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10 June 2020**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 10 June 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 4 June).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Covid-19 Vaccine: Developing Countries

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that developing countries will have access to a vaccine for covid-19. [903051]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I start by wishing you, Mr Speaker, a very happy birthday.

The UK is leading global efforts to ensure that equitable access to covid-19 vaccines is possible. We worked night and day to make the global vaccine summit last week a success. Not only did we significantly beat our fundraising target to buy vaccines for the world's poorest people, but we pledged £1.65 billion of UK aid to be the world's largest donor to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. We have also pledged £250 million to vaccine research through the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and are a key part of the brand-new scheme to ensure global vaccine production. But it is not just about money; the summit showed what true collaboration can do. The UK will leave no stone unturned to make everyone safe.

Virginia Crosbie: Businesses in M-SParc, a scientific park in my constituency, are developing innovation to fight the coronavirus pandemic, while at the further education college, Coleg Menai, and across the bridge at Bangor University, everyone is working hard in the fight against coronavirus by developing innovative technologies. For example, the science park businesses are developing proteins for vaccines and have made more than 8,000 visitors. Can the Secretary of State tell me how we are supporting innovative British businesses to play a role in fighting coronavirus and developing a vaccine for the rest of the world?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is lovely to welcome a scientist to our Green Benches. As my hon. Friend suggests, organisations right across the UK are playing a vital role in innovating to develop a coronavirus vaccine. It is

a great pleasure to thank all the communities across the island of Ynys Môn helping to fight coronavirus with their technological solutions. My officials are also working closely with the Action for Global Health network to draw on the expertise of a range of UK charities and organisations as part of our approach to shaping global vaccine efforts. If UK-backed candidates for vaccines are successful, the Department for International Development funding for international efforts will help to ensure that those are scaled up and support equitable access for all who need them globally.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

I start by welcoming the Secretary of State's apology concerning the sharing of an unacceptable, offensive and xenophobic image, but it was extremely disappointing that it took so long to apologise.

The Secretary of State has said she wants to ensure equitable access for many new vaccines once developed. AstraZeneca has guaranteed the US and the UK the first 400 million of any new vaccine in September, while those in the world's poorest countries will not begin to get any until the end of the year, at the very earliest. Does she think this is equitable access?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The vaccine challenge, and the race for scientists to crack that code and for industry to come in behind them to support, to produce and to deliver, is critical. AstraZeneca is leading the way with us and has now signed a licence for 300 million doses, should the Oxford vaccine be successful, which it has committed will go to low and middle-income countries, which is fantastic news. This is a huge piece of work, which is led by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and which DFID is involved in, to draw together that scientific effort. The key point about any vaccine that is found—obviously we hope one will be found—is delivery, which is why Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance is so critical, because it can reach out. It has effective networks for delivering vaccines in those poorest countries, where we want to make sure that everyone who needs it gets that vaccine.

Preet Kaur Gill: The "Oxford Dictionary" defines "equitable" as "fair or just"; what the Secretary of State has just outlined is neither. She rightly praises Gavi and the number of people it has vaccinated, but as she knows the alliance would not be needed if access to vaccines was actually equitable. There is a disconnect between the Government's rhetoric on this issue and their actions. Rather than outsourcing responsibility, will she step up and commit to attaching clear, transparent conditions on British taxpayers' money to accelerate development and guarantee truly equitable access to vaccines based on need, not how deep your pockets are?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK taxpayer, through UK aid, has made a huge commitment. We gave £250 million to CEPI very early on in the crisis. Those who use that CEPI money as part of their vaccine development work have that commitment. That is fantastic. Gavi is a fundamental part of ensuring the whole world works together to make vaccines available. By being the organisation that vaccinates nearly 50% of the world's children, it brings down prices. It can bring huge negotiating benefits so the value is spread across the world.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: The Department's work in funding the development of a vaccine for covid-19 is just one of many projects that help to protect some of the most vulnerable people in the developing world, but we cannot take our eye off the ball on the need to continuously tackle global poverty. Can the Secretary of State confirm reports that there is a rapid ministerial review happening of the aid budget and that the vast majority of new projects have been paused, and can she explain why these life-saving projects are being quietly put on hold without Ministers informing Parliament or engaging with the International Development Committee?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Our aid spending is linked to the growth of our economy. The challenge this year, in which gross national income will go down, means that the economy is likely to shrink. We are working closely with the Treasury to understand the likely forecasts and to ensure that we can meet our 0.7% commitment. We are working across Departments to ensure that we continue to drive UK aid spending and commit our official development assistance to the most vulnerable and poorest.

Developing Countries' Debt: Private Creditors

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her international counterparts on requiring private creditors to cancel debt owed by developing countries during the covid-19 pandemic. [903052]

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her international counterparts on requiring private creditors to cancel debt owed by developing countries during the covid-19 pandemic. [903057]

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her international counterparts on requiring private creditors to cancel debt owed by developing countries during the covid-19 pandemic. [903059]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Duddridge): The UK, the G20 and the Paris Club will suspend debt repayments from the poorest countries due this year. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and his G20 counterparts have called on private sector creditors to do likewise. At the World Bank spring forum, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development amplified that call, along with other World Bank governors.

Navendu Mishra: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. Following comments from the UN Secretary-General in recent weeks on the increase in allocations of its special drawing rights currency to give countries more access to funding, what is the Secretary of State doing to get an SDR issuance agreed multilaterally? Will she support the UK and other rich countries transferring some of their allocation to poorer countries?

James Duddridge: Last time, the allocation was split, and I am sure we would want it to be used by developing countries if special drawing rights were exercised. That

could be part of the solution, but as the hon. Gentleman knows, 85% of the banks need to agree, and the US effectively has a blocking right, which means that this is perhaps not a short-term solution but one to work on over time with international partners.

Mary Kelly Foy: I welcome the Government's role in the G20's suspension of bilateral debt payments due in 2020 from the world's poorest countries, as well as their donation of £150 million to an IMF debt relief scheme used for covid-19. However, the World Bank is yet to take action on debt relief, despite that being one of the most important things we can do to support developing countries in this global pandemic. Can the Minister tell me what actions the Government will take to ensure that the World Bank moves to cancel debt payments, to support the world's poorest?

James Duddridge: I thank the hon. Lady for recognising the work that has already been done on suspension and relief. That will perhaps be looked at again, in terms of private sector relief and expanding either the data or the amounts of both those schemes, before looking at cancellation issues, which will have a longer-term impact. We need to focus on solutions that will help immediately and leave longer-term solutions for the longer term, but that is still very much on the table. I would not want to leave the House with the impression that the World Bank is doing nothing. The international development banks overall are putting \$200 billion into developing countries over the next 15 months as a result of the covid crisis.

Kim Johnson: Have a wonderful birthday, Mr Speaker.

The coronavirus is having a significant impact on developing countries. The economic impact of the crisis is very severe. Poor countries face a debt crisis unlike anything we have seen. Their finances have been decimated by the global crisis, with private creditors exploiting the debt. The commitments made by the G20 at the spring meetings were a great start in reducing countries' debt burdens. However, does the Minister agree that suspension is not enough and that it will lead to a further debt crisis in two years' time? Does he agree that what countries urgently need now from the G20 is the cancellation of debt payments?

James Duddridge: The hon. Lady is right that suspension on its own is not an adequate response, but it was the right response to make immediately. She mentions the private sector. The Institute of International Finance is already working with the 450 main private sector lenders and put in place the terms of reference 10 days ago. The private sector, far from being abusive, can join that debt suspension. There will be a case potentially for extending that period and extending relief more generally, and we will continue our discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury on that. Ultimately, for some countries, cancellation may be an option, but we have to remember that 50% of countries were struggling even before covid.

Covid-19: African Union

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What discussions she has had with representatives of the member states of the African Union to help support the response to the covid-19 pandemic in Africa. [903054]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Duddridge): I was delighted that the chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki, was able to join and speak at the Gavi summit. This week, I would have spoken to all eight AU commissioners. Under our strategic partnership with the AU, we are revising our joint plan to work on covid-19 implications and intend to hold a virtual high-level dialogue later this month. I also speak to member states of the AU more directly.

Mark Pawsey: The pandemic has shown us the vulnerability of not only the health systems in African countries, but their economies. The African Union has warned that nearly 20 million jobs may be lost. Has the Minister seen the excellent work of the African Development Bank as it focuses on the recovery and, in particular, focuses on the private sector as the key to employment and prosperity?

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He clearly shares my concern that this is an economic crisis as well as a humanitarian and health crisis. The private sector and the African Development Bank play a critical role alongside supply chains, but particularly the ADB in relation to protecting livelihoods. I look forward to working as an alternate governor to the Secretary of State for that great organisation in Abidjan.

FCO Objectives: Prioritising Development Opportunities

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): What co-operation there is between her Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on prioritising development opportunities identified as FCO objectives. [903055]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Development policy and foreign policy are remarkably intertwined, which is why the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office already work together in 32 bilateral posts, nine multilateral missions and eight FCO-DFID joint units. To deal with coronavirus as effectively as possible and to co-ordinate our international efforts, we established a superb joint conflict, security and governance covid-19 hub, so the UK has a stronger presence in the world when speaking as one Government, rather than only as individual Departments.

Jerome Mayhew: Beyond the immediate covid response, the past 30 years have shown us that trade, not aid, lifts developing nations out of poverty. With this in mind, does the Secretary of State agree that the considerable soft power that her Department wields should be used to encourage and expand trading opportunities with developing nations?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK Government are firmly committed to ensuring that developing countries can reduce poverty through trading opportunities. Indeed, that is one of the critical outcomes, and we will have to work very hard to help those countries get back on their feet. DFID has a joint team with the Department for International Trade, which is working to enhance market access for developing countries, ensuring that they can

take advantage of this access through trade-related assistance and using our influence in organisations such as the World Trade Organisation.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Yesterday, the International Development Committee released its review of UK aid, which concluded that DFID was by far the best Department to deliver it. The integrated review is formally paused, but it seems that the Secretary of State is carrying out her own stealth review. The official development assistance meeting was chaired by the Foreign Secretary. All but 200 future DFID programmes are paused, and DFID looks as if it is taking most of the forecast ODA cuts. Can the Secretary of State tell us what is the scope of the review, what is the timetable, and why the Committee found out through whistleblowers rather than through official channels?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for her Committee's report, which I was able to read overnight before it was published. I also thank her for her compliments about DFID. Indeed, the effectiveness with which DFID is able to deliver aid is because the Department has decades of honed experience in understanding the most effective and targeted ways of spending taxpayers' money and getting the most developmental impact. It was a really encouraging report. As I said earlier, because of the likely drop in gross national income, we are having to assess, across the board, how we will manage the 0.7% target in the coming year. We are working across Government to ensure that we do that as effectively as possible, because as far as we are all concerned—the Prime Minister has been very clear on this—UK aid must be spent to help the world tackle covid-19.

Palestinian Authority Funding

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that funding to the Palestinian Authority is used to support her Department's objectives in that region. [903056]

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): The UK remains determined to work for peace in the region, and that means supporting a stable Palestinian Authority that can deliver essential public services to Palestinians and act as an effective partner for peace with Israel. In 2018-19, UK support helped the Palestinian Authority to provide education for 26,000 children, half of whom were girls, and deliver 3,000 more immunisations and 111,000 medical consultations. I recently announced £20 million in new funding to help Palestinian health workers battle the coronavirus on the frontline.

Andrew Percy: Happy 50th birthday, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.] I'll definitely get called again.

There has been some excellent working between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in response to covid. However, an investigation has shown that groups funded by the OHCA—the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs—and the World Health Organisation have links to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which is a proscribed terrorist organisation. Can the Minister assure me that no UK aid money has been channelled in that way?

James Cleverly: The UK has provided £840,000 to the WHO and UNICEF in response to covid-19. We maintain robust measures to ensure that aid is not diverted. We are determined to continue to play our responsible part in cross-Government approaches to support the Palestinian people and to work towards peace in the region.

Covid-19: Support for Charities' Response

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to support UK charities in their response to the covid-19 pandemic in developing countries. [903060]

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): What support she is providing to international NGOs based in the UK to help those organisations respond to the covid-19 pandemic. [903064]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Wendy Morton): Charities and non-governmental organisations are crucial partners for DFID and play a critical role in ensuring UK aid reaches the most vulnerable. We have used schemes such as our rapid response facility to send £45 million of special funding to them. We want them to deliver some of the rest of the UK's £764 million coronavirus response. Where our charity partners are struggling, we have introduced a special procedure to make sure they remain our partners for the long term.

Dehenna Davison: Many happy returns from the residents of Bishop Auckland, Mr Speaker.

Earlier this week, Members from across the House marked World Oceans Day, outlining how we can put nature at the heart of a clean and resilient recovery. Does my hon. Friend agree that Durham University's transforming energy access initiative will help the deployment of renewable energy sources, as part of the UK's ambitious climate change targets?

Wendy Morton: Increasing the deployment of clean energy is a key part of helping countries build back greener after the covid-19 crisis. DFID's transforming energy access programme, in which Durham University has played a valuable role, is supporting technology and business model innovations, accelerating access to affordable clean energy. It has already improved energy access for more than 5 million people in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. This is the sort of ambition we hope to be able to scale up from April 2021 under the Ayrton fund.

Ms Buck: Many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

UK-based international charities are under unprecedented pressure at a time when their services are most needed, with the latest research indicating that more than half have cut back on their overseas programmes and nearly half, particularly small organisations, are at risk of not surviving for another six months. Will the Minister ensure that the review of their work begins by the Government dealing with those with the lowest transparency scores and tackling programmes that do not put poverty reduction at the heart of their work?

Wendy Morton: I ought to have wished you happy birthday as well, Mr Speaker. That was rather remiss of me.

The hon. Lady makes a very important point. Civil society is an important policy and delivery partner for DFID and I absolutely recognise the work it does. Our continued partnership will be critical in ensuring that UK aid reaches those most in need as a result of covid-19. There are a number of funding schemes and programmes that DFID has recently announced and allocated, including a new £30 million UK Aid Direct funding round that is open specifically for small and medium-sized charities based both in the UK and internationally to support the global response to covid-19.

Topical Questions

[903066] **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities. Happy birthday from Blyth Valley, Mr Speaker. Does my right hon. Friend agree that to tackle the virus, so that we can all be safe from future waves of infection—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just say "Question 1" for now.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I want to put on the record that black lives matter. We must listen to those communities that face discrimination, and solve the unconscious biases that still create injustice and lost potential. My Department will redouble its efforts to drive out discrimination and support the poorest countries to achieve genuine mutual prosperity free of prejudice. That struggle for equality is exactly why it was so important last week that the UK brought together, via video link, the London 2020 global vaccine summit as part of a 60-country effort. A historic \$8.8 billion was raised to vaccinate the world's poorest people. Gavi will immunise 300 million more children as a result.

Ian Levy: Sorry about that, Mr Speaker, and happy birthday again.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that in order to tackle this virus so that we can all be safe from future waves of infection the international community must work together, co-ordinating and increasing support for vulnerable countries, and delivering the appropriate international financial and health system assistance?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Strong, resilient health systems are vital to national and global health security, and to helping to protect the world from infectious diseases, including covid. The UK has so far pledged £764 million of UK aid to help end the covid-19 pandemic, in support of the co-ordinated international response through the international financing institutions, multilaterals and global health initiatives, alongside DFID programmes. Through our multilateral partnerships and our regional and national programmes, we support developing countries to make their domestic healthcare systems stronger and more resilient and to better prepare for, prevent, detect and respond to health crises, including covid.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Penblwydd hapus, Mr Speaker.

The UK's Commonwealth Development Corporation does important work, but deeply concerning evidence has come to light, thanks to the work of Finance

Uncovered, regarding CDC investments in Myanmar, including \$30 million in an internet service provider called Frontiir, which, on the orders of the Myanmar Government, has blocked independent news sites reporting on atrocities taking place against the Rohingya. Will the Secretary of State now urge CDC to immediately divest from this company? Is she sure that none of the other microfinance programmes being supported is indirectly helping the Myanmar regime?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK Government condemn any action to restrict the freedom of expression of journalists, and have repeatedly raised the issue of internet restrictions and shutdowns at the highest level with the Myanmar Government, but, after going through due diligence, CDC invested in Frontiir to extend internet access to more people in Myanmar and to combat poverty. The company has followed the international Global Network Initiative standards by posting transparency statements so that users know whether the site has limitations upon it.

[903068] **Shaun Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Con): Wishing you a bostin' birthday from the Black Country, Mr Speaker. I was recently lobbied by a year 12 student from Wednesbury called Queenie, who wanted to ensure that no one in the world cannot access a vaccine. So I wish to ask my right hon. Friend: in addition now to being the largest funder of Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance, what work is the UK doing and what message does she have for Queenie to ensure that she can carry on in her fight to make sure that everyone can access vaccines globally?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Queenie is clearly a wise young person, and it is a really important question. The UK is at the forefront of efforts to drive global collaboration and resourcing, including our engagement through the access to covid tools accelerator and through industry for the development of new vaccines at the speed and scale required to ensure access for all those who will need them. As well as contributing £1.65 billion to fund Gavi's core programme we have committed £48 million to its newly launched covax advanced market commitment, aimed at incentivising manufacturers to produce sufficient quantities of a potential vaccine to ensure future access for low-income and middle-income countries.

[903069] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con) [V]: Happy birthday to you from Tewkesbury, Mr Speaker.

Many people in east Africa have suffered from food insecurity for very many years, and of course the challenge has been multiplied recently. Will the Secretary of State give us a quick assessment of the position in east Africa and what the Government are doing to help people there?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK is proud to support the World Food Programme, with £500 million last year, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, with £40 million, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, with more than £50 million, in their efforts to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition across Africa. We are also assisting countries to respond to the desert locust upsurge in east Africa, which threatens 25 million people with severe food shortages. UK aid has funded a

supercomputer to track that and help develop early warning systems and has provided £5 million to the UNFAO's regional emergency appeal.

[903071] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): In addition to dealing with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), will the Secretary of State urge the Commonwealth Development Corporation to avoid investments that involve making, selling or utilising single-use plastic packaging?

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I assure the right hon. Gentleman that all Departments are closely integrated in the work of humanitarian aid, economic development and improving our planet. The work of my right hon. Friend Lord Goldsmith means that we are fully integrated in ensuring that economic development is not done at the cost of the environment and the planet.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[903036] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 10 June.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): As we approach the third anniversary, this coming Sunday, of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, I know that the whole House would wish to join me in sending our heartfelt sympathies and thoughts to the families and friends of the 72 people who lost their lives and to the survivors. Across Government, we remain committed to ensuring that such a tragedy can never happen again.

Members from across the House will want to join me in offering our very best wishes to His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh on his 99th birthday. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am sure the whole House will also want to join me in wishing you, Mr Speaker, a very happy birthday.

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

Mr Speaker: Thank you for all the kind regards.

Vicky Foxcroft [V]: As a shielded person, I am grateful to contribute to Parliament once again. Many shielded people have contacted me, worried about Government guidance on going for walks. They want a "safe hour" walk for shielded people similar to that adopted in many other countries. Will the Prime Minister do that? They also want more transparency on the shielding list, with each category named and risks published. Will he provide that? Finally, will he agree to review the furlough scheme so that shielded people, in the future, are not penalised?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can tell the hon. Lady that we certainly will be doing as much as we can in the near future to ensure shielded people get guidance about how they can come out of their shielded environment

safely, in a way that is covid secure. Her point about furlough is a very important one, and clearly newly shielded people may be asking themselves whether they will be entitled to furlough funds. I have been made aware of the issue very recently. I can assure her that we will be addressing it forthwith.

[903038] **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): The threatened breach of the Sino-British joint declaration for Hong Kong is just the latest evidence of China's increasingly overt rejection of the rules of international fair play. The Communist party of China expresses derision for the west's short-termism and lack of unity, so let us prove them wrong. Would my right hon. Friend consider publishing a consultation paper on the development of a long-term strategy for our national and pan-national engagement with China?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps it would be helpful in advance of any consultation paper if I just set out my own broad position, and stress that I am a Sinophile. I believe that we must continue to work with this great and rising power on climate change or trade or whatever it happens to be, but when we have serious concerns as a country—whether it is over the origins of covid or the protection of our critical national infrastructure or, indeed, what is happening in Hong Kong—we must feel absolutely free to raise those issues loud and clear with Beijing, and that is what we will continue to do.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in his comments on Grenfell—that dreadful night—in his comments on the Duke of Edinburgh and, of course, in his best wishes to you, Mr Speaker? May I also say that I listened carefully to what the Prime Minister just said on furlough for those newly shielding, which I welcome? That has been something we have been concerned about. We will look at the proposal when it is put on the table, but I am grateful that he has listened to that and for what he has said this morning. “founded on a cold reality”,

The Prime Minister said Monday that feelings of black and minority ethnic groups about discrimination are and I agree with him about that. There have been at least seven reports on racial inequality in the past three years alone, but precious little action. For example, most of the recommendations in the Lammy report on inequality in the criminal justice system have yet to be implemented, three years after the report was published. Similarly, the long-delayed and damning report by Wendy Williams on the Windrush scandal has yet to be implemented.

I spoke last night to black community leaders, and they had a very clear message for the Prime Minister: “Implement the reports you’ve already got.” Will the Prime Minister now turbocharge the Government’s responses and tell us when he will implement in full the Lammy report and the Windrush recommendations?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, and of course I understand, as I said, the very strong and legitimate feelings of people in this country at the death of George Floyd. Of course I agree that black lives matter. We are getting on with the implementation, not just of the Lammy report but also of the report on Windrush. For instance, on the

Lammy report, which this Government commissioned, and for which I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), we are increasing already the number of black and minority ethnic people in the Prison Service, as he recommended. We are increasing the use of body-worn cameras, and we are trying to ensure, among other things, that young BME people are not immediately prosecuted as a result of the trouble they find themselves in. We try to make sure that we give people a chance, but I must stress that on the Lammy report and all these matters, it is absolutely vital at the same time that we keep our streets safe and that we back our police, and that is what we are going to do.

Keir Starmer: I welcome what the Prime Minister says about implementing the reports, and obviously we will hold him to it. He will appreciate that people do notice when recommendations are made and then not implemented, so it is very important that they are implemented in accordance with those reports. The latest report is the Public Health England report on the disproportionate impact of covid-19. That report concluded that death rates are

“highest among people of Black and Asian ethnic groups.”

It went on to say—this was the important bit—that

“it is already clear that relevant guidance...and key policies should be adapted”

to mitigate the risk. If it is already clear that guidance and policy need to be changed, why have the Government not already acted?

The Prime Minister: Not only is it already clear, but we are already acting. I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that as a result of the report by Professor Fenton, which again we commissioned, we are looking at the particular exposure of black and minority ethnic groups to coronavirus. We should be in no doubt that they have been at the forefront of the struggle against coronavirus, whether that is in the NHS or in public transport. Some 44% of the NHS workforce in London are black and minority ethnic workers. That is why what we are doing first and most directly is ensuring that those high-contact professions get expanded and targeted testing now, and that is what I have agreed with Dido Harding from NHS Test and Trace. I think that is the first and most practical step we can take as a result of Professor Fenton’s report.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister, I know, understands the frustration of those most at risk when they see a report like that and they know action is needed. Action is needed now, not in a few weeks or months, so can I ask for the Prime Minister’s complete—[*Interruption.*] Well, perhaps the Prime Minister will indicate whether that is all the action or whether there is more action. This is a serious issue, and we can make progress together, but it is important that it is done swiftly for those most at risk.

I want to turn to the overall numbers of those who have tragically died from covid-19, because those overall numbers haunt us. Since the last Prime Minister’s questions, the Government’s daily total figure for those who have died from coronavirus has gone past 40,000. The Office for National Statistics figure, which records cases where coronavirus is on the death certificate, stands at just

over 50,000. The number of excess deaths, which is an awful phrase, stands at over 63,000. Those are among the highest numbers anywhere in the world. Last week the Prime Minister said he was proud of the Government's record, but there is no pride in those figures, is there?

The Prime Minister: Let me just say that on the death figures for this country, we mourn every one; we grieve for their relatives and their friends. But I must also tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman—he has raised this point repeatedly across the Dispatch Box—that the best scientific evidence and advice is that we must wait until the epidemic has been through its whole cycle in order to draw the relevant international comparisons. I simply must repeat that point to him.

As for what this country did to fight the epidemic, I must say I strongly disagree with the way he characterised it. I think it was an astonishing achievement of the NHS to build the Nightingale hospitals. I think it was an astonishing thing that this country came together to drive down the curve—to follow the social distancing rules, in spite of all the doubt that was cast on the advice, to follow those rules, to get the number of deaths down, to get the epidemic under control in the way that we have. This Government announced a plan, on 11 May, to get our country back on to its feet, and that is what we are going to do. We have a plan, we are following it and we are going to stick to it.

Keir Starmer: It just does not wash to say that we cannot compare these figures with those in other countries. Everybody can see those figures and see the disparity, and we need to learn from those other countries—what did they do more quickly than us, what did they do differently? We can learn those lessons and ensure that the numbers come down. It is little solace to the families that have lost someone simply to be told, “It is too early to compare, and to learn from other countries.” And of course there will be long-term consequences of the Government's approach.

I want to turn now to another aspect of Government policy, and that is school reopening. We all want as many children as possible back at school as soon as it is possible and as soon as it is safe. What was required for that to happen was a robust national plan, consensus among all key stakeholders and strong leadership from the top. All three are missing. The current arrangements lie in tatters; parents have lost confidence in the Government's approach. Millions of children will miss six months' worth of schooling and inequality will now go up.

Several weeks ago, I suggested to the Prime Minister that we set up a national taskforce, so that everybody could put their shoulder to the wheel. It is not too late. Will the Prime Minister take me up on that?

The Prime Minister: As I told the House before, I have been in contact with the right hon. and learned Gentleman by a modern device called the telephone, on which we have tried to agree a way forward, which he then seemed to deviate from later on. Last week—*[Interruption.]* Last week he was telling the House that it was not yet safe for kids to go back to school; this week he is saying that not enough kids are going back to school. I really think he needs to make up his mind.

Since he is so fond of these international comparisons, he should know that there are some countries in the EU—in Europe—where no primary school kids are going

back to school, I think. We are being extremely cautious in our approach; we are following the plan that we set out, and I think that the people of this country will want to follow it. All the evidence—97% of the schools that have submitted data are now seeing kids come back to school. I think what we would like to hear from the right hon. and learned Gentleman is a bit of support for that, and a bit of encouragement to pupils, and perhaps even encouragement to some of his friends in the left-wing trade unions, to help get our schools ready.

Keir Starmer: Let us just have this out. The Prime Minister and I have never discussed our letter in any phone call; he knows it, and I know it. The taskforce has never been the subject of a conversation between him and me, one-to-one or in any other circumstance on the telephone; he knows it, so please drop that.

Secondly—he mentions other countries—plenty of other comparable countries are getting their children back to school. Wales is an example; across Europe there are other examples. We are the outlier on this. And it is no good the Prime Minister flailing around, trying to blame others. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to get through lots of other Members, so if we can listen to the question, I certainly want to hear the answers.

Keir Starmer: I was saying it is no good the Prime Minister flailing around, trying to blame others. A month ago today—a month ago today—he made the announcement about schools, without consulting relevant parties, without warning about the dates and without any scientific backing for his proposals. It is time he took responsibility for his own failures. This mess was completely avoidable. The consequences are stark. The Children's Commissioner has warned of

“a deepening education disadvantage gap”

And she spoke yesterday of “an emerging picture, which doesn't give confidence that there's a strategic plan.”. She called for the Government to scale up their response and said, “It must have occurred to the Government that space would be a problem; that there would be a need for temporary accommodation and classrooms.” The Government built the Nightingale hospitals; why are they only starting on schools now?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman still cannot work out whether he is saying that schools are not safe enough or that we should be going back more quickly. He cannot have it both ways. It is one brief on one day and another brief on the next. I understand how the legal profession works, but what the public want to have is some consistency. I hope he will agree that it is a good thing that 37% of kids in year 6 in our primary schools are now coming back, and that is increasing the whole time. I think the message that teachers want to hear across the country is that all parliamentarians in this House of Commons support the return of kids to school and, furthermore, that they are encouraging kids to come back to school because it is safe. Will he now say that?

Keir Starmer: I want as many children to go back to school as possible, as soon as possible, as quickly as possible—when it is safe. I have been saying that like a

broken record for weeks on end. I know that the Prime Minister has rehearsed attack lines, but he should look at what I said in the letter and what I have been saying consistently.

One way in which the Government could help those worst affected would be to extend the national voucher scheme. Because child poverty numbers are so high in this country, 1.3 million children in low-income families rely on those vouchers. They mean that children who cannot go to school because of coronavirus restrictions still get free meals. The Labour Government in Wales have said that they will continue to fund those meals through the summer. Yesterday, the Education Secretary said that will not be the case in England. That is just wrong, and it will lead to further inequality, so may I urge the Prime Minister to reconsider on that point?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we do not normally continue with free school meals over the summer holidays, and I am sure that is right, but we are aware of the particular difficulties faced by vulnerable families. That is why we are announcing a further £63 million of local welfare assistance to be used by local authorities at their discretion to help the most vulnerable families. This Government have put their arms around the people of this country throughout this crisis and done their absolute best to help—[*Interruption.*] I may say that this is not helped by the wobbling and tergiversation of the Labour party and the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Last week he said that it is not safe; this week he says we are not going fast enough. We protected the NHS, we provided huge numbers of ventilated beds and we are now getting the disease under control, but we will do it in a cautious and contingent way.

Today I will be announcing further measures to open up and unlock our society, but only because of the huge efforts and sacrifice that this country has made. We are sticking to our plan of 11 May. It is a plan that is working and will continue to work, with or without the assistance of the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

[903040] **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): Britain's new Advanced Research Projects Agency is vital to securing our status as a science and technology superpower, particularly as we recover from coronavirus. Will my right hon. Friend commit to protecting its funding and its independence, so that there are no obstacles to delivering transformational breakthroughs from clean energy to new vaccines?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend; he is absolutely right. We will be funding the Advanced Research Projects Agency to the tune of £800 million, and it will be tasked with supporting really revolutionary breakthroughs in this country. It is the UK—from the splitting of the atom to the jet engine to the internet—that has led the world in scientific research, and under this Government we intend to continue.

Mr Speaker: We are now heading up to Scotland. I call the leader of the Scottish National party, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister on Grenfell, and on the birthdays of both the Duke of Edinburgh and yourself, Mr Speaker?

The Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee:

"I do not actually read the scientific papers".

It is no wonder, then, that it took the UK so long to act on quarantine measures. The Prime Minister's scientific advisory group was not even asked for advice on this significant policy. This has been a complete shambles: too little, too late. We cannot risk ignoring the experts once again. Can the Prime Minister confirm what scientific papers he has read on the 2 metre social distancing rule?

The Prime Minister: I must say that I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. I have read a huge amount about a disease that affects our entire nation. I have actually read many papers on the social distancing rule, and it is a very interesting point. Members across the House of Commons will want to understand that I believe that those measures—the 2 metre rule—need now to be kept under review. As we drive this disease down and get the incidence down, working together, I want to make sure that we keep the 2 metre rule under constant review, because, as I think the right hon. Gentleman indicates, there is all sorts of scientific advice about that particular matter.

Ian Blackford: Of course, we know that the Cabinet has discussed reducing the 2 metre social distancing rule, but that is not the experts' advice right now. SAGE reported that being exposed to the virus for six seconds at 1 metre is the same as being exposed for one minute at 2 metres. That is a significant increase in risk. The last time that Professor Whitty was allowed to attend the daily press briefing, he stressed that the 2 metre rule was going to be necessary for as long as the pandemic continues.

People are losing confidence in this Government: a U-turn on schools; a shambolic roll-out of quarantine measures; and now looking to reduce the 2 metre rule far too soon. Will the Prime Minister continue to ignore the experts, or will he start following the advice of those who have actually read the scientific papers?

The Prime Minister: Actually, the people of this country are overwhelmingly following the guidance that the Government give. Tomorrow the House will be hearing a bit more about what has happened with NHS Test and Trace, and they will find that there is an extraordinary degree of natural compliance and understanding by the British people.

In spite of all the obscurantism and myth making that we have heard from the Opposition parties, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that there are all sorts of views about the 2 metre rule. He is absolutely correct in what he says about the SAGE advice, but, clearly, as the incidence of the disease comes down—I think members of SAGE would confirm this—the statistical likelihood of being infected, no matter how close or far people are from somebody who may or may not have coronavirus, goes down.

[903042] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Allowing zoos such as Africa Alive! near Lowestoft to reopen from 15 June is very good news, as it provides them with a realistic chance of survival. Would the Prime Minister give full consideration to allowing beer gardens also to reopen from 15 June, as the feedback that I am

receiving is that many pubs are now facing the unpalatable and unwanted prospect of having to make staff redundant?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to reopen hospitality as quickly as we possibly can. The House will remember that, according to the road map, we were going to open outdoor hospitality no earlier than 4 July. That is still our plan, and we are sticking to it. Guidance is now being developed for such hospitality. What we do not want to see is a roiling, Bacchanalian mass of people who can spread the disease, so it is very important that people understand the continuing risks that this country faces.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Prime Minister will be aware that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has today published the guidelines for the special payment scheme for severely injured victims linked to the troubles in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister will also know that this House passed legislation that excludes those injured by their own hand. But the innocent victims have not yet been able to benefit from this scheme, not least because of the actions of Sinn Féin, who are blocking the next steps to implementation. Will the Prime Minister and his Government now commit to doing all they can to move this matter forward so that our most vulnerable of innocent victims can receive this pension?

The Prime Minister: Yes indeed. I think the scheme provides a fair, balanced and proportionate way of helping all those who have suffered most during the troubles. It is very important that Sinn Féin, along with all other parties, allow the scheme to go forward as soon as possible.

[903043] **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): Many peaceful protests have been held across the country against racism following the appalling events in the US, including in my own constituency yesterday. Can I commend my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for recognising the significance of these events? As well as scrutinising the health impact of c-19 on ethnic minority groups, can he look again, using the Race Disparity Audit, for any persistent and systemic racism in all Government Departments—from the treatment of BAME people in the judicial system through to how we teach children about these issues in our education system?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. I completely agree with the need for all political leaders to promote these issues—to recognise how important they are in people's hearts. I am very proud of what I did as Mayor to encourage the promotion of young BAME officers in our Metropolitan police; we had a system to move them up. I want to see that kind of activity across the government of this country. It is the right way forward for the UK.

[903037] **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP) [V]: The response from the US President to the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement has been horrendous. Can the Prime Minister confirm to me if he still believes that Trump has “many, many good qualities”, and if so, what are they?

The Prime Minister: I renew what I have said many times; it is important for the House to hear it again. Yes, black lives matter, and yes, the death of George Floyd was absolutely appalling. As for the qualities of Mr Trump, let me say that, among many other things, he is President of the United States, which is our most important ally in the world today. Whatever people may say about it—whatever those on the left may say about it—the United States is a bastion of peace and freedom and has been for most of my lifetime.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley.

[903044] **Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): Mr Speaker, I hope you will allow me to ask the Prime Minister also to welcome the birthday of the Primate of England—the 2007 Yorkshireman of the year—the Archbishop of York, who is just laying down his crozier after 14 years of service. His great words were that we can share the glories, the struggles, the joys and the pains of this country.

We should remember that John Sentamu was tortured in Uganda, served in Tulse Hill, Stepney and Birmingham as well as York, and was a critical adviser to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry.

Can I put it to my right hon. Friend that if, in a period of eight years, there are eight interrogations of a bishop, each time John Sentamu, we have got more to learn about making the colour of one's skin as important as the colour of one's eyes and the colour of one's hair—something you may notice but does not tell you any more about them?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend warmly in paying tribute to the Archbishop of York as he lays down his crozier. He and I correspond very often and I take his advice very sincerely. I had no idea that today was such a distinguished birthday.

[903039] **Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Under suspicionless stop-and-search powers, which this Government are expanding, a black person is 47 times more likely to be stopped and searched than a white person—47 times. On too many occasions, stop-and-search seems to mean that being black is enough to be suspected of being a criminal. So will the Prime Minister abolish suspicionless stop-and-search powers and end the pain and injustice they wreak on so many people in Britain's black and minority communities?

The Prime Minister: It is very important that stop-and-search is carried out sensitively in accordance with the law. The fact that we now have body-worn cameras has made a great difference to the way it happens. I must say that section 60 powers can be very important in fighting violent crime. I am afraid that what has been happening in London with knife crime has been completely unacceptable, and I do believe that stop-and-search, among many other things, can be a very important utensil for fighting knife crime. It does work. It worked for us when I was running London and it must work now. I am not saying it is the whole answer—the right hon. Gentleman is right; it is not the whole answer—but it is part of the mix.

Mr Speaker: We now head up to the county palatine of Lancashire, with Mark Menzies.

[903045] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con) [V]: Hospitality and tourism businesses on the Fylde coast are concerned about their path to long-term recovery and the infrastructure needed to support that. Central to the issue locally is the M55 link road, a project that was fully funded but had an issue with some funding allocations. Will the Prime Minister put his weight behind this issue and help me to secure the £5.7 million needed to complete this shovel-ready project?

The Prime Minister: What I can say is that we will unite and level up with infrastructure projects across our country. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his lobbying for that particular scheme and can tell him that last year we put £31 million into the Preston western distributor scheme, which is a new dual carriageway that will reduce congestion in Preston and lead directly to the creation of 3,000 houses and more than 500 jobs. As for further expansion of the M55, my hon. Friend will have to wait, but there will be further announcements in due course.

[903041] **Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP) [V]: Even before the pandemic began it was clear that the UK has one of the most manifestly inadequate systems of statutory sick pay in the world: we are second from the bottom in European terms, and it continues to shun millions of workers who are low earners, work in the gig economy or are self-employed. As we come back from the crisis in economic terms and make the workplace better, will the Prime Minister agree to work with those of us in the Opposition who want to see a *[Inaudible.]* system that is fit for the 21st century that can meet people's needs?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course, statutory sick pay is an important part of the way we tackle the problems of self-isolation and all the issues faced by people facing coronavirus, but people also receive additional funds. Anybody looking impartially at what we are doing to support the people of this country throughout this epidemic will concede that the UK has done more than virtually any other country on earth to look after the people of this country, whether through the furloughing scheme, the bounce-back loans or anything else. Having listened to the hon. Gentleman, I should say I have also pledged that we are going to put in gigabit broadband across the whole of the UK, so that he can be heard more clearly in future.

[903049] **Mark Logan** (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]: We have seen much disinformation about the R value in Bolton and the north-west. Does the Prime Minister agree that having increasingly up-to-date local data will give correspondingly greater confidence to Boltonians in reopening our businesses, schools and places of worship?

The Prime Minister: Yes, which is why I am encouraged by NHS Test and Trace and the progress that it is making. With the help of the joint biosecurity centre, we are now able to identify hotspots, to do whack-a-mole and to stamp out outbreaks of the epidemic where they occur.

[903046] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: East Lothian prides itself on its food and drink sector, which is gravely threatened by reduced standards in animal welfare and production. The Government failed to enshrine protections in the Agriculture Bill, and earlier this week Ministers equivocated on the issue; will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to be clear today that high standards will be protected, a food standards commission will be established, and we will not face chlorinated chicken on our table, along with Kentucky fried medicine in our hospitals?

The Prime Minister: Not only will we protect animal welfare standards but, on leaving the EU, as we have, we will be able to increase our animal welfare standards. We will be able to ban the treatment of farrowing sows that is currently legal in the EU, and we will be able to ban the shipment of live animals, which currently we cannot ban in the UK. We will be able to go further and better, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman supports that. By the way, I also hope that he will tell all his friends in the—SNP, is it?—SNP that that is one of the reasons why their plan to take Scotland back into the EU would be completely contrary to the instincts of the British people.

[903050] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): Owing to covid, we are facing a unique economic challenge. I urge the Prime Minister to respond with a major package of infrastructure investment to create jobs and level up the whole country, including turbo-charging the roll-out of gigabit broadband, upgrading the Manchester to Sheffield line and finally building the full Mottram bypass. The people of Glossop have been promised this by politicians for over 50 years. We will even let him call it the Boris bypass—let us please just get it built.

Mr Speaker: And he can use his bike.

The Prime Minister: Thank you so much. I can confirm briefly to my hon. Friend that we are indeed committed under the road investment strategy published last year to building a bypass around Mottram, and I look forward to being there to see it done.

[903047] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): My constituents tell me that they have lost trust in the Government, as they are confused by mixed messaging around public health measures and angry that Dominic Cummings seems to have been left off the hook, but they are particularly worried about local jobs and livelihoods because of inadequate support schemes, a lack of crisis funding for Luton council and an illogical quarantine impacting on Luton airport. All of this has been on your watch, Prime Minister. How can my constituents feel confident about the proposed next steps for easing lockdown when your Government have fallen short so far?

The Prime Minister: Because I think the British public, with their overwhelming common sense, have ignored some of the propaganda that we have been hearing from the Opposition about our advice. They have ignored the negativity and the attempts to confuse and they are overwhelmingly following advice, and indeed, they are

complying with NHS Test and Trace—which is the way forward—which will enable us to defeat this virus both locally and nationally.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): Pre-covid, the Prime Minister made a firm commitment to reaching out to some of the most deprived areas and levelling up the country. This is needed now more than ever. Will he make a firm commitment—and re-commit—to Whitmore Reans, Chapel Ash, Penn Fields and the rest of Wolverhampton, so that they will not just survive but thrive?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I certainly will. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way he represents Wolverhampton and the many campaigns he fights for that great city. I can tell him just for starters that Wolverhampton will benefit from around £217 million of the growth deal funding across the Black Country, which aims to create 5,000 jobs, 1,400 new homes and £310 million in public and private investment—just for starters.

[903048] **Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Many happy returns, Mr Speaker. “Today they say that we are free, only to be chained in poverty”—not my words, but the words of Bob Marley in 1973. Figures from the Trussell Trust show an 89% increase in emergency food parcels across the UK in April, compared with the same month last year. People are struggling and they

need help now. Will the Prime Minister meet the Chancellor, charities and local government leaders to discuss a much-needed funding boost for local welfare assistance schemes in England?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. This country is going through a very difficult crisis—a public health crisis, an economic crisis—and of course, it has put many families to great hardship. I think the Government have done a huge amount to look after families across the country. We have, as she knows, put £3.2 billion more into local government. I announced earlier today—just now—that we are also putting another £63 million into extra welfare support for particularly disadvantaged families to help with meals throughout the summer period. She is entirely right. We face a huge economic problem. That is why we need to get moving, get this country going forward together, and work as parliamentarians and politicians to communicate to the public jointly what we are doing.

Mr Speaker: In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I now suspend the House for three minutes.

12.39 pm

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Hon. Members will know that preparations are under way for the new Division system of using pass readers in the Division Lobbies. On the basis of the tests so far and the best professional advice, I have concluded that we cannot use the new system today. I will make a further statement on Monday.

Horizon: Sub-Postmaster Convictions

12.43 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy what steps the Government are taking to support sub-postmasters wrongly convicted in the Post Office Horizon scandal.

I wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker, and many happy returns.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

I have listened to a number of postmasters' stories personally, and I saw the recent "Panorama" programme. It is impossible to ignore the negative impact that the Horizon dispute and court case have had on affected postmasters' lives, livelihoods, financial situations, reputations and, for some, as we know, their physical and mental health.

Convicted claimants seeking to overturn their convictions are going through a further process with the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which has the power to refer cases to the Court of Appeal to consider whether any of the convictions are unsafe. As the hon. Lady will appreciate, it is important that the Government do not seek to influence this process or comment on any individual cases. I can confirm, though, that the Post Office is co-operating with the CCRC to the fullest extent and the Government are monitoring this. Forty-seven of the 61 CCRC cases have now been referred to the Court of Appeal, and it is for the courts to decide whether the convictions are unsafe.

Let me acknowledge the strength of feeling on this matter on both sides of the House, which was evident in the debates I participated in earlier this year and in the correspondence I have had from many Members. That is why the Government are committed to establishing an independent review to consider whether the Post Office has learned the necessary lessons from the Horizon dispute and court case, and to provide an independent and external assessment of its work to rebuild its relationship with its postmasters. Full details of the terms of reference for that independent review are set out in a written ministerial statement that I laid in the House this morning. We are keen to see that review launched as soon as possible, and we are in the process of identifying a chair to lead the work of the review.

Chi Onwurah: The Post Office Horizon scandal may well be the largest miscarriage of justice in our history: 900 prosecutions, each one its own story of dreams crushed, careers ruined, families destroyed, reputations smashed and lives lost—innocent people bankrupted and imprisoned. Does the Minister agree that Monday's "Panorama" adds to the sense of a cover-up on a grand scale in the Post Office, a trusted national institution—and all because of the failings in the Post Office Horizon system?

For over a decade, the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance campaigned to get at the truth, but the Post Office denied all wrongdoing, imposing huge lawyers' fees on the claimants. Mr Justice Fraser's High Court ruling in December paved the way finally for justice for

some, but the mediated settlement means the truth remains hidden. Does the Minister agree that there can be no justice without truth?

So many questions remain unanswered. When did the Post Office know that the Horizon system could cause money to disappear, and what responsibility did the developer, Fujitsu, have? What did Ministers, to whom the Post Office is accountable, do, and what did they know? Who was responsible for innocent people going to jail? Have they been held accountable? Will all the victims be properly compensated?

Three months ago, the Prime Minister committed to a public inquiry, but we now hear that that is to consider whether the Post Office has learned the necessary lessons. We need an inquiry not simply to learn lessons but to get to the truth. Only a judge-led inquiry can do that, with the Post Office compelled to co-operate. Will the Minister now agree to the judge-led inquiry we need? It is the very least the victims deserve.

We need answers, not more delay. We will not rest until we get that and justice for all those wronged in this scandal.

Paul Scully: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place, and I appreciate her comments. A public inquiry, according to Jason Beer QC, one of the leading experts on this, talks about what happened, why it happened and who is to blame, and what can be done to prevent it from happening again. This independent review, chaired by someone independent of both the Government and the Post Office, will indeed look to do that—to understand and acknowledge what went wrong in relation to the Horizon system by drawing on the evidence of those people who, as we have discussed, have been wronged in this situation, using both Mr Justice Fraser's judgment and words and his own evidence that he will call upon.

The Government want to be fully assured—I want to be fully assured—that the right lessons are learned for the future and concrete changes have taken place at Post Office Ltd to ensure that this is not repeated. We want to be sure that, through this review, there is a public summary of the failings that occurred at Post Office Ltd, drawing on the judgments and, as I say, listening to those who have been most affected. That is the purpose of the independent review we are in the process of setting up.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is absolutely right that we acknowledge the injustices that were done at the time. I have spent a bit of time in post offices in my time, and I remember having conversations with sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in which they acknowledged to me that they could not get their books to balance at the end of particular days. They were really worried about it at the time. It is worth remembering that the post office network is made up of sub-postmasters, and they need our support at this moment in time. What can the Department do to ensure that our sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who are working around the country have the ability to continue while the Horizon scandal is taking place?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. The Government provided nearly £2 billion for the period 2010-18 and are investing a further £370 million in 2018-21 in the transformation of the

business. A negotiated agreement was secured with all 28 UK banks in 2019 and took effect in 2020. That has resulted in a significant increase in the overall fees received by the Post Office from the banks, and that will rise further if transaction volumes continue to grow. We have also encouraged the Post Office to strengthen its relationship with postmasters and postmaster training to foster a stronger commercial partnership. We recently put in place personalised support for postmasters. If we are going to get the future relationship with postmasters right, we have to tackle the injustices that have happened in the past, but we also have to rebuild, with the new management in the Post Office, trust and training and respect for the sub-postmasters of the future.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Scottish National party spokesperson, Patricia Gibson, who has one minute.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): We can all agree with the Minister that the reputations, mental health and lives of the victims of this scandal have been ruined. Alan Bates, the former sub-postmaster who led the legal case against the Post Office, has been clear that the Post Office has not changed. It is six months since judges found major issues, including an excessive culture of secrecy and confidentiality generally in the Post Office, but specifically relating to Horizon, so can the Minister explain why we still are not getting a public inquiry into the scandal? The Prime Minister told the House on 26 February that such an inquiry would be established, but the proposals set out by the Minister today fall short of that. We welcome the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee inquiry into this issue, but we really need a full independent public inquiry.

Does the Minister understand the anger and disappointment at the length of time it is taking to get the truth about one of the largest miscarriages of justice in the UK's history, amidst very serious allegations of perjury levelled against employees of Fujitsu, the company behind the system, and will he apologise to the hundreds of postmasters whose lives have been ruined—who have lost their homes, their livelihoods and their reputations as a result of inaction by this Government?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those questions. The review that we are putting in train covers the areas that a public inquiry would achieve. We want to find out exactly what is going on. We do not want to duplicate the effort, and we already have a number of words from Mr Justice Fraser that point to exactly where the chairman of the independent review needs to look.

This situation has been going on for some 20-odd years. It is disgraceful that it has taken this time for Alan Bates and his fellow group-litigants to actually get to a settlement and that so many people have had to suffer as a result. What I am keen to do now—my tenure in this role has been brief—is push on and make sure that they can get the answers that they need.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is clear that the Post Office concealed evidence that would have cleared sub-postmasters who were convicted and have had their lives ruined. A major part of the evidence came from a Fujitsu whistleblower, who revealed that Post Office accounts could be changed remotely from Fujitsu offices.

[Mary Robinson]

Sub-postmasters now have the opportunity to sue the Post Office for malicious prosecution, but while those who were subject to criminal proceedings are able to make claims, people who brought civil claims that have been settled cannot. This was clearly not the intention of the courts, so how can such a disparity in outcome be justified?

Paul Scully: In terms of the whistleblower, Justice Fraser recommended a number of individuals to the criminal prosecution service, and that will follow its train accordingly. In terms of the group litigation, the settlement was agreed with the Post Office and that included legal and all other costs. In those circumstances, the Government cannot accept any further requests for payments, but for postmasters who have been convicted and had their convictions overturned there is a process in place for them to receive compensation, if appropriate.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): The Minister will know that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which I chair, is undertaking an inquiry on the Post Office Horizon scandal, and it is a matter of regret that we were unable to take oral evidence from Mr Read, the current chief executive officer of the Post Office, Ms Vennells, the former CEO, and Fujitsu as planned on 24 March, because of the lockdown. The sub-postmasters who have suffered such a depth of injustice, such a wide range of harm, will no doubt welcome the news today of the Minister's inquiry, but will he confirm to the House that that inquiry will have sufficient power to compel the disclosure of documentary evidence and to compel witnesses to come before it to give evidence in public?

Paul Scully: I am sorry that, for the same reason, I was unable to attend that session, but I hope in future to engage fully with the Select Committee. The key point is that the Post Office has said that it will disclose everything, and I will ensure that it does, to the best of my ability. I saw the same "Panorama" programme as the hon. Gentleman did, in which there was a big discussion and a long piece about non-disclosure. That cannot happen again. We have to draw a line and make sure that we get answers. The chairman of the independent review will push for that and so will I, to ensure that the Post Office complies appropriately.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Most MPs want the Post Office to apologise to all those it has wronged and pay generous compensation to them in the circumstances. Will the Minister add the Government's voice to that and make it a demand of the Post Office?

Paul Scully: The Post Office has acknowledged mistakes in the settlement and the case that we have had. I am glad that both parties to the group litigation were able to reach a settlement. Other sub-postmasters who suffered a shortfall will be able to take advantage of the historical shortfall scheme that the Post Office has launched. They will be able to come forward and have their case investigated, and hopefully those wrongs will be righted.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I, the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and Lord Arbuthnot have been campaigning on this

for over seven years. People have been imprisoned; they have been ruined, both financially and mentally. As I have said on the record previously, they have been treated in a way a totalitarian state would treat people. The fact is that only a judge-led inquiry will get to the bottom of what is needed. Over the past seven years, I have cross-examined many of the Minister's predecessors; today, I urge him to insist on that, because without it we will not get to the truth.

The Post Office is not the only one to blame; the Government are to blame as well, because Government Ministers have shareholder representation on the Post Office board and they have sat back and done absolutely nothing. Last year, they allowed the Post Office to spend nearly £100 million of public money on trying to bankrupt the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance. That disgrace also needs to be exposed.

Paul Scully: I acknowledge the right hon. Gentleman's long campaign on behalf of the Horizon postmasters, which is to be welcomed. I have been shocked and surprised by the revelations I saw when I took over and continue to see. The terms of reference of the review are the same as those for a public inquiry. It is to work out: who is to blame, can it happen again, how can we prevent it from happening again, what wrongs were done, and how can we right them? The chairman will be independent of both the Post Office and Government.

On the Government's role as a shareholder, clearly the Post Office has operational independence, but numerous attempts have been made over the years to resolve the dispute, including an independent investigation in 2013 and a mediation scheme in 2015, which was supported by Post Office Ltd and Ministers. All those attempts failed to resolve the issues, leaving the court as the only way to provide the independent review that all sides needed.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I am sure we all agree that sub-postmasters are at the heart of our communities, none more than the communities I represent in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton. It is right that the Post Office is able to compete in challenging times, but may I ask my hon. Friend to reassure sub-postmasters in my constituency that the Government will continue to review the Post Office's relationship with sub-postmasters and make sure that they are given the protection and respect they are entitled to and deserve?

Paul Scully: One of the first things I said to the chief executive was to acknowledge the fact that we need to build the relationship with postmasters and give them the support they need in the future, and we need to make sure that we right the wrongs of the past. The chief executive has assured me, and his background supports this, that he is used to working with sub-postmasters as stakeholders, and I think that is what they need to be.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Postmasters across the country have been fired, gone bankrupt and, in some cases, gone to prison. Given the scale of this injustice, with over 550 postmasters' families left in financial ruin, does the Minister agree that the current compensation, which fails to cover their legal costs, is neither fair nor just?

Paul Scully: I agree that so many people have suffered. Indeed, some people have taken their lives, as well as losing their livelihoods; that is not to be forgotten. I was pleased that a settlement was reached by both sides of this agreement and, as I say, sub-postmasters caught within shortfalls in the past who were not part of that agreement are able to claim under the historical shortfall scheme.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): One of the great frustrations to date has been the refusal of the former senior management of the Post Office to answer detailed questions on this issue and to be held to account. That is the least that is owed to those who have been wrongly convicted, including my constituent Siobhan Sayer. Will my hon. Friend confirm that individual culpability of senior management figures within the Post Office will be part of this review?

Paul Scully: I totally empathise with the suffering of my hon. Friend's constituent, Siobhan Sayer. The chairman, who is independent of the Post Office, and the Government need to look at exactly what went wrong, which will by necessity mean looking at who took what decisions when. It will be complicated, because this happened over a period of 20 years, but none the less, they must get to the bottom of it.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Post Office Ltd has been allowed to destabilise the post office network by its underhand and legally dubious actions. This Government must take up their responsibilities as a special shareholder in Post Office Ltd and commission a judge-led inquiry—I make no apology for repeating that. Nothing less will do. Will this Government help to compensate those postmasters who have been so wrongly convicted and help shore up the finances of Post Office Ltd?

Paul Scully: In terms of the finances, the Government continue to work with the Post Office on its needs and to ensure that, although it is an independent company, it can work within its service obligations. In terms of the review, we recognise the hugely negative impact that the Horizon dispute had on postmasters. The financial settlement was a major step towards resolving some of those grievances, but there is more to be done. That is why we have launched the independent review, to ensure that the lessons are learned and that they can never be repeated.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): This is one of the worst disasters in public life since the contaminated blood scandal. Does the Minister agree that, if it is proven that Post Office executives were aware of the software faults but allowed innocent people to rot in jail, they were guilty of criminal negligence and possibly criminal conspiracy and therefore ought to be brought to justice? Will the proposed inquiry allow that to be done?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. The Horizon IT system was put in place in 1999, with the first issues being raised in the early 2000s, so this was over a long period. Mr Justice Fraser considered what happened over that period and set out his findings

in considerable detail and, as I said, he has referred some individuals to the Crown Prosecution Service. Post Office Ltd is now working to implement all the vital changes to which it has committed under the leadership of its new CEO, to reset the relationship with its postmasters.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Many hundreds of postmasters were forced to pay back many thousands of pounds to the Post Office—moneys that were never in fact owed or, indeed, missing. That in itself should trigger a criminal investigation. How much of that money went to pay the previous chief executive's £5 million salary, and why can the Minister not accept that only a judge will get to the bottom of this miscarriage of justice?

Paul Scully: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's part not only in campaigning on the plight of the sub-postmasters since coming to this place, but in his previous work representing some of them in the court case. As I said, the important thing about the review is: does it find out what went wrong and who made what decisions when, does it listen to the evidence of those who were wronged and get those voices out there, complementing what Justice Fraser said, and does it make sure it can never happen again? Those are the terms of the inquiry and review. The independent chair will get to the bottom of that while being independent of Government and the Post Office.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I cannot understand why the Government want to prolong the agony on this with the halfway house of an independent review. I add my calls for a judge-led review that progresses speedily. Does the Minister share my amazement at the behaviour of the Post Office, which had employed these postmasters and postmistresses for years and realised they were decent, hard-working people? They did not suddenly all become criminals. Did no one ask the questions? Can we please get on with this and get the full judge-led inquiry now?

Paul Scully: It is for that very reason that we have announced an independent review. Of all the judge-led inquiries in the last 30 years, the shortest lasted 45 days—that was one Minister dealing with two people, whereas this is an incredibly complicated case—and the longest lasted 13 years. In the last 30 years, inquiries have cost £600 million. We need something reasonable in its timing and extensive in its remit so that we can get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: The covid crisis has revealed what should have been obvious: that key workers, including postmasters, are essential workers and should have been treated with respect, not suspicion. Why did the Minister's Department fail to protect workers from a corporate governance failure of this magnitude, and how will it prevent such a failure from happening again?

Paul Scully: The Government have challenged it over the years, especially in recent years—the Horizon situation has come about over 20 years, but as I have said, recently there have been independent reviews in 2013 and investigations in 2015. It is because we have been

[Paul Scully]

unable to get a result that we have had to resort to the courts. We need to get to the bottom of this so that we can right the wrongs done to the postmasters of the past and ensure the respect of future postmasters, who must feel secure in their positive relationship with the Post Office.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I fear the cover-up could continue. The Post Office has decided to bring in Herbert Smith Freehills to oversee historic cases. This is the practice that contributed to the cover-up of a fraud at Lloyds HBOS over seven years and oversaw the establishment and operation of the Lloyds bank customer review, which was described by the Financial Conduct Authority's review of that scheme as discriminatory, flawed and an unacceptable denial of responsibility, and that review is now having to be done again. Does the Minister think the Post Office should reconsider that decision?

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend and I spoke about this earlier. As he says, the Post Office decides its own legal advisers. As far as I understand it, the Post Office changed its advisers to Herbert Smith Freehills in the latter stages of the litigation, which resulted in the settlement, good progress in resolving outstanding claimant issues and a successful launch of the historical shortfall scheme.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: Happy birthday from me also, Mr Speaker.

We have seen some movement today from the Government, and I do welcome that as far as it goes, but like the Equitable Life scandal, this is an ongoing deep injustice, as is the plight of people currently suffering under the loan charge. There is a consensus across the House that this just does not go far enough. Could I urge the Minister to build on the progress he has announced today and accept the will of the House that we need a judge-led inquiry to properly ventilate all the issues?

Paul Scully: As I have said, the terms of reference of this review are deep enough to get to the bottom of exactly what has happened. The fact that the chairman, who will be appointed, is independent of Government, is independent of Post Office Ltd, and will have the freedom to be able to go and find evidence to complement the evidence that has already been published by Mr Justice Fraser in his judgment means that there will be plenty to draw on in order to come to conclusions and recommendations.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister not accept that this is as big a scandal as that of the Guildford Four? Although the settlement was reached by mediation, which I approve of, much of that settlement was taken away in cash for lawyers. Can we not do something to ensure that the settlement justifies the indignities that many of these people have had to suffer?

Paul Scully: With regard to the scale of the issue, I agree with my hon. Friend that this has gone on for so long and has involved so many people who have suffered as a result, some with their lives, as we have heard. The

point is that the mediated settlement was between the Post Office and the sub-postmasters who took out that group litigation. I am pleased that it came to a conclusion, but, as a result of that, the Government cannot enter into a new discussion with the Post Office on that basis.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is noble of the Minister to offer himself up as a human shield for the Post Office in this way, but I hope that, when he returns to the Department today, he will tell his officials, who, I fear, have perhaps not briefed him as well as they might have done, and Post Office senior management that this review will just not cut it. He says that this is a complex case spanning a long period of time, and he is absolutely right about that. That is why it requires a judge-led inquiry. That is what will happen eventually, so why not just cut to the chase and do it now?

Paul Scully: I keep hearing that. I keep hearing the words "judge-led inquiry" and then I keep hearing that we need to move this on as quickly as possible. The point is that the terms of reference within this review are the same as a judge-led inquiry.

Patricia Gibson: Why not just have one?

Paul Scully: Because I do not want an inquiry that will last 13 years, with sub-postmasters coming back time and again with no justice. I have been pushing on this from the moment that I found out the details about it as postal affairs Minister. That is why I will drive this through to make sure that the answers are heard and that the independent chairman, who is independent of Government and independent of the Post Office, gets to the bottom of the case and gets some answers.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): In 2015, Post Office Ltd closed its own review of Horizon IT by saying that there were "no system-wide problems with our computer systems". Nothing could have been further from the truth. We have all been let down, and many sub-postmasters have been badly treated. I urge the Minister to start the independent review as soon as possible to discover precisely who knew what and when in Fujitsu, Post Office Ltd, and the National Federation of SubPostmasters. Does he agree that nothing should be ruled out, including criminal prosecution, if justified?

Paul Scully: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, as the criminal proceedings continue, those wrongly convicted continue as well, and that will sit along with Justice Fraser's findings. I do want to move this on as quickly as possible—not to rush anything, but to make sure that those postmasters can get answers and bring the injustice to an end.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I add my support for a proper judge-led inquiry, too. Della Robinson was sub-postmaster at Dukinfield post office. She lost her business, the building the post office was in, her rental property, her job, and almost her home. It is just wrong. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are re-evaluating any public positions held by current or former senior employees at the Post Office who were intimately involved in decisions that victimised sub-postmasters?

Paul Scully: I am aware that a former chief executive of the Post Office took up a role as a non-executive director at the Cabinet Office until she stood down. I am also aware that the Care Quality Commission has written to Imperial following a fit-and-proper-persons referral. The CQC is considering this. Lord Callanan wrote to the Department of Health and Social Care on 18 May to draw the Department's attention to the strength of feeling about the position in the NHS of the former chief executive of the Post Office.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Post offices are at the heart of our communities, yet the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have been so badly let down. I share the clear anger felt across the House on this issue, but to keep the network open and viable it must be attractive to take on a Post Office franchise. To do that there is the critical question of rebuilding trust. As the Minister holds the Post Office to account, will he hold it to account on how it is rebuilding trust with all sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses right across the network?

Paul Scully: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why some of my first conversations with Nick Read, the current chief executive of the Post Office, have been to ensure that he can do exactly that. We need to draw a line and right the wrongs of the past to give respect and trust, as well as support, for future postmasters to make sure they are valued stakeholders.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Many innocent sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have been bankrupted, imprisoned and wrongly accused of theft due to the Post Office's heavy-handed approach, when accountancy issues with Horizon reported financial irregularities. Sadly, one of my constituents tragically took his own life after being falsely accused of financial impropriety, leaving his family destitute and without their business. It is too late for an apology or compensation for that family. What new procedures have the Post Office introduced to protect sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses as a consequence of this scandal? What protections has the Post Office put in place to ensure accountancy software is fit for purpose? What action will be taken against those in positions of leadership in the Post Office during the scandal? And does the Minister agree that actions speak much louder than words?

Paul Scully: I sympathise with the hon. Lady's constituent who sadly took his life. That is one of many tragic stories. The fact is that we have now got the Post Office to accept its wrong position and the fact that the Horizon software could make mistakes—things were being changed there. That is why it is important to get that acknowledgment. It is also important that we continue to build trust with sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in their relationship with the Post Office. That is why every time I speak to the chief executive, I make sure that that is at the top of our agenda.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): If the Government accept that software can never be thought infallible, will the Minister take steps to ensure that the law and policy making reflect the truth that all software has bugs?

Paul Scully: We will, of course, review that and keep it in our mind.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The Post Office Horizon scandal prompts the question: why did the Post Office not believe its own sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, many of whom had given decades of loyal service, even after evidence was presented to them that the Horizon system was most likely faulty? Can the Secretary of State give a cast-iron guarantee, as other hon. and right hon. Members have requested, to all sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses and their families whose lives have been ruined, that there will be a judge-led inquiry, not merely a review, so we can ascertain how this happened, who is responsible and what steps can be taken to ensure that this never happens again?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that promotion to Secretary of State. He raises some really important points. The point is that, whether we call it a review or an inquiry, the terms of reference are exactly as he describes. We want to make sure we can get to the bottom of this to find out who made what decisions and how they were made, and ensure they can never happen again. That is exactly why I have pushed to make this happen as soon as possible.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): Isabella Wall was a sub-postmistress in Barrow. She ran a thriving shop and let flats above the property. As a result of the scandal, she lost everything. She was the very first person to come and see me at a surgery as a newly elected MP and I carry with me the anger she brought to that meeting. Does my hon. Friend accept that while the Post Office has accepted it got things wrong, there is a long, long way to go for people like Ms Wall before they are properly compensated for the financial and emotional losses they faced? Will he confirm that the Government will give weight to fair compensation being paid to wronged sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses?

Paul Scully: Isabella Wall is one of far too many constituents of ours who have suffered in this. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) was right when he said that the Post Office should have had more faith and trust in its sub-postmasters. Of course we will make sure we can get to the bottom of this to get some justice for Isabella Wall. On the group litigation, I am glad that they have reached a settlement. As for sub-postmasters who have not yet been part of a case but may have suffered a shortfall, I encourage them to come forward to take advantage of the historical shortfall scheme the Post Office has launched.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: Many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

There is no doubt that many grave injustices have been served upon sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, some of whom have gone to jail and lost everything. I know that my constituents will want two things. The first is to see justice done and the full facts brought out in a public inquiry, which is why a judge-led public inquiry is so important. They will also want to see their local post office network protected, ensuring it is shielded

[Neil Gray]

from the potential ramifications arising from the actions of management. So what plan does the Minister have to ensure both?

Paul Scully: On the inquiry, I have set out the fact that the terms of reference are wide and deep enough. The judge has already reviewed this situation; Mr Justice Fraser has already come up with many, many pages of a response about what happened when and what went wrong. We need to make sure we can build on that evidence, we listen carefully to those who have been wronged and we make sure it can never happen again.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

We are all aware that victims of this scandal have lost their livelihoods, savings and reputations, and that some have lost their liberty, as a result of a faulty computer system. I know that my hon. Friend understands the financial and emotional suffering that the Horizon litigation has brought on the victims, but does he agree that the only right and just situation will be to restore those victims to exactly the financial position they would have been in had this faulty system not occurred? I am talking about full compensation and an apology, and, equally, about the real criminals being brought to justice.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The point he raises shows why it took a court to get to the bottom of this, to break the deadlock that had been happening over so many years, which should have been settled so much earlier. That is why in December 2019 both parties in the group litigation agreed a settlement, following several days of mediation—it was a financial settlement totalling £57.75 million. Convicted claimants can still go through a further process; processes are in place for them to receive compensation, if appropriate.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP) [V]: The Post Office was not slow in dragging hard-working, honest sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses before the courts on the basis of spurious data from a flawed IT system, one that it knew to be flawed, thereby depriving good people at the centre of their communities of their reputations, businesses and personal assets, in some instances their liberty and, tragically, for some their lives. Does the Minister accept that a judge-led public inquiry, not a review, is required now, without delay, and that anything less is a further assault on the welfare of Horizon victims?

Paul Scully: The findings outlined during the Horizon case provided extensive insight into what went wrong with the Post Office—this includes the independent judicial review of the facts that all sides have been looking for. However, the serious impacts of this case mean more needs to be done. We want to be assured that the right lessons are learned, and that is the purpose of the independent review that we are in the process of setting up.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the postmasters in Beaconsfield and Bucks and across the country who have tirelessly carried on throughout covid-19? Will he also join me in paying tribute to Mr Patel, who passed away from covid-19 and served the people of Hedgerley loyally?

He was lovingly known as CD to many of the customers. Will the Minister please not only demand an apology but demand justice for the countless men and women who served and have suffered at the hands of the Post Office, and who see no justice? I hope that he will have the courage to deliver that for them.

Paul Scully: Justice is exactly what I want and what I want to be seen to be done. I would go further to extend my sympathy to the family of Mr Patel as well, because we must not forget, in all of this, at this particular moment in time, postmasters up and down the country are doing an incredible job for the most vulnerable people in society.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

At Prime Minister's questions on 24 February, the Prime Minister agreed with my request to commit to hold an independent inquiry into this horrific scandal. I followed that question up with a letter to the Prime Minister. Three months later, only this week, I received a response from the Minister. I welcome the Government's commitment to a review of mishandlings, but this cannot just be a review of past mistakes. With a background of many years in the postal industry, I know many whose lives have been destroyed by this scandal, including sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in my constituency of Jarrow. So I ask the Minister again, and make absolutely no apology for doing so: will he commit to having a judge-led review as quickly as possible that will take action against those responsible for the scandal, and ensure that each individual case is assessed and proper compensation is paid to all those affected?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for the work that she has done on this matter. Given her background, I can understand her motivation. As I have said, it is important to know that the terms of reference of this independent review are wide enough and deep enough to get to the bottom of what happened. An independent judge has already looked at this and built up a body of evidence and other views, which will be then be looked at as a complement to the review. Do not forget that public inquiries cannot determine criminal or civil guilt in themselves; that is reserved for a court.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Many colleagues in the House have alluded to the importance of sub-postmasters during this global pandemic. What reassurance can my hon. Friend give that Post Office Ltd has understood that there needs to be fundamental cultural and organisational change to ensure that sub-postmasters come forward and that therefore the critical network of post offices remains in our communities for years to come?

Paul Scully: I think that that lesson has definitely been learned by the new chief executive. Certainly, the Government have worked, as shareholders, on a new framework for the Post Office to make sure that we can build a solid, confident relationship with future sub-postmasters. Nick Read's background working with independent convenience stores suggests that he is used to working with people as stakeholders rather than as simple employees or instruments of a large company.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The Minister has said several times that the victims of this situation need to be heard and their cases listened to, so can he name any one of them who is in agreement with his position and is not calling for an independent judge-led inquiry?

Paul Scully: The sub-postmasters who have been wronged by this want some justice and they want it quickly. What I do not want to happen is a public inquiry that may take many, many years and cost them a lot of money to get more legal representation in. When people have the chance to study the terms of reference, they will realise that the chair will be independent of Government and independent of the Post Office, and that he or she will listen to them to make sure that their stories are told—not just listen to them but make sure that those stories are actually there to feed into making sure that this can never happen again. Then, I hope, they will see that justice can be done.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), but one of the stumbling blocks to a judge-led inquiry is cost. Does he agree that it is absolutely imperative that the honest, decent sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses across the whole country, and indeed specifically in Romsey and Southampton North, should not have a price put on lifting the stain on their characters?

Paul Scully: Sub-postmasters who have been wronged, including in Romsey, need to ensure that their voices can be heard quickly, with no cost. They need to be sure that this can never happen again, and get the acknowledgement that there have been severe mistakes that have caused misery for so many.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: This scandal represents a massive failure of accountability and oversight, not just by Post Office Ltd, but by the Government. Will the Minister apologise to those whose lives have been ruined? What assurances can he provide that the losses arising from the Horizon case will not affect postmasters' pay and unfairly penalise even more postmasters and sub-postmasters?

Paul Scully: There have been numerous attempts over the years to try to resolve the dispute. The fact is that the Post Office has independent operational control. However, facts have come to light through the litigation, revealing that the advice that the Government and the shareholders received over that period was flawed. That is why the Government will be monitoring closely the progress of the Post Office in delivering the programme of commitments following the settlement, including through the review. We have also reviewed the mechanisms that we have in place to maintain oversight of the Post Office, by increasing the frequency of shareholder meetings, establishing a Post Office policy team within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and publishing a framework document to govern the relationship between BEIS, UK Government Investments and the Post Office.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: A very happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker.

This Government have had six months to enact an inquiry—six months to seek justice for the damage, disruption and loss of livelihood caused by this scandal, not just to see whether the Post Office has learnt lessons. The Minister has said that he pushed for the independent review, but what about listening to the sub-postmasters who have been left destitute by this scandal and providing them with the judge-led inquiry they so desperately want? Will the Minister stop stalling with reviews and commit today to a judge-led inquiry?

Paul Scully: We can talk about semantics, but what we actually need are the terms of reference that get people what they want. Whether we call it a review or an inquiry, the fact is that it will understand and acknowledge what went wrong in relation to Horizon by drawing on the evidence. It will assess whether the Post Office has learnt its lessons, whether the commitments made by the Post Office in the mediation settlement have been properly delivered, and whether the processes and information provided by post offices to postmasters are sufficient. It will also examine the governance and whistleblowing controls now in place at Post Office Ltd. That is what we need to ensure that we get answers in as timely a fashion as possible. I am sorry that it has taken six months. These things are complicated; I would love to have announced the review that following day. However, I am glad that we now have terms of reference that are deep and wide enough to get the answers that we need and for which sub-postmasters have desperately been waiting.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister is quite right to emphasise the need for speed, but people have taken their own lives, and have been wrongly convicted and imprisoned. It does not get much more serious than that. This House is here to defend the liberties of our constituents. Will he bear in mind that the Prime Minister confirmed on 26 February that there would indeed be an inquiry, and, following this urgent question, will he discuss with his colleagues in the Government whether the will of the House may be different on this point from the will of the Government?

Paul Scully: We have looked at the different options. I do not want something that is long, drawn out and costly for sub-postmasters, and which does not necessarily get any answers for years and years to come, if ever. Someone used to say to me, "Less haste, more speed." Yes, we need to ensure that we can do this in a timely fashion, but that does not mean that we need to rush through the detail as the review is going ahead. We need to listen to the views of the sub-postmasters who have been wronged and put that alongside the findings of Justice Fraser to ensure that such things will never happen again.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The Government speak as if there is nothing that they could have done as a special shareholder. Well, of course they could have done something. This situation has left communities in York, such as Clifton, bereft of a post office. The fact is that the Government sat on their hands and did not use their powers, and sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were thrown into

[*Rachael Maskell*]

jail and made bankrupt, and some took their lives. Do the Government not want a full, judge-led inquiry with the powers necessary to investigate and dig deep because a review does not hold those powers and will not expose their failings in this matter?

Paul Scully: The Post Office has said that it will comply fully with this review. I will push fully for that compliance, and I am sure that the independent chair will want to get right to the bottom of things, however long that takes. We need to get on with the review and get it started now.

On the Government's actions over the past few years, this issue happened over 20 years, and with hindsight facts have come to light in the litigation that some of the advice received was flawed. However, we have pushed for many years to make sure that we can get a settlement, and I am glad that we are at the point at which we can start to get some answers.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): As a barrister of more than 30 years' experience, I have witnessed at first hand the sheer devastation that a wrong conviction, or even a false accusation, can bring to a family. This is the United Kingdom. This is an injustice. Will the Minister reassure me that following the review there will be real sanctions, because this injustice has effectively destroyed a much-loved public institution?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. She is right about its being a much-loved institution. What we must not lose is the amazing work of post offices and sub-postmasters up and down the country. We must make sure that their reputations are not tarnished by what happened over a 20-year period. We need answers as quickly as possible, so that I, the Government and all of us can see the recommendations that the chairman will bring forward from that review.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

For the Patels, moving from being managers of Acton Crown post office for more than three decades to their own sub-postmaster role in the country was meant to be a dream come true, but it turned into a nightmare when they lost not only substantial sums of money but their mental and physical health and their reputations. Mr Patel ended up with a criminal electronic tag—the humiliation of it. They want to know why in Acton, for more than 20 years, they were seen as upstanding pillars of the community—they handled multi-million pound sums and had a safe key—but suddenly in Oxfordshire they were falsely branded as criminals. Why did it take the Criminal Cases Review Commission to say that there had been a miscarriage of justice? Where was the oversight? Finally, can the Minister make good on the promise that Paula Vennells gave me in 2018 that Acton Crown post office will reopen? It closed on her watch, and she has since done a runner.

Paul Scully: We have had the most stable network of post offices for a number of years now, on which—obviously, covid-19 notwithstanding—we need to make sure we can build. I also want answers to why the three Patels—her constituents, who were fine, upstanding members

of the community—were seen in that way because of the actions of the Post Office. That is why we need to get this review done and why we need to get the independent chairman's recommendations out, so that we can see justice done.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Many happy returns of the day, Mr Speaker.

The scale of this scandal demands no less than a judge-led inquiry that has appropriate power. Why can the Minister not accept that that is the only way to examine fully and get answers on how this sorry saga went on for so long and caused so much misery and heartache to my constituents and thousands more across the country?

Paul Scully: We have 1,000 pages of Justice Fraser's findings to build on. Reviews are going through to overturn and look at a number of convictions. We have this review to build on all of that. I hope and believe that all that body of work will find the answers that sub-postmasters are after about when decisions were taken, who took those decisions, how they went wrong and how they were allowed to go wrong. The fact is that we must get some answers so that it can never happen again.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I think the Minister is doing an excellent job, and I have been in his position, when I announced a review but was not allowed to call it a review. I appreciate that he might think the difference between a review and an inquiry is just semantics, but for many people those semantics really matter. I share colleagues' views about the need for an independent inquiry. I would also like to know what the Minister will do about financial compensation. He has said that there are limits to what the Government can do, but it is really important that he looks at this again and sees what steps can be taken to ensure that those affected are fully and fairly compensated.

Paul Scully: In terms of compensation, the mediation that took place allowed a settlement to be reached by the members of that group litigation. Other sub-postmasters who have been found to be wrongly convicted will be able to go through other procedures to get compensation, and any postmasters who were not part of that litigation but suffered a shortfall as a result of the Post Office will be able to apply to the historical scheme. I believe that this review will be able to get to the answers and build on the body of evidence that Justice Fraser has built up through the findings of his court case. There will be a lot of answers and recommendations there to secure the future trust and relationship between postmasters and the Post Office.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Following this case being taken to the High Court, I have read that some Fujitsu employees are being investigated for perjury, which is a big deal. What discussions has the Minister had with the Attorney General and the Ministry of Justice on this issue, and when will he announce a judge-led inquiry into this whole sorry debacle?

Paul Scully: My understanding is that Mr Justice Fraser has referred a number of people to the Crown Prosecution Service.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I hope that all the time taken to wish you a happy birthday has not delayed any celebration you might have planned for later, Mr Speaker.

I want to raise a case that is one of many. Susan Knight was a postmistress of 32 years who was dragged before magistrates courts three times and Truro Crown court twice and made to pay over £20,000. This lady's life was made a misery, with her reputation trashed and 32 years of service for the Post Office counting for nothing. It is too late for her to rebuild her business. She is basically left with nothing. Can the Minister assure me, my constituents and Susan Knight that she will be adequately compensated in good time without a huge effort to achieve that result?

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend refers to Susan Knight. He has also told me about another constituent of his who was the landlady of a local pub and lost that pub. It was another terrible story, alongside those we have heard from Members on both sides of the House about their constituents. In terms of compensation, members of the group litigation have reached a settlement, and I am pleased that a settlement was reached after many years and that the deadlock was broken. As I said, anybody else who has not claimed can join the historical shortfall scheme, and if people have been wrongly convicted, there will be procedures in place for them to claim compensation.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

While the Post Office was wilfully hiding its own failings, it operated a system where by sub-postmasters were automatically guilty. The Post Office then ran its own prosecutions, so in effect, it was judge, jury and executioner. This proves that we need a judge-led public inquiry, with all the powers associated with that, to get full disclosure and a call for evidence. In the meantime, can the Minister tell me what steps the Government have taken to ensure that this abuse of power can never be replicated and that sub-postmasters now have fair and transparent contracts?

Paul Scully: Mr Justice Fraser is that independent judge who has looked into exactly what the hon. Gentleman described, which is why we want to build on those findings in what happens next. The Post Office has realised and finally acknowledged that it has done wrong. The fact is that the Government, within our new relationship and new framework as the sole shareholder in the Post Office, need to ensure that we can analyse the work that is done to earn trust and rebuild the relationship with future sub-postmasters.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): The biggest disgrace about all this is that innocent people have been incarcerated and imprisoned. Can the Minister confirm whether there are any sub-postmasters or sub-postmistresses currently in prison? If that is the case, will he commit to expediting immediately a full investigation into those specific cases for their release, if that is appropriate?

Paul Scully: What we are not going to do with the review is get in the way of the Criminal Cases Review Commission. It is really important that it does actually go through that process as quickly as possible for any number of reasons, not least to lift the conviction of

people wrongly convicted. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to decry the fact that people have been put in prison wrongly. Their reputation has suffered, their lives have suffered and, indeed, in certain cases their lives have ended. That is why I want to make sure that we can get on, set up this review and find those answers to move forward.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): If the review that the Minister proposes is just as deep and wide-ranging in going into the complexities as a judge-led inquiry, the question is why it should be less time-consuming and more cost-effective than a judge-led inquiry. I understand that the Government always say no before they say yes, so for the last time today, will he commit to a judge-led inquiry?

Paul Scully: I can give the hon. Member one easy answer as to why it takes so long, and that is lawyers. If we have a public inquiry, we tend to get a lot of expense, with both sides lawyering up, to use the vernacular. That is why £600 million has been spent in the last 30 years on public inquiries. We can either spend a lot of time in working on such a case, or we can get through a review, build on the work of the independent judge who has already looked at this case and has already built up the foundations, and make sure that we add to that by listening to the voices of those people who have gone through absolute hell.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Hearty birthday felicitations, Mr Speaker.

Throughout the financial and emotional suffering that the Horizon process has caused postmasters and their families across the country, I have been kept informed of developments by the Bailgate post office sub-postmaster, Simon Clarke, in my constituency of Lincoln. Can my hon. Friend tell me and the House how many senior managers responsible for the position that the Post Office has taken have resigned or been sanctioned or had any bonus payments revoked?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend. One of the problems with this case is that it has happened over 20 years, which means that a lot of people have moved on or moved around, and it has been difficult to follow those who have gone through the system in all this time. *[Interruption.]* I hear the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) say from a sedentary position that we gave the former chief executive a CBE. We have followed that up: she went through the independent honours commission, which works on that in a separate process, but we have actually made sure that we have written to the Care Quality Commission to ask if she is a fit and proper person in terms of the position she now holds.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for including me on the call list.

I sympathise with my hon. Friend, and I know that he will have heard what has been said today and will be listening very carefully. A succession of his predecessors have come to that Dispatch Box over years to read out statements from officials who we know have closely connected relationships with Post Office management and who knew that an injustice had occurred. What will he do to tackle the network of intertwined vested interests

[Lucy Allan]

on his doorstep—and I include the Cabinet Office and ex-Fujitsu employees—that led to this shameful and tragic scandal and cover-up?

Paul Scully: It may be that many Government Ministers have come here, but it is this Government Minister who has actually pushed to make sure that we can have a review and that we can have it independently chaired—separate from the Post Office, separate from Government—to come up with those answers. That is what postmasters want. We have made sure in Government that we have come up with a new framework for an increased frequency of shareholder meetings to ensure that we can hold the Post Office to account for its actions, but also ensure that the taxpayer gets the most out of the Post Office, communities get the most out of the Post Office and, importantly, postmasters can feel confident they can build up a trustful relationship as valued stakeholders within the post office network.

Virtual participation in proceedings concluded (Order, 4 June).

Mr Speaker: In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am now suspending the House for three minutes.

1.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

1.52 pm

BILL PRESENTED

EMPLOYMENT (REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS FOR CARERS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Edward Davey presented a Bill to require employers to make reasonable adjustments to enable employees with caring responsibilities for people with disabilities to provide that care.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 12 June and to be printed (Bill 134).

Local Electricity

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.52 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to enable electricity generators to become local electricity suppliers; and for connected purposes.

As the UK emerges from the lockdown, and as we look out across a different landscape, there is a need to rebuild local communities and local economies for the benefit of local people and local businesses and, in doing so, to meet head-on the challenge of climate change. To do that successfully, we need power—electricity in a low-carbon form, to light up and to heat our homes and workplaces and to run our transport networks and our vehicles.

In recent years, the UK has made great strides in decarbonising our energy system, but we still have a very long way to go, and the way we regulate the supply of electricity means that we are in effect operating with one arm tied behind our backs. We currently have a system that prevents local generators from becoming local suppliers. This very short Bill would help remove that barrier. I thank Power for People, which has carried out most of the background research, campaigning and preparatory work ahead of this Bill.

Today we face two great challenges: one immediate—the seismic economic shock created by the covid-19 pandemic—and the other looming large, which is the devastating impact of climate change. The Bill addresses both challenges. As a nation, we have made significant progress in meeting the targets under the Climate Change Act 2008, but the Committee on Climate Change is clear that ambitious new policy and regulation are needed if we are to continue to meet those targets in the future. At present, renewable electricity generation accounts for only 11% of all UK energy use, and our transport and heating networks need to be electrified to decarbonise our economy. To ensure that the dramatic rise in electricity demand that this will create is met by renewable generation, we must put the right policy and regulatory frameworks in place.

There is tremendous potential for a significant proportion of renewable energy generation to come from new community projects right across the country, whether solar, hydro on rivers and estuaries, batteries in former factories, or wind in the uplands. Such schemes can bring many benefits to many local economies—opportunities that are desperately needed, given the devastating economic impact of the covid-19 pandemic. A Government report published in 2014 found that the community energy sector could deliver at least 3,000 MW of generating capacity, yet at present it is producing only a tenth of that, equating to less than 0.5% of our total generating capacity.

There is a great opportunity for renewable energy to be the lead player in the economic recovery, but it is being blocked by the current energy market and licensing rules that lead to huge costs and burdensome bureaucracy being imposed on new supply entrants, with the result that some great and highly innovative schemes never see the light of day. A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that the financial, technical and

operational challenges involved in setting up a licensed energy supply company are such that the initial costs could exceed £1 million. It is a bit like someone setting up a micro-brewery, planning to deliver their beers to local pubs, off-licences and homes, and then being told that they have to pay £1 million in road tax for their delivery van.

To solve the problem, the costs and complexity of being a licensed electricity supplier must be proportionate to the scale of the supply operation. If they are, it becomes financially viable for renewable generators to supply electricity, and suppliers will spring up all over the country. This is what happens in Germany, where there are 1,000 such supply companies, compared with 60 in the UK. Most of them are local suppliers, which are community owned and supply renewable energy. Germany's big four control only 40% of the market. We need to empower local community groups and businesses to sell locally generated clean energy directly to local people and local companies.

The Bill would do that by establishing a right to local supply. That would give the energy market regulator, Ofgem, the duty to establish new market rules that ensure that the set-up and running costs of selling locally generated energy directly to local consumers are proportionate to the scale of the supply business. The Bill is a first attempt to lay out a mechanism that will fix the UK's local supply problem. It is accepted that there is scope for improvement and refinement, and new ideas are welcome for how that can be done.

Clause 1 states the purpose of the Bill: to enable the local supply of electricity. Clause 2 states that it is generators of electricity that can become local suppliers. This is intended to achieve the aim of smaller-scale renewable generators being able to supply electricity to a local area. There is a case for amending the clause to allow any organisation to become a local licensed supplier; the logic for that is that currently licensed suppliers do not also need to be generators.

Clause 3 goes to the heart of the Bill and gives Ofgem the task of setting up the local supplier licence process; it also requires that the process ensures that local suppliers face set-up costs and complexity proportionate to the scale of their operations. The exact details of that process are not laid out in the Bill, as it is believed that Ofgem should carry out this task. Subsection (1) requires Ofgem to set up the local supply licence mechanism to ensure that the costs and complexity of becoming a local supplier are proportionate to the size of the operation. Subsection (3) allows for the local supplier operation to be based on a radius area, although that could arguably be improved, if amended, to be a defined area.

The result of the Bill would be that building new community-scale renewable generation infrastructure and selling the electricity direct to local people through a locally licensed energy supply company would become financially viable. The benefits would be significant. These new local energy businesses, creating local jobs and being paid by local customers, would keep significant additional value in their local economies, thereby making them stronger. There would also be the knock-on benefit of greater public support for the transition to sustainable energy. There would be improved air quality. The nation's energy supply would be more secure and less dependent on imports. Being able to sell to local customers would reduce the need for renewable subsidies. Renewable generators would receive significantly more than their current 4p per kilowatt-hour and would be paid by their customers, not the state.

It may sound as though I am painting a picture of utopia, but this is nothing new. It has been done before. Local amenities across the UK, such as parks, swimming pool baths and libraries, were built from the revenues of the municipal energy companies of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In this respect, we need to turn back the clock.

One hundred and fifty-one MPs from right across the Chamber have declared their support for the Bill, from all parties. This is an advance on the 116 Members who did so when a presentation Bill was submitted in the last Session. Power for People, which is co-ordinating the public campaign for the Bill, have also mobilised the grassroots movement and brought together a broad coalition of support, including from 50 national non-governmental organisations and 43 local councils.

In conclusion, the Bill would enable local people to come up with local solutions to meet the challenge of climate change. In doing so, they would be creating sustainable jobs and making their local economies more resilient. I am very much aware that, very often, Bills such as this do not advance very far in this and the other place, but let us work together to turn the compelling objectives of this Bill into reality. It is now time to deliver power for people.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Peter Aldous, Sir Graham Brady, Rosie Duffield, Wera Hobhouse, Dame Diana Johnson, David Johnston, Ben Lake, Caroline Lucas, John Mc Nally, John Penrose, Selaine Saxby and Mr Barry Sheerman present the Bill.

Peter Aldous accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 135).

Senior Courts of England and Wales

2.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): I beg to move,

That the draft Court of Appeal (Recording and Broadcasting) (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 12 March, be approved.

The statutory instrument before the House today is intended to enable the inclusion of family proceedings within a pilot project testing the live-streaming of Court of Appeal hearings. The order advances the shared commitment between the Government and the judiciary to increase public engagement and understanding of the court system.

Currently, the recording and broadcasting of court proceedings in England and Wales is prohibited by section 41 of the Criminal Justice Act 1925 and section 9 of the Contempt of Court Act 1981. By virtue of section 23 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, the Lord Chancellor, with the agreement of the Lord Chief Justice, can make an order in some circumstances lifting the prohibition. That was done in 2013 to allow the recording and broadcasting of proceedings in the civil and criminal divisions of the Court of Appeal. However, that was not extended to the family division. The order before the House today lifts the prohibition on broadcasting and recording hearings in the Court of Appeal in relation to family cases for the first time, thereby furthering our objective of opening up the visibility of justice.

Let me make it clear that whether or not a particular case is actually broadcast will remain a matter for the judge overseeing and hearing the case, so judicial discretion will apply. The confidentiality and anonymity of the parties will be maintained, so the names of any children or the names of parties to a divorce hearing will not be disclosed. Only the judges and the advocates will be broadcast. If by any chance there were a litigant in person, for example, or sensitive witness testimony, we would expect the judge not to allow that to be broadcast, although in the Court of Appeal it is very rare for any witnesses to appear; the arguments tend to be on points of law. So let me reassure the House that the confidentiality of the parties will be fully maintained.

I should add that this order makes no further change to any family proceedings and the confidentiality applying to those; it is simply about broadcasting. I notice the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is present, and I should add that this applies only to England and Wales; it does not apply to Scotland or Northern Ireland.

The order is a small but welcome step in the direction of further opening up our justice system and I commend it to the House.

2.6 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I shall be brief; I have just a few comments and a couple of questions for the Government.

This is the fifth time that I have seen the Minister in the past four sitting days, as we have sat on our respective Front Benches, and the fourth time that he has the Opposition's support for a piece of legislation. But neither I nor the Labour party are going to start going soft on the Tories. Far from it—as the Leader of the Opposition said when he was elected, when the Government get it right, we will support them, whilst holding them to account.

We on this side of the House have demonstrated in the past that we support measures such as the online streaming of public court cases to create a more transparent and fair justice system, and I hope the move towards supporting digital justice where possible extends well beyond coronavirus and becomes a substantial part of our justice system. But whether in court hearings or the recording of court proceedings, digital justice must be done properly and be seen to serve justice in every situation.

This instrument will facilitate live streaming of family Court of Appeal cases, allowing the broadcasting of judgments and advocates' arguments in family cases in the Court of Appeal. It is a positive move, which will allow the public to see what happens in court in one of the most sensitive areas, and it will allow them to hear the decisions of judges in their own words.

I hope that Ministers may even take the opportunity of watching proceedings from the family court and others, particularly when people are forced to represent themselves in what are often complex legal matters because of the absence of legal aid. I hope that the Government will learn from the broadcasts and that they can find a way to make the system work more fairly and effectively.

Family proceedings are often regarded as insufficiently transparent, and this motion will go some way towards tackling that and helping people who are totally bamboozled by the whole court process. However, in such a move consideration must be given to matters such as protecting what are often some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Family court cases can involve highly emotional and sensitive matters and we must take seriously even any potential issues relating to safeguarding. The Minister has talked about that, but I ask him to say a little more about the safeguarding processes that will be in place to meet the need to protect these people while making this move to greater transparency.

Steps must also be taken to address the digital divide in our society and to ensure that, by opening up justice for people to engage with, we do not just find ourselves in a situation where people are excluded because they do not have the appropriate equipment to access it. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that. Ultimately, though, we welcome the steps that this order is taking and look forward to working with the Government to ensure that justice is even more open and transparent.

2.9 pm

Chris Philp: I thank the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman for the constructive and thoughtful approach he has been taking this week, and I look forward to that continuing for many months and years to come. I shall briefly answer his principal questions. On the matter of digital access to courts more generally, I completely concur with everything he said. We are absolutely committed to expanding and extending digital access. In particular, the roll-out of the cloud video platform, which is happening as we speak and due to be completed in the Crown courts and magistrates courts by the end of this month, is a critical part of that. I am glad that we can work together in pushing that programme even further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am really keen to see the system that is coming in for England and Wales being used in Northern Ireland when the opportunity

arises. Is it possible that discussions could take place with the police and justice authorities and through the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that this pilot scheme could also be done in Northern Ireland?

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Those matters are in the hands of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, but I would certainly be happy to pass on to the Northern Ireland Justice Minister the lessons that we are learning from the jurisdiction in England and Wales, and I would of course encourage them to follow the same path that we are treading if they wished to do so.

On the question of safeguards, the key safeguard in all this is the control that the judge exercises in how a case is conducted. It is still a matter for judicial discretion whether any individual case can be streamed and broadcast. As I said in my opening remarks, we would expect judges not to livestream cases where a litigant in person was present or if there was witness testimony where the identity of the witness might be a matter of sensitivity. We are, as we often do, entrusting to the judge the sensible and safe management of any individual case. With that, I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I consider that there is no need to suspend the House on this occasion, as I observe that everyone who is intending to leave has now left, and everyone who is intending to be present is now present. So we will proceed immediately to motion No. 3 on Exiting the European Union (Civil Aviation).

Exiting the European Union (Civil Aviation)

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): I beg to move,

That the draft Civil Aviation (Insurance) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 5 March, be approved.

It is a great pleasure to debate this statutory instrument. It is my first SI debate on the Floor of the House, and I had my first ever SI debate only yesterday.

This draft instrument will be made under the powers conferred by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and will be needed at the end of the transition period. As hon. Members are aware, the Government are committed to ensuring that the UK has a functioning statute book at the end of the transition period, while we continue to work to achieve a positive future relationship with the EU. Although the Government will seek to reach the best outcome for the UK and the EU, it is our duty to make reasonable preparations for all scenarios, including by ensuring that there is a functioning statute book, irrespective of the outcome of the negotiations. To that extent, we have conducted intensive work to ensure that there continues to be a well-functioning legislative and regulatory regime for aviation, including for insurance.

This instrument is made under section 8 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. It is subject to the affirmative procedure because it transfers an EU legislative function to a public authority in the UK. This procedure also enables the right level of parliamentary scrutiny for the proposed changes.

EU regulation 785/2004 requires air carriers and aircraft operators to be insured in respect of passengers, baggage, cargo and third parties, and against other risks, such as acts of war, terrorism, hijacking, sabotage, unlawful seizure of aircraft and civil commotion.

The amounts for which carriers and operators are required to be insured are measured in special drawing rights, an international reserve asset created by the International Monetary Fund.

The EU regulation also requires air carriers and aircraft operators to demonstrate their compliance with the minimum insurance requirements set out in the regulation. Elements of the regulation were developed in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. They make provision for exceptional situations where a failure of the insurance market means that carriers are not able to demonstrate that they are adequately insured in respect of all the risks specified in the regulation.

The withdrawal Act will retain regulation 785/2004 in UK law in its entirety at the end of the transition period. The draft regulations we are considering make further changes that are necessary so that the EU regulation continues to function correctly after the end of the transition period. The withdrawal Act will ensure that the same minimum insurance requirements for air carriers and aircraft operators that apply today continue to apply after the transition period.

The Civil Aviation (Insurance) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were debated in Committee in October 2018, made changes to the retained regulation

[Rachel Maclean]

so that it continues to function correctly after EU exit. The need for this additional statutory instrument arose due to the EU adopting regulation 2019/1243, which amended regulation 785/2004, after the 2018 regulations were made. The purpose of this SI is to fix further deficiencies introduced by those amendments.

The amendments made by this SI are technical in nature. Regulation 785/2004 includes powers for the Commission to adjust minimum required levels of insurance where international treaties make that necessary. The 2018 regulations converted those powers into powers for the Secretary of State to do the same via regulations. However, since the 2018 regulations were made, the EU's amendments to regulation 785/2004 have replaced the Commission powers with new versions more closely aligned to the legal framework established by the treaty of Lisbon.

To ensure that UK legislation continues to function correctly after the end of the transition period, these regulations take the same approach used in the 2018 regulations for the previous versions of the Commission powers. They replace them with powers for the Secretary of State to amend the minimum insurance requirements by regulations. That is what the SI is for. In summary, no change in policy is made by these regulations; they make only minor technical and consequential changes to ensure that UK legislation on aviation insurance continues to function effectively after the end of the transition period.

As I said in my opening remarks, we continue to work to achieve a positive future relationship with the EU. However, this instrument is an essential element in ensuring that we have a functioning statute book at the end of the transition period. It makes technical changes to ensure that UK legislation on aviation insurance continues to function. I hope colleagues will join me in supporting the regulations, which I commend to the House.

2.18 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It has been some four years since I stood at this Dispatch Box, so it is a pleasure to be back. I took part in Transport orals a few weeks ago, but that was on one of the screens above us. I am very pleased to be here shadowing the Minister today. We have already established a constructive relationship. We debated our first statutory instrument together yesterday in Committee. As I said to her, I will be writing to her and scrutinising what she does, but in a spirit of constructive working. We have the decarbonisation of transport brief and the EU transition brief, both of which are incredibly important in the current circumstances.

The statutory instrument that we are discussing today is uncontroversial in that we accept that, now that Britain has left the European Union and the end of the transition period is in sight, we need to transfer relevant powers away from the European Commission and to the Secretary of State for Transport as smoothly as possible. I understand that a number of statutory instruments will be issuing forth from the Minister in the coming months, and that could be seen as a mechanistic process to ensure continuity. That does not mean to say, however, that we will not scrutinise and challenge if we have concerns about the way that the Government are doing things.

As the Minister said, the function of the measure is to ensure that there are minimum insurance requirements for air carriers and aircraft operators in respect of passengers' baggage, cargo and third parties. My understanding is that that stems from the 1999 Montreal convention, whereby airlines are responsible for compensation in the case of death and injury to passengers, and are required to be adequately insured to cover any liabilities. The EU civil aviation insurance regulation sets out the minimum level required.

I have one question, which the Minister may have answered in her opening remarks. Given that the statutory instrument transfers power from the European Commission to the Secretary of State to set those minimum requirements, and that he—or she in future—can do so by regulation, is there potentially a risk that the minimum insurance levels will not be the same as they would be if we were still part of the EU scheme? I think that is quite an important point to note.

The statutory instrument is one of many that the Government are having to rush through Parliament as a result of what I would say is an unnecessary focus on an arbitrary date in our exit from the transition period. Given the limitations on parliamentary scrutiny at the moment because of the need for social distancing and the fact that not as many Members can take part in proceedings, as well as the delay that we have had over the past few months, there is a danger that we could be rushing delegated legislation rather than giving it the proper attention that it deserves. Given the need for certainty for the people who will be affected by such legislation, we do not want a logjam towards the end of the year, giving rise to uncertainty about whether arrangements will be put in place or not.

The fact that we have now got started, and that we have dealt with two of the statutory instruments this week, is a good start. I do not think, however, that fixing in law the end date for the transition period has been beneficial to the legislative process, and I am uneasy about the apparent lack of progress in ongoing negotiations with the European Union. The concerns about a damaging exit at the end of the year are very real. That is particularly important for the aviation industry, given that we are in a time of unprecedented economic upheaval for the sector.

The aviation sector's need for certainty has never been greater. Brexit will inevitably have an impact on a business that is, by its very nature, about crossing borders and relationships with other countries, and the global pandemic has hit aviation especially hard. There has been a devastating collapse in air traffic of approximately 90%, which is putting at risk an economically vital industry that supports 230,000 jobs.

We need clarity from the Government on three major policy areas. The first is the one that we are discussing today—the legislation related to the European Union and the transition period. We also need clarity on the financial support for the industry, and on the nature of the measures that the industry must implement to avoid further spread of covid-19.

I am pleased that today we are establishing a degree of clarity on one aspect, as it relates to the EU transition period, but confusion still reigns over the Government's quarantine for new arrivals, and we continue to wait for a specific conditional support package for the aviation industry. I and my colleagues in the shadow Transport

team are very happy to work with Ministers to try to ensure that the aviation industry is given the certainty, the clarity, the direction and the support that it needs.

2.24 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): This is my first chance to welcome the Minister and the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) to their places. I congratulate them both on securing such an important brief at such a critical time.

I am pleased to support the Government on the Bill. As we leave the European Union and become a sovereign state once again, we should feel capable of regulating our own affairs, and able to set our own level of insurance requirements in aviation. Just as it makes sense to control our own fisheries and protect our own marine environment, so it makes sense to do so for the sky above our heads. The acid test of a regulatory structure, however, must be whether it supports the aviation and aerospace sectors.

Having taken back control, we must be generous and collaborative with our international partners. I encourage the Minister, therefore, to seek bilateral aviation safety agreements with both the US Federal Aviation Authority and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency and ensure that where there are opportunities to deregulate further than either, we remain in alignment with both in respect of matters such as type certification, personnel licensing and trading standards.

While I am on the subject of regulation, I should like to congratulate Sir Stephen Hillier on his appointment as the new chair of the Civil Aviation Authority. My constituency, as well as being one of the most beautiful from the ground, is even more spectacular from the air. It is home to the excellent South Down gliding club, formed in 1930 and one of the oldest in the United Kingdom. Sir Stephen has a distinguished aviation career, and I ask him to consider making one of his priorities during his term in office the protection of airspace for recreational general aviation, such as gliding, which is so critical to providing affordable access to the skies and thereby inspiring future generations.

Going into this pandemic, our aviation sector was world leading in growth, jobs and competitiveness, but that is now at real risk. Aviation has taken the full force of the economic impact of the covid-19 crisis, devastated by border closures and the drop in passenger demand. Many of my constituents work for British Airways, Virgin, TUI and other airlines, or for businesses that are part of the extended Gatwick supply chain. I know of constituents such as Antonello and Grainne Patteri, who have served British Airways loyally for 24 years but whose loyalty sadly is not being reciprocated. I share their worry and frustration at how they are being treated, and it is right that I raise it with the Minister today.

While other industries are beginning their recovery, the downturn for aviation has only been exacerbated by the imposition of blanket quarantine, which hangs the “closed” sign on Britain just as our competitors reopen for business. I believe that the Minister fully understands, having previously worked in the financial sector, that if planes full of passengers from Iceland, whose last death from covid was in April, or from covid-free New Zealand were landing in the UK this afternoon, it would actually lower our average infection rate. I am reassured by the Government’s undertakings to implement air bridges as a matter of urgency, as well as to look again at testing

on arrival—something I first raised in April—but could the Minister be so kind as to provide an update in her winding-up speech?

My final point relates to future opportunities. Together with quantum computing, artificial intelligence, fintech and the life sciences, aviation and aerospace is one of the key industrial sectors where UK businesses have a global competitive advantage in a growing and high-value industry.

2.28 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I apologise for my late entrance, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was sauntering over unaware that the last SI had been moved formally. The sauntering turned into a sprint when I saw the monitor.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. For the avoidance of doubt, I must say that in current circumstances it is not necessary for everyone who is taking part in a debate to be here at the beginning—just in case the House happens to be full and we want to keep the numbers down. Most unusually, therefore, the hon. Gentleman has done nothing wrong.

Gavin Newlands: I will take that in the spirit in which it was intended, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The SI comes at a difficult time for the aviation sector, as has been highlighted, and one that undoubtedly will see a significantly impacted and reduced sector by the time these regulations come into force. Notwithstanding the fact that Scotland is being dragged out of the EU and the transition period against our collective will, and that the regulations are therefore a matter of regret to us, it is not in our or anyone’s interest to interrupt regulations that ensure minimum insurance requirements for air carriers and aircraft operators in respect of passengers’ baggage, cargo and third parties.

With that said, in looking at the issue of insurance in aviation, perhaps we should be debating whether airlines have or can access appropriate business interruption insurance to cover situations such as the one that we face right now. If they had that insurance, we might not now be in a situation in which so many of our constituents waited inordinate lengths of time to secure a refund—indeed, many are still fighting to get one. That is why we on the SNP Benches have called on the Government to implement a travel guarantee fund, which may well still be necessary.

In my dealings with operators, they have said that the rights in respect of cancellation refunds in essence go only one way. In other words, if the holiday provider cancels a holiday, be it because of travel advice or for any other reason, the consumer is entitled to a full refund, but if the passenger cancels a holiday because of Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice on the date of travel or the Government’s quarantine policy, only a portion of the refund, according to the terms and conditions of the bookings, is payable. Although it strays outside the scope of the regulations, does the Minister think that is fair?

The sector may not be as scaled down as we fear if the Government show the same level of support for this strategic sector as that shown by many other Governments around the world, including Scotland’s. I do not want to

[Gavin Newlands]

stray any further from the tight confines of the regulations, but other issues—including the situation facing workers at Rolls-Royce and British Airways, and right across the sector—may well be raised in much detail in my Adjournment debate, which will follow proceedings and which I am shamelessly plugging right now.

To conclude, I reiterate that despite the fact that we do not accept the basis on which the UK Government give effect to legislation that takes Scotland out of the EU, nor the transfer of discretionary powers from the Commission—an organisation accountable to the European Parliament and member states—to Ministers as individuals, we recognise the need to ensure that EU regulations are maintained on exit day, regardless of the constitutional situation. That is in the interests of consumers, passengers and businesses, and as such, we will not vote against the motion.

2.31 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I wish the Minister every success in her new role; we look forward to watching her progress. It is also nice to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), in her place. I am sure a long career beckons for both—perhaps in different roles, but it is none the less important to say that.

I thank the Government, and the Minister in particular, for bringing forward the regulations to ensure that the removal of what would be onerous European legislation is complete. The very nature of aviation means that we travel large distances into different countries and uphold their aviation rules, but the fact is that we must be the ones who set our own standards, and they must be safe and appropriate and give the cover that is needed, as the Minister indicated.

Regulation (EC) 785/2004 established minimum insurance requirements for air carriers and aircraft operators in respect of passengers, baggage, cargo and third parties. It also required air carriers and aircraft operators to have insurance that covers specific risks, including all things that could possibly take place—acts of war, terrorism, hijacking, acts of sabotage, the unlawful seizure of aviation and civil commotion. Such protections obviously need to be in place, yet the point of the matter is that if anything is to change in our aviation, it is imperative that although we will in all likelihood align with basic regulations, the decision lies where it should: with Ministers of our Government.

Our aviation sector is in unprecedented times. The regulations before the House remind the industry that we have a role to play in the industry going forward, as other Members have said. Whether that is by supporting the industry through production in the Bombardier factory in Newtownards in my constituency, similarly to the situation mentioned by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith); by supporting our airports to enable them to maintain connectivity across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and globally; by supporting airline staff and their baggage handlers; or by supporting individual airlines—for instance, British Airways, to which the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs referred, and in respect of which a number of my constituents, some with 30-plus years of loyal commitment to British Airways, are very concerned about

their future—the pandemic will mean change for our aviation sector. Hard times are ahead, but tomorrow can be a better day if we have the commitment that the Minister and our Government are showing for the aviation sector.

We have a role to play, and this statutory instrument clearly shows that we are determined to leave Europe and stand alone at that date, regardless of coronavirus and European determination to exploit an awful time not just for the global economy, but for all the families directly involved with the aviation sector in the UK. This small wording and legislative change shows not only that we are prepared to leave, but that we are mindful of the needs of the industry and are equipped to deal with those needs. It is such a small change, which may seem meaningless to some, yet the message is clear: the aviation industry is a priority for Members of this House. I, for one, will look into anything that affects the strength of the industry. With that in mind, I support this instrument, which brings power back to the House.

2.35 pm

Rachel Maclean: This is a great opportunity for Members across the House to express their support for the aviation industry in their own constituencies and across the whole country. The Government share that support.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) has given a clear and welcome commitment that she will be supporting this SI, although I understand that she may reserve the right to oppose and debate in the future, as is absolutely right. She asked about the transfer of powers from the European Commission to the Secretary of State. I can reassure her that as part of preparations for leaving the European Union, we, as a responsible Government, are preparing for all scenarios. We absolutely expect that the minimum insurance levels will apply for aviation in any scenario. She referred to the number of SIs that we have to get through. Ministers are working closely with officials in the Department to ensure that we can meet those commitments, and we expect to be able to do so. We expect to stick to the commitments that we have given, especially on aviation.

The hon. Lady referred to the financial support that we are looking to provide to the aviation industry. The Aviation Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), has discussed those points at the Dispatch Box, and I will certainly take the hon. Lady's comments back to her. A vast range of support has been given to businesses across the country, including many of the airlines that we all use. We expect that to continue and will keep all those measures under review.

The hon. Lady finally asked me a little bit about the Government's position on social distancing and quarantine. As she will know, all the measures are kept under review, and our priority is to keep people safe and to be guided by the science. We will continue that dialogue because we understand the pressures on the aviation sector.

It is a great pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who highlighted the importance of aviation in his constituency. I understand that there is a gliding club there. I am not sure whether he is a keen glider himself, but I wish the club well. I reassure him that we have

already reached, and have in place, a bilateral aviation safety agreement with the US. He also touched on air bridges. This policy has been introduced because it is our priority to keep people safe. We are looking into these matters closely and are keeping them under review as the position of the coronavirus pandemic progresses in this country.

Gavin Newlands: In looking at the potential dates for the introduction of air bridges, are the Government taking into account the different holiday seasons around the UK? England and Wales obviously have a significantly later holiday season than Scotland and Northern Ireland. Scottish and Northern Ireland airports will therefore be adversely affected if air bridges are brought in at the end of, or after, the Scottish and Northern Ireland holiday seasons.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. That matter is outside the scope of this particular SI, but I assure him that I speak to the devolved Administrations on a regular basis, so all these concerns are being discussed in the Department and I will certainly take his point back with me.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) expressed his support for aviation security, and mentioned the Bombardier plant in his constituency. We are aware of all those concerns, and are keen to work closely with him. I discuss connectivity with colleagues from Northern Ireland in my regular meetings with them. The Government recognise the importance of preparing throughout the year to ensure that we bring forward the required legislation for all possible scenarios at the end of the transition period and for Parliament to have the opportunity to scrutinise it in the normal way. This instrument, as we have seen, is essential to ensure that the legislation on aviation, which is an important part of the regulatory framework for civil aviation, continues to work effectively at the end of the transition period. I hope that the House has found this informative and that it will join me in supporting these regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Once again, I will not suspend the House, because the last piece of business passed very swiftly and I perceive that everyone who was intending to leave the Chamber has done so and that everyone who requires to be here for the next piece of business is here, so we will move immediately on.

Water Industry

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I beg to move,

That the draft Water Industry (Specified Infrastructure Projects) (English Undertakers) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 28 April, be approved.

Mr Speaker—no, Madam Deputy Speaker. I got that completely wrong before I had even started. I apologise.

The instrument before the House is a simple amendment to the Water Industry (Specified Infrastructure Projects) (English Undertakers) Regulations 2013 to remove the sunset provision. That would allow the 2013 regulations to continue in force and to be available as part of the regulatory framework of the water industry. Without this SI, the 2013 regulations would expire on 27 June 2020. Before I talk a little further about the Government's reasons for bringing forward this amending SI, I wish to outline the purpose of the 2013 regulations.

Water and sewerage services in England are provided by companies known as undertakers. The 2013 regulations were designed to help contain and minimise the risks associated with large or complex water or sewerage infrastructure projects, thereby helping to protect undertakers, their customers and UK taxpayers. Containing and minimising risks is likely to reduce the overall cost of borrowing for a given water undertaker and so ensure better value for money for that undertaker's customers. It also makes sure that delivery of such infrastructure projects will not adversely impact on the existing water or sewerage services provided by undertakers.

The 2013 regulations enable the Secretary of State or Ofwat to specify, by notice, an infrastructure project where either is satisfied that two conditions had been met. The first is that the infrastructure project is of a size or complexity that threatens an undertaker's ability to provide services to its customers. The second condition is that specifying the project would be likely to result in better value for money than if the project was not so specified, taking into account charges to customers and any Government financial assistance. A good example of this, just to set all this in context, is the Thames Tideway Tunnel, which meets both of those conditions.

Once it is specified, an undertaker is required to put the infrastructure project out to tender and a separate Ofwat regulated infrastructure provider is then designated to finance and deliver the project. Such infrastructure projects raise many complex issues, particularly around determining the cost of their financing, coupled with the construction risk that is far greater than that normally associated with an undertaker's typical capital investment.

Requiring an undertaker to tender competitively for an infrastructure provider for a large or complex project provides an objective means of testing whether the financing costs of such a project are appropriate and reasonable. Without the tendering process, competitively determining the cost of capital for this type of infrastructure project would not be possible. The ability to create Ofwat-regulated infrastructure providers also helps to ring-fence their associated higher risks and should result in more effective risk management for these projects. Creating designated infrastructure providers in this way means that a large or complex infrastructure project will not affect the ability of an undertaker to provide its

[Rebecca Pow]

day-to-day services for its customers and avoids any resultant extra costs that would ultimately be borne by their customers—in other words, the people using the water.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister assure the House that this provision will not be used as a device to prevent the additional provision of water capacity, which is much needed in the south-east? We have had huge overdevelopment, without the proper additional provision of water. We now wish to see an awful lot more food grown locally and in our country, which will need a lot of irrigation. So will she assure the House that increasing capacity will be an important part of the greener growth that we look forward to?

Rebecca Pow: My right hon. Friend makes an exceedingly good point. Of course the Government are completely aware of the situation on water supply and dealing with the issues he is talking about is on our top list of priorities, but what we are dealing with here is quite separate. We are talking about big infrastructure projects, some of which will deliver some of the water he is referring to and will be very helpful, but they will be separate, as is the Thames Tideway Tunnel, from the general work of the water companies and the smaller-scale projects that they will still undertake to keep our water supply as we need it.

The amending statutory instrument was laid in Parliament following a post-implementation review of the 2013 regulations, carried out in 2018. Eight key stakeholders were consulted, five of which submitted responses—Ofwat, Thames Water, Bazalgette Tunnel Ltd, Bazalgette Tunnel Ltd investors and the Consumer Council for Water. The review found that the 2013 regulations had been successful in fulfilling all their policy objectives: facilitating large or complex projects; minimising risks to undertakers; providing value for money to customers; and promoting innovation in the sector. Accordingly, the review recommended that the 2013 regulations' sunset provision be removed.

In March 2020, we undertook a further, targeted consultation on our proposal to remove the sunset provision in this piece of legislation. Views were sought from Ofwat, Water UK, Thames Water, Bazalgette Tunnel Ltd, the Environment Agency, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and the CCFW. Water companies were consulted via Water UK and Bazalgette Tunnel Ltd was given the option to consult its investors. Four written responses were received, from Ofwat, the Environment Agency, Thames Water and Affinity Water. All indicated that they were in favour of this amendment.

Currently, the only project regulated under the 2013 regulations is the Thames Tideway Tunnel, which I referred to earlier. However, Ofwat has identified four large or complex water infrastructure projects currently in development that may benefit from being specified in accordance with the 2013 regulations over the next 10 years, which might be of interest to my right hon. Friend. They are the south-east strategic reservoir at Abingdon, a joint project proposed by Thames Water; the London effluent reuse scheme, a project proposed by Thames Water; the south Lincolnshire reservoir, a joint project proposed by Anglia Water and Affinity Water;

and the River Severn to River Thames transfer, a joint project proposed by Thames Water, Severn Trent Water and United Utilities.

John Redwood: Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I have been generous in giving way, but I will do so again.

John Redwood: I thank the Minister, because she has got to the point that I was hoping she might be making, which is that we need more reservoir capacity urgently. It is crazy that with just one month of dry weather we are already at risk of some kind of hosepipe ban, after the wettest long autumn and winter I can remember.

Rebecca Pow: My right hon. Friend makes a sound point. A lot of the issue is that we have been in lockdown and there has been an enormous increase in demand for water because people have been at home, filling their paddling pools and watering their gardens and vegetable patches, as I have. That increased use of water has put on immediate pressure. It is not a drought situation, but he is right: we need to deal with our overall water supply, and that is absolutely on this Government's agenda.

A decision as to whether the infrastructure projects I have referred to could come within the scope of the 2013 regulations will be made on a case-by-case basis at the appropriate time when the schemes are brought forward. The Government are committed to improving water supply resilience, as set out in our strategic policy statement to Ofwat and our 25-year environment plan. That ambition is made more challenging because of the growing population, increased water demand from agriculture and industry and, of course, climate change.

We also want to ensure that there is sufficient water left for the natural environment. Without any action, many areas of England will face water shortages by 2050. The starting point for action is to reduce water use by reducing leakage from the water distribution networks and reducing our personal consumption. However, even if leaks and personal consumption are reduced, we will continue to need new water resource infrastructure. In our "Water conservation report", published in December 2018, we set out our progress on promoting water conservation from 2015 onwards.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister responded to an Adjournment debate secured by a Member from England on the decreasing water supply in rivers because of water being taken out by water companies. Is it her intention to ensure that that practice will stop and that river water levels will be retained?

Rebecca Pow: The water supply is to be looked at in the round. If the hon. Gentleman would like to have a conversation with me, I would be happy to tell him about all the things we have in train to deal with that, to ensure that we have enough water for everyone in future and take account of climate change and the growing demands. He raises an important point; keeping the right status for our rivers is incredibly important.

We endorse the industry's existing commitment to a 50% reduction in leakage by 2050, and we announced a consultation to enable us to set an ambitious target for personal water consumption. We consulted on measures

to reduce personal water consumption, including supporting measures on amending building regulations, water efficiency labelling and smart metering. Most of those measures can be taken forward without the need for new primary legislation, and we will publish a Government position on it later this year.

Alongside reducing leakage and personal water consumption, new water resources infrastructure, including reservoirs and water transfers, is needed to provide a secure supply of water for future generations. In the current price review period, Ofwat has made £469 million available to nine water companies to investigate and develop integrated strategic regional water resource solutions, so that they can be construction-ready by 2025. That work will be supported by the Environment Agency's national framework for water resources, which was published in March this year.

In summary, this statutory instrument enables the Water Industry (Specified Infrastructure Projects) (English Undertakers) Regulations 2013 to continue in force, in order that they can continue to be used in the future delivery of large or complex water or sewerage infrastructure projects. Such projects play an essential role in strengthening the future resilience of water resources in England. Retaining the 2013 regulations will help to reduce the associated financial risks of such projects, ensure that water undertakers continue to deliver their existing water or sewerage services to customers, and provide greater value for money. I commend the regulations to the House.

2.54 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As the Minister stated, this statutory instrument removes the seven-year sunset clause in relation to the Thames Tideway tunnel, to allow the 2013 regulations to continue. Those regulations, which Labour supported, enable the creation of infrastructure providers. To date, the Thames Tideway tunnel—nicknamed the “super sewer”—is the only project created under the regulatory regime. It is reportedly on budget and on target for completion by 2024. At 25 km long when completed, it will reduce the amount of overflow water and sewerage pumped into the Thames by 94%. It would appear that the regulatory model for this project has been successful and therefore should be allowed to continue. That would enable other large or complex projects to make use of the same funding model, as the Minister outlined.

As we are a few years off the tunnel's planned completion date, can I ask the Minister to provide an update on the progress of the Thames Tideway project, as well as what plans she has to review the tunnel's effectiveness when finished? I would also be grateful if she could outline the Government's strategy for managing the inheritance of major assets, such as the tunnel, by water and sewerage companies from the infrastructure providers that build them. Thames Water customers paid an average of £19 of their annual household bill last year to finance this project, while the company avoided paying corporation tax and its executives pocketed hundreds of thousands of pounds in bonuses. It is important that those who pay for the asset through their bills should retain some of the benefits if the asset is to be part of the water or sewerage utility base.

I note that there will be no new sunset clause. Is that a wise decision, given the fact that this is the only project being undertaken in this way and it has not yet been completed? Will the Minister elaborate on her decision

not to put in place a new sunset clause? The scale of infrastructure projects under this regulatory model demands a rigorous oversight and review process. The removal of a sunset clause will benefit a number of future large and complex infrastructure projects. What steps will the Government take to ensure that this regulatory and funding model is best suited to such multimillion pound projects?

Every effort must be made to increase customer confidence. In recent years, customers have faced rising water bills, while those at the top have received multimillion-pound packages, huge bonuses and dividends. In Yorkshire, the average annual water bill for this year will be £406. That is almost a 60% real-terms increase since the Yorkshire Water Authority was privatised in 1989. Labour is not opposing the amendment to the regulations today, but we are clear that a wider conversation needs to take place on making water bills affordable for customers.

Billions of litres of water are lost each day due to leaks, causing water shortages and environmental damage, yet a recent report found that unless action is taken now, parts of southern England will run out of water within 20 years. With a growing climate change crisis and increasingly extreme weather, there must be a larger strategy to tackle current and future challenges for our water and sewerage systems.

John Redwood: Does the hon. Lady agree that part of the answer to the south-east's problem is more reservoir provision? We have a massive expansion of housing with no additional provision and we will need a lot more for agriculture, because we will want more market gardening.

Stephanie Peacock: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point and I am sure the Minister has heard it.

I would like to conclude by asking the Minister this: what are the Government doing to encourage water and sewerage companies to reinvest in existing infrastructure to promote reduced household water consumption, prevent leaks, improve services to customers and protect our natural environment? I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.58 pm

Rebecca Pow: I welcome the shadow Minister to her place. I believe this is her first time at the Dispatch Box and I very much look forward to working with her on all the exciting issues we are dealing with in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs right now, not least the subject of water. I thank those who have contributed today, and I thank the shadow Minister for her comments.

As we look forward to the challenges of population growth and climate change, and we strive to leave the environment in a better place than we found it in, we know that new water resource infrastructure is going to be required. On that, I believe we are all agreed today. It is essential that we give the regulators the right tools to address those challenges and ensure we have sufficient sustainable water resources into the future.

I just want to touch on a couple of points that were raised by the shadow Minister, one of which was why we had not set another date for the subject we are

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reviewing today. The answer is that we did not consider it necessary or appropriate to set a further review date, as we expect that the power to specify projects under the regulations will be used infrequently. We will of course review the regulations as appropriate.

I was very pleased that the shadow Minister actually praised the tideway tunnel project. I have visited it myself and I recommend doing so, if she has not made a visit, when it is safe to do so with all the social distancing. It is an incredible project and a good model for projects of this nature, which is exactly what this SI concerns—projects of this type in future. As I have mentioned, a number of such projects could be coming forward in the next few years.

The Thames tideway tunnel is due to be operational in 2023, and the project as a whole is due for completion in 2024, but obviously we are still assessing the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, because that potentially has had some impact on the working schedule. We are very much keeping abreast of that.

The shadow Minister touched on whether these projects are value for money for customers. The tideway tunnel has demonstrated value for money for customers, being specified in accordance with the 2013 regulations, which has contributed to a lower cost of borrowing for the project. That has resulted in Thames Water customers paying an average increase of £20 to £25 a year, which is a reduction from the £70 to £80 initially modelled.

I reassure the shadow Minister that the whole issue of water supply is at the forefront of my mind, as the water Minister. As I outlined in my speech, we have a number of policies going through to help with that and, indeed, that ambition to reduce individual personal water consumption. At the moment, the average water used by a person in a day is 143 litres. It is interesting to reflect on how much one uses in a shower or bath or to clean one's teeth. We all need to start taking more notice of those things, although the right to water is obviously something we must always provide. There is a great deal in the pipeline to reduce water consumption, and there is also a great deal coming forward in the Environment Bill that will help the whole supply agenda, including measures dealing with abstraction and water and sewerage management plans.

On that note, I hope that the SI, which brings forward something that will be incredibly useful in the future, will be supported by the whole House.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): In order to allow the safe exit of Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am suspending the House for three minutes.

3.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Children and Young Persons

3.6 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 445), dated 21 April 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 April 2020, be annulled.

I thank the Minister for making time for this debate this afternoon in response to the prayer motion we have laid against these regulations. The Labour party has been clear that we do not support these regulations, and we will be voting accordingly.

These regulations make significant changes to the statutory protections for children in the care system, who are some of the most vulnerable and at-risk children in the country. Coming into force on 24 April and due to expire on 25 September, the regulations relax to a significant degree the safeguarding responsibilities of local authorities in relation to children going into and in the care system. The changes are wide-ranging, and I will not go into all of them today, but I will outline some of the provisions contained in the regulations that have caused the most concern.

First, social workers had been required to visit privately fostered children or those in care within one week when they go into care and every six weeks for the year after that. This requirement has been changed to

“as soon as is reasonably practical”,

even for a phone or video call. The requirements to review plans for children in care to set timescales have also been relaxed, denying children the opportunity to raise concerns and the problems they are having.

Secondly, independent panels, which approve foster carers and adoption placements, have become optional, and local authorities can now approve anyone who meets the requirements as a temporary foster carer, rather than only those who were connected to a child, with consequences for the future outcomes of that child. In addition, approval is no longer needed by a nominated officer to place children into care outside their local areas. Together with the change to allow placement with temporary carers who may not be connected to the child, this could mean that children are moved away from their home or anyone they know.

Thirdly, there now only have to be “reasonable endeavours” made to visit children's homes, instead of monthly visits, and Ofsted inspections no longer need to take place twice a year.

Fourthly, controls on the periods of time children can be placed in emergency or short placements has been extended beyond any reasonable definition of short. Children can be placed with emergency foster carers for 24 weeks, rather than the usual six days, and children can be placed in short break placements for up to 75 days, rather than 17 days.

Finally, as the Children's Commissioner has highlighted, children's homes can now enforce the deprivation of liberty of children if they are showing symptoms of coronavirus, in accordance with the Coronavirus Act 2020.

I am sure the whole House agrees that these are not small changes. It is easy to see how a whole generation of looked-after children could be adversely affected

during the six months the relaxed duties are in place—if, indeed, the Government do reverse them later this year. It is important to recognise the group of children we are talking about in this debate. As of 31 March 2019, just over 78,000 children were in the care of local authorities, up 4% on the previous year. On top of this, many more are classified as in need or at risk, and may flow in and out of the care system; about 100,000 children flow through the care system each year. Looked-after children have, almost by definition, faced great trauma in their lives. They may have started life in child poverty, in abusive households, in households that suffer from substance abuse or domestic violence, or with parents who suffer from mental illness. They could have been at risk of female genital mutilation, gang violence, child sexual exploitation, or radicalisation; or they could have been an unaccompanied child seeking asylum.

The outcomes for these children are much worse than for their peers. A report by the Social Market Foundation highlighted the fact that of children in or leaving care only 14% achieved five A*-C GCSEs in 2015, compared with 55% nationally, and they are five times more likely to face exclusion than their peers. In 2015-16, an estimated 39% of children in secure training centres had been in care, despite children in care accounting for about 1% of all children; and almost 25% of the adult prison population have previously been in care. Similarly, looked-after children are four times more likely to have a mental health condition, and 40% of care leavers aged between 19 and 21 are not in employment or education.

I am setting out these issues for the House because any disruption to the care of these children could have a significant impact on the rest of their lives. It is clear that these children are incredibly vulnerable, and in the context of the pandemic they need more support, not less. Our opposition to the regulations is echoed by the Children's Commissioner, a chorus of children's charities, and MPs from across the House; and Article 39 has applied to the High Court for judicial review of the changes. A specific campaign group, Scrap SI 445, has been established, such is the strength of feeling against the regulations.

The following are just a few examples of the opposition that has been voiced. The Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, said of the regulations:

"I think they should be revoked now—I don't think they are necessary or justified... There is a potential for children in care not to be given the protection they need and for them to be put at greater risk... For some, that means they are at greater risk of grooming or exploitation, especially older children in semi-independent accommodation."

She went on to say:

"The focus was not on the best interests of children, it was on the system and the providers of it... all of this should be based on the best interests of children, especially those that the state has such a high level of responsibility over."

The National Youth Advocacy Service has said that reduced contact by professionals increases safeguarding risks, with the Department for Education reporting that only one in 20 students identified as vulnerable continued to attend school during the lockdown. Many children and young people at risk of harm have been living without the safety net that school would usually provide, as well as having less contact with social workers and other safeguarding professionals.

The British Association for Social Workers said:

"Looked after children and young people are among the most vulnerable in society. Hard won rights in law are not simply bureaucratic processes but exist to protect children and young people and promote their well-being."

It added:

"Some of the changes in the Regulations seem suspiciously close to the 'freedoms' that were in the original draft of the Children and Social Work Bill"—

in 2016-17—

"clauses that were subsequently thrown out by a coalition of Parliamentarians, after a vigorous campaign by civil society groups and service users."

Finally, Become, the charity for children in care and care leavers, listed its objections thus:

"There was no justification or evidence for removing these particular safeguards... The emergency amendments were introduced just one day before they came into force without appropriate consultation or parliamentary scrutiny... The emergency amendments lack clear guidance or parameters about how and when they should be used... Current guidance does not provide sufficient detail on how the use and impact of the new powers will be centrally collated and monitored by government or Ofsted."

There is clearly consensus across the board that these regulations are not necessary. They are disproportionate to the need expressed by local authorities; will significantly increase the risk that these children and young people are already exposed to; are likely to be detrimental to children's outcomes; were introduced with no scrutiny and minimal consultation; and have no guarantee that they will be revoked in September. As such, the Labour party opposes these regulations and urges the Government to revoke them with immediate effect.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is a 90-minute debate. We have a fair number of speakers, so I urge colleagues to speak for no longer than 10 minutes.

3.16 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): With this statutory instrument, the Government are trying to do what they failed to do in 2017, during the passage of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, and what they failed to do with their myth-busting guide in 2019.

In 2017, the Government proposed allowing local authorities, under the guise of innovation, to opt out of protective legislation for children. The aim was to deregulate, on the back of the LaingBuisson report, making the sector ripe and ready for privatisation. After a groundswell of cross-party objection both in and outside this place, the changes, which comprised a whole chapter of the 2017 Act, were removed at the 11th hour. In 2019, the then Minister disseminated a dangerous myth-busting document advising local authorities to dispense with the statutory guidance in relation to the most vulnerable children. Again, this attempt to deregulate and wipe away hard-fought-for protective legislation for children was eventually quashed and the document withdrawn.

Any child protection strategy—whether we are in a pandemic or not—that requires the dispensing of the law to achieve it is counterproductive and downright dangerous. I am not sure if the current Minister is aware that the legislation that the Secretary of State so cavalierly dispensed with under this SI took decades to

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

achieve and was hard fought for by the profession and in this place and the other place. It led to our having one of the safest child protection systems in the world.

However, the Secretary of State's actions have removed the safety net, because since 24 April this year, vulnerable children in the care of the state, whose number stands at a record of more than 78,000, have lost their right to visits from their social worker when they are in placement. They have lost their right to have reviews regarding their care. They have lost their right to have temporary carers who have an existing connection with them. They have lost their right to have their complaints thoroughly investigated. These changes either substantially dilute or remove 65 legal protections and, worryingly, the expiration date can be revoked. In other words, this may become a permanent change.

The fact that a child is in placement does not always mean that they are safe. That is why this legislation existed. Children have been harmed, even murdered, by their carers. The consequences of having no social worker oversight and no one visiting or speaking to them about their care could not be more serious.

This SI has also seen a relaxing of the requirements that govern children's homes, a dispensing of fostering and adoption panels, emergency foster placements extended to 24 weeks and relaxations on placements away from a child's home area, and for children who are privately fostered, there is no longer a timeframe for when the local authority needs to check up on them in that placement.

Despite the Government's attempts to circumvent parliamentary scrutiny, they have also been disingenuous in stating that they have consulted key organisations about this SI when they have not. The facts are that a petition to withdraw the SI has, in a short timeframe, amassed over 7,300 signatures, and 51 organisations and over 452 individual social work professionals are calling for it to be withdrawn. Not a single local authority has publicly admitted asking for these changes. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), the Government are facing legal action from Article 39, because it, like many across this House who signed this prayer, has a grasp of the legislation and cares deeply about children. No social workers or local authorities regularly cite protective legislation for children as a block to them carrying out their role. What stops effective children and families social work is the constant barrage of cuts and resource stripping over the past 10 years.

To use this pandemic as an excuse to reignite experiments from 2017 and 2019 on the most vulnerable of our children is reprehensible. The Minister has so far been unable to explain to me the rationale and demand for these changes. I would like her to explain to the House today which local authorities, organisations and social workers asked for these changes, who was consulted on them, and when they were consulted. What involvement does the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families have in these changes? On which date did the Department begin assessing these changes? Additionally, the Minister should be able to share with us today how many local authorities have actually dispensed with these protections and what the outcome of such has been on the children concerned—because I cannot imagine, having been one myself, that a single social worker would allow any child they work with to be put at risk in this way.

I urge the Minister to revoke this SI immediately before she and her colleagues who follow their Whips on this vote are culpable for the significant harm that children may already be suffering and will certainly suffer in future.

3.21 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare two interests: first, that in the register; and secondly, given that these regulations go back to 2002, I think that, for the entire time, I was either the shadow Children's Minister or the Children's Minister and responsible for making some of these regulations. I am doubly interested in them today.

I am not going to vote against these regulations, but this is the opportunity for some serious questions to be answered. It is unfortunate that, these regulations having been laid before Parliament on 23 April, they came into effect on 24 April. Normal conventions about the 21-day rule simply did not happen, and this is the first time that this House has had the opportunity to scrutinise what are very important regulations.

There are serious question marks, as the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) mentioned, about the consultation that went into this. The Children's Commissioner was not consulted, and she has made further comments today to say that she has serious concerns about this. The British Association of Social Workers was not consulted. The Association of Directors of Children's Services was not consulted. The Local Government Association was not consulted. Apparently not even Ofsted was consulted before these regulations became a fait accompli.

There is also the question mark about why the regulations were—

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) *rose*—

Tim Loughton: I will not give way because we are short of time. I am sure the hon. Lady will get in later.

There are also question marks about why we had to do this in England but apparently similar moves have not been planned in Scotland or Wales. The Minister might want to comment on that. It would be useful to know what input went into these regulations and why they were chosen to be relaxed or extended in the way they were.

I am not against emergency legislation in these unprecedented circumstances. We are absolutely going to have to adapt across the board; we have become used to that. But this is a particularly sensitive area of policy dealing with some of our most vulnerable children, who are not in a position to provide the challenge and scrutiny that would be readily available in other areas. We have heard, through the commencement of the Domestic Abuse Bill, that there has been a spike in domestic abuse. We have heard from the NSPCC and others about an increase in reporting of suspected child abuse. It is when children are more vulnerable that we need to make sure that the checks and balances are absolutely there and working. There are also the fears about the impact of county lines gangs using the pandemic as a recruitment tool.

So across a whole range of areas, we should be concerned that the service is there to do what it desperately needs to do, particularly at this time. If we look through

these regulations, we see that too often the phrases “as soon as is reasonably practicable” and “best endeavours” come up, covering a multitude of sins.

I just want to know the thinking behind the introduction of these regulations. Was it because we were expecting a high incidence of social worker absences? We have had seven weeks of these regulations in practice, so the Minister might be able to give us some examples of what has happened over that time. We need to know how the Government are monitoring this. Was it a capacity issue that led to the regulations? What are the current vacancy rates? Was it a reprioritisation issue, and if so, on the basis of what risk assessment? What has the reprioritisation of those social worker resources, and so on, actually gone to? As a result of what has happened, how many new child vulnerability hotspots are springing up, particularly for the 85% of vulnerable children who have not been in school, as the Chairman of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), has pointed out? That was a really useful way of putting them on the radar; teachers were often the early warning sign that something was going wrong at home on a safeguarding issue. They could then pass that information on to social workers and others.

I want to touch briefly on the 10 areas. First, on section 28 and the regulations about visits—which I think I overhauled back in 2010—these are now to take place

“as soon as is reasonably practicable”.

I am not going to delude myself that it all was working perfectly before. The purpose of the Munro review reforms, which were brought in from 2010, was to get away from some of the arbitrary timescales and from being ruled just by a rulebook, rather than by the expertise of experienced and well trained social workers as well. With only a small number of children in school, those social worker visits are even more important, so if they are not happening practically, why not? Is this a resource issue? Are they happening virtually, and are those virtual visits effective? How are social workers teaming up with teachers trying to teach remotely, with the police and with others to ensure that they are monitoring those children in households with a safeguarding question mark particularly closely?

Secondly, the six-monthly independent review of childcare is important, but that is usually down to the independent reviewing officers. What are the IROs actually doing at the moment? Why can they not carry on as before? Thirdly, I am particularly concerned about adoption panels. Adoption was one of the big campaigns of the coalition Government, and I am proud of my part in getting adoptions up to a peak of 5,360 in 2015. However, adoptions went back down again last year and we are now back down almost to the levels before we started the overhaul of adoption regulations, at around 3,500, so we need more adopters to come forward. We need more children to be adopted. Who is doing that important work in the absence of adoption panels? If social workers are too busy doing things elsewhere, or if there are not enough of them because of the pandemic, who is approving those adopters to come forward? Does the Minister fear that we are going to see a further big decrease in the amount of adoptions happening? How many prospective adopters are coming forward but are unable to be processed and trained? Who is doing the training to ensure that they can take on those really important roles as adoptive parents?

The same goes for fostering panels. It is likely that we will see a big surge in people coming forward to offer foster placements, given the likely job losses that will come out of the pandemic. That is a fact of life in recessions. We need to ensure that local authorities are up and running and able to take on those foster placements and to train people and assess them properly to ensure that they are suitable to take on those children who desperately need a home.

Another area I am really concerned about is the dropping of senior officer approval for out-of-care placement. This has been a scandal for too many years. Over half of children are placed out of their area, against all the regulations. It makes it so much more difficult to look at their progress when we have to monitor them from afar, and they are often placed in cheap property in coastal resorts, particularly on the Kent coast. That has been a case in point. It is really important that when a child is placed out of area, it is as a result of proper scrutiny and a decision made at director level. That is a reform that I brought in. I am really concerned about who is now going to be responsible for that.

Skipping through a few of the other points, senior officer approval for the really important fostering for adoption placements has also been dropped.

I am also concerned about the dropping of Ofsted inspection frequencies, and in any case it seems as though Ofsted will not be doing any inspections until next year. That is really worrying. We need Ofsted inspections for new listings—new care homes—where we desperately need that capacity. We need to prioritise looking at homes that are deemed to require improvement or that are inadequate to make sure they are not continuing to offer a poor service or that they have improved and therefore can take on more children again. We need to do that because we have a serious capacity problem.

I understand the suspicion of others that this is a back-door measure to complete the work from the 2016 Bill. I led a delegation of very experienced noble Lords to see the then Secretary of State, Justine Greening—it was a large part of the reason the regulations were dropped, I am glad to say—so I do not want them reintroduced through this route, and I would like to hear it from the Minister that the measures are only temporary and will not be extended beyond September other than in exceptional circumstances. I would like her to show how they are being monitored where that is actually not required at the moment.

I repeat my invitation to the Minister. The all-party group on children, which I chair, is meeting the children's charities and others in July to assess how children are faring during the coronavirus pandemic, and it would be great if she could come and give an account of why the regulations are still required and how they are impacting on children. I understand why they were necessary; I do not understand why they were introduced in the way they were. We would all understand better if we had an account of the experience during the seven weeks they have been in operation, and some guarantees that the welfare of some of our most vulnerable children is not being compromised and will not be compromised for a week longer than it needs to be under the current conditions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. In order to get everyone in and give the Minister a good opportunity to reply, speeches should be a maximum of eight minutes.

3.31 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I can understand that there might be a need for some easements due to anticipated staff shortages during this crisis, but I do not understand why there are fewer safeguards on easements for children's services than in the arrangements for adult services. What is the logic in that? Obviously visits might need to be suspended during the lockdown, but why is it necessary to suspend the six-week contact rule? Are reviews not a crucial safeguard for the interests of children and young people in the care system? Who does the Minister think benefits from removing six-monthly reviews and what does she think is the main benefit of not holding panels for prospective adopters?

One of the conclusions from the child sexual exploitation cases in Rotherham and Rochdale was that children placed outside their own area were all too often out of sight and out of mind, and that is why it was so easy for them to fall prey. Like the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), I am concerned about the removal of senior-level approval for out-of-area placements. What alternative arrangements have been put in place to compensate for the loss of independent visits to children's homes? After all, it is only nine years since the House was discussing the Pindown report. When you make these places less accessible, it is easier for things to happen that should not happen.

Like my hon. Friends, I am curious to know who the Government consulted before they implemented these arrangements. I would love to know who made representations to the Minister and who asked for these arrangements. Was it the same people who tried to impose these changes back in 2016 and 2018? Of course, the reason they were eventually scuppered back then was that there was a genuine fear across the parties that the measures were intended to relax local authority scrutiny and safeguards, save money and pave the way for further privatisation of children's services. At the very point where this Government are rueing the fact that they made unnecessary changes to probation and are now planning to reverse them, it would be completely mad to create the same conditions for our children's services, only to go through all this again.

I am a bit more sceptical than the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham—I fear that the emergency may be a smokescreen and that this is just a third attempt at the same old game. I recognise that the Minister believes that the powers are being used sparingly. She says in her letter of 15 May that they should “only be used if absolutely necessary”.

Is she receiving regular reports on their use? Does she have any plans to collect and publish data on the use of these emergency arrangements? Will she place in the Library an interim report on the use of these powers to date?

I am also curious to know why the Minister thinks that children's services in Scotland have not been under similar pressure and do not face demands for a similar change. What does she think is different? Has she looked at that arrangement? As we have heard, the Children's Commissioner was rather critical of these

measures. Was it an oversight not to consult her? That requires a straightforward answer from the Minister. Was a children's rights impact assessment conducted before the regulations were approved? If so, will the Minister publish it, and if not, why not?

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is quite clear that, at a time of great crisis, the Government's first duty is to protect the most vulnerable. My hon. Friends and the former Minister, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), have spoken eloquently about the need for proper administration of this sector for vulnerable people. We must consider the broader implications of this mistaken statutory instrument. It appears to me that this is part of a wider mishandling of a range of issues related to children, which paints the Government in a very poor light. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another blunder in relation to children?

Steve McCabe: The honest answer is that we do not know, but when children's services across the country are under enormous pressure, this is maybe not the smartest time to relax safeguards and scrutiny. For that reason, we have to hope and trust that when the Minister says these measures are purely for the purposes of this emergency, she is being entirely frank with us. It would be easier to draw that conclusion if she could tell us what she plans to do after 25 September.

3.38 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): This has been a well-informed debate so far. I would like to begin by reflecting on the big picture of our system for protecting vulnerable children in this country. By international standards, the system ranks at or close to the top of the league tables for its effectiveness in protecting children who are at risk. In respect of children who are in the care of the state, we know that the earlier they go into the care system and the longer they spend in it, the better the outcomes. Where a local authority intervenes at the birth of a child and that child is placed in a secure environment, that child's outcomes are broadly equal to other children who have not been through the experience of having to go into care. There is undoubtedly an issue around children who come into care late in their childhood, having bounced around the system, at a moment of crisis, for whom the professionals we rely on have little opportunity to turn that situation around.

We know that that is the big picture of how children's social care works in this country. It is important to reflect that the consistent message from the sector over many years has been that system's effectiveness is driven by good professional practice rather than by regulation. Governments of all parties have introduced changes many times over the years to try to enable effective professional practice to create the security and protection that vulnerable children need. It is important that Parliament recognises that.

This population of children is around half of 1% of all the children in the country, but they are, as a number of Members have said, incredibly vulnerable. For them, their council is the emergency service that is there to intervene when they desperately need help. Around three quarters of those children are placed with foster carers. Having had the experience of 20 years leading

on this issue in a local authority, I believe that elements of the regulations are helpful in reducing some of the burdens that many foster carers complain about as they go on the journey of taking on that vital role, and have the potential to increase the speed with which foster care placements are made available for vulnerable children.

That is an example of where the regulations target an easement of a process that is heavy on face-to-face meetings. They replace it with no reduction in the requirements, as the shadow Minister suggested, but with a reduction in the process, to enable that to happen more quickly for the benefit of the children who need access to it.

This debate is happening at the end of a decade in which we have seen a 28% increase in the number of children in that system. Even against the backdrop of a rising number of children, that is very much evidence of a system that is under pressure. Although I am not remotely in favour of a bonfire of regulation, the House needs to recognise that not all regulation is helpful, particularly at a time when we face a national emergency. Many Members have talked about the need to reduce our expectations of schools and schoolteachers to enable us to manage the response to that. We must expect to go through a similar process in respect of children's social care.

Many of these easements reflect frustrations that prospective adopters, prospective foster carers and children who are going through the system have expressed for a very long time, which are brought into sharp focus by the fact that we cannot go through lengthy face-to-face processes at a time when social distancing and shielding are a crucial part of our national life. For that reason, it seems to me that although the measures outlined by the Minister have a bearing on the wider picture of a system that is under pressure, which needs to be debated, they are reasonable, they are proportionate and they have the potential, following an effective period of implementation, to help reduce some of the logjams in the system that impact our children.

A number of Members have mentioned the need to consult the broadest possible range of stakeholders. I know that the Department has engaged in a process that, perhaps not unexpectedly, has resulted in many organisations saying that although they do not have an objection to the regulations, they will not necessarily come out and support them. I entirely understand that, not least because I hear from many local authorities that they have not needed to implement significant changes to make use of these easements, but if they face a point at which there is either a large increase in the number of children in their care or a crisis in the availability of workforce time, it will be incredibly valuable that they can take advantage of the easements in order to respond effectively. Clearly, however, it would be helpful if we ensured in the future that, for example, directors of public health, chief executives and lead members of local authorities, all of whom will have a very broad perspective on this, were consulted, in addition to professional bodies such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

In conclusion, the message over many years is that effective protection for children on their journey through the care system relies on good social care and effective professional practice. We in this House need to show confidence at this time of national emergency—as we have in our health professionals—that those social-care-for-children professionals will also meet the highest

possible standards without the need for regulations to ensure that. For that reason, I hope that when these measures come to their end we will have the opportunity to learn from them and to see how local authorities have made use of the easements that are available. I also hope that we will see that they have not been misused or abused, and that this has ensured effective protection of our most vulnerable children at this time of national crisis.

3.45 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The number of looked-after children continues to rise; there were over 78,000 children in care nationally last year, a 4% rise on the previous year and a shocking 30% rise since 2010. In my home city of Liverpool, there are nearly 1,500 vulnerable children in care who need these protections, including 115 unaccompanied child asylum seekers—double the rate of the national percentage. This represents a rise on last year, with additional numbers coming under the protection of social services during this pandemic.

As schools return and hidden harms are exposed, Liverpool City Council is, like most local authorities, expecting a further rise in referrals. Liverpool is also a referral centre for unaccompanied children seeking asylum—children who need the maximum possible care and support to help them overcome the most traumatic of experiences. At a time when we need to ensure that our most vulnerable children have the support and care they need to survive trauma, neglect and abuse, it is most disappointing to see the Government relaxing these safeguards for financial reasons.

As the Government know, looked-after children face greater hurdles than other children in their adult lives. They are more likely to suffer mental health issues, more likely to end up in the prison system, more likely to succumb to drug or alcohol addiction, less likely to achieve educationally, and more likely to be unemployed. How will loosening the monitoring and support redress the situation?

Nationally, recent analysis by national agencies, including Action for Children, Barnardo's, the National Children's Bureau, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the Children's Society, estimates that funding for local authority children's services has fallen by an astonishing 23% since 2010, with a fall of £2.2 billion nationally. Liverpool City Council has seen its Government income slashed by 64% over the past 10 years, leaving a £460-million gaping hole. If the Government are serious about protecting our most vulnerable children and enabling them to have positive life chances, the answer lies not in reducing safeguards when they are under the protection of local authorities, but in adequately funding local authorities to allow them to do their job.

I am also concerned that neither the Children's Commissioner nor the major agencies concerned with children's welfare were consulted on these changes and nor was there a public consultation. If the Government truly believe their proposals were for the better, why the lack of consultation?

The coronavirus pandemic must not be used as an excuse to force through these measures that the Government have unsuccessfully tried to put through for four years. Allowing local authorities the right to opt out of ensuring

[Kim Johnson]

that certain safeguards or regular monitoring are in place would have a detrimental impact on the lives of children and their families and erode the rights and entitlements of children.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister to think again and to revoke this SI, to consult and listen to the Children's Commissioner and the expert organisations, and, indeed, to talk to children and their families. We need to do what is right, not what is possible, and that means looking to adequately fund local authorities to provide maximum care and protection.

3.49 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I want to reflect on this matter from the point of view of some work that I did last year. I spent some time training with foster care leavers and one thing that came across to me was the fact that they had several parts to their personality—this is not just a broad-brush thing. There was immense ambition and an immense wish to have a normal life, but the problem was that, often, the confidence was not there. They felt let down and abandoned, which means that the challenge for the system is to ensure that there is a consistency in their lives and an ability for their lives to move. They should not feel left behind and ignored during any crisis.

My reading of these regulations is not that they are about trying to reduce safeguarding, but that they are about enabling the machinery of local government—of social care—to help these children and young people get the support that they need. I absolutely agree—100%—that these measures need to be temporary. I need to hear that the safeguarding measures are there, that we will receive updates, as other Members have said, and that we will hear how things are being monitored.

I fear that if we do not put these measures in place, there may come a time when the mechanics are not in place—the reality of day-to-day lives where people cannot go to their jobs and do the social care work, and where there are not opportunities in offices to make sure that things are moving. If that happens, these children and young people will again feel that they have been left at the back, ignored and forgotten. One of the biggest challenges to overcome in life is the unknown, and covid has created an unknown situation for all of us, but let us imagine what it is like for those young people in care. They will not know whether they will reach their forever home or get to the point where they have a family around them. What we must remember in this debate is that behind each and every one of those statistics that has been shared, there is a life. There is a young child or a young person with ambition, who wants to have a family, who wants to have normality. Using these measures to ensure that that happens will be critical. Of course, safeguarding and all of those things are paramount, but we need to ensure also that the machine continues to work in their favour and to support them.

Munira Wilson: The hon. Gentleman talks about the machinery. Indeed, the Children's Commissioner has expressed concern that the starting point for these regulations is to ease pressure on services, rather than to think about what is right for the child in front of those

services. These are the most vulnerable children—even more vulnerable at a time like this. Does he not think that we have the balance wrong here by focusing more on the machine than on the child?

Dean Russell: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point and I appreciate her making it. Actually, there has to be a balance of both. We have to ensure that there is wraparound care for young people so that they can be supported. The machine is not necessarily an anonymous, amorphous blob of mechanics; it is actually people. It is social carers, who are doing that work on the ground and who should already be trusted in their roles. It is not about trying to say, “Let’s just keep going and going” in ignorance of the vulnerable young people involved. It is about making sure that the system is still working for them. Although I have some concerns, I can say that everything that I have seen in here so far really reflects the fact that we need to ensure that everything can continue, as it should do, to enable these young people to get to their homes, to get to families and to get the support that they need.

3.53 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We have come so far with children's rights, why are we going backwards? Those are not my words. They are the words of Charlotte, a 19-year-old care leaver. I start with those words because it is young people in care and those entering care who are directly affected by this legislation and yet it is the same young people who have been denied a say, as their rights have been ripped away. They were not consulted.

As a former social worker and fostering manager, I am deeply concerned about the impact of this legislation. Coronavirus has led to more anxiety, more stress and increased loneliness for many children. Right now, they need more support, not fewer protections. Anyone who has worked with children knows that their safety must be a top priority. Indeed, the Children Act 1989 says that the welfare of a child is paramount. The safeguards that the legislation removes or dilutes include how often a child sees their social worker, whether and when their care is independently reviewed, and whether a proper care plan is put in place for them. A lack of contact with significant professionals increases the risk to children. The Department for Education reported that only one in 20 children identified as vulnerable continued to attend school during the lockdown. This means that so many children have already been living without the safety net that school would usually provide.

The National Youth Advocacy Service, which does incredible work with children in care in Lewisham East and across the country, has made more than triple the number of safeguarding referrals during the lockdown compared with last year. NYAS is worried about how many children will be placed at risk and might go unnoticed by local authorities under this new legislation. These changes may be enforced temporarily, but their impact could last a lifetime. The adoption that is waved through without an independent panel shapes an entire childhood and beyond. Adoption and fostering panels should be able to sit virtually.

The legislation leaves huge gaps in rights and protections for children in care, and this Chamber must not allow children to fall through those gaps. With that in mind, what is the Minister's view on the comments from the

Children's Commissioner for England? We have heard her quoted so many times, and with her comments I will conclude my speech. Anne Longfield said:

"I would like to see all the regulations revoked, as I do not believe that there is sufficient justification to introduce them. This crisis must not remove protections from extremely vulnerable children, particularly as they are even more vulnerable at this time."

3.56 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to say a few words on this vital topic, because issues of child protection and social care for children are some of the most important that we as Members of this House and our colleagues in national, regional and local government will ever have to deal with. Indeed, much of the very essence of our jobs as Members of Parliament is to build a safer and secure community and a brighter and more sustainable future for the next generation. It is clear to me, however, that the changes contained in the regulations before the House are not fit for purpose. They will, as many stakeholders have indicated, seriously undermine legal safeguarding protections for some of the most vulnerable children in our country. These changes are unnecessary and could end up putting children in harm's way.

While we appreciate and understand the impact on local authorities in England as a result of coronavirus, the Government have yet to provide the evidence to justify the regulations. As such, I welcome the fact that Her Majesty's Opposition will oppose them and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), the shadow Secretary of State, for her remarks at the start of this debate.

I want to be clear that I do not believe it is acceptable to make sweeping reductions in children's rights with very few safeguards and absolutely no parliamentary scrutiny. The world has changed so very much in recent months and among many changes to our way of life, provision was made for local authorities in England to have "easements" on their statutory duties on adult social care to respond effectively to the demands of coronavirus. This was in the Coronavirus Act 2020. It is important to note that the same flexibility was not granted in relation to children's social care, yet guidance published in early April suggested that local authorities did not have to meet these statutory duties.

This stands in stark contrast to the Welsh Labour Government under the leadership of the First Minister, Mark Drakeford. Hon. Friends have already mentioned today the differences in approach to legislation in the countries across the UK. Rather than following the approach taken by Ministers in this House, in Wales they have chosen to issue guidance that explains how local authorities can work in an innovative way to continue to meet their statutory duties in the spirit of the law. This is, as is so often the case, a matter of will, and I want to ask the Minister to think again.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) said, one important stakeholder is the Children's Commissioner for England, who said in April that the current crisis should not

"remove protections from extremely vulnerable children".

I agree with her completely.

Ahead of this debate, I received a very helpful briefing from Napo, the trade union and professional association for probation and family court staff. These are hard-working

professionals who work around the clock in all parts of the UK to protect, support and defend some of the most vulnerable children in our country. I am inclined to listen to them and I suggest that the Minister does the same thing.

The Napo briefing noted that its members have very real concerns about child safeguarding during this continued lockdown period, and with schools still broadly closed and reduced access to children's social services, it is vital this House for strengthen to legislation to protect vulnerable children, not reduce it.

I want to make one further point, which is that these regulations make sweeping changes to foster care. The changes have caused great concern, and they include scrapping foster panels, extending emergency placements with local authority foster carers from six days to 24 weeks, reducing councils' obligations to privately fostered children, and removing conditions and levels of scrutiny for some foster care placements. The impact is wide and potentially very dangerous indeed.

I hope the Minister will listen to those in this House who have raised these concerns today, but if the Government will not listen to us, will they please listen to professionals out in the community? They do an amazing job under difficult circumstances every day, and I commend them for it.

4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am grateful for being allowed to speak on what, as other Members have said, is an essential matter. When we first went into lockdown, we were in unprecedented times and it was very disconcerting. None of us in the Chamber could have been unaware of just how disconcerting it was, not only for us in our job, but for our constituents, who came to us with the most complex problems.

It is absolutely my belief that the Minister and the Government brought in these regulations with the best of intentions to keep children safe at a time when we could not imagine at all how normal life would continue. However, as right hon. and hon. Members have said, time has brought perspective and shown how we have managed to adapt. Seeing me participate in a virtual Parliament when I had no idea how it worked was an example of what we can do if we have to. However, time has also shown us that some of the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations are not the best way of doing things. Right hon. and hon. Members—each and every one of them—have very eloquently and very significantly confirmed that to be the case. I want to give an example of where the regulations fall down. That was never the intention, but it is quite clear that they have fallen down.

The example I would give is the issue of contact. When I spoke to some of my primary schoolteachers at the start of lockdown—I have had, and still have, a good relationship with them—one teacher expressed her concern that she was not able to see and connect with a child in her class. She watches over and gives the child that little bit of extra emotional support because of their vulnerability, given her position and the knowledge that she has of that child. She encourages and she affirms that child more than the rest of the children in that class in a very quiet way, because the child shows signs of not receiving that support at home. The role of the teacher in a class is so critical, and the knowledge,

[Jim Shannon]

perception and initiative of the teacher can help such a child. She made contact with every parent of those in her class to establish the easiest way to keep in touch with her children—whether by phone call, video call, messaging the parents or a Zoom class—and to continue to play her part in meeting their needs.

How much more is that true for children who we know have support issues and who need contact with their social workers? I understand that lockdown is a very different time. It is not possible physically to visit children, but there are other forms of contact and support. Taking away the need for social workers to make contact in temporary homes is not a good thing, and I believe it is not necessary. If we are making changes, we should say that, although physical visits may not be practical, there is an obligation to have direct, sustained contact to lend support to these most vulnerable of children and to deliver for foster families.

Adoption UK said that in 2018

“more than half of all newly-placed adopters wondered in the early months whether they had done the right thing and whether they would be able to cope. 54% experienced stress, anxiety and/or symptoms of post-adoption depression.”

It is very clear that that comes in different forms. Even at the best of times, the early days of a placement can be particularly difficult for new adopters. For those currently at this stage in their adoption journey, that has been compounded by the covid-19 lockdown, leaving them isolated and detached from their usual support network. Removing statutory duties to support these new families will only leave them feeling more isolated, and will put more adoptive placements at risk. That can never be allowed to happen, as we know how important those placements are.

I have received, as have other Members, numerous briefings from Become and Adoption UK, among others—all expressing deep and sincere concern about the effects of these regulations and the vagueness of the proposed end date.

I will conclude by asking the Minister a couple of questions. If she is not prepared, or is unable, to revisit the need for the measures, will she at least confirm that the emergency regulations will expire on 25 September 2020? If not, will she outline the circumstances in which she believes it will be necessary to extend them and how that decision will be made?

4.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): This is a deeply unprecedented time, and it falls on all of us to protect and support those who are most vulnerable. Protecting vulnerable children has been at the heart of the Government's response. Many Members have spoken with great passion this afternoon, and I welcome this opportunity to explain the work that the Government have been doing for vulnerable children.

Every child is different and different children are vulnerable for different reasons. Therefore, we have been setting up networks of support across the country for different groups of vulnerable children. For some vulnerable children, especially those with a social worker, attending school is an important protective factor. That is why schools, colleges and early years providers have remained open for them throughout. When children

have not attended, we have worked with education settings and local authorities to ensure that social services are in touch with them. We have been surveying local authorities, and the vast majority of the most vulnerable children—those with a child protection plan—have been seen or contacted by their social worker within the past fortnight.

Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities always face extra challenges, and this has been a particularly difficult time for them and their families, so we have asked education settings to ensure that those with education, health and care plans can attend their normal school setting, but that has to be on an individual risk-assessed basis to make sure that the child's needs come first. We have also provided a wide range of specific online resources so that those staying at home can continue their education, and we have committed £37 million this year through the Family Fund to support more than 75,000 low-income families with disabled or critically ill children; £10 million of that is specifically in response to this pandemic.

Some 39,000 adoptive families have had extra help from the increase that we have made to the adoption support fund, and across the country our loving foster carers have been able to access extra help from the increases that we have put into the Fostering Network. Care leavers are particularly vulnerable and often face isolation, so we have made it clear that those who are due to leave care can stay in their current home. We have provided over £100 million of laptops and devices to care leavers and disadvantaged children so that they can stay in touch and access social care services, as well as education, putting care leavers and children in care first.

Teenagers in alternative provision are especially vulnerable, so we are wrapping those in year 11 who are in alternative provision with a bespoke package to support them not only now but through next year, too. For those suffering anxiety, we have increased mental health and wellbeing support and guidance for children, teachers and parents; we have invested in mental health charities; and, crucially, we have ensured that the new 24/7 mental health crisis lines are available to children as well as adults.

Domestic violence impacts on children, so we have worked with the Home Office to invest in specialist services and enlarged Operation Encompass, which brings together police and schools. We have funded the expansion of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and helped to promote its national helplines, so that people have a place to go if they are concerned that a child may be experiencing abuse or facing neglect. Our See, Hear, Respond project, led by Barnardo's, will further support vulnerable children at risk of harm.

All that I have outlined is just some of the work that we have been doing. A massive amount of work has been undertaken. I thank parents, teachers, childcare providers, social workers, foster carers and our partners in the public, private and charity sectors for all they are doing to support children. I also thank children and young people themselves, especially those in care and in children's homes.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: May I gently nudge the Minister to answer some of the questions that came from the Opposition? She is halfway through her speech and we have not yet heard about the children affected by these changes.

Vicky Ford: I am coming to exactly those answers.

The protection of vulnerable children relies on those on the frontline, especially children's services in local authorities, so we have supported local authorities with additional investment to help social workers to return to the frontline and by deploying more than 250 Ofsted staff directly into local authorities, as well as through new regional teams. But those on the frontline have faced challenges that they have never seen before. I have heard directly from many social workers about those challenges; hence we have needed to give them some regulatory flexibilities.

Munira Wilson: Will the Minister explain why, in respect of the easing of statutory duties, the standards that need to be met are lesser for children than they are for adults? Will she address the suggestion that many have put to her that we should publish data on local authorities that use the easements so that we can scrutinise what is happening on the ground?

Vicky Ford: Absolutely. I will address many of the points that have been raised. The safeguards for adult social care are different from those for children's social care because the statutory framework for adult social care differs. The easements that have been made on adult social care are in primary legislation, not secondary legislation, whereas in children's social care we have made absolutely sure that the primary legislation stays in place.

Let me continue to set the scene. Those on the frontline have faced challenges that they have never seen before. For those children with special educational needs and disabilities, and especially those with an EHC plan, which sets out the specific provisions required to meet their needs, such provision would normally happen in an education setting. However, although those settings have remained open for children with an EHC plan, not all of them have been able to attend, so it has simply been impossible for local authorities and health commissioners to deliver the full provisions of those plans. That is why we have needed to make some changes.

The regulations on children's social care are intended to support local authorities and providers, but do not remove any fundamental protections. Let me be really clear: section 22 of the Children Act 1989 remains in place, meaning that local authorities still have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child they are looking after, and section 1 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 remains, meaning that the child's welfare is paramount in all decisions on adoption. We have made no changes to primary legislation and the vast majority of secondary legislation has remained unchanged.

The amendments do not reduce the responsibilities that local authorities have to protect children from significant harm and to promote their welfare, nor should they be at the expense of the rights and protection of children in care.

Janet Daby: Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Ford: I am going to make some progress and come to the specific questions raised. We did need to prepare for the risk that local services may be unable to fully respond to significant pressures caused by covid-19. Serious staff absences, coupled with an increase in demand for services, could lead to the most vulnerable

children being put at risk if services struggle to cope with the requirements of legislation. Some of the changes provide for the ability to diverge from established timescales for a limited number of activities or to cater for situations where there may be staff absences or a need to reduce personal contact. For example, it may not be appropriate for a social worker to physically visit a looked-after child if covid is present or if the household is self-isolating.

Some changes are designed to help ensure that there are minimal delays in the adoption or fostering process. For example, in order to make sure that we have enough foster carers available at a time when potential need has increased, we have given flexibility on who could be a temporary foster carer, while still requiring that carers must be properly assessed for this vital role. Other changes allow local authorities more time to respond to formal reports, such as those from Ofsted inspections.

The flexibilities were developed rapidly and they needed to be, so the scope for formal consultation was more limited than normal and it was necessary to forgo the standard 21-day rule for their coming into force, but the views of a wide range of organisations did influence the regulations that were laid before the House, and I do welcome the opportunity to discuss them tonight. It is important to be clear exactly what those flexibilities are; otherwise young people will be unduly concerned. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) has suggested that short-break placements for children are now too long and there will not be any requirements on visits and care plans, but the annual limit of 75 days in any one year remains. We have removed the restriction on no single placement being longer than 17 days, simply so that children do not have to move between homes as frequently, and I am sure she will understand that.

Opposition Members have also suggested that social workers will no longer need to visit children living in care, but that is simply not the case. Statutory timescales remain in place. Social workers always must endeavour to meet those timetables, and in the small number of cases where they cannot meet them, for reasons such as sickness or self-isolation, they must be able to demonstrate that they can meet them and why the temporary amendment can be used. It is not the case that children's homes can deprive a child of his or her liberty. That decision can be made only by a public health officer, who has the power to impose proportionate requirements, including screening and isolation, if any individual has a suspected or confirmed case of coronavirus. That decision must always be kept under review and must take account of the child's wellbeing.

It has also been suggested that children could be placed with emergency foster carers for too long and without scrutiny, but in fact there will continue to be the same scrutiny of emergency foster carers. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) asked about decisions on placing a child in care outside his local area. I thank him for his invitation to meet his all-party group on children, as I would be delighted to do that. In fact, any decision to place a child with a non-connected person would still be subject to strict and intensive assessment by the local authority of their suitability, background and circumstances. This flexibility is available only in cases where additional scrutiny by a nominated officer will delay a child being placed with an appropriate and approved carer. He also

[Vicky Ford]

raised the important issue of serious safeguarding cases. No changes have been made to primary legislation that require local authorities to investigate suspected cases of the risk of significant harm, or local authorities' powers to make applications for emergency protection orders or applications for care protection orders.

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked why there were differences in other parts of the UK. Structures and approaches differ across each part of the UK and so will the pressures that are felt. We in the Department for Education speak to providers and local authorities in England. These changes are a response to what we have been told. Other countries will have spoken to their own local areas and will take actions accordingly.

The Children's Commissioner has a very important job to speak for children and it is right that she does so. We agree on the importance of protecting vulnerable children—indeed, I speak to her regularly—but on this matter we disagree. I set out clear responses to the points she made in an article in *The Guardian* in a point-by-point statement published on the Department's website. I suggest that Members who quoted her look at the detailed responses I have made, because we have worked to address many of her concerns on the guidance that we have published for local authorities. We are continuing to engage with her about how we can ensure our guidance is clear.

This is a really important point: these flexibilities should be used only when absolutely necessary and in the interests of the child, because the child's interests must come first. If there is no pressing need to use them, they should not be used. The flexibilities must be approved at chief officer level in local authorities or by top-tier management in other organisations. The decisions for their being used must be recorded. Ofsted will take note of any usage and stands ready to take action. Indeed, Ofsted is taking action, even at this time, to suspend 17 children's homes or stop them taking children.

Monitoring is important. We have been gathering information regularly on which of the regulations are being used and why. We are holding a monthly survey of local authorities. We are working with key organisations, including children's charities and provider representatives, to seek feedback on how the regulations are being used and the effect on children. I am glad to report that they are being used infrequently. The flexibility most likely to be used is one that allows medical reports to be considered at a later date of an adoption process, thus minimising delays in approving adopters and allowing those children to move on into that new forever family.

The changes will expire on 25 September. There is no plan to extend them. If there is a need for further flexibility, it will be on a case-by-case basis after discussion with stakeholders and subject to full parliamentary process. The regulation changes are temporary. They are not permanent. I am committed to keeping a close eye on the situation and will report back to Parliament before the summer recess.

The Government are absolutely committed to supporting vulnerable children and ensuring that they are properly safeguarded. We have demonstrated that through the initiatives I have outlined today. Supporting vulnerable

children will continue to be my No. 1 priority, the No. 1 priority of the Department for Education, and the No. 1 priority of the Government during this time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am expecting a Division on this Question, and hon. and right hon. Members should be familiar with the Division process. But could I please urge all hon. Members to pause at the relevant Dispatch Box and give their names and vote clearly? The Question is on Motion 5 on the Order Paper.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 123, Noes 260.

Division No. 55]

[4.24pm]

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Hopkins, Rachel
Ali, Tahir	Huq, Dr Rupa
Amesbury, Mike	Jardine, Christine
Anderson, Fleur	Johnson, Kim
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Jones, Darren
Ashworth, Jonathan	Jones, Gerald
Benn, rh Hilary	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Blake, Olivia	Jones, Ruth
Brabin, Tracy	Jones, Sarah
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Kane, Mike
Brennan, Kevin	Kendall, Liz
Brown, Ms Lyn	Kyle, Peter
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Lammy, rh Mr David
Bryant, Chris	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Buck, Ms Karen	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Cadbury, Ruth	Lynch, Holly
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Madders, Justin
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Matheson, Christian
Chamberlain, Wendy	McCabe, Steve
Champion, Sarah	McCarthy, Kerry
Clark, Feryal	McDonagh, Siobhain
Cooper, rh Yvette	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Cruddas, Jon	McGinn, Conor
Cunningham, Alex	McGovern, Alison
David, Wayne	McMahon, Jim
Davies-Jones, Alex	McMorrin, Anna
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Mearns, Ian
Dodds, Anneliese	Mishra, Navendu
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Morden, Jessica
Doughty, Stephen	Morgan, Mr Stephen
Duffield, Rosie	Murray, Ian
Eagle, Ms Angela	Nandy, Lisa
Eagle, Maria	Nichols, Charlotte
Efford, Clive	Norris, Alex
Elmore, Chris	Olney, Sarah
Eshalomi, Florence	Onwurah, Chi
Esterson, Bill	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Evans, Chris	Osborne, Kate
Fletcher, Colleen	Owatemi, Taiwo
Foy, Mary Kelly	Owen, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Alex Norris</i>)
Furniss, Gill	Peacock, Stephanie
Gill, Preet Kaur	Pennycook, Matthew
Green, Kate	Perkins, Mr Toby
Greenwood, Lilian	Phillips, Jess
Griffith, Nia	Rayner, Angela
Haigh, Louise	Reed, Steve
Hardy, Emma	Reynolds, Jonathan
Harris, Carolyn	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Hayes, Helen	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Healey, rh John	Rodda, Matt
Hill, Mike	Shannon, Jim
Hillier, Meg	Siddiq, Tulip

Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Streeter, Wes
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen

Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittome, Nadia
Wilson, Munira
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Ayes:
Matt Western and
Bambos Charalambous

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Ahmad Khan, Imran
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Bacon, Gareth
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan (*Proxy vote*
cast by Eddie Hughes)
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baynes, Simon
Benton, Scott
Bhatti, Saqib
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian

Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davison, Dehenna
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Eastwood, Mark
Ellis, rh Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Everitt, Ben
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann

Hart, rh Simon
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Loder, Chris
Longhi, Marco
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Malthouse, Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
Merriman, Huw
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Morton, Wendy
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Nici, Lia

Nokes, rh Caroline
O'Brien, Neil
Parish, Neil
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike

Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
David Rutley and
Mr Marcus Jones

Question accordingly negatived.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Local Elections (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 27 February, be approved.—(*James Morris.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft Representation of the People (Electronic Communications and Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 3 March, be approved.—(*James Morris.*)

Question agreed to.

Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That:

(1) the Resolution of the House of 16 January 2020 (Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)), as amended by the Orders of the House of 25 March, 22 April and 12 May 2020 (Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)), is further amended as follows:

Delete from "13 March 2020," to end and insert "10 July 2020, 11 September 2020, 16 October 2020, 23 October 2020, 30 October 2020, 13 November 2020, 27 November 2020, 15 January 2021, 29 January 2021, 5 February 2021, 5 March 2021 and 12 March 2021."

(2) the Orders for Second Reading of Bills on each of the days listed under Day 1 in the table below are read and discharged;

(3) each such Bill is ordered to be read a second time on the corresponding day listed under Day 2 in the table; and

(4) those Bills are set down to be read a second time on the appropriate Day 2 in the order in which they were set down to be read a second time on the corresponding Day 1.

Day 1	Day 2
12 June 2020	10 July 2020
26 June 2020	11 September 2020
10 July 2020	16 October 2020
11 September 2020	23 October 2020
16 October 2020	30 October 2020
30 October 2020	13 November 2020

—(*James Morris.*)

4.56 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to rise to support the Government's motion. It is to the great credit of the Leader of the House's Office that it revised the original schedule for the benefit of the House and—I am finding these words very difficult—I congratulate the Whips on their help in this matter.

What we have today is a Government who have allowed private Members' Bills to proceed. The last time a Government attempted to stop private Members' Bills—and I fear the original motion would have had the effect of ending private Members' Bills in this Session—was in 1945, and for a very similar reason. The Government had a lot of Bills to get through following the war, just as the Government have a lot of Bills to get through now, with very limited availability and space in the House.

In those days, private Members' Bills were written out by hand with a great deal of time and effort, put in red tape and placed on the Table. In due course, there was a ballot for them. The Government decided in 1945 that they were not going to do that, but one Member—Sir Alan Herbert, the Member for Oxford University—was very unhappy about that. In a speech on 16 August, he said:

"I have worked very hard. Hon. Members may laugh at my little Bills, but I believe they will be a little more popular with a great many people than some of the proposals which will later be laid before us. I presented them in due order at the Table yesterday. I am not quarrelling with your Ruling, Mr. Speaker, but you said that they must not appear on the Order Paper. But look at what this House is doing to me after all the things I promised to my constituents, and all the things I have promised to the constituents of other hon. Members. I get a hundred letters a week, not from my own constituents but from poor people who are worried about their divorces."

That was followed by laughter. He continued:

"There is no laughter about this. They write also about the Poor Persons' Procedure. I have a Bill here dealing with the provision of legal aid and assistance for the poor. That is something fundamental, but there is not a word about it in the Gracious Speech. What am I to say to all those people who write to me? I must tell them to stop sending their letters and to save their stamps, because I can do no more to help them if this Motion goes through; I might just as well be a Member of the German Reichstag or a stuffed exhibit in the Natural History Museum. If the House will not have my Bills on the Table I cast them on the Floor, as a monument to Parliamentary liberty and a challenge to despotic power."—[*Official Report*, 16 August 1945; Vol. 413, c. 143-144.]

With a great flourish, he chucked his Bills on to the Floor of the House. Unfortunately, he had not tied them up properly, and they fell apart, only to reveal that every single one of them was blank. That speech got the Government to reverse their position on trying to kill off private Members' Bills in 1945. Thankfully, this Government have not followed that and have listened.

By the way, I should say one other thing about poor old Mr Herbert. Although he got the private Members' Bills back and it became part of standard procedure, which most Governments do not like, the Government got their own back—they abolished university seats thereafter, and he was no longer a Member of Parliament.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am happy to engage in a conversation about reform of the private Members' Bill process. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a big fan of bringing forward presentation Bills under the auspices of Standing Order No. 57. If we are having that wider debate about reform of private Members' Bills, surely we need to move away from the ridiculous lottery that exists where, in the equivalent of buying a scratchcard, 20 Members have the opportunity to bring forward a private Member's Bill and realistically get it through. A great many of us, including the hon. Gentleman himself, will bring forward Bills under Standing Order No. 57, and they will never see the light of day or get on to the statute book.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. We are not having that wider debate, but the hon. Member has made his point.

Mr Bone: We are definitely not going to have that debate, because it is not part of this. That is for the Procedure Committee, and I might well support some of those changes. The hon. Member is actually wrong. In the last Parliament, some of the ballot Bills became law, but a number of presentation Bills also became law. I got an Act of Parliament. [*Interruption.*] No, it was about half of them. There was one Act that you might remember, Mr Deputy Speaker—it was called the Hilary Benn Act, and it rather changed the course of history, so people who say that private Members' Bills do not matter are wrong. The procedure is very clear. We do not now have the archaic position of having to lay the Bill on the Table. All we have to do now to get a presentation Bill is sleep for a week under Big Ben upstairs. Some things never change, but it does work, and presentation Bills, ten-minute rule Bills and ballot Bills do raise very important issues.

The first private Member's Bill Friday sitting of this Session went ahead before the lockdown, and three Bills got a Second Reading. The only one that unfortunately did not was promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). For some reason, the Minister seemed to not want to sit down and let the House vote. The result of that Friday sitting is that three Bills need a Committee stage, and they can get a Committee stage.

But the problem with private Members' Bills is the ruling that we have to get to the eighth Friday before we can get a Bill from Committee back to the House for Report and Third Reading and then try to get it through the House of Lords. The problem with the original motion was that the eighth Friday would become 5 February 2021, about a year after those Bills were introduced. The original eighth Friday was 11 September. Because of the coronavirus—I understand entirely the thought behind this—the Government have changed it so that the eighth Friday is now in November, but that still gives time for the Bills to become law.

David Linden: I enjoyed serving with the hon. Gentleman on the Procedure Committee. Was it not the case in the last Parliament that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) had Bills before the eighth Friday, but the Government refused to bring forward a money resolution? That is another issue—if the Government do not bring forward a money resolution, that essentially kills a private Member's Bill, which is why we need reform.

Mr Bone: I am not going to fall foul of the Deputy Speaker, because that is exactly a procedure that I would approve of. The idea that a Government do not lay a money resolution to allow the House to decide whether to pass a Bill is outrageous, but that is part of the problem of getting private Members' Bills through.

I want to congratulate the Government on doing a very sensible thing. We will now sit on 10 July, hopefully, for the second private Member's Bill Friday. We have one Friday in September and then a series in October—I think it is every week—and one in November. It is to their credit that the Government have moved on this issue. Unfortunately the Leader of the House will no longer be sitting on the Back Benches arguing for hours on end as to why some private Member's Bill should not get through, but perhaps he will turn up and sit at the Dispatch Box to listen.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this. I am very pleased to be able to say that the result of the change to the motion has meant that I do not have to speak for three and a half hours and I do not have to throw my 40 Bills on to the Floor of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We all live in disappointment.

Question put and agreed to.

Proxy Voting (Extension)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That:

(1) the Resolution of the House of 4 June (Proxy Voting (Extension)) be amended as follows:

Delete “because they themselves are at high risk from coronavirus for reasons that they are either ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ or ‘clinically vulnerable’” and insert “for medical or public health reasons related to the pandemic”.

(2) the temporary Standing Order (Voting by proxy) be amended as follows:

(a) Delete paragraph (1) and insert “(1) A Member may, by reason of absence from the precincts of the House: (a) for childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child, or (b) because they are unable to attend at Westminster for medical or public health reasons related to the pandemic, arrange for their vote to be cast in accordance with this order by another Member acting as a proxy (a proxy vote).”

(b) In paragraph (9) delete “the Order of 4 June 2020 (Proxy Voting (Temporary Standing Order)), and the Resolutions of the House of 28 January 2019 and 4 June 2020” and insert “the Order of 4 June 2020 (Proxy Voting (Temporary Standing Order)), and the Resolutions of the House of 28 January 2019, 4 June 2020 and 10 June 2020”.—(*David Rutley.*)

5.5 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I will speak briefly, so as not to detain the House. I spoke in the Standing Order No. 24 debate on this matter on Monday, when I urged the Leader of the House to listen to the debate and make the changes that he has indeed brought forward to extend proxy voting. I therefore thought it appropriate to say on the Floor of the House what I have said on Twitter, and thank the Leader for listening to what was said in the House and for extending proxy voting to enable those with caring responsibilities, and those who have reasons other than their own medical condition and are unable to be present—it is not that they do not want to come to the House—to have the opportunity to have a proxy vote and have their vote cast on their behalf. To the Leader, I say thank you.

One other thing, which is a question for the Leader to think about. I also said on Monday that I hoped—he indicated that he was open to this—to see whether it was technically possible to enable colleagues who are not able to be present in the House to participate in the legislative functions of the House, albeit I acknowledged that perhaps they would not be able to participate fully, as in intervening. I wonder whether he has made any progress on that. I accept that the matter may be technically complex and require some further thought, but I thought it worth mentioning on the Floor of the House. When the Leader has listened and responded to what is said in the House, it is appropriate to say thank you to him for doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

PETITIONS

Conduct of Mr Dominic Cummings during the COVID-19 pandemic

5.7 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I rise this evening to present a petition on behalf of my east end constituents, who have been outraged by the actions of the Prime Minister's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, during

lockdown. When everyone else has been told to stay home, protect the NHS and save lives, Dominic Cummings was using Barnard Castle as some sort of Optical Express drive-through service, which would be the height of irresponsibility at the best of times, but is even more outrageous during a global pandemic. The fact that the Prime Minister and the rest of the Cabinet have sought to defend this only reaffirms the widely held view that with this Tory Government, it is one rule for them and one rule for everyone else.

The petition states:

“The Petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Declares that the Prime Minister's Chief Advisor, Mr Dominic Cummings, driving 260 miles to Durham during lockdown for childcare reasons when he and his wife were displaying symptoms of COVID-19, acted against the UK Government advice to “Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives”; further notes that driving a 60-mile round trip to Barnard Castle to test if his eyesight was suitable for driving was potentially dangerous to himself, his family and other road users, and also breached the “Stay at Home” message; further declares that the support from the Prime Minister and other senior members of the Cabinet for Mr Cummings' actions weaken the efforts for public compliance with the stay at home and social distancing requirements; and further notes that the whole episode has upset many people who have abided by the rules and guidance, missing out on the chance to say goodbye to loved ones, not being able to see new-born members of their families, and missing family contact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to conduct an inquiry into the conduct and justification of the Prime Minister's Chief Advisor and that he be requested to consider his position; further to instruct all special advisers to adhere to the same rules as other members of the public.

And the petitioners remain etc.”

[P002574]

Conduct of Mr Dominic Cummings during the COVID-19 pandemic

5.9 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Huge numbers of my constituents have contacted me angry and upset about the Prime Minister's senior adviser breaking the lockdown rules that they so scrupulously followed, with all the sacrifices that that required of them. They followed the public health requirements for the greater good of all. They are angry not only that Mr Cummings broke the lockdown rules but that he was accorded a press conference in the rose garden of Downing Street to evade, explain and excuse this dangerous breach, with no sense that he and his family are not the exception and are not exceptional.

To those who, on public health grounds, condemned those who attended demonstrations at the weekend, I point out that we shall never know how many decided to go on those demonstrations because of the example set by Mr Cummings—that, if someone believes they have a good reason to ignore the rules, they can.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Prime Minister's Chief Advisor, Mr Dominic Cummings, driving 260 miles to Durham during lockdown for childcare reasons when he and his wife were displaying symptoms of COVID-19, acted against the UK Government advice to “Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives”; further notes that driving a 60-mile round trip to Barnard Castle to test if his eyesight was suitable for driving was potentially dangerous to himself, his family and other road users, and also breached the “Stay at

Home” message; further declares that the support from the Prime Minister and other senior members of the Cabinet for Mr Cummings’ actions weaken the efforts for public compliance with the stay at home and social distancing requirements; and further notes that the whole episode has upset many people who have abided by the rules and guidance, missing out on the chance to say goodbye to loved ones, not being able to see new-born members of their families, and missing family contact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to conduct an inquiry into the conduct and justification of the Prime Minister’s Chief Advisor and that he be requested to consider his position; further to instruct all special advisers to adhere to the same rules as other members of the public.

And the petitioners remain etc.

[P002572]

Conduct of Mr Dominic Cummings during the COVID-19 pandemic

5.11 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I rise on behalf of my constituents to launch this petition regarding the conduct of the Prime Minister’s chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, during the covid-19 pandemic. They are angry that, while they obeyed the lockdown instructions, depriving themselves of opportunities to see family members, missing funerals and, in some cases, missing the chance of a personal farewell, the chief adviser to the Prime Minister travelled 260 miles when he and his wife were both displaying covid-19 symptoms. They are angry that that was justified as owing to childcare requirements. They are angry that that reckless behaviour was compounded by a 60-mile round trip to Barnard Castle with his family, supposedly to test whether his eyesight was suitable for driving. They are really angry that the UK Government, including the Prime Minister, backed these woeful excuses, meaning that there is one rule for us and one rule for them. It is no wonder that nearly 1.2 million people signed the change.org petition calling for Dominic Cummings to go. At a minimum, we need an inquiry, but my constituents are quite clear: they want him to go.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun,

Declares that the Prime Minister’s Chief Advisor, Mr Dominic Cummings, driving 260 miles to Durham during lockdown for childcare reasons when he and his wife were displaying symptoms of COVID-19, acted against the UK Government advice to “Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives”; further notes that driving a 60-mile round trip to Barnard Castle to test if his eyesight was suitable for driving was potentially dangerous to himself, his family and other road users, and also breached the “Stay at Home” message; further declares that the support from the Prime Minister and other senior members of the Cabinet for Mr Cummings’ actions weaken the efforts for public compliance with the stay at home and social distancing requirements; and further notes that the whole episode has upset many people who have abided by the rules and guidance, missing out on the chance to say goodbye to loved ones, not being able to see new-born members of their families, and missing family contact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to conduct an inquiry into the conduct and justification of the Prime Minister’s Chief Advisor and that he be requested to consider his position; further to instruct all special advisers to adhere to the same rules as other members of the public.

And the petitioners remain etc.

[P002573]

Entitlement to paid care leave

5.13 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I rise to present a petition signed by more than 400 of my constituents. It acknowledges that there are more than 5 million unpaid carers in this country, who also juggle employment alongside their caring activities. It recognises the enormous strain placed on these people, with 2.6 million forced to quit their job, at an estimated cost to the economy—in lost revenues, earnings and additional benefits—of £5.3 billion, and it urges the Government, in Carers Week, to introduce a statutory paid leave entitlement for working carers of between five and 10 days per year.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Birmingham, Selly Oak Constituency,

Declares that the Employment Rights Act 1996 only provides for a ‘reasonable amount of unpaid time off’ to care for dependents for one-off appointments and emergencies; notes that latest figures show that there are an estimated 5 million people juggling paid work and unpaid care; further that Carers UK research reveals that 2.6 million have quit their job to care for a loved one who is older, disabled or seriously ill with nearly half a million (468,000) leaving their job in the last two years alone; further that the estimated costs to the economy of carers being forced to give up work to care had reached £5.3 billion in lost tax revenues, earnings and additional benefit payments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a statutory entitlement to paid care leave of 5 to 10 days per year.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002576]

Support for island communities affected by COVID-19

5.14 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This petition is on the unique position of islands across the UK and covid-19. It is of great importance to my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, and is supported by the MSP for Cunninghame North, Kenneth Gibson, and my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), who also represent island communities that face particular challenges at this time.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the economic fortunes and sustainability of island communities across the UK, such as the Isle of Arran and the Isle of Cumbrae, are more precarious than mainland communities, not least because of the higher number of older people in such communities; further declares that, despite welcome support from the United Kingdom and devolved governments, lockdown has been particularly challenging for island communities; notes that the exiting of lockdown for islands has to be slower than on mainland communities as ferry capacity must be restricted to ensure social distancing, with capacity expected to be initially limited to less than 20 per cent on some routes, presenting an unprecedented economic threat for island economies and leaving them at a disadvantage to the rest of the mainland UK; further notes that island communities are heavily reliant on tourism, levels of which have been significantly reduced by lockdown measures; further notes the impact that redundancies in the tourism industry will have on islands such as Arran, where one resort, the Auchrannie resort, employs 171 people from a total island population of 4,600; and further declares that as the Government prepares to reduce support in September for furloughed workers, fragile island communities will be particularly affected by mass redundancies and unemployment.

[Patricia Gibson]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to bring forward special measures to support island economies, including a furlough extension specifically for island communities.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002577]

Rolls-Royce (Redundancies)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*David Rutley.*)

5.16 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thought that we had just had the Adjournment debate, with the last petition from my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson); it has certainly eaten into the time available.

Following its announcement in May of a potential 6,000 job losses around the UK, Rolls-Royce last week proposed what it says is the first tranche. Some 3,000 posts across the UK are under threat, including 700 at the site in Inchinnan in my constituency. Inchinnan is a key site for the company's maintenance, repair and overhaul—MRO—operations, as well as manufacturing compressors and seals. Such businesses provide parts and support for Rolls-Royce engines used around the world. Their output is world-class, and recognised throughout the business and the industry at large as first-rate. Under the proposals, Rolls-Royce will close the MRO business completely, and the rest of the plant will be downgraded. A total of 700 jobs are threatened, which is over half the total workforce in Inchinnan.

These plans would be a hard blow to the economy in my constituency and across the west of the Scotland. Its impact will also be felt across the supply chain, which goes right across Scotland and the UK. Just yesterday, Wyman-Gordon in Livingston announced 72 redundancies, blaming a drop in orders, including from Rolls-Royce. These are the high-value and highly skilled jobs that we are all fighting to secure for our constituencies—the jobs that Government Ministers promote so often it is almost a cliché. These jobs are the cornerstone of manufacturing in this country and have the potential to grow it further. Yet UK Ministers have been quiet—nay, silent—about what they intend to do to support the workforce and the high-value manufacturing that is so often the subject of press releases and photos of Ministers wearing hard hats.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman may be aware that the International Air Transport Association does not expect air travel to recover to last year's levels until 2023. This sustained drop in demand is one reason why companies such as Rolls-Royce are considering large-scale redundancies. He may also be aware that British Airways has threatened to cut 12,000 jobs, citing reduced demand. Many of my constituents who have worked loyally for BA over many years have written to me about the fact that they are now being treated as expendable. I am deeply concerned about that. The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful argument; does he agree that we need an urgent Government intervention to ensure that jobs affected by reduced air travel are protected for the long term?

Gavin Newlands: The short answer is absolutely. I completely agree with the proposal that the hon. Lady outlines; in fact, it is a proposal that we have been making to the UK Government for months now. There are many estimates as to how long the industry will take to recover but, as I shall come on to say, there is no denying that it will face a long and slow recovery. The industry will face redundancies, but the issue is the

nature of some of those redundancies. I shall certainly touch on British Airways a little later, although Rolls-Royce is the focus of my speech.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: Before I kick on, it would not be an Adjournment debate without hearing from hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He brings forward excellent Adjournment debates and makes other excellent contributions in the House, which we all appreciate, and we are pleased to be able to participate.

I absolutely understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from: just in the past few weeks a major employer in my constituency has outlined how redundancies will be on their way soon. Does he agree that Government support for local industries is essential, as we all know that once a company shuts an operation it never, or rarely, reopens? If we do not hold on to these industries, we will face mass unemployment, alongside the fact that we will be perceived to be a nation that no longer manufactures or creates, leaving us absolutely at the mercy of imports, which should never be allowed to happen.

Gavin Newlands: As usual in these debates, the hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I will outline how Scotland has a very forward-looking approach to manufacturing, particularly in the area in which Rolls-Royce operates, but he is right that when these types of jobs go, they rarely return. I shall elaborate on that later.

When the Minister responds, I hope he will give us a full update on the work that he and his colleagues have undertaken to save the jobs of not only my constituents but those at Rolls-Royce sites right throughout the country. There is no doubt that in the short term there is a period of great challenge—perhaps the greatest ever challenge—for Rolls-Royce and the entire aviation and aerospace sector, but given the history of excellence at Inchinnan, there is also no doubt that as the sector recovers over the coming months and years, there will be a customer base for its output, and Rolls-Royce will benefit from that.

The unions recognise that and want to help. From the start they have set things out clearly to their members and to management and asked how they think the short-term operation of the site can work so that it has a long-term future. Throughout the process, the unions have been pragmatic, serious and forward-thinking, looking for a way forward that supports their members and the company's operations. Anyone who thinks that the unions at Inchinnan or anywhere else in the Rolls-Royce business are interested in anything other than the long-term future of production at the sites is living in a parallel universe.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Gavin Newlands: Who do I pick? I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; I predict that he will continue to be generous with his time as we all seek to intervene on him.

I appreciate that the focus of this debate is on Rolls-Royce, which is quite appropriate given that my hon. Friend has been leading on this issue as a constituency Member who faces a lot of redundancies in his constituency. I know he will agree with me, because he has done a lot of work on the fact that BA has also announced 12,000 redundancies, added to the 9,000 at Rolls-Royce and the terrible treatment of the workforce at BA. I know that my hon. Friend shares my concern that this is only the tip of the iceberg; is he, like me, hopeful that the Government will intervene? This is the tip of the iceberg, and we are going to see tens of thousands more jobs lost across the whole aviation, travel, tourism and aerospace sector. Does he agree that we need urgent Government action right now?

Gavin Newlands: I think I was told that I would agree with my hon. Friend, so I do agree with her—I agree completely with what she says. I will come on to discuss British Airways, so if anybody else has an intervention on British Airways, perhaps they should wait until that section of my speech.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene in this popular Adjournment debate. I congratulate him on making the case for the long-term growth prospects that come from the aerospace sector and Rolls-Royce's work. Does he agree that time is now of the essence for Ministers? The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which I chair, has in recent weeks heard that redundancy decisions are being taken now about tens of thousands of jobs throughout the country. If we look to other countries, such as France, Germany and the United States, which have already brought forward measures to support the industry, we see that the UK is starting to lag behind. We really need to see action sooner rather than later.

Gavin Newlands: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point, and I could not agree with him more. We constantly hear Ministers, particularly from the Department for Transport, talk about things being “under review”, but it has been four months now; we do not have time for further review. We need action, so I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to my friend for giving way. Although he is a friend of mine, I do wish to pay tribute to him for the amount of campaigning work he has done on this issue. A number of constituency Members throughout the country have a situation in which the local economy appears to be collapsing, and my hon. Friend has really led this charge, so I pay tribute to him for that.

I have constituents in Glasgow East who, like my hon. Friend's constituents, work at the Inchinnan plant and are incredibly concerned about the situation. The Government have shown, whether through things like the furlough scheme or other aspects of how they have handled coronavirus, that they will intervene, and it is right that when they do things right we pay tribute to that. This is a Government who have in the past intervened, stood up and strongly signalled when they needed to see action, so may I say to the Minister and the Government, through my hon. Friend, that on this issue the Government need to speak up and reassure

[David Linden]

my constituents back home in Glasgow East that they are fighting to try to protect these jobs as much as possible?

Gavin Newlands: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those words; I am sure the Minister will address them in his speech.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) for his tenacity, and not just on Rolls-Royce. With Glasgow airport in his constituency, he has his work cut out for him, but he has certainly risen to the occasion. He will be aware that constituents of mine are also employed in Rolls-Royce in Inchinnan. One of the key concerns I hear from them is that the Rolls-Royce facility is part of the planned National Manufacturing Institute Scotland, which is to develop skills and engineering in the west of Scotland. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the UK Government step in so that we can continue to use the Rolls-Royce facility to develop highly skilled engineering jobs in the west of Scotland?

Gavin Newlands: Yes, I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I will touch on NMIS later in my speech, so I do not want to give too much away now.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Obviously, we must focus on the long term, but there is an immediate and short-term issue. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that some companies seem to have rushed to make decisions on closures when the furlough scheme has been on the go and available for a while now? I have a company in Kilmarnock, Wabtec, which has announced it is closing its plant, ending railway works at the site after more than 100 years. It refuses to consider the furlough scheme, and I do not understand why. It seems to me that Rolls-Royce might be having the same knee-jerk reaction. It could utilise short-term support, then look at the long-term future and see whether it could get long-term Government support.

Gavin Newlands: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I would have preferred it if the Government had not signalled their intention to end the furlough scheme in October, because for many businesses, it will just push redundancies from earlier in the year to later. Perhaps the Government should look at extending it and phasing it out a bit more gradually than they have said. However, the scheme exists and is here until October, and too many businesses are not utilising it to the maximum.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: Yes, although I do not think I have given any of my own speech for a good time.

Antony Higginbotham: I welcome the debate the hon. Gentleman has managed to secure. He made a really important point about the impact this decision will have across the UK, not just because of Rolls-Royce's geographic scope, but because of the whole supply chain that sits behind it. Does he agree that often supply chain businesses

are clustered, so the impact will be felt in some communities far more than in others, which is why we need to be particularly mindful of these redundancies?

Gavin Newlands: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. My constituency has Glasgow airport in it, so as he can imagine, there are many aviation jobs and a strong aerospace sector. We face a pretty tough time in the coming months.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House. It is important for my constituents in Ansty, where about a third of the workforce are in danger of losing their jobs. They have recently secured some new repair and overhaul work at the plant, to bring in an additional 30 to 50 jobs, but I understand that some of that work is now going to be offshored and carried out by Rolls-Royce overseas. Does he agree that, at this time, we need to look at how to keep some of that activity here in the UK?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more, and I will go on to talk about offshoring. I have already made the point that when these jobs go and the work goes overseas to other sites in the Rolls-Royce family, if I can call it that, and to joint venture partners, it is very unlikely to return, so I totally agree with what the hon. Gentleman has just said.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: Why not get them all out of the way at the start?

Zarah Sultana: I thank the hon. Member for being generous with his time and congratulate him on securing this important debate. Coventry is home to the Rolls-Royce Ansty plant, whose skilled workers will be vital in building the sustainable economic recovery we need following this crisis. Does he agree that the Government must not sit on the sidelines and abandon Rolls-Royce workers, but instead work with the company and the trade unions to protect those jobs and invest in the green technologies of the future?

Gavin Newlands: I totally agree that it is not for the Government to sit on the sidelines here. We often hear Governments of all persuasions saying that these things are a matter for private business, but this is a strategic sector of extreme importance to the country. Again, once the jobs go, they will be gone, so the Government have to step in and do something.

We need to be clear that the sacrifices proposed by the workforce and the trade unions go beyond minor flexibilities. They involve real-terms hardship for workers and their families, working for less pay, mothballing sites for months and increasing working hours. These have all been proposed by the union reps at Inchinnan as practical and achievable solutions to the current temporary difficulties. They tell me, however, that these comprehensive offers have been met with complete silence from Rolls-Royce. That is simply unacceptable. Industrial relations should not be conducted as though we were living in the 19th century. The hard-working and loyal workforce must be fully involved in decisions that will

change their future and those of their families. My constituents, and those of other Members, who work at Inchinnan should not be treated like chattels or given their jotters whenever the management decide that savings are to be made. As I have said, everyone accepts that there will be change—the unions, the workforce, elected members and management—but it is only the management that appear to have locked themselves in a bunker, appearing only to issue their edicts and give frankly ludicrous interviews to the media.

That brings me to the chief exec, Warren East. I watched Mr East's interview with the BBC, in which he was giggling away as he was quizzed about the loss of thousands of UK jobs. I am sure he regrets that that happened, but it was grossly insensitive to the thousands of workers whose livelihoods would be lost as a result of that decision, and they are asking for an apology. I do not want to get personal with regard to Mr East, not least because he took a meeting with me on Friday to discuss the situation, for which I am grateful, and during which, incidentally, he said that the Inchinnan workforce were second to none in the business. But I am told that Mr East and his higher management have shown no interest in dialogue with the workforce. There has now been engagement with the Scottish Government, but that took some time and many requests. I should say that the Scottish Government are absolutely committed to supporting and working with Rolls-Royce to ensure that they do all they can to secure a strong future for Rolls-Royce and its workforce in Scotland.

Rolls-Royce has had a strong relationship with Scotland since 1939, when it built its facility at Hillington. It was built to produce Merlin engines for the RAF's Hurricanes and Spitfires during world war two, and it produced nearly 24,000 Merlins by the end of the war. I grew up not far from the Hillington site, and I had a good view of the factory's tall chimney from the family flat close to the site of the old Renfrew airport. It was a bittersweet moment when the factory closed in 2005, when the work moved to a purpose-built facility at Inchinnan and a redeveloped site at East Kilbride. The factory was part of the local landscape, and the investment would surely safeguard jobs for years, perhaps decades, to come, but just seven years later it was announced that the East Kilbride site was to close and that its production was also to move to Inchinnan. Now, just 15 years later, that purpose-built site is itself in grave danger.

It does not have to be this way, not least because of the relationship that Rolls-Royce already has as a tier 1 partner with the Advanced Forming Research Centre—the AFRC—which sits alongside the Rolls-Royce plant. The AFRC is a globally recognised centre of excellence in innovative manufacturing technologies, R&D and metal forming and forging research, which I have visited a number of times. There has also been a huge level of manufacturing-oriented investment in the Inchinnan area, including £39 million of city deal funding to create the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District Scotland—AMIDS—next to Glasgow airport. Again, this affects the whole site. There has also been £75 million of Scottish Government investment in building and establishing the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland—NMIS—with a further announcement of an additional £20 million on 28 May. Including other partners, this investment is now close to £100 million, so there can be no doubt of the Scottish Government's commitment to

high-value, highly skilled jobs being developed, retained and attracted to Scotland. The question for Rolls-Royce is whether it can match that commitment. There has been no discussion of the long term with the workforce and their representatives. The loyalty shown by the staff at Inchinnan, some of whom have been forced to transfer sites twice during their employment, first from Hillington and then to East Kilbride, has not been repaid and has not been respected.

This highlights a wider problem across the industry. The behaviour of IAG British Airways and its chief executive, Willie Walsh, has been widely reported and condemned in this Chamber and by the Transport Committee. It must be said that the behaviour of IAG British Airways is more reprehensible than that of Rolls-Royce, which still has some sort of relationship with its unions, albeit a little fractious of late. It is simply unacceptable for the loyalty shown by any workers, whether they work for Rolls-Royce, British Airways or anyone else, to be rewarded with the exit door the minute a challenge arises that management think can be met through cost-cutting alone. We cannot have industrial policy run as a race to the bottom with no regard to the longer term or to the communities and families who rely on these jobs.

Yesterday I presented my Employment (Dismissal and Re-employment) Bill to prohibit employers from dismissing employees and subsequently re-employing them for the purposes of diminishing their terms and conditions of employment. I cannot believe that I had to present a Bill to try to make this illegal, but apparently that is the case. Does the Minister think that it is fair for a workforce to be told that they would be made redundant and a proportion rehired on vastly reduced terms and conditions—up to 70%, in some cases? If not, will he back my Bill, or the aim of it, at least, to protect the workers of this country from unscrupulous management?

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Member agree that it is obscene for British Airways or any other company to take advantage of the Government's furlough scheme to then change the contracts of its workers? Some of them are my constituents, and they have expressed great concern, anger and dismay that after 30 years of loyal employment with British Airways, they have been discarded. At a time when British Airways has plenty of money in reserves, as well, it seems that its policy may be to give Virgin a run for its money. Does he think that it is now perhaps time for Government to say to British Airways, "It's time for your slots at Heathrow and elsewhere to be looked at and not given the special treatment that they presently have"?

Gavin Newlands *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before the hon. Gentleman answers, the topic of the debate is Rolls-Royce. I absolutely understand people's anger at what has gone on with British Airways. I will allow a little bit of latitude, but we must really focus on the topic. I think that is an excellent topic for another debate, to be honest.

Gavin Newlands: The hon. Gentleman makes a very strong point about the misuse, almost, of the furlough scheme. I know that this has drawn some criticism from Ministers, but if only they had listened at the start, because when they introduced the scheme, we all said

[Gavin Newlands]

that there were no protections in it for redundancies. Other countries have put in protections to stop this sort of behaviour, but the UK Government did not listen, and here we are with regard to British Airways.

Chris Stephens: I was pleased to co-sponsor my hon. Friend's Bill yesterday. There is a wider point about redundancy, particularly as it relates to Rolls-Royce. We are seeing, far too many times, firms choosing to lay off UK workers because it is easier to lay off a worker, in terms of redundancy, in the UK than in other countries. For example, Germany has 120 days' notice and there has to be a far tougher process. As we come out of lockdown, should not the UK Government be looking at and discussing the whole issue of redundancy when it comes to their legislation going forward?

Gavin Newlands: I concur with my hon. Friend. In fact, executives formally allude to the fact that there are different rules and regulations in other countries, and the UK workforce will bear the brunt.

Patricia Gibson: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so frequently. This is a debate about Rolls-Royce, but is it not a concern that when bad practice is used for all to see, it emboldens other companies in bad behaviour? British Airways has set a bad example with its arrogant attitude to its employees, and it has always had terrible industrial relations. It fails to appreciate that the company is built on the back of the loyal workers; some have worked there for decades. In that context, we are all afraid of what might now happen with Rolls-Royce.

Gavin Newlands: I totally agree. I said at the start, when British Airways came out with that horrendous proposal, that it would potentially give the wider sector cover to do something very similar. I have certainly been told stories of small and large businesses looking to do something similar and perhaps waiting to see the outcome if British Airways is allowed to carry on.

In both cases, Rolls-Royce and British Airways management have made great play of their roots, history and heritage here in this country. In both cases, that pride seems to extend only to proffering their hand for taxpayers' cash. When it comes to repaying those taxpayers by keeping them in employment, supporting the industry and working together to tackle short-term problems, that heritage suddenly evaporates. Two thirds of Rolls-Royce's proposed worldwide job cuts are set for the UK. That shows the loyalty the management have towards the communities and citizens of this country.

At the moment, Rolls-Royce employs roughly 52,000 people globally, of whom 23,000 are UK employees—about 44% of the entire workforce, down from 64% in 2000. That is in part as a result of some global acquisitions, but it is also the result of a previous restructuring which offshored jobs from the UK. It is hard, therefore, not to conclude that Rolls-Royce prefers to offshore UK jobs, rather than to work with sector partners and the UK workforce to recover and rebuild for the future, despite the fact that it has been in receipt of £670 million of UK Government money—mainly research and development money—over the past 20 years.

Rolls-Royce in Inchinnan is at the heart of the new advanced manufacturing innovation district that I described. That district represents a drive for world-class manufacturing and industry. I mentioned earlier that those buzzwords have almost become clichés, but in the case of Inchinnan they are 100% true. The maintenance, repair and overhaul of Inchinnan is world leading to the extent that for many years its workers have been sent around Europe and the far east to assist the company's operations there. Five years ago, Rolls-Royce were recognising the

“dedication and flexibility of the Inchinnan workforce who continue to play a key role on the success of Rolls-Royce.”

What has changed in those five years? If Inchinnan plays a key role, why is it being singled out, disproportionately, as the hardest hit plant in the UK? It is difficult to reconcile Rolls-Royce's previous faith in the workforce with the treatment it is now meting out.

Ministers have often stood at the Dispatch Box in this Chamber and lauded the kind of manufacturing that Inchinnan is renowned for—as they should. But the test is not what is said in this place and recorded in *Hansard*; it is the action the Government take to protect and promote our manufacturing sector, particularly at a time when the industry needs action from the state. So far that action has been virtually non-existent when it comes to my constituents and others around the UK. The UK is home to one of the world's leading aviation and aerospace sectors. It supports more than 1 million jobs in the UK. It is one of the important strategic sectors of industry in this country, if not the most important. It is high time the Government acknowledged that and acted accordingly. We need to hear what the Government plan to do, because when these jobs go, very few, if any, will return. Other global sites will absorb that capacity, and those skills and those jobs will be lost to these shores.

Successive Administrations have made great play of the power of the free market, as if Milton Friedman himself had the skills and craftsmanship to produce the kind of output my constituents produce every day. That sort of ideological nonsense is dead. The impact of covid-19 has shown the need for the state to have a key role in setting the strategy for our economy and intervening where required. The workforce at Inchinnan have shown that they must be listened to, and that decisions must be taken by management after discussion and in consultation with them; not as a paper exercise, but as part of a real long-term plan.

I ask the UK Government to use their influence and power to intervene not just for my constituents in Inchinnan, but for all our aviation and aerospace businesses and workers. This is not the time to let our industries down. The Government laud high-skill production. Now is the time for them to show that they are interested in deeds, not words.

5.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): I thank the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) for securing this important debate today. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), whose two sites in Barnoldswick are impacted—I know that some of those workers actually live in your constituency, Mr Deputy Speaker—and

my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), the Chief Whip, have both made representations to me on behalf of their constituents.

I would like to begin by stating that Rolls-Royce is one of our most important manufacturers in the United Kingdom. It is the world's second largest manufacturer of large civil aerospace engines and our largest civil aerospace company, and it accounts for about 2% of all UK exports of manufactured goods. On 18 May, the Business Secretary spoke to Warren East, the chief executive of Rolls-Royce, who advised that he would be making an announcement on restructuring plans involving job reductions globally. Warren East explained that this latest restructuring was a difficult but necessary decision to respond to the changed medium-term market conditions for civil aircraft resulting from the covid-19 pandemic and, of course, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the company. Although still uncertain of the number of job reductions at any particular location, he indicated that all its civil aerospace sites were likely to be impacted, and assured us that Rolls-Royce would notify the MPs in the constituencies that would be affected. Warren East was grateful for the Government's covid-19 business support measures, which are helping the company in the short term. However, he made it clear that no Government support could replace the lost global customer demand and reduced flying hours. Rolls-Royce made a public announcement on the restructuring plans on 20 May. It said that it would reduce its global workforce by at least 9,000, and that about two thirds of the job reductions would be in the United Kingdom.

Alan Brown: Did the Minister challenge Rolls-Royce on why the UK is losing workers so disproportionately, what the reasons are for that and what it could do to reverse that decision?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question, and I will come to that a little later in my speech. Essentially, the number reflects the proportion of civil aerospace jobs here compared with Rolls-Royce's global footprint.

Rolls-Royce has now commenced its statutory consultation process, and on 3 June it opened a voluntary severance scheme that will reduce the number of compulsory redundancies. The Government fully appreciate that this news will come as a crushing blow—a crushing blow—to the Rolls-Royce workforce. We understand what a worrying time this is for its proud and talented workers who, through no fault of their own—and we heard the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North eloquently describe the workers in his own constituency—will now be affected by this decision.

We now know that reductions are planned across all Rolls-Royce's UK civil aerospace sites, and last week Rolls-Royce confirmed that at least 700 workers will be affected in Inchinnan in the hon. Member's Paisley and Renfrewshire North constituency. The site in Inchinnan currently has about 1,300 employees, who manufacture compressor blades for civil aerospace and defence products, as well as performing maintenance, repair and overhaul services. I would like to use this opportunity to assure the hon. Member that my officials are in regular dialogue with colleagues in Scottish Enterprise, and will continue to work with them to support not only the Scottish Government's effort to help those affected, but the broader aerospace industry that he spoke about in Scotland.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Over 200 job losses are proposed at Rolls-Royce in Barnoldswick. Rolls-Royce is a jewel in the crown of manufacturing in east Lancashire, and it is important to everyone, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has worked extremely hard on this. Does the Minister agree that supporting the small modular reactors programme would help protect jobs at Rolls-Royce?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I was going to come to small modular reactors later on. Supporting that programme will mean that Rolls-Royce will have another product line which could become a world beater in a market that we estimate to be worth about £300 billion a year.

Gavin Newlands: I hear what the Minister says about liaising with Scottish Enterprise and so forth, and I am aware of the engagement that Rolls-Royce has had with Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government, but what are this Government doing, other than changing warm words with Scottish Enterprise? What are the Government doing to keep the jobs in this country?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I hope that as I make some headway in my speech he will recognise what we are doing. I can tell him, because he asked about this earlier, that in terms of financial support the corporate finance facility from the Bank of England has provided £1.8 billion of support to airlines, and £300 million to Rolls-Royce—I will come back to that—and £60 million to Meggitt as well.

David Linden: I want to press the Minister further on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). The Minister speaks about dealing with Scottish Enterprise and officials in Scotland, but I am afraid that that sounds to me like looking at the impact of this and thinking about the pace and so forth. Every time I visit a Government Department there are posters up all over the place saying "Britain is GREAT", "Britain is open", and "Britain is great for manufacturing". The Minister mentioned that the Secretary of State had a conversation with Rolls-Royce on 18 May; has the Secretary of State picked up the phone to Rolls-Royce since then, or is it the UK Government's view that it is just inevitable that this is going to happen, and in fact Britain is not open and Britain is not good for manufacturing? That is the message that I am getting at the moment.

Nadhim Zahawi: It is exactly the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman says, and I hope that when he listens to the words that I am about to deliver he will recognise the support we are putting into the aviation industry; I hold calls with the whole of the sector and I hope he will see after I have completed my speech to the House that this Government are committed to the sector.

Mark Pawsey: The Minister is about to talk about the financial support that the Government are providing to the sector, but he has also spoken about the catastrophic fall in demand for both air travel and new aircraft. Could the Government bring forward any measures to stimulate demand for air travel?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and, again, he anticipates my speech. We are looking at all of this, as I hope he will recognise from some of the things I will be saying soon.

Patricia Gibson: I am very interested in what the Minister has just said about looking at ways to facilitate an improvement and an increase in air travel given the crisis we have just gone through. Does he agree with me and probably all his own Back Benchers that not having the quarantine, which has been brought in with no real medical evidence to support it at this late stage in the game, would help, and that to impose it will in effect deliver a hammer blow to some of the industries that he says he is trying to help?

Nadhim Zahawi: With respect to the hon. Lady, I completely disagree. At the beginning of this epidemic, when we were in the contain phase because the number of incidences was low, we had a triage at ports and airports for passengers coming from hot countries and places such as Wuhan and the rest of China, northern Italy and then the whole of Italy, Japan and of course Iran as well. But as we moved from contain to delay, because the virus began to spread in our communities, the scientific advice was very clear that having that sort of triage at airports was making very little difference. Now that we have the virus under control, and the numbers are reducing every single day and the spread in our communities is becoming very low, it is dangerous not to have a quarantine, because we could easily import the virus from other countries. We are reviewing this every 21 days, and, of course, working on the air bridges that we have heard the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Transport talk about for the future. That is important; lives are incredibly important, but so are livelihoods.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will try to make headway, without abusing your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have given way before, so now let me try to make some headway with my speech.

We will do all we can to support every worker affected at each location, including through the Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus and, of course, Partnership Action for Continuing Employment in Scotland.

Rolls-Royce has confirmed that it will work with those bodies and other regional organisations, such as local enterprise partnerships, local authorities and the unions, to help those who will be affected to get back into employment as quickly as possible.

I have also kept in close contact with my counterpart in the Scottish Government, Fiona Hyslop and Ken Skates in the Welsh Government, and Diane Dodds in the Northern Ireland Executive. During these challenging times, we have a weekly call as a team looking at the shocks of covid-19. I will be meeting with the Minister for Business, Fair Trade and Skills next week to have an in-depth discussion on the Scottish aerospace sector. At a national level, we are working closely with the aerospace industry, particularly through the Aerospace Growth Partnership. My colleagues were asking what support we will be delivering to assist companies through the pandemic and into recovery—

Darren Jones: With all due respect, all of us are having those types of meetings on a daily basis, and we understand the challenges facing the sector. The difference is that the Minister is in a position to do something about it, and the clock is really ticking now for many, many workers, including small and medium-sized enterprises in the supply chain that supply Rolls-Royce. Redundancy notices are being handed in to trade unions now. We are losing workers, we are losing skills and we are losing production capacity. May I gently encourage the Minister in his summing up perhaps to give us some dates and some announcements about action that will be taken, ideally, in the coming weeks?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I hope that, as I make some headway, he will see some of the action that we have already taken to help the industry. I have held several meetings with groups of senior industrialists from the sector during this period. I am pleased that aerospace companies have been able to draw on the Government's extensive financial support package, which includes £330 billion of loans and guarantees, the tax deferrals and the furlough scheme for workers. Rolls-Royce has benefited from £300 million of support from the Bank of England's Covid Corporate Financing Facility. My Department is working with an industry-led UK aerospace supply chain taskforce, set up by the ADS Group, the national aerospace trade association, in consultation with Airbus. The taskforce, led by Tom Williams, the former chief operating officer of Airbus, is looking at supply chain vulnerabilities within the industry and at potential remedies, including around financing. That will ensure that ongoing covid-19 Government support is co-ordinated with the actions of business to support supply chains and employment.

We are continuing to back the sector strongly. Our Aerospace Technology Institute—ATI—programme is providing £1.95 billion of Government funding for aerospace R&D by 2026, which will be matched by industry. The programme has been a game-changer for the UK aerospace industry since 2013, providing real long-term certainty about the availability and the level of public funding, giving industry the confidence it needs to invest. From Broughton in north Wales to Derby in the east midlands and Inchinnan in the constituency of the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, we are at the cutting edge of global aerospace innovation. We manufacture the most advanced parts of an aircraft here in the UK, and we want to maintain our position for many years to come. Indeed, creating this positive business environment helped to give Rolls-Royce the confidence to build its new large engine testbed in Derby, the largest indoor facility of its type in the world.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: If the hon. Gentleman will give me a couple more minutes, I will come back to him.

The facility is capable of testing large engines and, crucially, the next generation of UltraFan engines. Looking to the future, we recently opened the £300 million feature flight challenge. It will award £125 million of grants to small and medium-sized companies investing in future aviation systems and vehicle technologies, which will enable new classes of electric or autonomous air vehicles. We are supporting SMEs through innovation

and productivity programmes, and we are looking at what scope there is to refocus some of these to assist with the short-term needs of businesses. That is what we are doing currently with those SMEs. We are making sure that Rolls-Royce and others can sustain investment in cutting-edge technology so that they are competitive when the markets actually recover. Our joint research projects funded through our ATI programme, which I referred to earlier, are supporting the development of the next generation of cleaner and quieter aero engines.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for his generosity in giving way. He rightly talks about the support the Government have given to industry and the aviation industry, but with that we expect some corporate social responsibility. Will he outline what that means? Does it mean the Government are going to have to, and will, review redundancy legislation so that companies that are not engaging in CSR and are getting taxpayers' money are told by the Government, "Sorry, you can't make people redundant"?

Nadhim Zahawi: I hope to address the hon. Gentleman's point in my concluding remarks. Suffice it to say that the most valuable resource in any organisation—I have spent more years being in business than I have as a Member of Parliament and a Minister—is the human resource, and that any leader, and chief executive, would be minded to think long and hard before behaving in a way that makes their people, the family who make up their business, feel as though their leadership are not listening to them.

In addition, we are supporting investments in new green aviation technologies, which will not only help us to deliver on our net zero commitments, but keep the UK at the forefront of the aerospace sector globally. We continue to back Rolls-Royce's export campaigns, including, where needed, through UK Export Finance.

The recovery of the aerospace sector is, of course, dependent on the wider aviation sector, as has been mentioned in this debate, and on getting aircraft flying again. The Government are committed to getting this crucial sector restarted. Led by my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, we are in active discussions with industry through an expert steering group, as part of an international aviation taskforce. The group has been instrumental in the development of the health measures guidance for passengers and operators, which my Department for Transport colleagues will be publishing as soon as possible. The border health measures that we spoke about earlier will be subject to review—currently this will be every three weeks—to ensure that they are in line with the latest scientific evidence, and remain effective and necessary. We are examining the possibility of alternatives to the international passenger self-isolation rules, including air bridges, where countries have managed the virus and we are confident in their measures for departing passengers—I spoke about that earlier. We will continue to work with industry on this concept and, ultimately, we will be guided by the science. I am sure the House will appreciate that the health of the public will always come first.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving in and giving way. Let us go back to the welcome support he outlined, which he is saying the Government are putting

in for the future of aviation and cutting-edge technology, and being ahead of the world. If the UK is going to be so far ahead of the world and the Government are providing all that long-term certainty, can he explain why Rolls-Royce is still laying off so many workers in the UK? That still does not square. Let us go back to the earlier intervention about small modular reactors. This is an unproven technology and good money is being thrown after bad. If we are looking at diversification, should it not be into green renewable energy? Should we not be looking to throw money into this in that way, to help sectors diversify, instead of looking at more nuclear energy?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, but I did address it earlier in my speech—I hope he will read it in *Hansard* tomorrow morning.

I know that workers at Rolls-Royce who risk losing their jobs will be in a state of shock at the way events have unfolded. Just a few months ago, the sector was thriving. Apart from the financial impacts and worries, this news will take its toll on the overall wellbeing and health of individuals and families. I know that Rolls-Royce will act in a responsible way—colleagues mentioned corporate social responsibility—in assisting those affected, and, as I have committed, we will also do all we can to support them.

I started by speaking about the importance of Rolls-Royce to the UK. Although this restructuring is hugely painful, it is intended to make sure that the company remains competitive and can return to growth in civil aerospace as we come out of the covid-19 challenge. Rolls-Royce remains committed to the UK, as is evidenced by its investment of over £2 billion in UK infrastructure over the past five years. We will continue to support the company and the wider UK aerospace industry to get back on its feet and back it into a position of growth, protecting high-paid jobs across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

The workforce was mentioned. The leadership at Rolls-Royce have made it very clear to us that they are being sensitive to their workforce, which is why they have introduced the voluntary scheme first of all.

I will end by saying that we continue to look at what other countries are doing around the world in supporting aerospace and aviation, and we will review our support in the light of the global environment.

David Linden: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not know whether the Minister perhaps did not hear, but my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) was seeking to intervene. Given that there are 55 minutes left for the debate, is it in order for him to make his point to the Minister, who would not let him in?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Interventions are either accepted or not accepted by The Member for whom they are intended. It is for them to make that decision, not the Chair.

Question put and agreed to.

6.6 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 10 June 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Post Office Horizon IT System: Independent Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I am today announcing the scope of the independent review into the Post Office Horizon IT system and trials which the Prime Minister committed to on 26 February 2020. This followed Post Office Ltd reaching a settlement, in December 2019, of £57.75 million to conclude a long-running case brought against it by a group of postmasters over issues related to Post Office's Horizon IT system.

The longstanding dispute and subsequent trials relating to the Post Office Horizon IT system have had a hugely negative impact on affected postmasters and their families. These events have deeply affected postmasters' lives: their livelihoods, their financial situation, their reputations and, for some, also their physical and mental health. In his judgments in the "common issues" and "Horizon issues" trials, Mr Justice Fraser identified significant failings within Post Office Ltd over nearly two decades, particularly in relation to the treatment of postmasters and in its management culture.

Under its new CEO, Nick Read, Post Office Ltd has admitted it got things wrong in relation to the Horizon case and has apologised. It has also started to take steps to reset the relationship with postmasters. These are important moves in the right direction. However, given the very serious impacts this case has had on many individual postmasters, more needs to be done.

Government want to be fully assured that through the review there is a public summary of the failings that occurred at Post Office Ltd, drawing on the judgments from the Horizon case and by listening to those that have been most affected; that lessons have genuinely been learned; and that concrete changes have taken place at Post Office Ltd to ensure that this situation will never be repeated. For these reasons Government have decided to establish an independent review.

The independent review shall:

Understand and acknowledge what went wrong in relation to Horizon, leading to the Group Litigation Order, by drawing on evidence from the Horizon judgments and affected postmasters' experiences and identify what key lessons must be learned for the future;

Assess whether the Post Office Ltd has learned the lessons from the criticisms made by Mr Justice Fraser in the "Common Issues" and "Horizon Issues" trials and those identified by affected postmasters and has delivered or made good progress on the organisational and cultural changes necessary to ensure a similar case does not happen in the future;

Assess whether the commitments made by Post Office Ltd within the mediation settlement—including the historical shortfall scheme—have been properly delivered;

Assess whether the processes and information provided by Post Office Ltd to postmasters are sufficient to i) enable both parties to meet their contractual obligations; and ii) enable

postmasters to run their businesses. This includes assessing whether Post Office Ltd's related processes such as recording and resolving postmaster queries, dispute handling, suspension and termination are fit for purpose. In addition, determine whether the quality of the service offer for postmasters and their relationship with Post Office Ltd has materially improved since the conclusions by Mr Justice Fraser; and examine the governance and whistleblowing controls now in place at Post Office Ltd and whether they are sufficient to ensure that the failings that led to the Horizon case issues do not happen again.

The review will be led by an independent chair who will be announced in due course alongside final timings and terms of reference for the review.

The review shall set out Post Office Ltd's actions in response to the findings of Mr Justice Fraser. While avoiding a re-examination of the findings made by Mr Justice Fraser through the lengthy court proceedings, it must use these and the experiences of affected postmasters as the basis for its work. The review should not encroach on the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission and the Court of Appeal. The review should make any recommendations it sees fit, including actions that may, in its view, be appropriate as a result of its findings. The final report will be laid in the Libraries of both Houses upon completion of the review.

[HCWS280]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Coronavirus: Local Authority Funding

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): On 22 May the Government announced £300 million additional funding for local authorities to support them to develop and action their plans to reduce the spread of the virus in their area as part of the launch of the wider NHS test and trace service. This funding will enable local authorities to develop and implement tailored local covid-19 outbreak plans through for example funding the recruitment of additional staff where required.

Today we are updating the House on the detailed allocation of these monies which has been made on the basis of the 2020-21 public health grant allocations. This allocation formula has been chosen as that which best reflects the public health needs in local authorities.

This funding is for local authorities in England only. This means an additional £57 million will be provided by HMT via the Barnett formula for the devolved Administrations, £29 million for the Scottish Government, £18 million for the Welsh Government, and £10 million for the Northern Ireland Executive.

<i>Authorities to which grant is to be paid</i>	<i>Amount of grant to be paid</i>
Barking and Dagenham	£1,566,647
Barnet	£1,599,177
Barnsley	£1,568,553
Bath and North East Somerset	£849,159
Bedford	£806,281
Bexley	£902,348
Birmingham	£8,438,988

<i>Authorities to which grant is to be paid</i>	<i>Amount of grant to be paid</i>	<i>Authorities to which grant is to be paid</i>	<i>Amount of grant to be paid</i>
Blackburn with Darwen	£1,366,942	Lambeth	£2,919,086
Blackpool	£1,693,874	Lancashire	£6,367,420
Bolton	£1,997,675	Leeds	£4,141,249
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	£1,808,624	Leicester	£2,489,071
Bracknell Forest	£385,454	Leicestershire	£2,309,000
Bradford	£3,870,360	Lewisham	£2,267,070
Brent	£1,993,129	Lincolnshire	£3,069,554
Brighton and Hove	£1,862,524	Liverpool	£4,088,731
Bristol, City of	£3,032,572	Luton	£1,425,693
Bromley	£1,369,923	Manchester	£4,836,535
Buckinghamshire	£1,954,838	Medway	£1,592,918
Bury	£1,080,413	Merton	£964,982
Calderdale	£1,233,390	Middlesbrough	£1,566,024
Cambridgeshire	£2,493,304	Milton Keynes	£1,065,306
Camden	£2,460,643	Newcastle upon Tyne	£2,185,756
Central Bedfordshire	£1,156,291	Newham	£2,843,060
Cheshire East	£1,533,331	Norfolk	£3,717,780
Cheshire West and Chester	£1,513,306	North East Lincolnshire	£1,049,417
City of London	£146,484	North Lincolnshire	£855,156
Cornwall	£2,387,297	North Somerset	£868,716
County Durham	£4,498,138	North Tyneside	£1,140,250
Coventry	£2,041,190	North Yorkshire	£2,022,805
Croydon	£1,998,175	Northamptonshire	£3,270,065
Cumbria	£1,717,862	Northumberland	£1,528,975
Darlington	£778,834	Nottingham	£3,126,717
Derby	£1,807,712	Nottinghamshire	£3,802,915
Derbyshire	£3,859,136	Oldham	£1,560,230
Devon	2,618,508	Oxfordshire	£2,858,487
Doncaster	£2,233,745	Peterborough	£1,017,883
Dorset	£1,287,650	Plymouth	£1,402,003
Dudley	£1,941,764	Portsmouth	£1,637,748
Ealing	£2,261,924	Reading	£901,002
East Riding of Yorkshire	£1,024,000	Redbridge	£1,279,157
East Sussex	£2,534,832	Redcar and Cleveland	£1,076,223
Enfield	£1,582,042	Richmond upon Thames	£858,104
Essex	£5,783,212	Rochdale	£1,591,757
Gateshead	£1,513,527	Rotherham	£1,518,012
Gloucestershire	£2,221,773	Rutland	£120,148
Greenwich	£2,159,691	Salford	£1,975,758
Hackney	£3,100,891	Sandwell	£2,276,836
Halton	£948,538	Sefton	£1,995,065
Hammersmith and Fulham	£2,020,099	Sheffield	£3,101,989
Hampshire	£4,789,993	Shropshire	£1,126,797
Haringey	£1,862,362	Slough	£689,507
Harrow	£1,020,258	Solihull	£1,040,717
Hartlepool	£825,809	Somerset	£1,925,972
Havering	£1,022,848	South Gloucestershire	£863,029
Herefordshire, County of	£845,091	South Tyneside	£1,250,300
Hertfordshire	£4,506,303	Southampton	£1,571,231
Hillingdon	£1,629,656	Southend-on-Sea	£887,492
Hounslow	£1,467,891	Southwark	£2,521,368
Isle of Wight	£700,230	St. Helens	£1,328,091
Isles of Scilly	£11,935	Staffordshire	£3,634,365
Islington	£2,430,588	Stockport	£1,473,704
Kensington and Chelsea	£1,932,848	Stockton-on-Tees	£1,310,997
Kent	£6,311,401	Stoke-on-Trent	£2,084,370
Kingston upon Hull, City of	£2,235,503	Suffolk	£2,789,363
Kingston upon Thames	£940,711	Sunderland	£2,219,966
Kirklees	£2,381,215	Surrey	£3,477,690
Knowsley	£1,595,940	Sutton	£920,329
		Swindon	£930,733

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Written Statements

10 JUNE 2020

Written Statements

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<i>Authorities to which grant is to be paid</i>	<i>Amount of grant to be paid</i>
Tameside	£1,419,817
Telford and Wrekin	£1,162,281
Thurrock	£1,050,883
Torbay	£886,457
Tower Hamlets	£3,220,464
Trafford	£1,156,759
Wakefield	£2,247,805
Walsall	£1,650,559
Waltham Forest	£1,478,904
Wandsworth	£2,541,671
Warrington	£1,136,884
Warwickshire	£2,137,781
West Berkshire	£540,345

<i>Authorities to which grant is to be paid</i>	<i>Amount of grant to be paid</i>
West Sussex	£3,178,715
Westminster	£2,890,797
Wigan	£2,392,101
Wiltshire	£1,586,902
Windsor and Maidenhead	£435,650
Wirral	£2,733,018
Wokingham	£499,857
Wolverhampton	£1,920,236
Worcestershire	£2,752,192
York	£733,896
Total	£300,000,000

[HCWS281]

ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than
Wednesday 17 June 2020**

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