharing your petition with me as Secretary of State at DEFRA. I was very sorry to read about the damage and disruption caused to residents of Prestolee in Greater Manchester by flooding in both 2015 and over this last winter.

The Government as a whole fully recognise the devastating impact the recent flooding incidents have had on communities across the country and sympathise with those affected. This Government are committed to investment in flood risk management and continue to play a key role in improving protection for those affected. Between 2015 and 2021, the Government are investing £2.6 billion to better protect the country from flooding, including funding for over 1,000 flood defence schemes better protecting 300,000 homes.

However, the twin pressures of climate change and population growth mean that further action is needed. Therefore, the Government are doubling the amount they invest in the flood and coastal defences in England to £5.2 billion over six years from 2021, which will better protect a further 336,000 homes and non-residential properties from flooding.

The Environment Agency (EA) has been working hard with partners, including Bolton Council, to understand flood risk in Prestolee and Stoneclough and to develop measures that could be put in place to reduce that risk. In doing this, the EA have surveyed and re-modelled the River Irwell and completed a Strategic Business Case. In October 2019 and January 2020 the EA met Yasmin Qureshi MP, along with a member of her team, to provide an update on the work. The EA looks forward to continuing this discussion through the next phase of the project.

A key challenge for the delivery of the Prestolee and Stoneclough Flood Scheme is to secure the complete funding package for construction. Under the Government's Partnership Funding rules Flood and Coastal Risk Management Grant-in-Aid (FCERM GiA) and Regional Flood and Coastal Committee Local Levy can provide around 60% of the costs. Further funding from other sources must be secured to deliver the works in full (up to £1.5 million). Discussions with potential funding partners are ongoing.

DEFRA FCERM GiA funding for capital projects to maintain or improve flood defences is available from the Environment Agency (EA) in accordance with the Government's Partnership Funding approach. The Partnership Funding approach was introduced because requests for FCERM GiA each year exceed the total amount of funding available. Flood and Coastal Risk Management projects are therefore being prioritised to optimise the best outcomes available in terms of improved protection.

Since Storm Eva in 2015, the EA has undertaken a series of practical measures to improve resilience in Prestolee and Stoneclough. This has included operational teams removing sediment from the River Irwell, assessing the viability of temporary defences and spraying invasive species on the river bank so that construction of any potential flood walls can be done as efficiently as possible.

Following the latest flood, which occurred on 9 February 2020, the EA held a very well attended community drop in on 11 March. The EA has supported the creation of a flood group to share project updates, share real time flood information and flood forecasts, and gather knowledge and experiences to further understand the flood* risk and develop project proposals.

DEFRA Flood and Coastal Risk Management Grant-in-Aid (FCERM GiA) funding for capital projects to maintain or improve flood defences is available from the Environment Agency in accordance with the Government's Partnership Funding approach. The Partnership Funding approach was introduced because requests for FCERM GiA each year exceed the total amount of funding available. Flood and Coastal Risk Management projects are therefore be prioritised to optimise the best outcomes available in terms of improved protection.

The aim of Partnership Funding policy is to encourage total investment to increase beyond levels that Government alone can afford. The Partnership Funding approach also aims to:

- Increase transparency around levels of Government funding available to Flood and Coastal Risk Management projects;
- Enable further investment towards worthwhile projects and encourage external investment;
- Allow a greater level of local ownership and choice on how communities are protected;
- Encourage more cost-effective solutions; and

Better target DEFRA's funding toward those who are most at risk and least able to protect or insure themselves.

The Partnership Funding arrangement means that the maximum amount of FCERM GiA available to any project can be calculated based on the outcomes it is expected to achieve, expressed as a Partnership Funding Score. This represents the percentage of project costs that has been secured through FCERM GiA and hence the size of any 'funding gap'.

Partnership Funding clarifies the level of investment communities can expect from Defra's FCERM GiA, so it is clear what level of funding is needed from other funding sources to allow projects to go ahead. Partnership funding contributions can be secured from a range of sources including Local Levy, local beneficiaries, partners, and growth funds from the UK government.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact the Secretary of State about this important issue.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Monday 11 May 2020

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Monday 18 May 2020**

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