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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 10 September 2020

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The House met at half-past Nine 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

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—
Chalk Streams

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to (a) protect and (b) enhance chalk streams. [905804]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We are already working with our partners to take action to protect and enhance chalk streams, which are precious habitats. That includes reforming abstraction, improving water quality through the Environment Agency's water industry national environment programme, and legislating to support those measures. However, as I said at a roundtable that I ran this week with water companies, chalk streams are vital. We have to do something to look after them, and we will be hosting a conference on this on 16 October.

James Wild: I am grateful for that reply. Last year, water companies discharged sewage into our precious chalk streams and rivers in North West Norfolk and across the country 200,000 times. I welcome my hon. Friend's efforts to tackle that unacceptable level. Will she instruct the Environment Agency to take more enforcement action, and will she assure me that the new powers in the Environment Bill will be used to set tough, legally binding targets?

Rebecca Pow: We know that effective regulation is the key to preventing pollution from affecting water quality. That is why a range of enforcement and sanction options are open to the Environment Agency, which we expect to be used wherever necessary. We also expect water companies to set out how they will manage sewage discharges through drainage and wastewater management plans. However, I acknowledge that further action is necessary, particularly on sewage pollution and combined sewage outlets. I referenced that at the roundtable earlier this week, and more work will be going on.

Deforestation

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): What steps he is taking to prevent deforestation. [905805]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Recognising that commodity supply chains are a major driver of deforestation, the Government established the global resource initiative taskforce. Following the taskforce's recommendations, we are consulting on proposals for a new world-leading due diligence law and working to forge an international alliance on supply chains at COP26. UK international climate finance is also used to protect the world's most biodiverse forests, with £5.8 billion committed between 2016 and 2021.

Ruth Edwards: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer, and I welcome the Government's consultation in this area. May I urge her to make our landmark Environment Bill even more world-leading by including legislative measures on due diligence?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for being on the ball about the Environment Bill in particular. It will be back before the House very soon and will fulfil the Government's manifesto commitment to deliver the most ambitious environmental programme in any country on earth. We understand the eagerness about measures in relation to due diligence, but we do not want to anticipate the outcome of the consultation. Any decisions on the next steps on these measures will be confirmed in the Government's formal response to the consultation, which will be published after the consultation closes on 5 October, but we are very positive about it.

Food Production Standards

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to protect British food production standards in trade deals. [905807]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We have a manifesto commitment that, in all our trade negotiations, we will not compromise on our high environmental, animal welfare and food standards. We have retained in law our existing standards of protection. We have laid before the House our negotiating objectives, stating that we will uphold those, and we most recently established the Trade and Agriculture Commission.

Seema Malhotra: Many of my constituents, including Nimmi Soni, have written to me with their concerns about the Government's commitment to protecting food standards. The Secretary of State is right that in its manifesto his party promised not to compromise on food standards in trade deals, but twice—twice—the Government have refused to support Labour amendments to put that into law. If over 70% of people do not want us to sell food imported from countries with lower food standards, and more than 1 million people have signed a National Farmers Union petition for British food standards to be put into law, why are the Government refusing to do what the public want and expect? The country has a right to know.

George Eustice: In retained EU law, we have indeed put in place the existing prohibitions on the sale of, for instance, poultry washed with chlorine and beef treated with hormones. We have legal prohibitions and our own legal bans on certain practices. Those remain in place and will not change.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday was Back British Farming Day, but while our farmers are at risk of being undercut in future trade deals, it will take more than just one day of wheatsheaf-wearing to protect them. Will the Secretary of State support the amendment in the House of Lords to put the Trade and Agriculture Commission on firmer footing, especially to offset the clear conflict of interest of Tony Abbott negotiating agricultural trade deals with Australia that could risk British farmers' livelihoods further?

George Eustice: Tony Abbott is one of a number of people on the Board of Trade. Their role is to champion British exports overseas. They do not decide Government policy or the Government's negotiating mandate; those negotiations are led by the Secretary of State for International Trade. We have set up a food and agriculture and trade standards commission, and it is already meeting. It does not need to be placed on a statutory footing.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Nancy Pelosi and several other American politicians have said that there will be no trade deal with the US if the UK reneges on treaties that it has signed up to, as the Government intend to do with the EU withdrawal agreement. Given that the UK Government dumped food standards from the Agriculture Bill to pursue a US deal that now appears dead, what options will the Secretary of State be looking at to restore those protections, and can we see guarantees on food standards for imports written into law?

George Eustice: There are a number of ways in which we secure standards on food imports. One is through the prohibitions on sale, as I have already mentioned, which include things such as poultry washed with chlorine or hormones in beef. There is also the sanitary and phytosanitary chapter that exists in every trade deal that sets out our requirements for the safety and standards of food coming in. Finally, of course, we use tariff policy to take account of certain practices in other countries.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What advice has the Secretary of State asked for or been given about the liability of the UK Government for damages arising from their failure to ensure that our current standards are upheld in any future trade deal? Will the Government be prepared to compensate farmers and other food producers whose businesses suffer as a result? Will consumers whose health is affected be similarly entitled to compensation?

George Eustice: There will be no need for compensation, as this Government will protect and uphold our food standards.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Food standards and geographical protections go hand in hand, and despite the Secretary of State's earlier answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh

North and Leith (Deidre Brock), this Government are giving up on food standards and trade deals and are abandoning the EU's protections on protected geographical indications. Those actions threaten Scotland's high-quality produce, including whisky. What reassurances can he give the whisky workers in my constituency that their industry will be protected, and will the Government do a welcome U-turn and seek to rejoin the EU's protected geographical indication scheme?

George Eustice: We will not rejoin the EU's scheme, but the withdrawal agreement makes provision in the area of protected food names and PGIs, and there will be recognition of the existing ones that have been set out. In addition, we will be establishing our own independent PGI and protected food name scheme to take new applications after we leave.

Air Quality

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What representations he has received on the potential merits of amending the Environment Bill's provisions on air quality. [905808]

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What representations he has received on the potential merits of amending the Environment Bill's provisions on air quality. [905823]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Measures to improve air quality are a key part of the Environment Bill, and we have engaged with stakeholders during the development of these measures to ensure that they are ambitious and impactful. We are confident that the measures, including the commitments to set two air quality targets, will deliver real benefits for air quality, and we will continue to engage and collaborate with stakeholders, parliamentarians and the public as we work to implement them.

Ruth Cadbury [V]: Until lockdown, air pollution blighted the life expectancy and health of many of my constituents, and, as traffic levels are starting to rise again, we are seeing the same problems of air pollution arise. Will the Government commit to including the World Health Organisation's guideline on air pollution limits in the Environment Bill, and will they also include particulate matter as well as nitrogen dioxide in the legally binding targets?

Rebecca Pow: As I have said, we have two air quality targets already in the Environment Bill and the WHO's PM 2.5 is on there. We will consult on exactly how that will come through, which is absolutely right. All experts agree with that. The hon. Lady makes good points about coronavirus and the impact on air quality. The Air Quality Expert Group and others have done some very useful and significant research, which will be looked at in great detail to ensure that the right measures are coming forward.

Navendu Mishra: Local modelling has revealed that 21 locations across Stockport will have nitrogen oxide levels above the legal limit in 2021. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), I ask the Government to commit today to including nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter as legally binding targets in the Environment Bill.

Rebecca Pow: The Environment Bill has a big section on tackling air quality, with two targets to be set. Many other air pollutants—five in total—are also tackled, and we already have targets in place for them as part of the clean air strategy. We have a comprehensive strategy, because we appreciate just how serious the issue of air quality is. We as a Government will be tackling that with measures including clean air zones across the country, many of which are coming forward in the near future.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her responses to my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), but may I press her further? According to Labour research, almost 60% of people in England are living in areas where levels of toxic air pollution exceeded legal limits last year. That shocking statistic should jolt the Government into action. Will the Minister commit to incorporating World Health Organisation air-quality standards into the Environment Bill?

Rebecca Pow: I welcome the shadow Minister to her place. As I have said, the Bill contains two targets, and dealing with PM2.5 is one of them. We understand that that is the most significant and impactful pollutant of our health, but we must consult on this issue. I have met many experts and specialists in this area, and we must wait for the actual data before we can finally bring those measures into the Bill and ensure that we get this right. As I said, clean air zones are being introduced across the country to tackle this issue through our clean air strategy.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): May I point out to the food Minister that, contrary to what she might think—

Mr Speaker: Order. We need question 11.
National Food Strategy

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the national food strategy. [905810]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I take this opportunity to thank Henry Dimbleby and his team for their work to examine our food system and the vital role it plays? We will consider their independent report carefully, and we expect the second part during the course of next year. The Government have undertaken to respond with a White Paper within six months.

Paul Maynard: My apologies, Mr Speaker; my excitement about this report knows no bounds, hence my enthusiasm. In my constituency, the Minister is now something of a folk heroine, thanks to the report. May I invite her to visit Blackpool and see how the recommendations on tackling holiday hunger will benefit the most deprived communities in the UK? Because we may be in a food desert, she might have to put up with a Greggs pasty for her lunch, but we will put on a good show for her none the less.

Victoria Prentis: Flattery will get my hon. Friend everywhere, and I would be delighted to visit his constituency, where I have fond memories of at least one family holiday as a child. A Greggs pasty will be just great.

Animal Welfare Offences

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What plans he has to increase the penalties for animal welfare offences. [905812]

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What plans he has to increase the penalties for animal welfare offences. [905817]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): Animal cruelty has no place in our society, which is why the Government are committed to increasing the maximum custodial penalty for animal cruelty from six months to five years. The Government are fully behind the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, which will provide one of the toughest sentencing regimes in Europe.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for her answer, but I have been really disturbed by recent reports in the local press regarding incidents of animal cruelty in my constituency. I certainly worry that individuals who are capable of deliberately inflicting pain and suffering on animals are capable of far worse. Will the Minister go a little further and give a guarantee that the maximum five-year sentence for the worst animal cruelty offences will be on the statute book by January 2021?

Victoria Prentis: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman, and we are all keen to do what we can to stamp out animal cruelty. Unfortunately, I cannot give any guarantees about the progress of parliamentary business, but the Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder)—who is currently in his place—will take place next month. The Government fully support the Bill and hope that it will become law very soon.

Bambos Charalambous: I welcome the Minister's confirmation that we will have a five-year maximum sentence for animal cruelty. The RSPCA has estimated that there were more than 100,000 instances of animal cruelty during lockdown. That is a great concern, and we want to ensure that action is taken. Will the Minister confirm that there will be greater enforcement and steps towards prosecution, to ensure that those who commit animal cruelty are brought to justice?

Victoria Prentis: Enforcement is, of course, a matter for local police forces, but what we can do in this place is make sure that the right laws are in place to give them the tools that they need to stamp out animal cruelty.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): There has been much laudable support for this and many good intentions, but since 2016, when we had the Select Committee report recommendation to bring in five-year maximum sentencing, each Government have decided they are going to do it and it is still not done. My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) has presented his Bill, so this is about making sure that the Government will support it and make time—Government time—to get it through, because we must not prevaricate any longer. With a maximum six-month sentence, and only four months if someone pleads guilty, it is absolutely ridiculous that we cannot bring in stronger sentencing.

Victoria Prentis: The Chairman and members of the EFRA Committee have done their bit through their important work in producing that report in 2016. The Second Reading of the Bill takes place next month, and I very much look forward to either attending the debate or following it very closely. I can reassure my hon. Friend by saying that the Government strongly support that private Member's Bill, and fully expect it to be adopted very soon.

UK-grown Produce

Danny Kruger (Devezes) (Con): What plans he has to promote UK-grown produce in the domestic market. [905815]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Government are determined to help our farmers and food producers to increase sales domestically and internationally. We welcome efforts from all parts of the food chain to promote UK produce, including the promotional work done by groups like the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board. We have recently co-funded a consumer-facing milk campaign, and we continue to work with the AHDB and others on future promotional work.

Danny Kruger: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, which is very welcome indeed. Does he agree that food produced in other countries using techniques that drive up yield and drive down costs but are illegal here in the UK should be subject to import tariffs that make those techniques economically pointless?

George Eustice: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The use of tariff policy to protect producers and to safeguard against certain types of production is indeed a legitimate use of tariff policy, alongside other measures such as the sanitary and phytosanitary chapter that we are negotiating.

Healthy and Sustainable Food

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the accessibility of (a) healthy and (b) sustainable food. [905818]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We have commissioned the national food strategy independent review. Other Government policies are addressing healthy food provision through, for instance, the tackling obesity strategy, healthy start vouchers and free school meals. Sustainable food production is absolutely at the heart of our future agriculture policy.

Ian Byrne: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Local welfare provision can be a lifeline for families on the brink of food poverty. That is why I warmly welcome the Department's funding allocation of £63 million of emergency support back in July. I am growing increasingly concerned, however, that this funding is due to expire in October, at the same time that the furlough scheme is drawing to a close, food bank use is rocketing, and we will be in the midst of a recession. What future funding will the Department allocate for local welfare provision?

George Eustice: We have made a number of interventions to help people struggling with food affordability, particularly in lockdown and its aftermath. We continue to keep all these policies under review. We have the free school meals voucher system that ran, as the hon. Gentleman says, over the summer, and there are other measures that we have been working on with local authorities.

Smaller Farmers: Supermarket Prices

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that small farmers obtain a fair price from supermarkets for their produce. [R] [905819]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We want farmers to get a fair price for their produce, and the Government are committed to tackling the contractual unfairness that exists in the agrifood supply chain. Through the Agriculture Bill, we are seeking to strengthen the position of farmers by improving transparency in the supply chain, and there are new powers in the Bill to introduce statutory codes of contractual practice.

Chris Loder: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply, but the supermarket Sainsbury's is threatening to tear up the contracts of small dairy farmers in West Dorset that supply it with milk if they refuse to sell it a percentage of their calves. Does he agree that Sainsbury's is abusing its dominant position, and will he support me in defending small farmers across the country from these predatory supermarkets?

George Eustice: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue in more detail. We now have a groceries code adjudicator who regulates the types of contract that supermarkets can put in place and precludes certain practices, but through the Agriculture Bill we can go further, and stipulate further requirements in contracts in future.

Flood Defences

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase flood defences. [905820]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Government are investing a record £5.2 billion to deliver around 2,000 new flood defence projects to better protect 336,000 properties in England by 2027. Up to £170 million is also being invested to accelerate work on flood defence schemes that will soon begin construction, and I am very pleased to say that, largely thanks to my hon. Friend's great campaigning efforts from the Back Benches, Tenbury Wells will receive £4.9 million in economic recovery grant to enable the completion of the scheme she has been championing and to better protect 570 jobs, 80 businesses and 82 properties.

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the Minister personally, and the Secretary of State, for all they did to ensure that funding will deliver a scheme for Tenbury Wells. May I ask her to encourage, from the Dispatch Box, the Environment Agency to crack on and get a socially distanced consultation under way on its preferred design?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that, and for all the work that she has done. Now that the money is there, she is itching to get on with the project. The Environment Agency has worked proactively to develop safe ways to work during the pandemic, and I am reliably informed that it will start a public consultation on the Tenbury flood risk management scheme this autumn. It will use socially distanced and virtual engagement methods that are covid-secure to ensure that it engages as widely as possible.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): People in South Yorkshire are still waiting for the Prime Minister's flood summit, which was promised last November, four months before the covid-19 lockdown in the UK. This is the second time I have asked the Secretary of State to explain the delay. Will he apologise, and commit now to a date for the long overdue summit?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the shadow Minister for that question. This issue has been raised a number of times. I have had many Zoom calls with Members from the area over the lockdown, and the difficulty with having the project has been that we have been in lockdown, but we have made major flood announcements, including the announcement of £5.2 billion of funding. Many of the Yorkshire areas have benefited, but of course, if there are further conversations that the shadow Minister would like to have, we would be happy to have them.

Animal Welfare Standards

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase animal welfare standards. [905821]

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase animal welfare standards. [905825]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): This country has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. We have modernised standards for dog breeding, changed the way we do pet sales, brought in a world-leading ivory ban, and introduced mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses. We are going further, as we said we would in our manifesto, to end excessively long journeys for farm animals, to ban primates as pets and to ban imports from trophy hunting.

Tom Randall: I thank the Minister for that answer, which will reassure the many Gedling residents who write to me on animal welfare issues. As our manifesto made clear, leaving the European Union gives us the opportunity to enhance standards, not reduce them. Given that, does my hon. Friend agree that we should perhaps stop playing party politics on this issue, and get behind the many initiatives that the Government have introduced to promote high animal welfare standards and increased protection for animals in homes, farms and the wild?

Victoria Prentis: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that there is a great deal of interest across this House and, indeed, among our constituents in issues concerning animal welfare. The UK is a leader when it comes to matters of animal welfare, but there is always more that we can and will do.

Fiona Bruce: My family enjoys quality food bought directly from farms and their shops across my constituency, such as Ibbotsons in Sandbach, Glebe Farm in Astbury, Hall Farm shop in Alsager and the Cheshire Egg Co.'s dispenser at Pace's Farm, and daily fresh Bidlea milk from Twemlow. What more can the Government do to help those and other rural businesses in my constituency to promote their high-quality local produce?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the delicious food—from lovely meat to the famous Cheshire cheese—that is undoubtedly available in her constituency. We are supporting initiatives to promote local produce, including through recent industry-led marketing campaigns. We will always champion our farmers and producers to grow more of our great British food.

Sustainable Fishing

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote sustainable fishing. [905822]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The Fisheries Bill, which is currently in Committee and on which I will be spending the rest of the day, sets out a legally binding framework, including fisheries management plans, which will help to protect and recover stocks, to support a thriving, sustainable fishing industry, and, we hope, to safeguard the environment.

John Lamont: Sustainability means that coastal communities around the UK, such as Eyemouth in my constituency, can continue to fish for generations to come. When renegotiating access to UK waters, how will the Minister ensure that all boats comply with our rules and that our marine life is protected from overfishing?

Victoria Prentis: In future, all vessels, both from the UK and elsewhere, will be subject to licence conditions set by the UK sea fisheries authorities. The conditions will set out the areas that can be fished, species that can be caught and types of gear that can be used when fishing in UK waters. Marine enforcement officers from all the fisheries administrations have the powers to inspect vessels and ensure that they comply with our rules.

Topical Questions

[905764] **Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): As we approach the end of the transition period, DEFRA's primary focus will be on putting in place all the necessary legislation for January, working with industry to ensure that we are ready for change, and putting in place the necessary capacity to enable us to deliver a smooth transition to becoming an independent country.

Andrew Griffith: What is my right hon. Friend's Department doing ahead of the upcoming winter to improve the fluvial transport capacity of the Rivers Arun and Adur, which is of great concern to farmers in my constituency of Arundel and South Downs?

George Eustice: The Environment Agency has completed capital schemes to reduce flood risk at Shoreham, Littlehampton and Arundel. Three maintenance projects on the Arun are due to be completed before winter, on the River Stour and at Greatham and Hardham.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Seventy-nine per cent. of the citizens' climate assembly agreed that economic recovery after covid must be designed to help to drive net zero, including through greater reliance on local food production and healthier diets. Will the Secretary of State commit his Department to reviewing those findings and acting on them?

George Eustice: We are already running our own reviews in those policy areas through the national food strategy, which is run by Henry Dimbleby. Indeed, the powers in the Agriculture Bill give us precisely the ability to support local projects.

[905766] **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): Two weeks ago, on a farm in Gayton in my constituency, I saw the damage being caused to the sugar beet crop by yellow virus. Will Ministers look seriously at the request from British Sugar and growers across Norfolk and elsewhere for us to follow the French example of a temporary derogation in respect of neonicotinoid seed treatments, to allow the industry to tackle the immediate issue while working on longer-term solutions?

George Eustice: The Government recognise that sugar beet growers face yield losses this year because of the difficulties in controlling aphids. We support the restrictions on neonicotinoids to protect pollinators, but we have always been clear that we remain open to applications for emergency authorisations under the current rules.

[905765] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Secretary of State's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) was slightly disappointing. The climate assembly was made up of 108 people, from all walks of life and from throughout the country, who considered the evidence and gave their time. The report makes evidence-based recommendations on how we should reach net zero by 2050. May I push the Secretary of State to give assurances that he will consider those recommendations and not give the climate assembly participants a slap in the face? Will he also ensure that recommendations are appropriately incorporated in legislation?

George Eustice: We are always open to recommendations, suggestions and proposals from people in all walks of life, whether they are on any type of formal committee or not. The point I was making was that we have our own national food strategy, which is itself running a large engagement process to engage people in many of these ideas. We will of course consider those ideas as we put together future policy.

[905767] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con) [V]: In recent years, flooding Ministers have worked with me to deliver the multi-million pound Lytham Dock Road pumping station and the £17.4 million Church Scar sea defences. We now need that same level of focus to address considerable inland flooding in parts of Fylde. Will Ministers meet me to discuss how we tackle that challenge?

George Eustice: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these issues. However, since 2010 the Government have invested £181 million in flood defences in Lancashire to better protect about 37,000 homes, and over the next two years we plan to invest a further £21.6 million to support inland fluvial and coastal defence schemes and better protect nearly 5,000 homes.

[905771] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): One of the Government's biggest successes during this pandemic has been their work with FareShare, which has allowed local food charities in my constituency, such as Evolve and Bestop, to get food out to vulnerable people. The DEFRA funding involved has diverted fresh food away from waste to those who really need it. Clearly, we have a long way to go in this pandemic, so is the Secretary of State considering extending this funding?

George Eustice: We work closely with FareShare, as we always have. As the hon. Gentleman points out, we did make some additional funding available to help it to support the financially vulnerable during this pandemic. Obviously, as we go into winter we keep all these matters under review.

[905769] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): One of the biggest issues that Gedling residents have written to me about since my election is the culling of badgers. I recently met representatives of the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust to hear more about the issue and the vaccination programme it is running, with DEFRA funding. Although it is important to follow the science in the decision making, there are concerns that the cull will eradicate some badger populations. Could my right hon. Friend tell me what criteria were used to determine the next areas where the culling will take place and what the extent of it will be?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In our response to the Godfrey review, we set out our approach to dealing with bovine tuberculosis in the next five years. As for his specific question, we look at epidemiological assessments in individual areas to see where particular strains are present in both badgers and cattle, and that drives the decisions about where culling is necessary.

[905773] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister's earlier answer on deforestation simply was not good enough. Why are the Government only consulting on due diligence measures to cover illegal deforestation, given that we know that many of the activities contributing to deforestation in, for example, the Amazon, are legal and that Bolsonaro for one is relaxing legal protections? We do not need a consultation to tell us that UK companies should not be complicit in destroying the Amazon, so will the Minister look at and support my amendment to the Environment Bill, which would require due diligence across the board?

George Eustice: As the Minister said earlier, we have a consultation out at the moment, and people will no doubt respond to it. But the evidence we have is that actually many of these countries do have laws in place and the issue is a failure to enforce those laws, which is why we have consulted on that basis.

[905774] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: Fishing communities in my constituency were devastated by the terms negotiated by a Tory Government for European Economic Community membership. Now what little remains is threatened by Brexit negotiations and the Fisheries Bill. Fifty years on, what has changed, other than the constant sell-out of Scottish fishing communities?

George Eustice: I fundamentally disagree with the point made by the hon. Gentleman. It was indeed against the interests of the fishing industry, right across the UK, to join the European Union and the common fisheries policy, which has meant that we have access to only half the fish in our own waters. Leaving the EU means that we can rectify that and get a fair deal for fishermen in every part of the UK, which is why the Scottish industry strongly supports the approach of the British Government.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con) (V): Following the outbreak of covid among staff of Banham Poultry, in my constituency, more than three weeks ago, the company has had to shut down its plants, and slaughter or sell millions of pounds worth of its chickens to competitors for pennies, without the compensation it would normally receive for culling in relation to animal health, incurring losses of about £2 million a week. The two family shareholders have made it clear that that is unsustainable without any signal of Government support or progress towards reopening. Given that the company received no help earlier in the year through covid interruption schemes or furloughing, because it was rightly deemed a strategic food business, and has had no compensation for culling, can my right hon. Friend give some signal today, before the company's emergency general meeting tomorrow, that the talks with the Government in the past fortnight will lead to some financial support, to avoid the loss of an historic business and local economic devastation?

George Eustice: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I had a meeting with my officials yesterday to discuss the case. We understand the difficulties that Banham Poultry is facing, and I know that our officials are in constant dialogue with the company, as are officials in other Departments, including Public Health England and the Treasury.

[905802] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): WWF has today published the "Living Planet" report, which paints a shocking picture of global biodiversity loss. However, it also finds that we can restore nature by taking urgent action on conservation and on how we produce and consume food. The Secretary of State mentioned his manifesto commitments to maintaining high environmental standards in trade deals. How can we trust those commitments when this Government cannot even stand by international law?

George Eustice: The WWF report is a wake-up call for everybody around the world. At the heart of every piece of policy in DEFRA is the intention to build back nature, including through our agriculture policy, where we are encouraging sustainable agriculture; through the new targets and governance framework in the Environment Bill; through our approach to sustainable fisheries; and through our work on due diligence in the supply chain. This is a crucial time, and the UK is a world leader here.

We have COP26 and the convention on biodiversity, which we will be involved with next year, and we will be championing the environment in all those international forums.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire, representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, was asked—

House of Lords: Relocation

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions the (a) Prime Minister and (b) Prime Minister's staff have had with the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body on the (i) timeline, (ii) cost and (iii) logistics of relocating the House of Lords to York. [905854]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire): There have not been discussions of that nature with the Sponsor Body, but the hon. Lady will be aware of the recent exchange of correspondence on the restoration and renewal review, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the right hon. Member for his candid reply. Stakeholders in York expended time, energy and money on the House of Lords proposals the Prime Minister announced in January, so to learn today that the Prime Minister did not engage in due process is, quite frankly, shocking; it just shows his populist virtue signalling to my city and the north. Will the right hon. Member communicate to No. 10 that, if the Prime Minister is going to put forward proposals, he must go through due process before wasting time in places like my city, where people desperately needed the jobs that he was proposing?

Damian Hinds: I think the hon. Lady might have inferred something from my answer that was not actually there. To be absolutely clear, the sponsor body of the restoration and renewal programme works within the remit provided by Parliament and is conducting a review, looking at a range of options to make sure that we get continued, uninterrupted and sound operation of this place and secure value for money for the British public.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Covid-19: Mental Health

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support mental health during the covid-19 outbreak. [905855]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): This is a timely question from my hon. Friend, on World Suicide Prevention Day. The Church's healthcare chaplains work in both acute and community mental health services. The diocese of Manchester provides mental health wellbeing youth workers to provide mental health first aid, and the parish of Goudhurst in Kent provides subsidised mental health counselling in 13 schools.

James Sunderland: Given the current crisis and the inability of young people to meet, what impact is covid-19 having on the young persons working for the Church and on that good work?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend raises an important point. His own diocese, the diocese of Oxford, reports that connection with young people has been greatly reduced throughout lockdown. With the new measures to suppress the virus coming in on Monday, churches can hold services tailored to young people, as many already do, and church youth groups can continue to meet in multiple groups of six or fewer. I hope that churches will consider those options to increase the number of young people involved with the life of the Church.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Covid-19: Electoral Arrangements

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent assessment the Committee has made of the effectiveness of electoral arrangements during the covid-19 outbreak. [905856]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The commission is working to ensure that the elections in England, Scotland and Wales next May can be delivered safely and effectively. This includes close collaboration with the UK Government, public health officials, returning officers and political parties, and it is also closely monitoring comparable international elections taking place during the pandemic to see what may be learned from others' experiences. In collaboration with the UK's electoral co-ordination and advisory board, it is now working on additional guidance and resources for those administering May's elections to address the specific challenges of managing the polls in a covid-19 secure way.

Owen Thompson: Throughout the pandemic, people have been accessing news and public affairs online more than ever. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this highlights more than ever the need for increased investigatory and sanctioning powers for the Electoral Commission, as have been provided in Scotland in the Referendums (Scotland) Act 2020, rather than the public attacks on it from Government Members?

Christian Matheson: It is true that electoral law as it stands predates much of what we now have from the internet, in terms of the way that information can be found. Any changes to those laws will be a matter for the House, but I am sure that the Electoral Commission will use its experience to give us advice on how those changes might be brought forward.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Carrier Strike Report

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What plans he has to support the National Audit Office in following up the recommendations of its June 2020 report on "Carrier Strike". [905857]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) [V]: The National Audit Office produced an important report in June, examining the Ministry of Defence's management of carrier strike and how it is addressing the risks involved in achieving the full capabilities of the carrier strike group. My hon. Friend will know that the Public Accounts Commission approves the strategy and the budget for the NAO but does not involve itself in specific reports owing to the statutory independence of the Comptroller and Auditor General, but we are interested to see that the work of the National Audit Office does meet Parliament's needs.

Mr Hollobone: The Crowsnest radar system is 18 months late. The three crucial new support ships will not be ready until the end of the decade. Only 48 of the 138 Lightning jets have been ordered, and the MOD has no idea about the lifetime costs of this programme. What can my hon. Friend do to ensure full parliamentary scrutiny of the National Audit Office's superb report, so that the MOD's handling of this programme can be comprehensively examined?

Mr Bacon: My hon. Friend raises the question of the progress, or lack of progress, made around issues such as the radar system and developing the support ships required. He will be pleased to know that the Public Accounts Committee recently announced formally that it will take evidence on the carrier strike report from the National Audit Office during September.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Electoral Commission: Independence

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): What assessment he has made of the independence of the Electoral Commission. [905858]

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent representations the Committee has received on maintaining the independence of the Electoral Commission. [905872]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The Electoral Commission's independence is established in statute. It is a public body independent of Government and accountable to Parliament through the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, which I represent here today. Its independence is a vital part of ensuring that it is able to deliver the vital functions allocated to it by Parliament. The Speaker's Committee seeks to uphold that independence when it fulfils its statutory functions in reviewing the Commission's estimates and plans and overseeing the appointment of electoral commissioners.

Mr Bone [V]: I thank the hon. Member for that response, but will he tell me whether he agrees with the eminent QC Timothy Straker that the Electoral Commission has made "gross errors"; that it "always has its own interest to protect"; that in legal terms, it had committed "a gross error which would not have been committed by a first year law student";

and that it should be stripped of its existing enforcement powers? Or does he just agree with me that it is time to scrap the Electoral Commission?

Christian Matheson: The hon. Gentleman has always made his views in the House very clear on this matter, for which I am always grateful. I have seen the reports of Mr Straker's comments, which have been made to the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and we await its report on the evidence from Mr Straker and others coming to it. The commission's record of having had about 500 adjudications, only five of which have been challenged, and only one of which has been upheld in the courts, is a record that I think the commission can be proud of.

Kevin Brennan: Ironically, I have come into the House today in the middle of a training programme that I am doing with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association on electoral monitoring. Of course, it is a feature of any proper democratic system that there is an independent electoral commission, and it is a feature of corrupt countries that they seek to undermine the work of independent electoral commissions. The remarks by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)—I wonder whether the Committee would agree—are typical of those who do not wish there to be an independent Electoral Commission, because the Electoral Commission found out that the activities of Vote Leave were illegal and fined it £61,000 as a result. That is the reason for these attacks.

Christian Matheson: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the clarity of his position. The commission will continue to undertake its role independently, as decided in statute by this House. I would say respectfully to those hon. Members who seek to replace or abolish the commission that it might be helpful to bring forward proposals as to what they would replace it with so that we have some clarity about possible alternatives.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

House of Commons: Strategic Direction

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Who is responsible for setting the strategy for the running of the House of Commons. [905860]

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire): Setting a strategy for the House of Commons service is a responsibility of the House of Commons Commission under the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, as amended by the House of Commons Commission Act 2015, which states:

“The Commission must from time to time set strategic priorities and objectives in connection with services provided by the House Departments.”

As with many of its functions, the Commission delegates preparation of the draft House service strategy to the Commons Executive Board. The present strategy for the House of Commons service was considered by the then Administration and Finance Committees and agreed by the then Commission in 2019.

Mrs Miller: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very full answer. I think it is clear that the strategy running the House of Commons has, perhaps unintentionally, diluted the focus of those we charge with running this place and, I believe, is at risk of adversely affecting both our culture and our ethos here. This is a serious place of business, now more than ever—we are putting in place laws for the future of our communities and our country—not a hospitality or a tourism venue. Will the Commission take this opportunity of a pause in business as usual completely to rethink the focus of its strategy and, importantly, look at how we embed the culture and ethos so important to the running of this place?

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Lady raises a number of very important issues that are at the heart of the consideration of the current House of Commons Commission. Can I just say to her that there is no impediment at all to Members bringing forward suggestions on how the House strategy is designed and improved? We would encourage Members to come forward to the House of Commons Commission to share their thoughts if they believe that improvements can be made. More engagement from Members is always a good thing, and their advice and input are key to making sure we get the services we need. We know Members are always busy, and the administration is working in new ways to engage Members in tailoring services for the House. We now have a new head of Member engagement and a new customer services director. Any changes to the House of Commons Commission, as the right hon. Lady does know herself, would be a matter for this House.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Electoral Commission

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What representations he has received on recent media reports suggesting that the Government plan to abolish the Electoral Commission. [905862]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The Committee has received no representations regarding the media reports to which the right hon. Gentleman refers, which relate to a submission to the Committee on Standards in Public Life. That committee is undertaking an important review of electoral finance regulation, and the commission looks forward to engaging with the conclusions of its work in due course. The Electoral Commission is established by statute, and any changes to its constitution would be a matter for Parliament, not the Speaker's Committee.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his answer. Would he agree with me that, while we can probably all think of occasions where we disliked adjudications from the commission, the fact that the Government—or the governing party—clearly want to be rid of it is an indication that probably, as an independent body, it is doing rather a good job?

Christian Matheson: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the figures I gave earlier to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). The track record of the

Electoral Commission is one in which over 500 adjudications have been made, five have been challenged in court, and only one of those challenges has been upheld. I think that that record stands on its own two feet.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Covid-19: National Recovery

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support national recovery from the covid-19 outbreak. [905863]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Church schools have taken a lead in getting children back to school, and many of the Church of England's 33,000 social action projects have adapted and expanded—for example, in the provision of food, especially to those who are vulnerable and shielding. In my hon. Friend's diocese of Salisbury, £1.27 million has been spent on the Renewing Hope project to support ministry and mission in rural communities, and Salisbury cathedral is one of 12 to benefit from the £900,000 the commissioners have spent supporting heritage crafts.

Danny Kruger: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. It is incredibly encouraging to hear all of that. Does he agree with me that faith communities, the Church and other faith groups have a huge contribution to make to national recovery and to the future of our society, but that to realise this potential we need public servants at all levels of national and local government and in public services to overcome certain prejudices or suspicions they have about working with faith groups, and what does he think the Government can do to encourage that?

Andrew Selous: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised this point, because he is absolutely right. The Government need to combat religious illiteracy by making the case that the public square should never be purely secular, as secular humanism is itself a belief system and such an approach would be illiberal.

Covid-19: Financial Support

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support people in financial difficulty during the covid-19 outbreak. [905864]

Andrew Selous: Some 1,000 Church of England parishes are directly involved in debt advice, sometimes working with debt counselling organisations such as Christians Against Poverty. In my hon. Friend's county of Leicestershire, the diocese of Leicester chairs the Fair Finance Group, which tackles financial exclusion working with local councils, the Department for Work and Pensions and credit unions.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer, because financial difficulty is a really difficult problem. I was lucky enough to visit St John's in Hinckley,

at the request of the Rev. Gary Weston, where he showed me its food bank and the food parcels that it delivers to provide support locally. One of the questions that he wanted me to ask today was about better joining up with local government and raising awareness of what churches can do, because they can respond very quickly to provide support for local people in need. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that that can happen?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, which leads on directly from the previous question from our hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), and he is absolutely right to raise it. I am very aware of the good work of St John's in Hinckley. He might know that it is benefiting from £800,000 of further investment in mission and ministry, provided by the Church's strategic development funding. Churches such as St John's have been quietly getting on with essential work in the community, as is happening up and down the country, and I am hugely grateful to all of them. He is absolutely right; they need to work hand in hand with local authorities, and local authorities need to be aware of what churches are doing in their areas.

Church Services: Innovation

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support churches to continue to use innovative ways of conducting services after the covid-19 outbreak. [905865]

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is right to raise this point. I know that he, like me, celebrates the fact that more people than ever have been taking part in church services during lockdown. The Church will continue to support good online worship, incorporating the best of the changes from lockdown with the best of what came before.

Steve Double: Since the beginning of the pandemic, churches have been conducting services in a variety of ways. I am thinking in particular of the open-air services held by Wave House church in Newquay and the Anchor church in Fowey—in Cornwall we do like a church with a maritime-themed name. Other churches have been holding services online. A recent Tearfund survey found that as many as one in four adults in the UK has listened to or watched a religious service during the lockdown. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we come out of the pandemic, it is important that churches continue to innovate and adapt, in order to engage with people in a variety of ways?

Andrew Selous: Absolutely. My hon. Friend raises a really important point. I am grateful to him for alerting the House to Tearfund's research, which found that one in four people in the UK has listened to or watched a religious service over the lockdown, and I am particularly pleased to learn of the initiatives in the two local churches that he mentioned. He will be pleased to know that the diocese of London, for example, has led large outdoor services, and in the diocese of Norwich, in a large-scale drive-in service, hymns and preaching were beamed directly to car radios through a dedicated FM channel.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire, representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, was asked—

Palace of Westminster: Restoration and Renewal

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When he plans to provide an outline business case for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. [905877]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire): On current plans, the proposed approach to the works and the funding would be put to both Houses for agreement in 2022. This is subject to the outcome of the strategic review, which is due to conclude in the autumn.

Chris Bryant: Oh dear! It is eight years since one report said that we had “a looming crisis” in this building, and four years since a Joint Committee of both Houses produced a report, on 8 September 2016, which stated that we were facing “an impending crisis.” Since then we have had years and years of more new problems in the building than we are able to cope with. There is no sense of urgency about this crisis. Get on with it, for heaven’s sake.

Damian Hinds: I assure the hon. Gentleman that there really is a sense of urgency. Of course, he was a distinguished member of the Joint Committee, and he is right about the risk of fire, flood and falling masonry in this building. Progress has of course been made, but a lot has happened in the five years since the original proposals and it is therefore right that we have a review, which is proceeding at some pace, with quite an aggressive timetable, and will report in October.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Overseas Aid and Development

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What (a) steps the Church of England is taking and (b) recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on overseas aid and development. [905882]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The pandemic has worsened poverty and hunger in many developing countries. In response, the Archbishop of Canterbury has launched the Together In Unity Appeal to help vulnerable communities across the Anglican

communion. The Church is in regular contact with Ministers and envoys to discuss a range of development and freedom of religion and belief issues.

Wes Streeting: I very much welcome the Church’s work in this area. Does the Church share my view that the merger of the Foreign Office with the Department for International Development must not lead to the UK abandoning its commitment to the 0.7% target, and that every penny counted against that target should genuinely be spent on aid and development purposes?

Andrew Selous: Yes, absolutely. The Church is pleased that the Government have publicly committed both to spending 0.7% of gross national income on aid and to maintaining the OECD definition of overseas development assistance.

Racial Discrimination

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): If he will publish an update on the Archbishop of Canterbury’s steps to tackle racial discrimination in the Church of England. [905884]

Andrew Selous: In July, both archbishops launched an anti-racism taskforce to assess progress in implementing past recommendations to the Church in this area. The report will be concluded before the end of the year, and then an archbishops’ commission will be formed to produce recommendations for action on combating racism.

Janet Daby [V]: The Archbishop of Canterbury’s proactive approach over the summer to address the Church’s issue with racial inequality was welcome. He also commented that the Church was still deeply institutionally racist. Does the hon. Member believe, as I do, that there is a need to address in more depth the history of the Church’s involvement in the slave trade and beyond?

Andrew Selous: Although the Church has issued a formal apology for slavery and both archbishops undertook a public act of repentance, the Church does still need to be deeply mindful of its involvement in slavery and its more recent completely shameful treatment of Windrush generation migrants, who were, in some appalling cases, asked not to come to Church of England services. We ask forgiveness from those whom we have treated so badly.

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 briefly suspending the House.

10.32 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

10.37 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Deputy Chief Whip and Deputy Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

Mr Speaker: We welcome the acting Leader of the House.

The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Stuart Andrew): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. A member of the Leader of the House's household is awaiting a covid test result after having been symptomatic. The Leader of the House is therefore self-isolating along with his family, so I have had the good fortune—yeah, right—to be asked to reply. The business for next week will include:

MONDAY 14 SEPTEMBER—Second reading of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill.

TUESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (Day 1).

WEDNESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (Day 2).

THURSDAY 17 SEPTEMBER—Debate on a motion on the coronavirus job retention scheme followed by, general debate on support for the self-employed and freelance workers during the coronavirus crisis. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 18 SEPTEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

THE PROVISIONAL BUSINESS FOR THE WEEK COMMENCING 21 SEPTEMBER WILL INCLUDE:

MONDAY 21 SEPTEMBER—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (Day 3).

TUESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (Day 4).

WEDNESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER—Second reading of the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill.

THURSDAY 24 SEPTEMBER—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 25 SEPTEMBER—Private Members Bills.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the forthcoming business. Of course we all wish the Leader of the House and the whole Rees-Mogg family well. We know that it had to be something very serious for him not to be here.

I am disappointed that, since last week, there is no legislation to protect renters. It is not in the business statement, so can I make a further plea on this, because the protection runs out on 20 September? We may well have unemployment chaos, but we do not want a homelessness crisis too.

All I asked for last week was a debate on the border in the Irish sea, but then we got the UK Internal Market Bill. It is so controversial that the most senior Government lawyer has resigned, possibly because a Minister said in the House that it would be a breach of international

law, and now the shadow Counsel General in the Senedd has also resigned. The Treasury Solicitor is there to advise on the law—I know, because I used to work there—and he has a duty to the court to uphold the rule of law. Roland Phillips, a senior Government lawyer, produced a document called “Judge over your shoulder”, and that is what we have to do: advise to avoid being in breach of administrative law and the rule of law. It is not an op-ed from Government lawyers; it is legal advice. But now everyone who breaks the law made here in Parliament can say, “Sorry, your honour, I only broke it in just a small but specific way.” To use Lord Denning's phrase, when he quoted Thomas Fuller:

“Be ye never so high, the law is above you.”

He said that to the then Attorney General. We all swear to uphold the law. Will the Deputy Leader of the House ensure that the legal advice of the Treasury Solicitor is published or that a statement is made to the House on the legal implications?

This is clearly not the Government of law and order, because this time last year it was an unlawful Prorogation and this year they are breaking the law. I dread to think what is going to happen next year. One way to describe them is ICU—incompetent, chaotic and useless, whether on testing generally or on care homes specifically, because the Department of Health and Social Care has had to say this:

“We apologise unreservedly to all care homes who have been affected”.

One care home manager said:

“It's like Russian roulette, people can be positive working for a week and no one knows.”

May we have a statement on how many processing lab centres there are? Every single university and technical college that has a lab should be pressed into service to do the tests for us locally in the UK.

Mr Speaker, you are right to say that the House is important, but there is a chaotic message. One day it is to Nick Ferrari and the next day it is to Robert Peston. That is not how Parliament works. Yesterday it was announced from a lectern that we are going to reduce social gatherings from 30 people to six. Well, that's the Cabinet sorted!

Will the Deputy Leader of the House please find time for a debate on the Procedure Committee report, which was published this morning? I have not had time to read the whole thing, but it stated in the summary:

“In any event, if lockdown conditions are reimposed in a way which prevents substantial numbers of Members from travelling to Westminster, the House ought to consider reverting to remote voting.”

The UK Internal Market Bill has huge implications for the devolved authorities, so in order that hon. Members can take part in the debate, will the Deputy Leader of the House allow them to take part remotely? Yesterday, the queues were far too long; hon. and right hon. Members were queuing in Portcullis House. As I have said before, the Ayes and Noes should be separated. The hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) said that maybe we should have four electronic readers. I know that when I pressed one, it was not in service. This is exactly what we are telling people not to do, yet we are doing it here. There are so many pinch points where we are really close to each other.

The Deputy Leader of the House will know that I constantly raise the issue of Nazanin, and despite the Defence Secretary's helpful comments last week, she is now going to be put on trial on Sunday. She has diplomatic protection, so will the hon. Gentleman make representations to ensure that someone from the British embassy is present for her trial? She should have been released in March, and she is the only one not to have been granted clemency. Also, her tag needs to be extended so that she can go to hospital. Anousheh and Nazanin are being punished for being with their Iranian families. Could he also ensure that arrangements are made for their families in Britain to meet the Iranian Foreign Minister, who will be in the UK next week? And let us not forget Luke Symons in Yemen either.

Finally, I want to remember Martin O'Neill, who passed away on 27 August. He served the Labour party and this House incredibly well—28 years here, 15 years in the other place—and of course was a director of Hibernian FC. He was a true public servant. May he rest in peace.

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her comments about my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and his family—I am sure he will also be grateful for them—and I thank her for the welcome she has given me. I fear I will not be anywhere near as articulate or knowledgeable as my right hon. Friend, and I certainly will not know what happened in 1678 or 1824, or whatever quotes I am sure will come from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

The right hon. Lady mentioned renters. As she rightly points out, we have had a scheme in place up to September that has been running for six months. There is a balancing act between renters, and making sure they are secure, and people who are renting out their properties, some of whom are also struggling. The Government will look at this very carefully.

The right hon. Lady said she asked last week for a debate on the border down the Irish sea. I am glad that the Government have been as effective as usual in delivering that debate. We have five days of debate coming up over the next two weeks, which I am sure she will be pleased about. She will know that the Government do not publish legal advice.

Valerie Vaz: You can in some circumstances.

Stuart Andrew: I would be interested to know how many times Labour did when it was in office. There are five days of debate, so Members will be able to debate all these issues extensively and put these questions. I am glad the House will have the opportunity to do that.

The right hon. Lady rightly referred to the issue in care homes. The Government and I are grateful to all those who have worked in the sector during this incredibly difficult time, and we have ensured that lots of tests have been sent to those homes, but of course my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will be making a statement to the House immediately after business questions.

On making statements to the House, it is absolutely right that Ministers should come to the House—it is part of the ministerial code—and I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House reinforces that message each and every time to my colleagues in Government.

The right hon. Lady was right to mention the Procedure Committee report. I actually think the hybrid system has been working extremely well, but my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is currently looking at that report and will come back to the House in due course.

I too want to pay tribute to Martin O'Neill: 28 years in the House is an incredible length of service, and I know that he was highly respected on both sides of the House.

Finally, the right hon. Lady was right to raise the issue of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. It is indefensible and unacceptable that Iran is bringing new charges, and of course we constantly raise the matter with officials over in Tehran. She made the interesting point about the families meeting the Foreign Minister when he is here. I will certainly make sure that that request is put to the Foreign Secretary.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Like many others in the House, I have campaigned long and hard on the unfair treatment of those suffering under the loan charge—including many in and around my constituency—and I know that the issue unites the House. HMRC has historically behaved appallingly with regard to those people, including by the retrospective nature of what it has done, but now it appears that those facing these issues have been asked essentially to put their representations in to HMRC before September—this month. The problem is that HMRC is not capable of processing all those representations now, which means that many of them will not get any justice or any help and assistance and may suffer even further financial penalties. My concern is that HMRC and the Government need to add extra months—six months more would help enormously—and I therefore make that representation, and ask if my hon. Friend could pass it on to the Treasury.

Furthermore, I think it is time for us to have another debate in Government time on the process. It is vital, if our constituents are to have any sense that this place represents them, for us to show that HMRC has behaved badly, leaving many of our constituents in deep financial difficulty, in depression and with some having even committed suicide.

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to express the strength of feeling that many people in all parts of this House feel about the issue. I will of course pass on his concerns to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. There has been extensive debate about this in the House, and we had long debates about it in the Finance Bill, of course, but it may be an opportune moment to make an application to the Backbench Business Committee, which hopefully could provide time for further discussion.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I also wish the Leader of the House and his family well. I can hardly hide my disappointment at his absence. After five long months of my absence from this Chamber and the sometimes problematic communication through the virtual proceedings, I have been looking forward to being patronised in the flesh, rather than over the internet.

[Tommy Sheppard]

To be serious, coming back here I have been able to see at first hand, with my own eyes, the procedures that have been implemented in the House as regards the covid epidemic. I pay tribute to the staff and management of the building for what they have done. Just one thing seems incongruous, and that is the way in which we continue to vote in Divisions of this Chamber.

That brings me to the report published this morning by the Procedure Committee, which recommends, having considered the matter in great detail, that we should return to the electronic remote voting system we had at the beginning of the pandemic. That was not only efficient and secure, but, most importantly, is safe and does not require Members to be in close proximity to each other. I therefore ask the Government, will they respond to that report before the beginning of November, when the current procedures run out? I think they should do so as a matter of urgency.

Secondly, I raise the question of the so-called internal market Bill, which will dominate our proceedings over the next couple of weeks. We should be explicit that the Bill represents the most concerted and full-frontal assault on the devolution settlement in the United Kingdom that there has ever been. Under the guise of securing common standards, there will in effect be a race to the bottom and a lowest common denominator approach to consumer and environmental protection. It is completely unacceptable.

To crown it all, clause 46 of that Bill makes provision for this Chamber—not the Scottish Parliament—to determine spending priorities on matters that are devolved. Pet projects of the UK Cabinet could therefore trump the wishes of the Scottish people when it comes to spending. Is it the intention of the Government to proceed with this legislation without the consent of the devolved Administrations? If it is, what is the point of those devolved Administrations in the first place?

The Government are insulting the concept of devolution. This will be a better recruiting sergeant for the cause of political independence for Scotland than anyone on the SNP Benches could ever be, so I caution the Government to be wary of that. I am out of time, Mr Speaker, so I will reserve my other points for my next appearance.

Stuart Andrew: It did not take long for me to disappoint someone, did it? However, it is a pleasure to see the hon. Gentleman's cheerful face in public and live.

The hon. Gentleman made a point about the Procedure Committee. Let us be frank: we are not in the full lockdown position that we were in when remote voting was taking place. Remote voting also had its issues, with Members of this House having problems with connecting. I can honestly say to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) that, as a Whip, I know full well how hard it was to get some of my flock connected to the system. The system we have is working as best it can in difficult circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman then came on to the issue of the internal market Bill—again, SNP Members cannot help peddling the myth that we are having a race to the bottom. Nothing could be further from the truth. We want to take this opportunity, as an independent sovereign country, to go around the globe seeking the best trade

deals that we can get. As for this constant gripe about a power grab, there are 70 competences coming from Brussels back to the United Kingdom, many of which will go to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. This is not a power grab. If anything, it is a power surge for the devolved Administrations. I would like to confirm that we will, of course, be seeking legislative consent from the devolved legislatures and will continue to work closely with them to understand and respond to any concerns that they have.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In my capacity as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on freeports, I welcome recent reports that an early designation of freeports is likely, perhaps as early as the Budget. It would be helpful if those that are submitting bids, such as Immingham in my constituency, had a clear idea of the timeframe and when an announcement is likely to be made. Could we have a statement from the Secretary of State outlining the position?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituency, and I know that he will do everything he can to ensure that it is at the top of the list. I will, of course, ensure that his question is put to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and I will come back to him as soon as possible.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the acting Leader of the House to his place. I very much welcome the announcement of Backbench Business debates next Thursday and the following Thursday, which will help us to eat into our significant waiting list of unaired debates.

Last week, I raised with the Leader of the House the testing capacity in Gateshead. At a time when there is a significant increase in coronavirus cases, my local authority has seen a significant reduction in local testing capacity, and it also tells me that it is being asked to pick up more and more of the work on contact tracing. Have the Government given any thought to how that will be resourced, and when will our local testing capacity be restored? We really need that capacity to deal with the increasing number of cases in Gateshead.

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. I am delighted that we have been able to find more time to catch up with the Backbench Business slots that are available in the Chamber. Because we have had disruption over previous months, it has been important to get the legislative processes back in place as quickly as possible, but I am glad that we are starting to see more and more other aspects such as Backbench Business debates, with Westminster Hall hopefully opening in October.

The hon. Gentleman talks about local testing, which I know is a big issue. It is a fact that we have one of the best testing rates in the world, equivalent to one test for every five people in the country, and we are outpacing countries such as Germany, Spain and Italy. It is inevitable that there may be some problems; I accept that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be making a statement immediately after this, in which I am sure he will update the House on the progress that has been made.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): As the Member of Parliament for Kensington, I feel passionately that we need to get fire and building safety laws on to the statute book as quickly as possible. Will my hon. Friend confirm that we are fully committed to implementing the first phase recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry and are doing everything to get that legislation on to the statute book as quickly as possible?

Stuart Andrew: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Ever since she arrived in the House, I have seen her passionately fighting for her constituency on that issue. It is a very important issue, and she is right that we are determined to do this, but there is a process and a sequencing that we have to go through. I have seen some of the personal abuse that she has received, which is totally unacceptable. She is fighting as hard as she can for the victims who suffered that awful tragedy, and I know that she will not let that abuse stop her carrying on her great work.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Today is World Suicide Prevention Day. I know that Members across the House will wish to mark that and thoughtfully share messages on their social media. Self-harm is, sadly, a strong predictor of future suicide. The all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention has been conducting an inquiry, and on 23 September we will be holding our virtual launch of the report to see how we can reduce and prevent self-harm in young people. May we have a debate in Government time to look at the recommendations of the report and to find how we can reduce the risk of suicide?

Stuart Andrew: The all-party group should be congratulated on the work that it does. Suicide prevention is incredibly important. I think I have said in the House before that one of my friends killed himself when I was at school. It is something you never really get over. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there are early indications that we need to look at. This would be a perfect topic that the Backbench Business Committee might want to consider for a debate, because I am sure many Members would want to take part.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend find time for a debate on the restoration of the Sessional Orders preventing demonstrations outside the Palace of Westminster? Returning here last Tuesday, I thought I was entering the Glastonbury festival, which I thought had been cancelled. To allow the noise, the disruption and the cost of policing is absolutely ridiculous, so can we please restore these orders so that we no longer have demonstrations on a busy roundabout sandwiched between Westminster Abbey and the Palace of Westminster?

Stuart Andrew: Of course we all want to protect the right to protest, and that should be done, but equally we need to be able to do our job here in Parliament. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's question is put before my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, opening a medically supervised drug consumption room would break the law in a very specific and limited way. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that saving the lives of vulnerable people and

reducing the harm and antisocial behaviour associated with drug injection would be a very good reason to break a flawed and outdated law?

Stuart Andrew: I have heard the hon. Lady raise this issue on a number of occasions. This is a very, very difficult area that we have to be very careful with. I know that she has raised it with the various Departments, and there will be further opportunities for her to do so. Perhaps she will want to have an Adjournment debate to raise it in more detail.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: I was going to ask my hon. Friend a question about Alfred the Great, but I discovered that he does not go back before 1600, so it will have to wait. He is fully aware that Somerset County Council is trying to make a bid to become a single unitary council: it calls it, believe or not, "One Somerset", but that does not add up. For a start, the county council covers only part of Somerset. Its plan should be called "One Chunk of Somerset". I am afraid it is a joke. Please can we debate the common-sense answer? Let us restore Somerset to its old boundaries before we change everything, and let us look at some of the real alternatives like the excellent plan put forward by the district councils, which is not only intelligent but makes sense.

Stuart Andrew: It is almost as though a call for independence in the south-west is going on, but I know that as a strong Unionist my hon. Friend would not be calling for that. The White Paper will be available soon. That will present him with the chance to put forward his views loud and clear, but he may wish to seek an Adjournment debate if he has the opportunity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I pass my best wishes to the Deputy Leader of the House, who is here in the Chamber today.

I get regular contact from Pakistan about issues that are very, very important. Bishop Nadeem contacted me with media reports outlining how, on 7 June 2020, a mob reportedly attacked Christians in the village of Mazang Nowabad Sharaqpur, in the Punjab province in Pakistan. The mob were said to have come with assault rifles and clubs. They damaged houses, desecrated the local church and snatched goods and livestock. A total of 88 Christians, including women and children, were forcibly displaced from the village in which they had been living for generations. Will the Deputy Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this very important matter?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman, as ever, raises a very important point. The events that he describes are extremely distressing to hear. We are deeply concerned to hear about the scale and severity of violations, not just in the example that he gives but in other places around the world. I know that the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief will be overseeing the implementation of the recommendations from the Bishop of Truro and will be making sure that all Ministers are aware of them.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Clause 98 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 provides that, so far as is practicable, a Minister must arrange for a motion to be debated and

[Joy Morrissey]

voted on in the House of Commons within seven days of the end of each six-month period of review. Will my hon. Friend update the House on plans to put such a motion before the House?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and I agree that it is of utmost importance that Parliament is able to scrutinise Government legislation properly. That, of course, is a statutory commitment that has been made, and further announcements regarding the debate will be made in the usual way.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Many children from my constituency of Bristol East attend Broadlands Academy, which is in the constituency of the Leader of the House. This week, 70 pupils there have been denied their right to education because of minor infringements of uniform policy—for example, a logo missing because the shop simply did not have those items in stock, or shoes that could not be polished. I suspect that the Leader of the House thinks that every child should turn out every day as if they are on their way to Eton, and I cannot begin to imagine his horror at the thought of unpolished shoes. I have applied for an Adjournment debate. Given that the Leader of the House will not be able to speak in that debate, I am quite willing to speak on his behalf. I hope that he shares my horror that these are children who have missed out on months of education, have had a really tough time and are now being denied the right to go to school. Is Westminster Hall likely to resume sitting soon, because I may stand a better chance of securing a debate?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady raises an issue of which I have no personal knowledge, so cannot make specific comments about it, but I agree that it is absolutely important that all children get back to school. It is imperative that they do so, which is why it has been a big priority for the Government and we are ensuring that it happens. I can confirm that we are doing everything that we can to ensure that Westminster Hall debates are up and running again next month. I hope that the Leader of the House will be able to update us further soon.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): This week saw the launch of Onward's levelling up taskforce, which seeks to address regional inequalities, such as those in my constituency, and to support the Government's delivery of its manifesto pledge to level up. Will the Deputy Leader of the House make parliamentary time available for the House to address how covid-19 has exacerbated those inequalities, and how the Government seek to maintain the momentum for levelling up in historically underfunded communities such as Stoke-on-Trent?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. We had an opportunity in yesterday's debate to talk about those very issues. She is right to say that coronavirus has affected different parts of the country in different ways. We have already published work looking at the various disparities in the way that the virus has affected different people in different regions. I hope that she will be assured that Public Health England is working with the local authorities to identify the way in which those disparities have widened and

how, hopefully, we can mitigate that. I know that we now have excellent Members of Parliament for that great city who will carry on fighting to ensure that we level up as we promised.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab) [V]: A constituent contacted me yesterday to say that she had been trying to get a test for her eight-year-old asthmatic son who had been showing covid symptoms since 7.30 that morning. Her partner, who is a key worker, also had symptoms. By mid-afternoon, she was told that the only place with any availability was in Scotland. She lives in Bradford, an area currently under local restrictions with rates that are now the second highest in the country. When she went to the local walk-in testing centre, she was told that the tests had been sent elsewhere in the country. Although she has a test booked for today, many other people are facing exactly the same issue. Does the acting Leader of the House agree that that is totally unacceptable, and will he ensure that the Health Secretary sorts it out?

While the hon. Gentleman is at it, will he also ensure that the Health Secretary properly answers letters from MPs? In response to two separate letters that I wrote to the Secretary of State about the imposition of local restrictions, I received a single letter from an official who did not deal with any of the substantive issues raised. Given that my constituents are currently experiencing additional restrictions on their freedoms, does the acting Leader of the House think that I, as their representative, deserve a full and proper answer direct from the Secretary of State?

Stuart Andrew: Of course, being a neighbouring Member of Parliament, I know exactly the issue that the hon. Lady faces regarding Bradford. As I said a moment ago, we are testing thousands and thousands of people. I accept that there are some issues, however, and I will certainly raise them with the Secretary of State. I know that the Leader of the House has personally been looking into the response to correspondence, and in fairness to the Department of Health and Social Care, it has received thousands and thousands of pieces of correspondence. I recognise, however, that we need to do better, and I know that the Leader of the House is ensuring that that happens.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con)[V]: I welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box.

Notwithstanding the debate on aviation later today, let me give just one example of how British Airways is treating long-term employees. I have a constituent whose contract has two months to run. She has been sent a new contract that expects her, in just over a week, to agree to a cut of thousands of pounds in her pay, and to transfer to a zero-hours contract or take compulsory redundancy. She feels threatened and bullied, as do many others, and she knows of other companies following that pattern. Will my hon. Friend arrange for a debate on corporate employment practices and the way that some employees, particularly women, are facing brutal choices? Let us examine what the Government can do to assist them through this changing corporate landscape.

Stuart Andrew: A huge strain has been put on many industries, and the Government have taken unprecedented action to support them. In the light of that, the sort of behaviour described by my right hon. Friend is frankly

unacceptable. I assure her that the Government are fully committed to ensuring that all employers remember the contract that they signed with their employees. There is a debate this afternoon, but she may also wish to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate on this topic.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I wish the Leader of his House and his family all the best. I have just come out of quarantine, and it is quite challenging to be stuck within four walls, although how big someone's four walls are might be debatable.

The rise of covid infection rates is worrying to us all, and one way of protecting ourselves, and others, is to wear face coverings in many settings. The Government have mandated that in many settings, but why are we not considering the more widespread use of face coverings in this House and our own working lives? Clearly we have not done that, and it is not always possible to socially distance in the House. Would it be a way of protecting all members of staff in Parliament if face coverings were more widespread, and would it be sensible to debate that?

Stuart Andrew: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position, and I know that, as her neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House wanted to welcome her too. I will not comment on the issue of four walls—mine are very small.

The House authorities have done an enormous amount of work to make this place safe, and if people want to wear face masks, they have the freedom and the right to do so.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Notwithstanding the statement that will follow, may we have a debate on the Government's orders, which will marshal us in our streets and have a profound impact on family and social life? Will the Minister hang his head in shame that such orders can be made in a democracy without even a debate in a free Parliament?

Stuart Andrew: It was this House, through legislation, that gave Ministers the powers to implement these measures. Ministers are not making these decisions lightly; they are not easy decisions to make. We do not want wilfully to restrict people's civil liberties, but we have to act to ensure that we are keeping our communities safe. If my right hon. Friend wants a debate, I am sure that the Backbench Business Committee would be happy to hear his application.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: Thirteen-year-old Jack Worwood was walking on the pavement on his way to play football with friends when he was hit by a vehicle. The driver, Liam Wilson, was driving at nearly three times the speed limit, and he fled the scene. Jack died the next day. Liam Wilson was sentenced last Thursday. After various reductions, it is likely that he will serve in prison only two years of a six-year sentence. Jack's family members in my constituency are devastated at the lack of justice. On 16 October, the Death by Dangerous Driving (Sentencing) Bill is listed ninth for debate. As it is unlikely to be reached that day, will the acting Leader of the House commit to a debate on the issue in Government time, given that both this Government and the previous one undertook to legislate to increase sentences for causing death by dangerous driving?

Stuart Andrew: I cannot imagine how the family of Jack Worwood must be feeling. My sympathies—and, I am sure, those of the whole House—go to them. The issue of sentencing has been looked at and there is a sentencing review going on at the moment, but I will certainly raise the specific case with the Attorney General on the hon. Member's behalf.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): On Saturday, Consett AFC scored an extra-time winner to take them through to the FA Vase final on 27 September. Unfortunately, yesterday's restrictions mean that the match might have to be played behind closed doors, on the first occasion that Consett have reached Wembley in their 120-year history. It looks as if there will at least be significant reductions in the number of fans who can attend—down to the low hundreds. Will the Minister use his good offices, if at all possible, to push for a flexible uplift in the number of fans who can attend if the coronavirus situation allows, and for a general debate in Westminster Hall on the contribution of non-league football teams to their local communities?

Stuart Andrew: I congratulate the football club. I know from when Leeds United were promoted recently that many fans were disappointed they could not have the usual celebrations. We do have Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions on 24 September, which would be a good opportunity for my hon. Friend to raise the issue with Ministers. Let us hope that we get Westminster Hall open as soon as possible so that he can have that debate.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): As Members have already mentioned, today is World Suicide Prevention Day—an issue that cuts across politics and other issues, and touches on our basic humanity. In that spirit, I urge the Minister to find time for us to debate gay conversion therapy, which is a vile and fraudulent practice carried out by vile and fraudulent individuals on some of the most vulnerable people in our society; it is staggering that it is allowed in these islands at all. Scotland has been working to address the issue, and it has been found that 70% of people subjected to this practice have reported suicidal thoughts. There is a great deal of unity across the House for a ban, and we should find time to speak about the matter.

Stuart Andrew: Personally, the hon. Gentleman is pushing at an open door. He raises a very important point that needs to be looked at carefully and in detail, and the Government Equalities Office is doing just that. I will certainly raise the hon. Gentleman's point with the Minister for Women and Equalities, and come back to him.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Last weekend, my son developed a persistent cough after his first week back at school. We went online, booked a test, drove six miles to the test centre and had the results back in less than 24 hours, and I am delighted to say that they were negative. But that short period in quarantine was not an easy one, and I hope that the Leader of the House is released from his quarantine as quickly as I was. This week, though, I have heard from constituents in Warrington who have been told that their nearest test centre is 76 miles away in Telford. Will my hon. Friend tell me

[Andy Carter]

what steps the Government are taking with Public Health England to increase testing capacity in Warrington and to bring more testing specialist labs online?

Stuart Andrew: I am glad that my hon. Friend had a successful experience with his testing and that he got the results very quickly. He is right to raise these issues. I accept that with the huge-scale operation happening at the moment, there will be some problems, but the Secretary of State for Health is coming shortly. I hope my hon. Friend will stay and listen to his answers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Isn't the acting Leader of the House doing such a good job today? He is being very clear and, as Sir Humphrey would say, very courageous. He has made it clear that if the Government announce new policy outside the House, they are breaking the ministerial code and that he will reprimand that Minister. Well, yesterday the Prime Minister announced major new policy in a press conference, so I assume the acting Leader of the House is going to go round to No. 10 and tell the Prime Minister off. Could the acting Leader of the House make a statement next week on how that meeting goes?

Stuart Andrew: There is nothing like a bit of friendly fire, is there? [Laughter.] And to think that my hon. Friend stood in my constituency in 1997! I would have thought he would be a bit more friendly. [Laughter.] I have made it very clear that the Leader of the House absolutely reinforces the message that statements should be made to the House, and he will continue to do so. Unfortunately, I suspect that I will not be here answering questions next week, so I will not be able to tell my hon. Friend how that meeting went.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: Northern Trains decided, just as the Government encouraged people back to work, to cancel all services to Manchester Piccadilly along the Rose Hill line until December. This would close Rose Hill, Woodley, Hyde Central, Hyde North and Fairfield stations. Working cross-party with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and Councillor David Meller, Stockport's transport lead, I am seeking an urgent resolution to this problem. We met the Minister last week, who was really understanding, and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove has the Adjournment debate this evening on the issue, but what more can we do to send the clearest unified message from this House of Commons that Northern should think again?

Stuart Andrew: As the hon. Gentleman mentions, the Adjournment debate today will be on that very issue. He will have another opportunity to raise the issue at Transport questions next Thursday, and I am sure he will do so.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May we have a debate on state aid? I am mystified as to why this should be a problem in the free trade talks. Will the acting Leader of the House confirm—indeed, will the Government confirm—that we have no intention of returning to the failed policies of the 1970s, and that we

have no intention of propping up failed companies or picking winners? If the Leader of the House were here, he could give us a lecture on the failed policies of 18th-century mercantilism and the failed policies of autarky. Let us have a firm statement from the Government that the only freedom we want to have on state aid is to give less state aid than the EU norm. Let us have it now.

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend will be delighted to know that we are having that debate on Monday, when those points can be made.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): May we have a debate on establishing a bereavement standard to simplify, streamline and standardise the process for grieving families to close accounts with utility companies and service providers following the death of a loved one? I anticipate that the acting Leader of the House will say that I should go and see my good and hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and the Backbench Business Committee, but may I respectfully draw the acting Leader of the House's attention to early-day motion 818?

[That this House calls on the Government to introduce a Bereavement Standard to simplify and streamline the process for grieving families to close accounts with service providers following the death of a loved one; believes the lack of such a standard has created a complex array of arrangements with each service provider requiring different levels of information to close accounts; notes that it can often take weeks, months, and in the worst cases years to close down accounts prolonging the pain and suffering for a family in mourning; further notes that the four simple campaign aims would support families as well as streamlining the process and providing a level playing field for business by introducing standardised paperwork to close an account, accepting digital death certificates, wills and proof of beneficiary status where possible, dedicated bereavement customer care channels (email, chat, webforms) to avoid long call waiting times, an agreed timeframe for companies to respond and settle accounts, and agreed bereavement customer service behaviours supported by adequate training; and urges the Government to work immediately with industry to introduce a Bereavement Standard to support grieving families, many of whom have been impacted recently by COVID-19, through one of the most difficult times in their lives.]

The acting Leader of the House will see that there are sound arguments that, as well as aiding families, will support businesses. The EDM has attracted more signatures than any other EDM signed since 1 September, but it is noticeable that few members of the Government party have signed. In anticipation of our pursuing it through the Backbench Business Committee route, will he encourage them to sign that EDM to identify their support for the campaign?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman has certainly advertised that EDM very well. He raises a very important point. Bereavement is a difficult and trying time. I will write to the Minister responsible and come back to him.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I was taught that your word is your bond, that if you sign something, you honour it, that if you swear something, you stand by it, and that absolutely essential to British values is the rule of law that underpins democracy. I am completely

perplexed as to how a Lord Chancellor, who has by law to swear that he will respect the rule of law, could possibly sign off an explanatory memorandum for the Bill that we are to debate on Monday, which states there is “inconsistency or incompatibility with international or other domestic law”.

How can we possibly go to China and preach to them about abiding by the treaty on Hong Kong and how can we possibly preach to Putin about honouring his obligations to guarantee the integrity of Ukraine when we have said to the world that we no longer believe in the rule of law?

Stuart Andrew: I am afraid I do not accept that that is what we are saying. We are deactivating a certain EU law restriction in a specific and limited way to make sure that the Government always have the ability to protect the peace process and to ensure we can support our economic recovery, but the hon. Gentleman has every opportunity over the five days of the next fortnight to raise those points, and knowing him, I am sure that he will.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): May I welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box, where he is taking both hostile and friendly fire with aplomb? As a northerner, he will know that the residents, farmers and business owners of South Ribble are a resilient bunch. However, this summer too many of them have been flooded in Leyland, Tarleton, Hesketh Bank and Banks. People have lost crops. They have lost possessions, and their businesses have been damaged, and they are rightly cross and upset. The ways to fix that distressing problem sit with too many individual organisations at the moment. Will my hon. Friend join me in encouraging the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to urgently bring forward its surface water flooding proposals and get this serious problem addressed?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is right to highlight this incredibly important issue, because people are rightly worried about the threat of flooding. I know that she has met the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I will certainly make sure that the point she has raised is passed on again, but it is important to remember that we have announced record amounts of investment. I know that she wants that sooner rather than later, and I will certainly push the specific questions she has asked.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a statement from the Department for Transport on extending the period of validity for theory test certificates? My Garrowhill constituent Craig Donaldson was due to sit his practical driving test, but when lockdown came, his theory test expired. Will the Minister organise for the Department for Transport to do the right thing and ensure an extension of theory test certificates so that Craig can take his driving test?

Stuart Andrew: I am sure that Craig and many other people across the whole country are keen to get on with their tests. The hon. Gentleman has the opportunity on Thursday to raise the question at Transport questions, which I am sure he will do.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Listening to the skilfully reassuring—indeed, mellifluous—responses of my hon. Friend at the Dispatch Box, one could easily forget that outside this House, increasing numbers of

reasonable people have a mounting sense of alarm about the Government’s response to coronavirus. Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), may I impress on the Minister that we really do need a debate in Government time on liberty and the rule of law under the Government’s coronavirus response?

Stuart Andrew: I know that my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for civil liberties and has made that point on many occasions in this House. I will certainly raise that request for a debate with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Despite the horrors of Grenfell and subsequent Government promises, the majority of buildings that were identified as having flammable aluminium composite material cladding, or other dangerous cladding, still have it covering their walls. High-rise residents, including in my Slough constituency, have been left concerned for their safety and understandably frustrated that, even after three long years, so little has been done to help them. Indeed, at the current rate of remediation, it will take a shocking 39 years to fix. Does the acting Leader of the House agree that the Government must do much more and that he personally should allocate time for Members to raise this important issue in a debate, to give those despairing constituents a voice?

Stuart Andrew: As I said earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), the Government take this issue very seriously. Some 215 buildings have now had their ACM cladding removed—that represents 47% of buildings—and work is already under way on a further 108. The hon. Gentleman is right that it is important, and I will make sure that Ministers have heard his voice.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): You, Mr Speaker, the acting Leader of the House and House of Commons staff should be congratulated on the fact that we have not lost one single sitting day in this Parliament as a result of coronavirus. We do, though, need to find a new balance—a new way of working. The call-list system and the continued lack of Westminster Hall debates reduce our ability to raise issues that we need to consider, and there is a risk of losing the spontaneity of this place, which is so important. Usually, at 10.30 am it is standing-room only, but even the socially distanced places are empty. We need to operate safely, but we need expansive and spontaneous debate, which is a crucial part of our parliamentary process. Can the acting Leader reflect on that and perhaps draw together a way to address the issues in respect of the way we run the House? Perhaps he can explain to me why we do not have Westminster Hall debates next week—what is stopping us?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend asks me some questions that I probably do not have the ability to answer at this stage, although I do recognise the importance of getting every aspect of the House of Commons and Parliament up and running as normally as possible. She is absolutely right that having the Chamber full, with scrutiny, debate and interventions, is incredibly important. I understand that the Commission will meet on Monday to discuss many of these issues; hopefully, there will be further updates from the Leader of the House next week.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There was deep disappointment among my constituents about the Government's decision not to vote for the extremely reasonable amendments to the Fire Safety Bill. Beyond Government action, will the hon. Gentleman find time for an urgent debate about the responsibility of original building developers and the insurance industry? Companies such as Taylor Wimpey, Laing O'Rourke, Redrow and others are simply not living up to their responsibilities when fire safety and other building defects are found—as they have been in my own constituency.

Stuart Andrew: I reiterate the points that the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), made at this Dispatch Box: we are determined to bring in that legislation, but we need to go through the sequential way in which it has to be done. The points the hon. Gentleman raised are important, and I will certainly write to the Minister for him and ask for an answer.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to see my constituency neighbour at the Dispatch Box, although I am a little surprised to see him as acting Leader of the House. I welcome him to his place.

I am sure the acting Leader of the House shares my concerns about air quality. Today sees the publication of the Climate Assembly UK report, of which air quality is an important part. Our clean-air zone in Leeds is under threat. We have not had a statement from the Government or a debate on air quality, which is an issue not just for us in Leeds but for those in Birmingham and other cities. Will he press his colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to come forward and make a statement, or for there to be a debate in the House on this hugely important issue?

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful for the kind comments of my constituency neighbour. He is right to highlight air quality. It is good to see that there have been some significant improvements, but much, much more needs to be done, and he rightly cites cities such as Leeds. We have just had DEFRA questions, of course, but he may want to think about applying for an Adjournment debate, at which a Minister can come and answer his specific questions.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): High-street regeneration is an important part of the levelling-up process for northern towns such as Radcliffe in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the best ways to start to regenerate our towns is by promoting the shops and businesses that are already in towns, through campaigns such as my independent shop competition, which runs until the end of this month? Will he find the time for a statement or debate in Government time on the importance of high-street regeneration, which is vital to towns throughout the country and particularly to northern towns that need levelling up?

Stuart Andrew: I commend my hon. Friend for his independent shop competition idea, which I may have to try to pinch for my constituency. The Government

are bringing forward a further £90 million as part of the towns fund, which he will obviously be interested in. There is an opportunity post covid, when more people may be working from home, to regenerate our town centres, as people leave home for their lunch hour, for example. I suggest he applies for an Adjournment debate, but I will continue to raise his points with the Minister responsible.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: At his briefing yesterday, the Prime Minister referred to a “moonshot” strategy for covid testing. May we have a debate, in Government time, to establish what this moonshot strategy means, or whether the Prime Minister is in fact tuned to the moon, on this and other issues?

Stuart Andrew: I actually think it is important that we are ambitious about trying to get as much testing as possible. People just try to shoot this down right at the beginning. I remember when they thought we would not get to 100,000 tests a week—we are far exceeding that now.

Chris Bryant: It is going really well, isn't it?

Stuart Andrew: It is going a lot better here than in many other countries. As I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is about to make a statement, when the hon. Lady will be able to hear his answers.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): One of the highlights of my week last week was sitting in my office and getting a very excited FaceTime call from my four-year-old goddaughter after her first day back at school. It has been great seeing the faces of the children as they are excitedly seeing their friends and learning again. Unfortunately, some children in my constituency are unable to go back to their school. Greenfield Community College's Sunnysdale site in Shildon closed last December, and it has fallen into a state of disrepair and has not yet reopened. We want to see the repairs completed as soon as possible. Does my hon. Friend agree that they need to get done as soon as possible? Will he encourage the Secretary of State to meet me to discuss how best we can look at providing good secondary education in Shildon, in order to give children the best possible start in life?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of young people being back in school, where they belong, being taught by teachers and being with their friends. I understand that Durham County Council is responsible for the college's buildings and that pupils are being supported to attend a site at Newton Aycliffe. I will certainly make sure that I speak to the Minister responsible and try to seek a meeting for my hon. Friend.

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 suspending the House for three minutes.

11.38 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Secretary of State, I would like to say that he and I had a conversation in a meeting last night, and I think we have some new arrangements coming forward to help the House.

11.41 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Just to concur with what you have said, I do regard it as incredibly important to come to the House as often as possible. Sometimes these are fast-moving situations, and I will ensure that I give the House my full attention and, as I try to do, answer as many questions as fully as I can.

With permission, I would like to make a further statement on coronavirus. We have done much as a nation to get this virus under control, so we have been able to restore so much. To give just one example, figures today show that radiotherapy services in England have now returned to pre-pandemic levels. This is good news and will save lives. But as I said to the House on Tuesday, we are seeing some concerning trends, including an increase in the number of positive cases, especially, but not only, among younger people. As the chief medical officer said yesterday, we must learn from the recent experience of countries such as Belgium that have successfully put in place measures to combat a similar rise in infections. So today, I would like to update the House on a number of new measures that will help us to get this virus under control and to make the rules clearer, simpler and more enforceable.

First, we are putting in place new rules on social contact. We have listened to feedback from the public and the police, and we are simplifying and strengthening the rules, making them easier to understand and easier to enforce. In England, from Monday, we are introducing the rule of six. Nobody should meet socially in groups of more than six, and if they do, they will be breaking the law. This will apply in any setting—indoors or outdoors, at home or in the pub. It replaces both the existing ban on gatherings of more than 30 and the current guidance on allowing two households to meet indoors.

There will be some exemptions. For example, if a single household or support bubble is larger than six, they can still gather. Places of education and work are unaffected. Covid-secure weddings, wedding receptions and funerals can go ahead up to a limit of 30 people. Organised sport and exercise are exempt.

These are not measures that we take lightly. I understand that for many they will mean changing long-awaited plans or missing out on precious moments with loved ones, but this sacrifice is vital to control the virus for the long term and save lives, and I vow that we will not keep these rules in place for any longer than we have to.

Secondly, we are putting in place stronger enforcement. Hospitality venues will be legally required to request the contact details of every party. They will have to record and retain those details for 21 days and provide them to NHS Test and Trace without delay when required. This system is working well voluntarily, with minimal friction, and it is very effective, but it is not in place in all venues. It is only fair that it is followed by all. We are supporting

local authorities to make greater use of their powers to close venues that are breaking rules and pose a risk to public health, and fines will be levied against hospitality venues that fail to ensure their premises are covid-secure.

Our goal, as much as possible, is to protect keeping schools and businesses open, while controlling the virus. The data show that, while the cases among 17 to 30-year-olds are rising, the number of cases among the under-16s remains very low. We all know how important it is to keep schools open. As the chief medical officers have said, the long-term risks to children's life chances of not going to school are significant and far greater than the health risks of going back to school. The latest data confirm that.

University students will soon be returning. The Department for Education has published the updated guidance for universities on how they can operate in a covid-secure way. That includes a clear request not to send students home in the event of an outbreak, to avoid spreading the virus further across the country. If you are a student who is about to return to university or go to university for the first time, please, for the sake of your education and your parents' and grandparents' health, follow the rules and do not gather in groups of more than six.

Our ability to test and trace on a large scale is fundamental to controlling the virus, as we have discussed in the House many times. The latest data show that we are doing more testing per head than other European countries such as Germany and Spain, and we have record capacity. We have increased capacity by more than 10,000 tests a day over the last fortnight. While there have been challenges in access to tests, the vast majority of people get their tests rapidly and close to home. The average distance travelled to a test site is 6.4 miles, and 90% of people who book a test travel 22 miles or less. We already have more than 400 testing sites in operation. We added 19 last week and plan 17 more this week.

However, as capacity has increased, we have seen an even faster rise in demand, including a significant increase in demand from people who do not have symptoms and are not eligible for a test. That takes tests away from people who need them. If you have symptoms of coronavirus or are asked by a clinician or local authority to get a test, please apply, but if you do not have symptoms and have not been asked, you are not eligible for a test.

At the same time, we are developing new types of test that are simple, quick and scalable. They use swabs or saliva and can be turned round in 90 minutes or even 20 minutes. So-called Operation Moonshot, to deploy mass testing, will allow people to lead more normal lives and reduce the need for social distancing. For instance, it could mean that theatres and sports venues could test audience members on the day and let in those with a negative result, workplaces could be opened up to all those who test negative that morning, and anyone isolating because they are a contact or quarantining after travelling abroad could be tested and released. We are piloting that approach right now and verifying the new technology, and then it can be rolled out nationwide. *[Laughter.]*

I am going to depart from my script here. I have heard the naysayers before, and I have heard Opposition Members complain that we will never get testing going. They are the same old voices. They opposed the

[Matt Hancock]

100,000 tests, and did we deliver that? Yes, we did. They say, “What about testing in care homes?” Well, we delivered the tests to care homes earlier this week. They are against everything that is needed to sort out this problem for this country, and they would do far better to support their constituents and get with the programme. I am looking forward to rolling out this programme and this work, which has been under way for some time already, and I am determined that we will get there. If everything comes together, and if the technology comes off, it will be possible, even for challenging sectors such as theatres, to get closer to normal before Christmas.

Finally, the most important thing that each and every one of us can do is remember the small things that can make a big difference: hands, face, space, and if you have symptoms, get a test! Hands: wash your hands regularly and for 20 seconds. Face: wear a face covering over your mouth and nose if you are in an enclosed space and in close contact with people you do not normally meet. Space: always stay 2 metres away from people you do not live with, or 1 metre with extra precautions, such as extra ventilation, screens or face coverings. And of course, if you have covid symptoms, get a test and self-isolate.

Coronavirus is a powerful adversary, and when called upon, the British people have done so much to blunt the force of this invisible killer. Now, at this important juncture, we are being called upon once more to deliver our collective commitment to follow the rules and get this virus under control. I commend this statement to the House.

11.50 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): As always, I am grateful for my advance copy of the statement.

We welcome the restrictions that the Government have imposed—indeed, we would have welcomed them on Tuesday afternoon, had the Secretary of State confirmed what was being said on Twitter that morning. Case numbers have been rising sharply in recent days across all ages, and sadly the number of hospital admissions is beginning to increase as well. We all want to avoid a second national lockdown. Lockdowns extract a heavy social and economic price from those already suffering, and we should also remember, especially today, which is World Suicide Prevention Day, the mental health impact of lockdowns.

Before I comment on the substance of the Secretary of State’s remarks, I want to ask about schools. We have had many examples across the country of classes and whole year groups—hundreds, possibly thousands, of pupils—starting the new term as they finished the last term: at home and not in education. Is it really the Government’s policy that if there are one or two positive cases in a year group, the whole year group is sent home for two weeks? If so, are parents and carers eligible for sick pay and financial support, given that they will have to take time off work to look after their children?

We were promised a world-beating test, trace and isolate regime by now. The Secretary of State says we have one. On Tuesday, I highlighted the deteriorating performance in finding contacts. He said that I had muddled my figures. Full Fact said I was right and he

was wrong. I will leave it to him to judge whether he wants to correct the record. I would rather he just corrected test and trace. In one study, researchers found that 75% of infected people did not adhere to the self-isolation rules. I know he is piloting extra support, but we need a system now, urgently, so that those who are low paid and in insecure work can isolate without fear of losing their jobs. We need a system immediately. We have been calling for it for months.

On testing, the Secretary of State told us a few moments ago to get with the programme. We just want him to deliver testing for our constituents. We have had example after example of people being told to go hundreds of miles. In Telford, the borough has been gridlocked because the system has been telling everybody to go to Telford. Yesterday, the Secretary of State was touring TV studios trying to dampen demand, even though he had previously said in the House in July to people with symptoms:

“If in doubt, get a test.”—[*Official Report*, 20 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 1864.]

He was telling people to get tests.

Given that the Secretary of State had encouraged people to get tests, and with 8 million pupils returning to school, with thousands going back to workplaces which his Prime Minister has insisted on—surely it was obvious there would be extra demand on the system, so why did he not plan extra resource capacity to process tests? It is not the fault of ill people asking for tests; it is his fault for not providing them. We have had no apology today to our constituents who have been told to travel hundreds of miles for a test.

Having failed to provide the tests that people need, and, by the way, having failed to provide wider diagnostic tests—the waiting list for diagnostic tests hit 1.2 million today, the highest on record—the Secretary of State now wants to deliver 10 million tests a day as part of his so-called project Moonshot. I have long been pushing him for a strategic mass testing regime, and from the start the World Health Organisation has told us to “test, test, test”, but we are all fed up with undelivered promises and “world beating”. Mass testing is too important to become another failed project. It is all well and good the Secretary of State talking about moonshots, or the Prime Minister telling us that we will be tested every morning, but even better would be simply to deliver the extra testing that is needed now, not just the headline figures.

I have some specific questions. First, the Prime Minister told the nation that he wants this in place by the spring. The chief scientific adviser pointed out that it would be “completely wrong to assume this is a slam dunk that can definitely happen”.

How quickly will this be delivered, and how quickly will the pilots in Salford and Southampton be assessed?

Secondly, what is the cost? According to *The BMJ*—the British Medical Journal—leaked documents suggest that the cost will be £100 billion. Is that correct? If not, will the Secretary of State tell us his estimate of the cost of processing 10 million tests a day, and will he tell us how much has been allocated to project Moonshot?

Thirdly, who will deliver that? There are universities piloting projects, such as the University of Leicester rolling out LAMP—loop-mediated isothermal amplification—testing, so what discussions has the Secretary of State

had with them? It has been reported that he has already signed agreements and understandings for the delivery of this project with GSK, Serco and G4S. What procurement processes have been undertaken, and will he tell us whether that is correct?

Fourthly, what are the priorities? The Secretary of State is still not testing the loved ones of care home residents who are desperate to see relatives; and when will the Government actually deliver the routine testing of all frontline NHS staff, which we have been demanding for months? Effective testing depends on quick turnaround, local access and effective contact tracing. Given that he has not even been able to deliver those basics, how on earth do we expect him to deliver this moonshot?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman was rather better when he was supporting the Government action in the first part of his response. He cannot seem to decide whether he is in favour of more testing, or against it. All we get is complaint after complaint, rather than support for his constituents and the people of this country in our quest to get through this virus.

First, on who is eligible for a test, precisely as I said and as he literally read out, if you have symptoms, get a test. If you do not have symptoms, you are not eligible for a test, unless specifically asked for one. [HON. MEMBERS: "If in doubt!"] Yes, if you have symptoms and are in doubt about whether those symptoms are coronavirus, get a test. If you do not have symptoms, do not get a test. That has not changed. It is exactly the same. What has changed is that the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) does not know whether he is coming or going.

The hon. Gentleman does not seem to understand that the way in which we build a huge project like our testing, which is at record levels, is to back all the horses. Once again, he complained about businesses supporting us in our roll-out of mass testing. That divisive approach is wrong. We support universities, businesses and the NHS to deliver more testing; we do not support the totally confused approach of the Opposition. He does not know whether he is in favour of or against more testing.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the money; £500 million has thus far been allocated to this project, but more is likely. He asked about staff testing in the NHS. As he well knows, we follow clinical advice, but always keep it under review. Finally, he asked about schools. The policy on schools is that, if somebody tests positive, that bubble needs to self-isolate. A bubble is defined as those who are in close contact within a school setting.

I will end on a point on which we agree strongly. On this, World Suicide Prevention Day, all of us are united in support of the mental health services provided across this country, and of all those who are working hard for people with mental ill health or at risk of suicide. That is a project on which all of us are on the same side and working together to support people.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): As someone who has long campaigned for mass testing, I warmly welcome the ambition behind Operation Moonshot—and the implied characterisation of the Health Secretary as this country's answer to Neil Armstrong. However, 10 million is a huge target. Could he give the House some idea of the proportion of that 10 million that is

dependent on new technologies and the proportion that we can get to with existing technologies? Mass testing is so important to getting the country back to running as normal, and while we all want those new technologies, it would be helpful to have an understanding of how much expansion we can expect of the technologies we already have.

Matt Hancock: That is an extremely clear and strong position from the Chair of the Select Committee. Of course we are expanding the current technologies. We have a plan, when we are on track for it, to get to 500,000 tests a day by the end of next month, on the current technologies. On the next generation of technologies, I am not going to put a figure on it because it depends on the technologies coming off. The very nature of backing new technologies is that we do not know which ones are going to be verified. That is why we have so many that are being piloted, and so many with whom we are working. We have tests right now in Porton Down being verified. We want this to go as fast as it can, and we want it to go as large as it reasonably can, but we do not put a specific figure on it—we put all our weight and support behind this project, which will have the positive benefits that my right hon. Friend so eloquently sets out.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: Yesterday we heard the Prime Minister describe his Operation Moonshot as the

"only hope for avoiding a second national lockdown".

Already some experts have described this mass testing strategy as being fundamentally flawed, so does the Secretary of State think that the Prime Minister is gambling on something that the experts feel cannot be delivered?

On Tuesday, the Secretary of State failed to answer my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) when she asked if it would be better to allow tests to be carried out locally and just move the samples around the UK instead of moving potentially infectious people. As he did not give an answer then, will he consider this now?

Finally, will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the launch of Scotland's Protect Scotland mobile tracing app yesterday? What update can he give the House on his own Government's plans to release a similar app?

Matt Hancock: We have been working with the Scottish Government, as well as the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Government and, actually, Governments internationally, on an update on the app technology.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, that is simply a mischaracterisation of the policy. Of course we move samples around the country all the time. What we want to do, of course, is continue to reduce the distance people have to travel. As I say, the average distance that people have to travel to get a test is 6.4 miles.

On the hon. Gentleman's first point, there were, in the spring, some people who complained about my determination to expand our testing capacity at a record pace. We are hearing some of those voices again complaining that we want to increase testing. Both the SNP and Labour are making a huge mistake in opposing mass testing. It is an incredibly important tool in our arsenal.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): My right hon. Friend is a great supporter of the UK's businesses and entrepreneurs. In his measures to tackle the virus, will he intercede with his public health colleagues to prioritise the businesses that generate economic growth, so that when this is over we have an economy that is prosperous enough to cash the very generous cheques that we have written?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and speaks with great knowledge, experience and eloquence on this matter. We have to protect livelihoods as much as possible, in the same way that we are trying to protect education as much as possible. That does mean sometimes that we have to take measures on social contact that people would prefer not to see, but unfortunately the measures that the Prime Minister outlined yesterday, and which I set out in my statement, are, in my judgment, absolutely necessary both to keeping the virus under control and to protecting education and the economy as much as possible.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): A significant increase in covid cases has been confirmed in Liverpool over the past week, with widespread community transmission. I have been contacted by constituents with symptoms who are trying to book a test and either cannot, or are told to go to Oldham, Manchester, Powys, or Colwyn Bay, even though there is a testing facility at Liverpool airport just down the road, in the constituency. Will the Secretary of State explain why that is, and say why there is no availability of home test kits, given that there appears to be so much unused testing capacity?

Matt Hancock: As I said in my statement, there is record testing capacity, and most people get tested very close to home. We do have a challenge, however, because some people without symptoms who are not eligible for a test have been coming forward. Thus far, I have been reluctant to place a barrier and a strong eligibility check on the front of the testing system, because I want people with symptoms to get that test as fast and easily as possible. However, given the sharp rise in the past couple of weeks in the number of people coming forward for tests when they are not eligible, we are having to look at that. The key message to the hon. Lady's constituents is that the tests are vital for people who have symptoms, and therefore people who do not have symptoms, and have not been told by a clinician or local authority to get a test, should not and must not go and use a test that somebody else who needs it should be using.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I understand the recent actions that my right hon. Friend has taken to limit gatherings to six people, and I encourage everyone in West Bromwich East and the wider west midlands to follow the new rules. Does he agree that West Bromwich should remain separate from any local lockdown in central Birmingham, given that they are two distinct areas with varying rates of infection?

Matt Hancock: Of course, West Brom is a distinct area and separate in its geography from central Birmingham. However, I caution my hon. Friend that we are seeing sharp rises in cases across many parts of the west midlands. We take these decisions on a localised basis; we do not take a whole local authority or area of

regional geography in one go, but we do follow the data. I will make sure I keep in touch with my hon. Friend. She is a strong advocate for her local area, but sometimes action is necessary.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the new test centre in Wythenshawe town centre that opened this week, but may I challenge him on the consistency of governance around his Department? In Greater Manchester, the *Manchester Evening News* is reporting that Bolton has been subject to four sets of rule changes in the past fortnight. ITV is saying that 74 local authorities have a higher infection rate now than Greater Manchester had before it went into lockdown. Last week, my constituency of Wythenshawe and Sale East, which straddles Manchester and Trafford, would have been split asunder if the Department had not U-turned. Restrictions in Greater Manchester are not working because infection rates have mushroomed. What is next, Secretary of State?

Matt Hancock: I was in contact with the Mayor of Greater Manchester this morning on the question of what we do in Greater Manchester. The national measures that were announced yesterday will come into force in Greater Manchester, and it is important that people follow them. We took further action in Bolton. The case rate in Bolton was coming down well, but thankfully before we implemented the rule change to remove some of the restrictions, we were able to act and stop that relaxation from happening, and we then had to tighten the rules up. I am working closely with councils in Greater Manchester, and talking to the Mayor, and I will also take on board the hon. Gentleman's views in ensuring that we get these measures right. The message to everyone in Greater Manchester is the same as it is across the country: follow the rules and follow the social distancing, because only by doing that can we get this under control.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The Secretary of State must accept that there is a problem here. Constituents of mine in Kent displaying symptoms of covid were this week advised to go for tests in Bude in Cornwall and Galashiels in Scotland—and this is in a mild September, before the autumn and winter when people have coughs and colds that may look like symptoms of covid. It is no good blaming people who are asymptomatic. I would be interested if the Secretary of State could say what percentage of people turning up for testing do not have symptoms. This situation needs his personal grip. He referred to the need for him to increase testing capacity from 1,000 a day to 100,000 a day. This is an urgent matter that he needs to grip before the autumn and winter bite. Will he commit to ensuring that by the end of the month anyone who has symptoms of covid can get a test at a reasonable place that is convenient to their home?

Matt Hancock: It is of course my goal for that to happen immediately. The challenge is to increase capacity—a subject that my right hon. Friend and I have discussed at length, and of which I know he is a strong supporter—and to make sure that that capacity is used by the right people. That is why I am clear about the eligibility for testing. It is really important that people hear the message that if they have symptoms, of course they should get a test; we urge them to get a test

because we need to find out if it is covid for their sake and for everybody else's. But at the same time, it is important that people who are not eligible do not come forward for tests because they are taking a test away from somebody who has symptoms. Yes, I want to solve this with ever more capacity, but I also want to ensure that the tests are used by the right people.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: Many of my constituents are incredibly anxious about schools reopening and want to send their children off to school in the knowledge that they are safe. I am sure that the Health Secretary agrees that keeping schools open safely requires a testing infrastructure that is fit for purpose, so can he explain to the House why each school has been provided with only 10 testing kits?

Matt Hancock: We have strong protocols on the return to school. I am really glad about the success of the policy to get all schools back; it is one of the Government's unsung successes over recent weeks, and is working effectively. The guidelines set out very clearly when testing is appropriate. Testing is appropriate for people who have symptoms. Close contacts of people who have symptoms need to self-isolate and not get a test unless they have symptoms, because getting a test would not allow them to leave self-isolation anyway because of the risk of false negatives. That is why the policy is as it is. We have given each school 10 or more tests so that they can easily use them in an emergency, and that has been warmly welcomed by most schools.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): A successful return to school in west Berkshire has been matched with a reduction in the availability of testing. I have listened to my right hon. Friend this morning; if there is a reluctance to impose more stringent eligibility criteria, would he consider an order of priority based on, for example, working parents and teachers being able to access tests sooner?

Matt Hancock: Again, there has not been a reduction in capacity in Berkshire or anywhere else in the country. There has been an increase in capacity. My hon. Friend makes a good point, though, about prioritisation. The question is how to enforce prioritisation without putting in place barriers that slow down access to tests for people who need them. We are looking at that now.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab) [V]: Will the Secretary of State please explain the lack of availability of home testing kits, which has dropped dramatically in my area of West Lancashire? In the absence of home testing kits, very ill pensioners are being offered tests 80 or 100 miles away. The confusing message in the assurance that he is trying to give is that there are too many getting tested, but that, if in doubt, people should get tested. How does that deal with the asymptomatic carriers or spreaders? This is a huge hidden danger. In the light of the Secretary of State's earlier comment, my constituents would genuinely love to get with the programme, get tested where necessary and stay safe—if only the Government's words met their actual experience of the system.

Matt Hancock: The clarity that the hon. Lady calls for can be provided as follows. If you have symptoms, get a test. If you do not have symptoms, and you have not been asked to get a test, please do not use a test that somebody else needs because they do have symptoms—they

might be elderly, for instance, and she rightly refers to her constituents—because the tests are there for them. The capacity is expanding every day, but we need to ensure that we get those tests to the people who need them.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): To reiterate the point made by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), my communities in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton are in themselves unique and very diverse, particularly with respect to Birmingham. I was very reassured by my right hon. Friend's reply to my question last week about a sub-local level approach to national restrictions. Can he confirm what that looks like in detail and, in particular, where the lines will be drawn, and can he assure me that the approach taken will not be an arbitrary line-drawing process but a real engagement with local stakeholders?

Matt Hancock: We consider the approach to local action on a ward-by-ward level. For instance, in parts of east Lancashire and west Yorkshire we have a ward-by-ward decision. That is driven by the data, so we do have to look at the data across the board. I take very seriously the views of the local directors of public health. There are several parts of the country, including my hon. Friend's constituency, where I am concerned about the rise in the number of cases.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: The lockdown in Bolton will devastate the hospitality industry and affect the physical and emotional health of my constituents, so will the Secretary of State ensure that they can be tested in Bolton as soon as they require it? Will he ask his friend the Chancellor to provide more financial assistance to the Bolton economy, because the maximum £1,500 for three weeks is not enough; it just about pays for one employee on the minimum wage?

Matt Hancock: Of course, those who have been on furlough can reapply for furlough, and yesterday the Chief Secretary to the Treasury set out further support that is available for businesses in areas where we have had to intervene. The measures that we have taken in Bolton are strict but absolutely necessary, as I set out on Tuesday. I am grateful for the hon. Lady's support for those measures and the discussions that we were able to have before they were introduced.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and very much welcome the exciting progress on developing saliva testing. Outstanding progress has already been made on expanding testing capacity, and he deserves our thanks for his tireless work.

Inevitably, this is not without its challenges. On Tuesday evening, hundreds of cars from across the country—and I do mean hundreds—descended on Telford's testing site, as they were directed to do by the booking system. Tests quickly ran out, roads became blocked, people who had travelled from as far away as Cornwall, Stockport and London were turned away, and my constituents were no longer able to access tests in the area and so in turn were sent elsewhere. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give that the error in the booking system that directed so many people to Telford has now been corrected, and does he agree that people should not be criss-crossing the country and travelling for many hours to secure a test?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I absolutely agree, and I also agree with my hon. Friend's description of the situation, which is that we have built this system at great pace. I did not know about the example in Telford, although I had heard that many people had been directed there in this instance. In fact, only on Tuesday evening, after being in the House, I had a meeting about the problem of people being directed to travel too far. We are absolutely looking at the broader problem, and I will take away that particular example and find out exactly what glitch caused it.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I note from the statement that organised sport is exempt from the new regulations. We all want life to return to normal, including sport, which is an important sector of our economy, but, as things stand, next month 20,000 spectators are scheduled to travel to Twickenham. Can the Secretary of State help me to understand the logic whereby the scientific advice suggests that a family of six cannot meet a relative in their garden, yet the Prime Minister is saying that the guidance on sporting events, which means thousands of spectators will be travelling around the country to stadiums, drinking and socialising, is still only under review?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady has answered her own question, because the Prime Minister did announce that that programme is under review, and the results of that will be announced shortly.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): We accepted massive restrictions of our liberty in March because we wanted to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed, and we achieved that—indeed, not all the capacity was used. We are now imposing more restrictions on people's liberty. Does the Secretary of State's strategic goal for England continue to be to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed, or has he now gone further and is aiming for zero covid in England?

Matt Hancock: We did protect the NHS all the way through the peak, and this country can rightly be proud of the building of the Nightingale hospitals. We saw a hospital in China being built in two weeks and lots of people told me that we would never do that here, but we did it here in nine days. I am very proud of the team who delivered on that.

The strategic goal is to keep the virus down. The problem is that if the R goes above 1 and the numbers start going up, they inexorably continue to rise. So it is not okay just to let it rise a bit; the problem is that once it is going up, it keeps going up unless we take action. That is one lesson we learned in the spring and we have relearned it; we can see it if we simply compare what has happened in Spain, France and Belgium. In the first two, the curves have kept going up, whereas Belgium took significant action, similar to what we announced yesterday, and its curve has come down again. So that is why there is not a trade-off between taking action, even if it is tough action, and protecting the economy and, for instance, the ability to open schools.

I hope that that answers my hon. Friend's question. We have seen a number of countries around the world announce that they are going for an eradication strategy—indeed, the Scottish Government announced that—but this virus has shown that it is very, very hard to eradicate. We want to keep it under control while we pursue both the mass testing and then the vaccine, to deal with it once and for all.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Tomorrow, I will be at Rowlands Pharmacy in Sundon Park, where I hope I will be able to get my flu jab, if supplies allow. This year, it is more important than ever to get a flu jab, to protect capacity in our NHS. Will the Secretary of State provide an update on the number of vaccines that have been secured for people this winter? Will he guarantee that there will be enough vaccines for all at-risk groups?

Matt Hancock: The answer to the second question is yes. We are rolling out the biggest ever flu vaccine programme. We continued to buy flu vaccine throughout the spring and summer, as it was obvious that we needed a much bigger programme than is normal. In the first instance, the vaccine will be available to the at-risk groups, including the over-65s and those with health conditions on the flu list. We will then expand the provision to the over-50s, depending on the take-up in the highest-risk groups. We set that out a couple of months ago. The flu jab is coming onstream soon. I was at a pharmacy this morning where it is being rolled out from Monday. This will be accompanied by a huge advertising campaign to encourage people to get the flu vaccine.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): From Monday, the Government are imposing the most profound restrictions on people's personal liberty and family life. Why has there not been a debate and a vote in the House of Commons this week?

Matt Hancock: I will take away the point my hon. Friend makes and discuss it further with the business managers. I have come to the House today to be able to answer questions on this matter. I take the point that that is not the same as the statutory instrument itself, and it is something on which I have had discussions with the business managers. Inevitably with a pandemic, we do have to move fast from the health perspective. I will make sure that I get back to my hon. Friend as soon as I can once those discussions have concluded.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): South Shields is on the watchlist. We have a testing station in my constituency, yet people cannot get a test at all or are being told to travel, with symptoms, to the other end of the country. So far this week, the Secretary of State has said, "It's the fault of young people. It's the fault of schools. It's the fault of holidaymakers." In fact, it is everyone's fault for doing exactly what he asked and trying to get tested. He should show some leadership, own his failures, and tell us how and when he is going to rectify this awful mess.

Matt Hancock: Across the country, the average distance people have to travel is 6.4 miles. It is really important that the messages from all those who are responsible public servants and those who have strong public voices, as the hon. Member does, in South Shields, across South Tyneside, in the north-east and, indeed, across the country—and it is incumbent on us all to repeat these critical public health messages—are "If you have symptoms, get a test, but if you are not eligible, then please don't use up the tests that are needed for other people."

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Youth organisations, such as those involved in scouting and guiding, and sports training clubs are vital for the social development

of young people in Dudley South. Will my right hon. Friend do everything he can to make sure that such youth organisations, and sports coaching, can continue for as long as it is safe to do so?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend, who speaks so clearly for his constituents and for the young people who enjoy those facilities, will I am sure be pleased to know that youth groups are exempt from the rule of six, because they have their own covid-secure guidelines, in the same way that schools do and in the same way that organised sport is exempt.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In his statement yesterday, the Prime Minister said he would introduce an army of covid marshals to help ensure social distancing in town centres. Can the Secretary of State tell me how these covid marshals will be recruited, how much they will be paid, how they will be paid for and what powers they will have?

Matt Hancock: This programme will be rolled out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, because we will be working very closely with local authorities to make it happen, and we will publish the details in due course.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I know how hard the hospital and A&E leaders are working at Leighton Hospital to prepare the hospital for winter in the context of covid, which is why I was incredibly disappointed to see the local Labour party telling residents that they were not going to get any extra funding to do that. Can the Secretary of State assure my local residents that that is not the case, but also agree to meet me to discuss the issue of much-needed longer-term investment in the Leighton Hospital site?

Matt Hancock: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, who speaks so strongly for Crewe and all its residents to discuss, the need for a high-quality NHS. Of course, my hon. Friend is a qualified doctor who, during lockdown, spent a huge amount of time in hospital and working on the frontline of the NHS, and I think we should all applaud him for that work. I am absolutely happy to meet him. He knows, with enormous expertise, of what he speaks. We are all grateful for his service, and I hope that we can continue to make improvements to Leighton Hospital.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Some 10% of infectious people are being sent over 22 miles—some, hundreds of miles—without contact tracing, for testing, so would the Secretary of State agree that the current testing system also amounts to a spreading system for the virus?

Matt Hancock: No, because the testing sites operate, of course, in a covid-secure way; we put a huge amount of effort into the infection control procedures at testing sites. I want to reiterate, for anybody listening who has symptoms and might be worried by some of the things they are hearing, that the average distance that people go is only 6.4 miles, and that 90% of people travel less than 22 miles to get a test. If you have symptoms, please get a test.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend has said time and again this morning that if people do not have symptoms, they should not get tested, because the antigen test does not work if someone does not have symptoms. Patrick McLoughlin—a good friend of ours, now in the House of Lords—always used to say to me, “If you want to keep a secret, say it in the Chamber of the House of Commons.” How can we get this message across with some snappy title, rather like the rule of six? It is very straightforward. How can we get across the message that if people do not have symptoms, it is pointless and a waste to go and get tested?

Matt Hancock: I can think of no better way in Lichfield than to get my hon. Friend out and about making that case—in a socially distanced way, of course. He is quite right. We have to get the message across, in the first instance to Members of this House, and I hope we are doing that today. We are also making clear in the communications around the process of getting a test that, if people do not have symptoms, they are not eligible. We are reviewing what more we might need to do, because we have to use our record testing capacity for the people who need it most.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: This morning, the Transport Secretary was unable to say what enforcement powers the Prime Minister’s new covid marshals will have and what their responsibilities will be. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), does the Secretary of State know what powers these marshals will have and what training they will have to undergo?

Matt Hancock: We are giving local authorities more enforcement powers—for instance, to be able to close venues should that be necessary on public health grounds. We will set out more details of the marshals shortly.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What revisions of the technology supporting the booking of testing can be undertaken to match local demand more closely to local supply?

Matt Hancock: That is something we work on constantly. It is not always perfect, as this questions session attests, but it is something we are constantly working on to try to minimise the distance that people travel. The team have done a good job of getting that distance down to 6.4 miles, not least with the roll-out of dozens of new testing sites every week, but there is always more work to do.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The reason why Kirklees has managed to buck the national trend and keep our infection rates relatively stable is the great work that the council has been doing with Government and other agencies. We have been working really hard in Batley to get our restrictions lifted. Coming into what could be a difficult autumn and winter, can the Secretary of State commit to keeping the extra resources—the mobile testing units—in our community, so that the R rate does not spike and we do not have to close down again?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to Kirklees and colleagues who represent the seats within it, who have worked across party lines with national and local government.

[*Matt Hancock*]

We have put more resources in, and they will continue for the time being when they are needed. We are, of course, driven by the data, so in a way, it would be good news if they were not needed, because that would mean that the number of cases had come down. The hon. Lady represents exactly the sort of approach that we should be taking. We are all on the same side against this virus. It is far better to be constructive and work together in a team effort. That is what the public want and expect. They do not want sniping from the sidelines, such as we have seen from the Labour Front Bench.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to mass testing. In rural constituencies like mine, mobile testing units such as the one in Uckfield are key, but there seems to be a glitch in the system. A constituent called Colin, who lives in the village of Fletching, was directed miles away when he could have been directed to the local mobile unit. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the glitch is fixed?

Matt Hancock: With pleasure.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): We know the Secretary of State is fond of technology, and we welcome that. I wonder if today he will welcome the 160,000 downloads of Protect Scotland, the app launched by the Scottish Government. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and I are tracing, so if anyone shows symptoms, that will show up. When will England catch up and launch a contact tracing app similar to Protect Scotland?

Matt Hancock: It is a real pleasure to be commended on my enthusiasm for technology—normally comments about my enthusiasm are followed by a large “but”. In this case, I totally agree about the importance and use of technology, and that will be coming to English pockets very soon.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): It is inevitable that, with the return of our schools this week, we have seen increased demand for testing across the country, not least in my own patch of Bracknell. In true military fashion, may I ask what scope there is for flexing or surging resources at short notice? Indeed, how do we ask for it?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is a former military logistics expert, and in my experience—especially my recent experience during this crisis—there are no greater logistics experts in the world than those in the British military. He knows of what he speaks. We are surging, but doing so particularly in the areas where the case rate is higher, and thankfully in his part of the world the number of cases remains relatively low.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am sympathetic to the idea of mass testing and have been for some time, but what does the Secretary of State say to someone like Professor David Spiegelhalter, who has said that mass testing could lead to hundreds of thousands of false positives, with the knock-on effect of over a million people who have been in contact with those individuals being told to self-isolate? What assessment have the Government made of that issue?

Matt Hancock: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for mass testing. He might want to have a word with his Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). Of course the specificity of the test is incredibly important, so that we do not get false positives. There are ways to deal with it, and those are taken into account in the moonshot programme.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): As children return to school, there is understandable anxiety among parents in Gedling about getting ready access to testing if they require it. The head of Richard Bonington school wrote to me this morning saying that delays and difficulties in accessing testing keep children away from school. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that as well as gaining access to testing centres, parents can continue to apply for home-testing kits to get prompt results?

Matt Hancock: Someone who has symptoms can of course apply for a test in a drive-through centre or to have the home test. Of course those are available; it is just that demand has gone up, especially demand from those who do not have symptoms. Those who do not have symptoms but have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive should not be applying for a test, because, as was mentioned earlier, they may get a false negative and actually need to self-isolate. We are really clear about who should be getting a test and who is eligible for a test. In a way, though, my hon. Friend's question demonstrates why mass testing is also so important—it means we can roll out testing even further. The hon. Member for Leicester South used to be a great supporter of Tony Blair—

Jonathan Ashworth: I am.

Matt Hancock: In that case, maybe he needs to have a word with the former Prime Minister. Tony Blair is a big fan of mass testing. It is a pity the hon. Gentleman does not know which way he is looking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his commitment to the job in hand. In the approach taken, there is a balance to be struck between health and ensuring that the economy is okay, so will he outline what discussions have taken place with those who have successfully implemented a different type of response to the coronavirus, such as Norway and Sweden? Does he believe that we can learn lessons and perhaps consider other approaches?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this question. We are constantly looking across the world at different approaches. Sweden, unfortunately, has had many, many more deaths from coronavirus than Norway next door, so we do look at the difference in approaches. For instance, we are looking at the difference between the response to the second rise that we have seen across parts of Europe from Spain and France and that of Belgium, which I mentioned earlier. We are constantly vigilant and looking abroad, and trying to find the best way not only to keep the virus under control but to support education and the economy.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I wonder whether the Secretary of State could give some advice to my constituents. One teacher had symptoms on

Tuesday. She rang for a test and was told to go to Oldham, which is a 160-mile round trip. Because she has a one-year-old child, she did not want to do that and she was feeling too ill to do the drive, so she opted for a home test, which came, but she has not got the results back yet. In the same school, another teacher's daughter was ill. She has not been able to get any test anywhere apart from its being sent. She has still not got the results.

Another school—this has come in this morning, while I have been sitting here—has had 20 pupils off with covid symptoms out of a cohort of 106. One of the parents subsequently rang in to say that they had tried to book an appointment for their daughter. They spent nine hours online and were offered an appointment in Glasgow. Derbyshire is in the middle of the country and Glasgow is several hundred miles away. She turned this down, which is not a surprise, but persevered and got an appointment today at Burton. She went to Burton-on-Trent but the staff would not carry out a test as the parents do not have a barcode—a barcode that has still not been received by them. There were four booths at Burton. No one else was there using them—only this parent, his wife and their daughter. What do parents do in this situation?

Matt Hancock: If people have symptoms of coronavirus, they should self-isolate and get a test. We have heard examples—of course we have—of people having challenges getting tests. I am very glad, though, that in two of the cases that my hon. Friend outlined, home tests have been sent. In the third case, there was clearly a technical problem, given that the barcode is emailed to people who supply their email address. People with covid symptoms need to self-isolate and then, if somebody gets a positive test result, their households also have to self-isolate. These policies are absolutely critical to the control of the virus.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It has been reported that the coronavirus pandemic is leading to a second, quieter epidemic in mental health. The amazing north-east suicide prevention charity, If U Care Share, says that calls to its helpline have risen by nearly 300% during covid, and a survey of Samaritans volunteers found that callers across the country are generally more anxious and distressed than before the pandemic. Will the Secretary of State tell us what plans are in place to ensure that there is support for areas such as mine—Gateshead—before this becomes a crisis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. The hon. Lady is right to raise this. We are putting more support into mental health services, but there is a challenge, especially with people who were not able to access mental health services during the lockdown and therefore their condition got worse and more acute. This is an area that I am working on closely. I have had meetings with the Royal College of Psychiatrists throughout the crisis. I would also like to correct or amend a response I gave in a previous exchange, about which the hon. Lady has written to me, when I said that the number of suicides had fallen. The fact is that the number of suicides reported has fallen, but there are concerns about how many were able to be reported because of delays with coroners. I just want to put on record my correction to

that fact, in acknowledgement of the problems in reporting. I reported on the figures as fact, but we should report that those figures are the reported facts.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is there no scintilla of doubt in my right hon. Friend's mind, occasioned by the growing body of scientific opinion that questions the interpretation of the data and concludes that the policies of Governments—I use the plural—are having an impact worse than the disease itself?

Matt Hancock: I am afraid to say that, although I would love my right hon. Friend to be right, my firm belief, based not only on the clinical advice but on my own analysis and judgment of the facts and the international comparisons, is that it is necessary for the public health of the nation to take actions to control the spread of the disease and to take the firm and now legislative actions that we are taking. The reason is that if the virus spreads, we know that it then spreads into the older age group, who too often die from this disease. We also know that it does not just go up in a straight line, and that if we let this disease rip, it goes up exponentially. That is why, with a heavy heart, I strongly support the extra measures that the Prime Minister outlined yesterday and the strategy of this Government and most Governments around the world to handle this pandemic.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Nobody pretends that this is easy, but there are real problems in the system. The latest figures for test and trace in England are now out, and they are the worst figures since it started. The numbers have actually gone down since last week. That is the fact, I am afraid. The Secretary of State might not have seen the latest figures.

In relation to testing, my constituents have, ironically enough, been told to go to Derbyshire, Aberdeen, Weston-super-Mare and all sorts of places. Considering that we have one of the lowest car ownership rates in the whole of the UK, it is difficult for many people to go at all, if they are not allowed to use public transport and do not have much money and cannot afford a taxi to go to Aberdeen or Derbyshire. Given the number of times that my constituents have been told, including today, either when they ring or when they use the website, that there are simply no tests available at all anywhere in the whole of the United Kingdom, this is a shocking problem that we all need to address. I just hope that the Secretary of State will please, please, please stop all the huffing and puffing and simply get on with trying to solve these problems. Our constituents are really worried that they are not able to do the right thing, and if people stop doing the right thing we will lose control of this completely.

Matt Hancock: That is exactly what I am trying to do, and I appreciate the tone in which the hon. Gentleman asked the question. To be clear about the data on contact tracing that have just been released, on the number of people who have provided details of one or more close contacts, we reached 82.0% of those in the last week up to 2 September, which was up from 79.9% in the previous week.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Care homes in my constituency are allowing family visits in their gardens. However, they are concerned that the weather is about to turn. What is my right hon. Friend's advice to my care homes?

Matt Hancock: The challenge of how to keep people in care homes safe is a really tough one, because visits to care homes are important not only for our wellbeing and our desire to see our loved ones, but for the mental and physical health of those who are in the care homes. However, we also need to protect them from the disease, because they are among the most vulnerable to it in the whole of society. There are covid-secure ways to have visits to care homes, including indoors. Again, once we get to a position of mass testing, this is the sort of thing we will be able to deliver in order to enhance that support and make it easier. My hon. Friend is quite right to raise this, and it is something that I long to be able to provide a solution to.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I agree with the Secretary of State on the importance of mass testing. However, I am afraid to say that a number of residents in Ceredigion are being directed, under the current system, to travel much further than the 6.4-mile average he referred to in his statement. Indeed, in some instances they have been asked to travel as far away as Birmingham, over 100 miles away, while we know that Londoners are being told, in turn, to travel to Aberystwyth to get their tests. My question is a simple one: how does he intend to work with the Welsh Government to address this problem?

Matt Hancock: The solution, as I have mentioned a few times this afternoon, is to ensure that we continue the expansion of capacity—as the hon. Gentleman knows, there is now record capacity in the testing system—and, at the same time, ensure that those who are eligible for tests come forward to get those tests. Some people have been asked to travel, but the vast majority of people get tests close to home and get the results back very quickly.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): Whether on vaccines or testing, British scientists have been at the forefront of our efforts against this pandemic. I am very pleased that GlaxoSmithKline in Barnard Castle is playing its part, working with the Government on this national effort. May I encourage my right hon. Friend to also consider working with Honeyman Group, which is also Barnard Castle-based? At the moment it has the potential capacity to deliver up to 10,000 tests per day and I know it is very keen to work with us.

Matt Hancock: Excellent. I would love to work with the companies my hon. Friend mentions, and work with her on trying to make that happen.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): With the six-person rule not coming in until Monday, that effectively gives people encouragement to have large gatherings of up to 30 people in their households over the weekend. That is clearly a risk when there is, at the moment, an increase in the spread of the virus. It also means that it is even more important that the Government have the best test, track and trace systems in place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) pointed out, the Scottish Government have got the Protect Scotland mobile app up and running. That has been used by 160,000 people already. When, oh when, will the Secretary of State and his Government have their tracing app in place?

Matt Hancock: Very soon. As the UK Secretary of State, I urge all people in Scotland to download the app. I know that the Scottish Government's app is technically excellent and I strongly endorse it, as I will strongly encourage people in England to download the English app, people in Wales to download the Welsh app and people in Northern Ireland to download the Northern Ireland app to support the whole UK to do everything we can to tackle this problem.

Points of Order

12.52 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I start by thanking the Secretary of State for putting some of the record straight about the suicide figures for the first quarter of this year? However, he will know that I also asked him to confirm that the suicide figures for the last full year, 2019, have, sadly, risen. I think it is important that we get that on the record as well.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock) I am happy for that to stand on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government announced the business for the next fortnight earlier today. As you know, the Committee on Standards, which I chair, has seven lay members and seven Members of this House sitting on it. We have been missing two members, because appointments were meant to have been made by now. I do not know why the House Commission delayed that for a considerable period of time, but they have now gone through the Commission. It would seem that we still have no sign of the motion before the House for another two weeks, which makes it really difficult for the Committee on Standards to do its job properly. We have important issues to debate and to deal with. I just wonder whether you, Madam Deputy Speaker, could kick some shins somewhere in Government to make sure we get that motion, so that these people can be appointed. They are desperate to start the work and it all seems a bit unfair on them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I cannot promise to kick shins; I always find that the use of the stiletto heel works better, but I do not intend to do that either.

I do appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman has made, and he is right to make it in the Chamber. I will make sure that Mr Speaker is aware of his very reasonable concerns, and I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench will let the Leader of the House know of them. *[Interruption.]* I got a nod from the Whip, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). It is vital that a Committee such as the Standards Committee is able to carry out its work properly, and the House ought to facilitate that.

I will now suspend the House for three minutes to allow people to leave safely and carefully.

12.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Climate Assembly UK

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

12.58 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Darren Jones will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Darren Jones to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once, of course. Interventions should be questions and should be brief.

12.59 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): This morning, I had the privilege of launching the report of Climate Assembly UK, “The path to net zero”, along with the Chairs of the five other Select Committees that commissioned the citizens assembly back in 2019. This afternoon, as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I am launching a high-level inquiry into the findings of this groundbreaking report. I am keen, as I know other members and Committee Chairs are, that we take forward the work of the climate assembly by examining the policies that can deliver on net zero and provide solutions that are fair and equitable.

This major inquiry of the BEIS Committee will take a two-pronged approach. First, we will launch an overarching inquiry into the findings of the assembly in order to review, on a regular basis, the Government’s engagement and interaction with the findings of the assembly and progress in implementing its proposals. We will do this by monitoring progress in relation to this important piece of work, and working in close collaboration with the other Committees that commissioned the assembly.

Secondly, and in addition, the Committee will mainstream the work of the climate assembly. We will undertake detailed scrutiny of its proposals within the context of other existing and future inquiries. For example, the Committee is currently undertaking work on net zero and COP26, and we will shortly announce details of a series of new energy and climate change inquiries that we have selected following our recent My BEIS inquiry, which will focus directly on some of the energy recommendations in the assembly’s report. We will also examine issues around net zero and the green recovery during the course of our post-pandemic economic growth inquiry.

The findings of the climate assembly will therefore shape and inform the Committee’s programme of inquiries for the duration of this Parliament. I know that other Select Committees are considering how to use and take forward the findings of the assembly’s report, and we will no doubt have further announcements in due course.

Just to put the assembly report into context, it may be helpful to remind the House of its origins. More than 10 years ago, the House passed the Climate Change Act 2008. It has since declared a climate emergency and set a statutory target to reach net zero by 2050. We have already provided international leadership on

[Darren Jones]

decarbonisation, but the pace of reform has slowed and we must get back to business. However, meeting a challenge of this nature and this scale is clearly going to affect the lives of every citizen, organisation and community across our country. So everybody needs to understand why they are being asked to take action and what changes will need to be made, from how we eat to what we buy, how we heat our homes, how we do business and how we travel. That is exactly why the six Select Committees came together to establish this first ever UK-wide citizens assembly on climate change—an example of this House leading the public debate, but on the basis of informed public perceptions.

This report is a unique body of evidence enabling us in Parliament and Ministers in Government to understand the public's preferences for how we reach net zero, and it is a timely and important reminder of the public's expectation that we do so. To avoid any misconceptions, I should stress that the citizens assembly is not a simple opinion poll or a lengthy focus group. It is entirely different. This assembly involved 108 citizens, precisely reflective of the composition of the UK population—including attitudes to climate change—sitting down together, learning about the issues in depth, considering a whole range of viewpoints and taking into account their own values and lived experiences to come to a consensus on how we should act on climate change. Rather than being spoon-fed questions which they had to respond to, assembly members were asked to come up with their own principles to underpin their approach, to define for themselves what they thought was fair, and to make compromises and trade-offs in a way that could be acceptable and supported by most people.

The report, therefore, has a wealth of detail across a range of policy areas, and I encourage hon. Members across the House to read the executive summary to get a sense of the expectations that the British people have of us. The full report, which runs to 500 pages, provides granular detail and insight about the rationale behind the policy recommendations and the conditions attached to them. It provides a strong emphasis on some core principles that run throughout the policy recommendations, informing and educating everyone being a priority. Public, industry and individuals in Government have a shared responsibility to act. Then there is fairness across the whole of the United Kingdom, including for the most vulnerable, on issues of affordability, jobs, balancing the regions and nations, incentives and rewards—in actions, not just in words. Those adversely affected by the transition should not lose out—it should be a just transition and benefits should be shared by all of us. There is a call for strong leadership from Government and a strong demand for a cross-party approach to meeting the targets. Last was the principle to remind us all that protecting and restoring the natural world is as important as decisions on infrastructure, or consumer or business behaviour.

As a package, the assembly report provides us with guidance, but it is our job as politicians and as Ministers in Government to craft the policies and to implement them. It is therefore now up to us, with this report delivered and the assembly concluded, in our Committees and in our Parliament, with officials and Ministers, to turn the conclusions into clear legislation, policies and funding decisions.

I was struck, reading the report, by the assembly's degree of consensus on so many very difficult issues, with clear steers on a direction of travel and a willingness to make that journey together. It showed the pragmatic attitude of the British people to get on with taking the actions that are absolutely required of us. I take from this report that people are willing to be led towards a net-zero Britain, but it is now for the Government to take action. The call is for the Government to lead, to explain why we need to act, and to map out a route that meets the scale of the challenge—a route that is achievable and, in line with the report, seeks the popular consent of the British people. That should be built on open, collaborative, cross-party consensus.

Let us take this unique body of work as a template for action, a signal of what is achievable and an opportunity for the UK not only to build back better domestically in our own country, but to show the world how it can be done. I look forward to reporting back on the work of my Committee. I congratulate and commend all the assembly members and the staff involved in putting together this groundbreaking piece of work. I commend Climate Assembly UK's report, "The path to net zero", to the House.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) [V]: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's statement. I agree with him that this is a very fine report. I think there are two reasons why this project has been so powerful: one is the nature of the attendees at this assembly and how they were selected, being representative of the whole country; and the second is the proportionate nature of the recommendations in the report. Does he agree that the considered, measured and tolerant approach that has been adopted is a good example for all those individuals and groups who wish to contribute to the climate change debate?

Darren Jones: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I think the point he makes is really important because, for some in this debate, calls for action on climate change are demeaned as being from activists or not being supported by the British people. The citizens assembly report shows that these are pragmatic, considered and evidence-based decisions with support from a whole cross-section of the United Kingdom. That should give Ministers the confidence to take action in line with the recommendations in the report, and I know that it gives the right hon. Gentleman and his Committee, as well as the rest of us, the confidence to hold the Government to account very strongly in the implementation of those policies.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This has been a fantastic initiative. It is obviously important that politicians take the report and its recommendations seriously.

One important theme in the report is consumer fairness. It is crystal clear that we need to be fair to consumers, which means more direct investment in heat decarbonisation and energy efficiency from the Government, but it also means greater consumer protections. Does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that that means learning from mistakes, such as the green deal mis-selling by companies such as Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems, or HELMS? We need to look at those mistakes, learn from them, make recommendations to improve consumer protections, and get that fairness for consumers as we go forward to net zero.

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his continued work on consumer protection, which I know he advocates on the Committee that I chair, of which I am grateful that he is a member. He will know, and Ministers will know, that we have written to the Secretary of State about the Government's energy efficiency programme. The consensus in the report is that we need to take these actions, but that that should be done with clear, strong leadership from the top that puts fairness and equity at the heart while providing the choice that consumers need from providers and different technologies in the home. We also need to ensure that there is protection and enforcement at the end of that, lest things go wrong. I know that Ministers are considering those issues. They have brought forward the TrustMark for the energy efficiency programme, and I know that we will continue to ensure that consumer protection and fairness to consumers are at the heart of the Government's response.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on presenting the report, and I look forward to working with him on this on the Select Committee. One of the themes that have come out is that of course the environment is key, but so is ensuring that the economy is well managed. Does the right hon. Member—I mean, the hon. Member—agree that covid has had a financial impact on the business sector and that we will need to do more to help businesses to help us to achieve net zero?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for my elevation to the Privy Council, for which one can only hope. I agree absolutely that the consensus in the report and in our conversations on the Committee is that our economic recovery from the pandemic and our transition to net zero are no longer distinct issues but one and the same. They have to be embedded, and that requires Government to work in partnership with business. Some sectors will be affected more than others, and it will be difficult for some important parts of the British economy to make these changes, but I am confident that we can make them together. I know we will do that work on the Committee and bring forward proposals for the Government to do so.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): If we are to meet net zero, including targets on the electrification of transport and the decarbonisation of heating, either by electricity or by hydrogen produced by electricity, as the citizens assembly highlighted, we will need a lot of power, but not all of this can come from intermittent renewables. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time for the Government to get serious and set out plans for all the low-carbon generation we will need, including nuclear, which provides high-skilled jobs for his constituents and mine?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I know that she represents many workers in the nuclear sector in her constituency, and I know why that is an important issue to raise. The report made it clear that the energy mix is something that the public have clear views on, and I am sure they have the same anticipation as we do in the House for the arrival of the energy White Paper, which I am promised is due in advance of the Budget in the coming weeks, at which point we will

get into these issues. It was clear from the report that there is a preference for onshore and offshore wind and solar, but a recognition that that has to come with investment in our network, our storage and our flexibility capacity, and that until we do that, there is absolutely a preference for low-carbon sources of energy.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I welcome the hon. Gentleman's inquiry. Does he agree that the fairness aspect of the report is particularly important? People are sometimes put off by the idea that the affluent are telling those on low incomes that everything about their lifestyle is wrong—where they work, what they drive, where they go on holiday. There needs to be a greater understanding that some people might like to make certain changes, but do not have the means to do so at the moment.

Darren Jones: This is really very important. A member of the Committee asked the assembly in a private briefing this week how it defined fairness. The answer is really important because it was defined by the assembly members—they were not given a definition—and because the assembly represented a plethora of different types of people across the country: rich, poor, from different locations, with different levels of education, maybe activists and campaigners on climate change, maybe people sceptical of climate change. They came to that consensus on what fairness means, and they see no reason why we cannot deliver that through all our policies.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend. He was launching the report at the same time as DEFRA questions this morning, so will not have seen the Government Front-Bench response, which I thought was slightly disappointing in treating it as just another report. One of the top issues in terms of pure policy in the report is protecting and restoring the natural world, which is very timely given the Living Planet report. Does he agree that we will tackle that only with international co-operation, which is why it is so very important that we abide by international law and rules?

Darren Jones: I did not see the DEFRA Secretary's answer, but I would be disappointed if that was the case. I wonder whether he has not read the cross-departmental memo, given the comments of the BEIS Secretary this morning at the launch, welcoming the report as an important and substantive contribution to Government thinking. We should remember, of course, that BEIS has the responsibility to co-ordinate net-zero decarbonisation across every Department, including DEFRA, so perhaps the BEIS and DEFRA Secretaries could talk about the importance of this report.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As chair of the net-zero all-party parliamentary group, I thank my hon. Friend and the other Select Committee Chairs for commissioning the citizens assembly and for the holistic and well-rounded nature of the report. Citizens assemblies could form an important part of our pre-legislative scrutiny and policy making in Parliament. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should utilise such assemblies much more widely in the House?

Darren Jones: I note my hon. Friend's long-held action in this area, both before and during his time in Parliament. I congratulate him on his all-party parliamentary group, which is making an important contribution to the debate here in Westminster. This is the first time that we have had a UK-wide citizens assembly and it was on the really complicated topic of climate change, but that has shown that it works. A citizens assembly brings people together in a consensus-building fashion to understand the trade-offs and to come forward with proposals that people are happy with. I endorse my hon. Friend's suggestion that we look at these models—perhaps not just in Westminster, but in local government. In my city of Bristol, we are hoping to reinstate such activity after the pandemic as a way to bring people with us and to ensure that we really understand the ambitions of the British people. This report is an example of a British ambition for very strong action, and that should give the Government confidence in such action.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I note the importance placed in the report on cross-party working to ensure that these actions are supported in the long term, so let me take this opportunity, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, to pledge our support in delivering the recommendations of the report, all of which we completely endorse. Does the hon. Member agree that the biggest impact on achieving net zero will be made by the actions that are taken soonest, and what does he think is the most important action that the Government need to take now to help us to achieve this goal?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words and her pledge of support on behalf of the Liberal Democrats for the call for cross-party consensus on tackling climate change, which the Labour party also supports. As for her question about the most immediate action, this autumn and winter is the most important period for dealing with this issue. Not only do we have to borrow and spend significant amounts of money owing to the economic consequences of the pandemic, but we are also waiting for key policies from the Government—from the energy White Paper to the net zero review, through to the Treasury review on green finance, the heating in buildings regulations, and so many other things that are all due to come together in the next few months. Now is the opportunity for the Government to bring all that together and to set out a

progressive set of policies to meet the scale of the challenge, which I am sure will be in line with the principles of the climate assembly report.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): The report expresses some concerns about the potential robustness of carbon capture and undersea storage, although not perhaps as a way of achieving the transition to net zero. In 2019, the then Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee said that it did not believe that the UK would be able to meet its Paris obligations without applying CCUS. Does the hon. Member think that that remains the case, or does he agree that the UK should continue to pursue this technology over three or four sites, and does he agree that one of those should be at St Fergus in the north-east of Scotland?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the suggestion that I have any influence over the location of these sites. Unfortunately, I have to break it to him that I do not. Carbon capture and storage prompted an interesting debate in the climate assembly because CCS is a little further ahead than other negative emissions technologies in proving its capabilities in research and scaling up into industrial settings. Assembly members felt that it was a way to slow down the action we need to take on other renewable sources of energy, and were concerned about issues such as the leakage and storage of carbon in the use of these technologies. That is why they down-prioritised it in comparison with wind or solar. It is important to note that the assembly was unable to consider issues such as tidal power because the research was not in the right place for it to be able to do so comprehensively. We quickly need to understand the capacity of carbon capture and storage for scaling up and meeting needs, but we should also recognise that we must prioritise an urgent speed-up in the use of clean renewable technologies, and in my view CCS is only a temporary solution.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will now suspend the House for three minutes to allow the safe exit of Members who are here for this business and entrance of those who await the next business.

1.18 pm

Sitting suspended.

Virtual participation in proceedings concluded (Order, 2 September.)

Backbench Business

Aviation Sector

[*Relevant Documents: Second report of the Transport Committee, "The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the aviation sector", HC 268, and the Government response, HC 745; and e-petition 303081, "Support the British aviation industry during the covid-19 outbreak".*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before we come to the Backbench Business Committee debate on the aviation sector, as must be obvious to the House, 59 Back Benchers wish to speak and it will not be possible to get everyone in. Eventually, there will be a time limit of three minutes, but we will start on the Back Benches—not, of course, with the mover of the motion—with a limit of five minutes. Very soon, that will be reduced to three minutes. I give the warning now, so that people may edit their copious notes.

1.23 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the aviation sector.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to open this debate, which I do on behalf of the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare). I thank the Backbench Business Committee, the Petitions Committee and my own Select Committee on Transport for making this debate happen.

To frame the debate, I will talk about the current aviation picture, the Government's welcome interventions, what more the Government can and should do, the jobs at risk in the aviation sector, and passenger and consumer rights. I am happy to take interventions, as stated, but I ask right hon. and hon. Members to remember that they will be within my time limit, so perhaps they could make them snappy.

Let us talk about the current picture. The aviation network in the UK is the third largest in the world and the largest in Europe. It is a sector that we should all be proud of. As a nation—an island nation—we have travelled the world, explored the world, sent our entrepreneurs around the world and brought people to us. I say to the Government that the aviation sector is vital, not just from a business perspective but from a strategic angle. It is worth £28 billion to the UK economy. It employs 230,000 people directly, and for each one of those, 4.7 more jobs are created in the supply chain or the passenger experience.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Transport Committee for helping, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), to secure this debate. Does he agree that the national picture that he describes of job losses and the impact on the supply chain also has an impact on local areas where airports are a major part of the local economy? Does he agree that it would be worth the Government's considering not just sector-specific support but specific short-term area-based support for the aviation communities that have been very badly hit at this time?

Huw Merriman: My fellow member of the Transport Committee is absolutely right. We should bear in mind what has happened to passenger numbers. Numbers in April this year compared with April last year were down by 97%. To put that in focus, that means 5,800 flights whereas we previously had 201,000. It has been an absolute collapse. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the impact not just on aviation but on communities that work in it or indeed support it from a retail perspective.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and for giving me the chance to ask a question as well. The sector is worth some £1.9 billion to the economy of Northern Ireland. It is also very important strategically for the jobs it creates, and equally relevant to the other regions. Does he agree that there must be a meaningful sector-specific programme for aerospace from 1 November this year that recognises not only the centrality of technology and development in terms of the upcoming comprehensive spending review, but the decades-long challenge we have in improving productivity and skills retention and development? All the areas—Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and parts of England—must work together and focus on the Minister to get the help that we need, for all those reasons.

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Gentleman, as ever, for his contribution. He is absolutely right. Perhaps this is where I should put in my asks with the new Minister, whom I welcome to the Dispatch Box. Yesterday was his first day in front of the Transport Committee and today is his first day at the Dispatch Box. It has been a busy week for him already, with more to come.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) *rose*—

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Huw Merriman: Before I take any further interventions, I will make a little more progress.

The airports have already lost £2 billion just in the first few months, and they expect to lose another £4 billion. I would like to put on record my thanks to this Government for the £330 billion injection into businesses to keep them going. That has meant that 9 million people have been able to stay in employment through the furlough scheme. But of course I am going to stand here and ask for more, as is always the annoying case for Ministers with Back Benchers.

Lilian Greenwood *rose*—

Huw Merriman: I will take some more interventions in a moment.

I would like the Government to look at the aviation sector specifically. I say this because the Government—I do understand this—have brought in quarantine to keep us healthy and safe in travelling to certain countries. That is the right thing to do—a nuance-based approach to ensure that where it is safe to travel we can do so on air bridges and not quarantine for 14 days. None the less, that intervention does have an impact on aviation, which justifies more Government support. In addition, testing is happening in other parts of the world. The Government have not yet brought testing forward. I very much hope that during the quarantine period we

[*Huw Merriman*]

can allow people to take a test and then come off quarantine. That may well be later in the process, but I would like to see such a measure.

Those interventions from Government, which the aviation sector would say intervene on its ability to keep going, justify a sector-specific deal. I would like an extension of the furlough scheme for aviation. I would like a complete cut of air passenger duty for a period, which easyJet says would allow 60% of national flights to continue. I would like the Government to allow a business rate cessation as the Scottish Government have done. I would like to see those measures from the Government in return for our continued approach on quarantine and testing.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. As well as asking for a greater financial package, does he believe that the Government need to work much more closely with our airports, particularly Gatwick and Heathrow? They are proposing testing and screening that will help our aviation sector to get to where it needs to be, considering where we are with covid and the economy.

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. As she and I know, Gatwick is the jewel in our crown in the south-east. Many of our constituents rely on it for good, well-paid jobs, but it is looking at staff reductions of 25%, which worries me greatly.

Lilian Greenwood *rose*—

Huw Merriman: I will, of course, take an intervention from my hon. Friend—the hon. Lady—who is a previous Chair of the Transport Committee.

Lilian Greenwood: I hope that we are also hon. Friends.

The hon. Gentleman is speaking about the intervention and support required from the Government. A few moments ago we heard about the report from Climate Assembly UK that was launched today, which includes bold recommendations about the future of aviation and our route to net zero 2050. Does he agree that taxpayer support for the sector should be conditional on action both to protect workers and to cut emissions, as we transition to a more sustainable future for the aviation sector?

Huw Merriman: I thank my predecessor for all the amazing work she did on the Transport Committee, as well as today with the climate change report. She is absolutely right. When the Government bring out their sector renewal programme for aviation—and I hope we will hear more from the Minister on that—I hope to see incentives for greening aviation. That must be the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Huw Merriman: I will make a little more progress as I have only a few minutes left, and I might then take one or two more interventions.

I wish, from the Government Benches, to touch on the opportunity for more competition in the market. If airlines are not going to expand, and if they are to cut their workforce drastically, I would like the way that we allocate slots at our airports to be changed dramatically. If companies such as British Airways do not have the

staff to continue to utilise the slots—hon. Members should bear in mind that from a legacy perspective BA has 51% of Heathrow slots—I would like those slots to be auctioned to new entrants to the market, so that we can make more money and see a bit more responsibility. Those are good free-market principles, and once we leave the European Union, we can start to make such changes. I know we are somewhat bound by IATA rules, but so is the US and it still makes its own rules. I urge the Government to look at the competition argument for slot reallocation.

Jobs and redundancies are a huge worry, and 30,000 jobs in the aviation sector have already been directly put at risk. Virgin and Ryanair have each suffered 3,500 job losses, and easyJet has lost 4,500. The Transport Committee report made clear that redundancies were inevitable with such a drop in passenger numbers, but I am afraid I must make a special mention of British Airways, our national flag carrier. Of its 42,000 staff, 12,000 have been put at risk. Across the board, those members of staff were given the option of taking voluntary redundancy, and if they did not sign a settlement agreement they would lose their staff travel allowance, or they had effectively to reapply for their old jobs on terms that had not been set out. That was a big Russian roulette gamble for them and a big risk. If they did not agree to voluntary redundancy they could be looking at reductions in terms and conditions at more than 50%. For them not to even know those conditions when being given such a choice is, in my view, absolutely shoddy treatment, especially at a time when British Airways' parent company, International Airlines Group, is looking to spend €1 billion on a new airliner, and 66% of its profits were put in by British Airways staff.

The fact that there is so much suspicion about the behaviour of British Airways is because this restructuring has been tried before. That was dusted off, and now there is a perception and a feeling—and, I think, evidence—that the pandemic has provided the perfect backdrop for BA to start paying its staff on low-cost terms. If that is the case, why do I have pay a premium for it to occur?

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that premium brands are built on people, and it is incumbent on companies that aspire to be a premium brand to treat their people in a way consistent with that?

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend is right. Across the House we expect the best from our premium brands if they are to be our flag carriers. If a company is saying to its staff, “You might be required to allow us to put you out of work for eight weeks during the year without pay”—that is two months—“and at other times we might effectively put you on furlough without pay”, how on earth is a member of staff supposed to react?

What I would say before I take one more intervention—[*Interruption.*] I will not take another intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I see an opportunity for British Airways here. It is fair to say that the new chief executive, Luis Gallego, is a thoughtful and reasonable man who is two days into his job. I do not believe he will have the same scorched earth approach to industrial relations as his predecessor. There is still time, because these terms have not yet come out, for British Airways to do the right thing. Perhaps it will do what Ryanair has done and say,

“There is a 20% pay cut across the board, for everybody. That pay will be returned when better times come.” We know that our aviation sector has better times to come. I say to IAG’s chief executive: it is not too late, you still have time to do the right thing and protect your workforce and your brand.

On that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, I give way completely and allow the debate to continue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy, and for understanding that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon. We will therefore begin with a time limit of five minutes, and I call Abena Oppong-Asare.

1.35 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to have been able to secure my first Backbench Business debate on the future of the aviation sector, alongside the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). I am shocked that the Government did not deem it necessary to initiate a debate on this issue at such a crucial time, but I am glad to see a high turnout of MPs, from across the House, wanting to contribute to this debate. I thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for his work in supporting the aviation industry, and my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for the work she has done to support workers in Pontypridd who are facing the risk of redundancy.

The aviation sector supports 1.6 million jobs across the UK and contributes £22 billion to the economy. It should have come as no surprise to the Government, as passenger numbers dropped by 97%, as the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle mentioned, and as overall air traffic was reduced by 90% during the covid-19 lockdown, that the aviation industry would need industry-specific support. Once again, the Government’s lack of preparedness has resulted in a number of devastating consequences for my constituency and others across the UK. Along with my hon. Friends, I have been calling on the Government to provide bail-outs to support the aviation sector and, above all, the people they are supposed to represent, who are at risk of losing their jobs and livelihoods.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a crucial argument. She will know just how many jobs are under threat in south Wales, particularly at British Airways in the Vale of Glamorgan, and at other aerospace companies. Does she agree that the Government need not only to take action on jobs now, but to offer support to help young people training at Cardiff and Vale College for future careers in aerospace and green aviation? The Government need to give them some hope, as well as saving jobs now.

Abena Oppong-Asare: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which I completely support, and I am going to cover that much further in my speech. He mentions British Airways, which has announced that it wants to cut 12,000 jobs. Some 6,000 of its overall workforce have already taken voluntary redundancy, with many claiming that they have been pressured by scare tactics such as a fire and rehire policy. Those redundancies were announced five months ago, in April, yet the Government have still failed to protect its workers.

Since the announcement, many more have followed. EasyJet is planning to cut 4,500 staff; Jet2 has made more than 100 pilots redundant; Virgin Atlantic has made more than 3,000 staff redundant, including 47% of its pilots; and Flybe, the largest operator in the UK of domestic flights, has gone into administration, leaving 2,000 people without jobs. I could continue, but I am sure the Government are well aware that an estimated 110,000 airport or airport-related jobs are at risk. I have been contacted by operators in the aviation sector who have warned me that the sector can no longer weather the impacts of further inaction.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on that point about airport operators. In my patch, I have been in regular contact with the operator of Luton airport, which is responsible directly and indirectly for 11,000 jobs in Luton that are potentially at risk. But this is not only about jobs. It is also about the important revenue streams that come from the airport into Luton Council and wider voluntary and charitable organisations. Do you agree that part of this debate is about those vital revenue streams, as well as jobs?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is an intervention, not a speech, and Members must refer to one another as “the hon. Member”, not “you”.

Abena Oppong-Asare: My hon. Friend raises a really important point, which I completely support, and it echoes the conversations that I have had with operators in the aviation sector.

The obvious inaction has been noticed across the industry, and while some employers have a will to act in their employees’ best interests, that is not possible without a support package. One employer contacted me to make it clear that, while the Government repeatedly refer to the package of support that aviation has had, the specific nature of industry concerns has not been recognised at all. My colleagues and I have made it clear to employers and businesses, and I will re-emphasise it to the Government today, that we want to work in collaboration with all those affected to ensure that a plan can be put in place to secure the future of the industry. This debate is not about political point scoring. It is about holding the Government to account where they have failed the best interests of people across the UK.

My colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench have worked with unions and other stakeholders to produce a policy position that can help to protect jobs, the wider supply chain and the environment. I urge the Government to listen to the recommendations that have come from the industry for them to implement a robust plan and to provide a bail-out package for the aviation sector.

I also urge the Government to consider taking action on recommendations from industry leaders. The first is for the introduction of airport testing to minimise the need for mandatory 14-day self-isolation. It is clear to all now that the risk posed by covid-19 will not be eliminated in the immediate future, but when cases do begin to fall again—and they will—we must have a system in place to encourage the economy to reopen immediately. Passengers have been discouraged from travelling because they know they will have to quarantine for 14 days on arrival back in the UK, even if they test negative for covid-19. The blanket quarantine rules are another reflection of the Government’s lack of preparedness

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

as more infections were traced back to different travel destinations, to which they responded with a short-sighted and damaging policy.

This is why I am calling on the Government to work with businesses to produce a clear commitment to tackling climate change and investing to make the use of cleaner fuels and other low or zero-emission technologies viable options for businesses. If the Government truly want us to be the world leader, we must start acting like one. Direct emissions from aviation account for 2% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The threat to our planet, our country and our constituencies from climate change is ever growing.

Covid-19 has caused businesses and individuals to operate differently, as we are forced to come up with creative solutions to problems that we did not expect to face. We should take this opportunity to factor in the wider issues that urgently need tackling. The aviation sector has been impacted by measures relating to covid-19 in a very specific but not limited way. The entire industry and my colleagues on the Opposition Benches are ready to work with the Government to develop a plan for the future, and I hope that the Secretary of State for Transport and the Prime Minister are ready to engage in that urgently needed discussion.

1.43 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome the Minister to his place. In one sense, I welcome this debate, because it gives an opportunity for us all across the House to point out how important the aviation sector is to our economy, to jobs and, indeed, to global Britain. In another sense, I am rather sorry that we are having to have the debate, because it suggests that the Government have not yet quite got the message about the importance of the aviation sector.

Before I come to my main point, I wish to pick up on one of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who referred to the British Airways situation. I have constituents affected by the British Airways decisions, about which I have had concerns that I have raised with the company, but I also have constituents who will be losing jobs at other airlines, and at Heathrow airport itself. That is an impact of the rapid reduction in the number of people who are flying around the world. The best way to ensure that those people have jobs and to support those jobs is to get planes flying again. I welcome the fact that the Government have introduced the air bridges—that was a positive move—but I fear that the air bridges have increased not certainty but uncertainty for people, because of the constant changes that have taken place, sometimes within 24 hours.

Although I have some concerns about the air bridge policy, I wish to focus on testing, and I welcome what the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) said about its importance. First, let me set out the background. This is an important point: stopping people flying into the UK is not going to mean that there is no virus here in the UK—the virus is here; we are going to continue to have cases of covid, and will have more cases in the coming months—but it does

mean job losses and a negative impact on our economy. Passenger numbers at Heathrow have fallen by 82% and cargo is down 35%. It is reckoned that for every 1,000 passengers, one job is created. The fewer passengers, the fewer jobs. Cargo is also important, particularly for the UK as we are looking to improve our trading relationships around the world, and a lot of cargo is carried on passenger flights.

Sadly, there are those who say that if we want to promote testing and therefore reduce quarantine and increase the number of flights, we are putting public health at risk and putting the economy first. This is not an either/or situation; it is about assessing the proportionate risks. It is about mitigating the risk of people coming into the UK with the virus while at the same time reducing the risk of a damaging impact on the economy. I am certain that testing has to be the way forward in the foreseeable future, but at the moment airports are not even permitted to trial tests on passengers.

It is incredibly important that, far from leading the world, the UK is lagging behind. Japan has been testing since April, and Germany, France, Austria and Iceland all have testing, which variously reduces the quarantine period or means that people can abandon it. In all, 30 countries have testing facilities at their airports. British companies, with their ingenuity, have been developing new rapid tests—TravelSafe Systems recently demonstrated one to me in a GP surgery in my constituency. The infrastructure is there and the testing capability is there and being advanced as we speak.

Crucially, trials would provide data. Currently, decisions are taken on the basis of modelling, which has not proved infallible during this pandemic. Real data would be much a better basis for making decisions. The Government's position currently appears to be that if there is a risk with testing that one person has a false negative, we cannot test anybody. That is a counsel of perfection and it is wrong. We have to see testing introduced in our airports. We are talking about not a single test to abandon all quarantine, but possibly a test on arrival and a test a few days later to reduce the quarantine period.

I am sorry that the Minister finds himself responding to this debate, because I think the Department for Transport gets this, so my message is to No. 10, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care, and it is simple: if we want to get the economy moving, and if we want to get planes flying again, give airports permission to trial tests. Stop the UK dragging its feet; let us lead the world and set the standard to restore world travel and world trade.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

1.49 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): General Electric Aviation Wales, in Nantgarw, near Caerphilly, is one of the most important employers in south Wales. It employs 1,400 people, has an excellent apprenticeship scheme and is recognised as one of the key anchor companies in the whole of Wales. As the site maintains and overhauls jet engines from 90 airlines around the world, it has been hit hard by the contraction in air travel. In the late

spring, the company announced 180 voluntary redundancies. That was a serious blow, but at the beginning of July the company announced the loss of 369 jobs—quality, highly skilled jobs that neither the company nor, indeed, south Wales can afford to lose.

The Welsh Government are doing their utmost to be supportive, but what is really needed today is for the Westminster Government to be proactive, especially with regard to extending the furlough scheme. This would not be a long-term measure, because there will be an upturn in the number of flights and there is absolutely no doubt about the effectiveness and efficiency of the Nantgarw site. In fact, in early 2017 Nantgarw was selected, after intense competition, as the site to repair and overhaul the GE9X, the world's largest and most efficient jet engine.

If the Government do not give the necessary support to General Electric in Nantgarw, this will be in sharp contrast to what is happening in so many other countries. In France, Germany and Italy, for example, there is great Government support for the aviation industry. The Governments of those countries are giving massive support to their companies, because they realise that it is a very necessary investment.

Let me be clear that if the Government do not support the sector, and Nantgarw in particular, when jet engines need maintenance, the sector will again be at a huge competitive disadvantage. Once skilled jobs are lost, they are extremely difficult to replace.

So I ask the Government to please step up to the plate and do what is necessary. They must come forward immediately with a comprehensive support package for the sector. In particular, they need to support furlough.

1.51 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): May I start by welcoming the Minister to his post? He is a welcome addition to the Department for Transport team. When I left the Department 14 months ago, I resolved that I would not speak in this place about transport issues for a while, because it felt appropriate not to tread on the toes of my successor. I am here today because I believe passionately that this is an issue that must be addressed, and quickly. This is a crucial industry not just at our airports, but across our country for a whole range of businesses and a whole of people whose livelihood depends upon it.

I echo the comments of the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), on the importance of testing. This has to be the way forward. It is vital for the industry not only that we get short-haul flights moving again, but that we open up transatlantic routes, which are fundamentally important to the industry. We can only do that through testing. I cannot understand why we are not at the very least trialling testing on a number of routes to demonstrate where the issues are. My message to the Minister—and, through him, to all those on the Treasury Bench, in No. 10, in No. 11 and elsewhere in Government—is that we have got to do this, and we have got to do it now. There is absolutely no reason why a regime of trial testing in this country could not be introduced in a few days, or why the results could not be carefully monitored on selected routes to give us a blueprint to take things forward. We must do this, and we must do it now.

We also have the issue of our airports. Our airports, and many of the businesses that support them, are operating at a fraction of their normal capacity because the Government are telling them that they have to do so. In that situation, we cannot apply the normal regulatory regime. For example, we cannot tell our airports to pay their full business rates when the Government are telling them not to operate their business. This autumn we have to take a pragmatic and realistic approach for the businesses affected.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my view that much of the real pain of this situation will be felt by our smaller regional airports across the country, which will play a vital role in helping our nation to recover from the current situation? Will he join me in urging the new Minister—I, too, am delighted to see him in his place—that bringing forward the review of regional connectivity should be at the top of his to-do list?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree, because this is not actually about our principal airports; it is about the regional airports, which are the cornerstone of their local economies. Heathrow airport will be there in 10 years' time whatever happens, but we cannot say the same of our regional airports, which are facing a financial crisis as we go through this pandemic. We cannot expect it to be business as usual for the taxes they pay, the regulations they follow and so on. A sensible series of steps will have to be taken this autumn to ensure that those businesses are still here in a year's time when this crisis begins to abate, as we all hope it will.

I also want to echo some of the comments of the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). It is inevitable, sadly, that there will be job losses as a result of what is happening at the moment. I wish it were otherwise—we all wish it were otherwise—but it is not. However, it must also be the case that every airline should strain every sinew to ensure that it protects as many jobs as it can, because these are the people on whom those airlines and airports will depend as they seek to rebuild their business, hopefully in 2021. So my message to all those employers is: do what you have to do to keep your businesses afloat, so that there is still an employer there, but do not go beyond what you need to do to deliver that recovery. That would be absolutely the wrong thing to do in this incredibly difficult time for our country.

We must also consider the broader sector, because this is not just about airlines and airports. It is about a whole range of other businesses, including the suppliers to the aviation sector, the firms that make the planes, parts of planes and equipment at our airports, and the travel businesses, large and small, that depend on this sector.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an important point about the broader sector, because across the north of England and north Wales, a huge amount of the supply chain for the airline sector and the people who actually make the planes is really vulnerable at the moment, including Gardner Aerospace in my constituency, which is at risk of losing half its staff. That is a really important point for the Government to take away from this: there is a much broader sectoral issue.

Chris Grayling: These are crucial points. If we are seriously to rebalance our economy, we cannot afford to lose some of the fine manufacturing businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere that service our aerospace sector so well and make it such a fundamentally important part of the manufacturing side of our economy.

Of course, the Government can do something in this field because as a nation we procure, for military and civil purposes, a significant amount of equipment. This autumn, as we go into the Budget round and look to step up capital spending to help us through the recovery, we have the ability to take procurement decisions that will help the businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency and others. My message to Ministers is that, as we look at how best to take ourselves through the recovery, the purchasing power they have to invest in equipment that we will need for the future could make a real difference if they were to bring forward some of those orders now.

My final point is that we absolutely have to rebuild the sector, get these businesses going again and get people flying again, but there is also a duty on the industry and all of us to ensure that this is, as far as is possible, a green recovery. There is no simple way of solving the environmental impact of the aviation sector. It cannot suddenly become net zero or green overnight, but it has to take steps in the right direction, whether through the electrification of airports, the reduction of fuel consumption of planes or other methods that can make the industry less environmentally impactful. My message to the industry and to the Government is that they should work together to ensure that the industry really is on the mend and that we get people flying again, but should do so in the most environmentally sustainable way possible. This is a crucial industry, and it must get back to something like normal, but it needs to do so in a way that is consistent with all our futures.

1.58 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Liverpool John Lennon airport is in my constituency, so I would particularly like to congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on obtaining this debate and giving me the opportunity to say something about what is happening there. I found myself agreeing with the former Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling)—a rare event—when he said that this involves a much broader range than just the airlines and the staff who work in the airports. We have air traffic controllers, ground handlers—it is Swissport at Liverpool John Lennon—and various retail outlets, many of whose staff are on furlough. There are also the airlines—mainly easyJet and Ryanair at Liverpool John Lennon—as well as airport security and other service providers, and that is just at the airport. I have not mentioned industries that service it, as the right hon. Gentleman did.

In addition, tourism and the visitor economy in Liverpool have been a huge part of the regeneration of the city. This has been dependent in part on the airport, and it was particularly boosted by our year as European capital of culture in 2008. It supports some 35,000 jobs

in the industry. As John Irving, the chief executive officer of Liverpool airport, told me and as all parts of the sector have told the Government, aviation was one of the first sectors impacted by covid. The impacts are worldwide and ongoing, and therefore will be significant for some time, and full recovery post covid is likely to take a long time, with some people suggesting that volumes will not recover in the next two or three years.

So far, the impact has been bad: 15% of the jobs at my airport, John Lennon, have gone, with more redundancies not ruled out. EasyJet, one of the main airlines there, is making 70 redundant, despite having taken a £600 million loan from the Government and paid out £174 million in dividends to its shareholders at the beginning of furlough, and Swissport has 60 jobs at risk at the airport. Many of the retailers who are still on furlough will face an uncertain future in October, and a significant number of security staff and others providing services in the airport find their jobs at risk.

Passenger numbers are 65% below what would be expected normally at this time, so ongoing difficulties cannot be ruled out, and the 14-day quarantine chopping and changing of arrangements from one week to the next simply generates uncertainty. On the lack of progress in finding a way forward on testing, I completely support what the former Prime Minister said. There is no adequate financial support for those who suddenly find themselves having to quarantine, and this adds to the uncertainty. We must have a sector-specific deal for aviation, and we must have a tapering or a continuation of the furlough scheme to make sure that the industry does not completely disappear in future months.

2.1 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Three minutes—gosh! I am glad the high-speed rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), is on the Front Bench to inspire me to get a move on.

I welcome the new Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), to the ejector seat role of aviation Minister. He is the fifth in two years; I was No. 3. Such is the turnover that who knows how long he will last. Will he still be there to bring us in to land? I do not know, and that is part of the problem. The sector does not have the continuity in the Department that it needs for long-term decision making. My hon. Friend has fantastic officials, but he certainly has not got enough of them. In the past year, they have had to deal with the collapse of Thomas Cook, the slow, prolonged agony and death of Flybe, and now covid-19. They are absolutely frazzled, I have no doubt, which means they cannot do the longer-term work on the issues, such as slot allocation, that I think it is so important for the Department to grapple with.

I agree with everything that everyone has said so far—there is no point repeating it—but on testing, let me make a plea for us to learn from Italy, which now has obligatory pre-departure testing. There is no environment more conducive to the transmission of the virus than that on board an aircraft. We have a chance to test people before they board, and we should oblige all UK-registered airlines to do just that. Passengers would check in half an hour early, as they do in Italy at

the moment, and if they tested positive, they would not be allowed to board. That would stop the importation of the virus into the UK. To me, it stands to reason.

May I assist my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) by making a few pleas on behalf of regional airports, in case he does not get the chance to do so? The Government need to move faster on regional airports, which were having an existential crisis already when Flybe collapsed, and it is currently a case of “Apocalypse Now”. There was a regional airport review, it reached conclusions and there was a 10-point plan. I know because I wrote it, and left it in my in-tray, so I know what it is going to say. The Department knows what it wants to do on public service obligation flights, and that can easily be changed. They are all domestic routes and there is no quarantine angle at all: we can make the changes now.

The Minister may have heard—in fact, I doubt he has heard yet—that Southend airport has, just this week, installed its new £400,000 security scanner. It is one of those that allow passengers not to have to remove liquids from their baggage, and it is part of our overhaul of transport security. They are immensely good news across all airports, but they cost an incredible amount of money—£400,000. In many smaller airports, they require a complete redesign of the terminal layout. Just go and ask the chief executive of Leeds Bradford. Can the Government do more to consider better use of capital allowances to facilitate that sort of investment?

My mantra as Minister was that we were the aviation nation and had to remain so to be ambitious on behalf of the UK sector, but we risk becoming a flightless nation, stuck on the ground and unable to go anywhere. There was a flightless bird called the dodo, which is now extinct. Do not let UK plc’s aviation sector become extinct, please.

2.4 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): With Teesside International Airport in my constituency, aviation is obviously important to us there. I welcome the Government’s £8.5 billion support package for the industry and their approach to travel corridors, which have allowed aviation to start its return to normality. I hope that, as science develops, the air bridges will become more focused and better, but so much more is required.

The recent investment in Teesside International Airport is bringing jobs, connectivity and economic growth to the north-east. Ben Houchen, the Conservative Mayor of Teesside, set out four years ago to save the airport, which is a prime example of what a well connected local airport can do for an area. It is connecting Teesside to the world, broadening horizons and increasing opportunity. It has created jobs for local people, not just in aviation but in other sectors as well, and it is a critical part of the transport infrastructure for the region, with direct links to the rest of the world via Amsterdam and Heathrow that serve as a magnet for business investment.

That connectivity is a key asset for both private and public sector organisations relocating to the area, and it will be an obvious benefit for the Treasury or other Departments that are thinking about relocating. We need appropriate support to ensure that regional airports survive and continue to provide the connectivity that drives and facilitates investment and plays a critical part in both the levelling-up and build back better agendas.

In getting aviation back on its feet, we have the opportunity to redefine the aviation sector. After the reset driven by covid-19, we can move to a more sustainable and greener future through a balanced and considered approach. Climate Assembly UK, which today published its report “The path to net zero”, supports the need for an ongoing and sustainable aviation industry and makes recommendations that include the need to engage the population in making necessary changes and promoting UK travel.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): My hon. Friend will share my concern about the fact that Rolls-Royce in Barnoldswick is now looking to offshore 350 jobs to Singapore. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government really need to engage with such businesses, because once local skills bases disappear, they are gone for good?

John Howell: I agree absolutely. We need to do all we can as we go through the covid-19 crisis to make sure that we retain key industries and jobs in our country.

Climate Assembly UK also recommends investments in the development and use of new technologies for air travel. There are different aspects of that to consider, including the development of sustainable fuels—some investment in that sector would be good—and the work of companies such as Kromek in Sedgefield, which is developing technology to analyse the air on an aeroplane between take-off and landing to see whether the virus is present on the plane. If we can test on the plane, we do not need to test at the airport—we will know whether there are people carrying the virus on the plane. I would encourage investment in those sectors, which could make our airlines safer and cleaner, and give confidence to both business and leisure travellers.

The aviation sector is vital to our economy, to jobs, to trade and to growth, and there are many proposals on what support could be given, ranging from business rates relief to bring us in line with counterparts in Northern Ireland and Scotland, some form of employment costs support beyond the end of the job retention scheme, some funding for the Civil Aviation Authority, suspension of air passenger duty, and, in particular, support for investment in more sustainable airline fuels. I would strongly encourage urgent efforts on some or all of those.

There is a post-covid-19 vision for a UK economy that is stronger, more sustainable and more productive, and which works for all the UK’s nations and regions. Aviation can play a key role in that future, connecting us to the world, supporting business and UK exporters, and supporting the hundreds of thousands of jobs that rely directly and indirectly on aviation, including those in our world-leading aerospace and tourism sectors. It is important that the Government understand the damage caused by the pandemic. With the right support, the sector can emerge on the other side with as many jobs and as much infrastructure as possible, and with opportunities to support a green economic recovery through investment in low-carbon aviation technologies.

2.9 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on his new post as aviation Minister.

[Henry Smith]

I first had the opportunity to raise the potential impact of covid-19 on the aviation sector back in January. I have the privilege of representing the world's busiest—or it certainly used to be the world's busiest—single runway airport, and this issue is extremely important to the wellbeing of my local economy, which includes the headquarters of Virgin Atlantic airlines, easyJet's largest centre of operations, and many other such centres. However, as other right hon. and hon. Members have said, this is also an extremely important industry and sector for the UK economy.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): My hon. Friend is a formidable champion of aviation, particularly in West Sussex. Does he agree that an important point in this debate is that the impact affects the entire supply chain, from companies such as Avtrade in Sayers Common in my constituency, which neighbours his, all the way down through companies that provide the food, luggage, baggage handling and maintenance contracts?

Henry Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is exactly right: the UK aviation industry is vital to the whole of our national economy, and there is a ripple effect. If, in our island trading nation, aviation is not supported, the negative impact is felt throughout the economy. That is why I make no apology for being parochial about Gatwick airport; this is an important issue for the whole British economy.

I am very grateful to Members on both sides of the House for joining me in the Future of Aviation Group, which I am honoured to chair. We have introduced a 10-point plan of recovery and support for the aviation industry. As I have only minutes left, I will highlight just five of those key points.

First, as has been mentioned, testing is essential. Over 30 countries test arrivals for covid-19. That is important not just for confidence for people travelling again, but for public health confidence. We are at a competitive disadvantage in relation to countries in Europe, such as France, Germany, Italy and Austria, which do test if we are not testing. Further afield, other countries such as the UAE and Singapore test too. It is absolutely vital. Virgin Atlantic tells me that it does not expect business to be at even a quarter of 2019 levels by the end of this year. Testing would help that.

Secondly, we recommend an extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme—the furlough—for aviation sector employees until March 2021, because, effectively, the sector will experience at least three winter seasons as a result of the situation.

Thirdly, business rates relief for airports in England, as has occurred in other parts of the United Kingdom, is extremely important.

Fourthly, I have been arguing for many years for the reduction—indeed, the scrapping—of air passenger duty, but we need a relief for at least the next year to support airlines.

Finally, we need a sustainable regrowth of our aviation industry. In February, the UK airline industry committed to net zero carbon by 2050. We need investment—some £500 million of matched investment—from the Government with industry to develop sustainable aviation fuels. That is the way we will recover, for our whole country.

2.14 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The star award for using covid as an opportunity to demoralise and destroy its workforce has to go to British Airways. One of my constituents—a long-standing employee of 25 years—told me that after months of toxic bullying and mental anguish, she has been offered a new contract that is so deliberately ambiguous that she feels she has to take it or face redundancy. The worrying proposals in the new contract include, for example, that she may be forced to relocate temporarily or permanently to anywhere in the world. An associated company may also take over her holiday entitlement; that company will also have access to her health records and, bizarrely, the right to search her and her property. All that for a 40% reduction in her pay, while the outgoing chief executive is £3 million better off.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Lady has made an important point. Does she agree that because this appalling behaviour towards the workforce has gone unchecked, it has been replicated by other companies such as Centrica? Does she also agree that the Government should support the Employment (Dismissal and Re-employment) Bill, sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), which would stop this appalling practice?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The hon. Member's intervention leads me nicely on to my next point. My constituent tells me that some of her colleagues have actually taken their own lives and some have suffered heart attacks. The Government are not powerless. They can put a stop to these awful fire and rehire practices before they spread through other industries.

Our easyJet base in Newcastle has also closed. Our neighbours in Europe, recognising the value of regional connectivity, jobs, skills and a supply chain that benefits the wider local economy, have given substantial bailouts—not loans—to their operators. They have also substantially extended furlough, which the Government here rejected outright yesterday. I spoke to an easyJet pilot who asked me to put to the Minister why the Government are not considering travel corridors on a region-by-region basis in the same way as they have applied measures in the UK. It does not make sense to shut down access to an entire country when just one part of it has an outbreak of coronavirus.

I am sure the Minister will tell us that the Government have set up the aviation engagement unit, but can he tell us exactly what it has achieved? From what I can see, it has achieved very little so far. My constituents' futures and jobs are on the line. It is in the Government's gift to do something. Why don't they?

2.17 pm

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the Chair of the Transport Committee, for securing this much-needed and timely debate on the aviation sector. It has been a pleasure to work with him on the Committee, under his chairmanship.

We have considered the devastating impact of the coronavirus on the aviation sector and the Government's response to support the sector, not least travel corridors, safe travel guidance, passenger refunds and, of course,

the furlough scheme. I welcome reports that the Government are looking at more comprehensive testing at UK airports to reduce the time for quarantine, which would further help the travel industry to get anywhere near back on its feet.

The much-anticipated aviation recovery plan is due this autumn. It simply cannot come soon enough to address the scale of the crisis still facing the sector. The Government should be commended for setting up an unprecedented level of support to protect jobs, but, sadly, despite the measures in place, the obstacles to survival faced by many smaller airlines and regional airports would challenge even the most experienced pilot.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend represents the nearest airport to my airport in Newquay. Does he agree that the regional airports are going to play a vital role in delivering on the Government's levelling-up agenda, and that if we lose them it will make the Government's job of investing in the regions even harder?

Simon Jupp: My hon. Friend takes the words straight out of my mouth. Colleagues will recall the collapse of Flybe in March, which was devastating for its employees, many of whom live in Exeter and East Devon.

Despite Government intervention and offers of assistance, Flybe shareholders chose to walk away from an airline that they signed up to support. It was a punch in the gut to regional connectivity, and the impact is still felt in East Devon and across the south-west. Although some former Flybe routes from Exeter airport have been brought back to life by new airlines, the future of these routes remains on a knife edge. Back in March, a review of air passenger duty was announced as part of a package of measures to support Flybe and regional connectivity by air. Many colleagues welcomed this move to level the playing field by ensuring that regional airlines were not hampered by having to pay APD twice. It is essential that the Government use all the tools at their disposal to ensure a fair and level playing field for operators such as Loganair and Blue Islands, which operate from Exeter airport.

After months of engagement with the aviation industry, I hope that the Government are actively considering scrapping business rates for airports for 12 months, with Government support making up the difference to local authorities that would feel the pinch. Airports in England have paid more than £17 million in business rates since the start of the lockdown in March, despite passenger numbers dropping by around 97%. In response to the Transport Committee's inquiry, the Government said that discussions on business rates were ongoing with airports. I urge the Government to speed up discussions and offer solutions that support the future of regional aviation, because we will not be able to level up our regions if we level off regional connectivity.

2.20 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing the debate, and the Chair of the Transport Committee on his work, his support and his Committee's excellent report.

My remarks today will reflect the situation around Heathrow, but will not be limited to it. I thank and commend the local authorities around west London, and also West London Business, Brunel University and others, for their remarkable efforts to come together for local rescue and recovery plans. I also welcome the call for an aviation communities fund from local authorities, particularly to support reskilling, business growth and infrastructure.

This is a national emergency, and the impact of not acting now to secure an aviation deal and to support businesses in aviation communities in the next few weeks will be devastating. The cost to the state will be far greater than the cost of measures to get us through even to the spring, when many companies expect to see demand grow. The message from employers is clear: aviation is much more than airports and airlines. It is the aviation fuel companies, retail, baggage handling, hospitality, security, logistics, facilities management, engineering, airline catering and much, much more. Their needs are different—some are paid for each flight, some per passenger, and some for services such as meals on flights—but their sustained success depends on each other. It is urgent to act now, because section 188 notices are being issued as companies plan for what they expect to be the end of furlough at the end of October.

Jim Shannon: One of the suggestions that the unions and others have put forward is that Her Majesty's Government could mitigate the level of redundancies to recognise that those the hon. Lady has referred to, who could be made redundant, will have been paying national insurance of some 14% and paying into their pensions as employees, while also saving the UK benefits and redundancy payments. Her Majesty's Government could provide some funding—perhaps 25% funding—for each employee's wages to retain the skills and, at the same time, ensure that the business can get to January and to November next year, which it needs to get to.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Member makes a very important point. Indeed, may I put on record my thanks to Unite, GMB and the other unions that I have been working with for all that they have done, day in, day out, to support workers and their businesses? He also makes a very important point about the retention of skills. Airport businesses have said to me that it takes six to nine months to train somebody to work in such a complex environment. Even cleaning an aircraft is as much about understanding security and counter-terrorism as it is about being able to serve all those passengers and the company. I thank him for making that point, because it is linked with the issue that this is about not just individual employees, but our readiness to recover when the time comes and keeping our businesses in place.

It is important to act now. Tens of thousands of jobs could be saved by a flexible extension of furlough, perhaps allowing employers to have employees on reduced hours, which will mean that families are supported to pay their bills and to stay in work. If the Chancellor and the Transport Secretary do not do this, they will simply pass a preventable problem over to an already stretched Department for Work and Pensions. In Feltham and Heston alone, there has been a 74% increase—to more than 19,000—in the number of people on universal credit. The local citizens advice bureau has talked about

[Seema Malhotra]

the number of inquiries it has had about debt. People are now being forced to borrow from loan sharks to pay one bill as another red letter looms.

Patricia Gibson: No doubt the hon. Lady shares my disappointment that the Chancellor's promise of tailored support has not yet materialised. Does she agree that ending furlough in October, just when payment holidays are ending, will cause real difficulties for families? There is no respite for them. It really is time for the Government to step up and provide tailored support for furlough.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. She shows that families will look to Christmas with dread, rather than with aspiration and hope for the new year. In six months' time, we could be seeing children who are preparing for exams after two years of disrupted education being evicted from their homes—that is the scale of what will happen. I request that the Government act quickly to ensure that we get support in place early and do not see a wait until November, when it could be too late.

A recent report by Oxford Economics has shown the scale of local jobs around Heathrow: 133,000 are being directly and indirectly supported, including jobs in the Prime Minister's constituency. Following the response to a parliamentary question about membership of the expert steering group, however, I am concerned that the Minister is not hearing all the voices in aviation. Perhaps he will not mind if I write to him with additional suggestions for under-represented voices and academic voices that could be useful to thinking about the future of aviation.

In summary, I make five recommendations. I recommend working with employers on a flexible and targeted continuation of furlough to keep people in work until aviation recovers—other countries are doing it, and so should we. Business rates deferral has been called for by Heathrow—I have written to the Prime Minister about it; Heathrow has not said “waiver”, it has said “deferral”—to help with cashflow, which in turn will help other businesses. Reduced quarantine through increased testing will bring greater confidence to fly. I also recommend a slot waiver review, so that airlines are not penalised next year for being unable to use slots this year. Finally, I recommend investment for growth, including through a new communities fund.

That extension of furlough, however, should also be conditional. For example, Heathrow has issued its own section 188 notice and, on Dnata Catering, many employees have written to me to say that they are being forced to sign a new contract on reduced terms. Instead, those companies should be negotiating with their unions for a solution—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

2.26 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing the debate, and for his work on behalf of the thousands of employees in the aviation sector. This pandemic has impacted the sector hugely.

I place on the record my thanks to my constituents who are employed by British Airways—Victoria Lines, Andrew Harris and Jay Kalijan—who have engaged with me extensively on the impact of BA's treatment of them. I have endorsed the campaign calling for a review of the landing slots allocated to BA.

I am thankful that the Government have taken such unprecedented steps to protect workers in the aviation sector, with support in excess of £8.5 billion. Had the Government not taken those steps, the impact would have been even more catastrophic, although we must do more. Despite such an unprecedented intervention, British Airways, Ryanair, easyJet and Virgin Atlantic have all made, or intend to make, large-scale redundancies. The situation is unsustainable, as major UK airports continue to see losses.

The impact on the aviation sector is not limited to the major airlines or the big international airports. It was clear early on, with the collapse of Flybe, that regional connectivity was also at risk. I am proud of the work of our Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, who has taken Teesside International airport from strength to strength, having saved it from virtual destruction after it was given away by Labour-controlled local authorities. If anyone needs an example of how essential aviation is to protecting local jobs, following the rescue of Teesside airport, the international sporting brand Dunlop specifically chose to retain its UK offices in my constituency, because of that connectivity. It is important for recovery that we support regional airports.

I believe strongly that we need to recognise that national policy can often disadvantage regional airports. I am therefore glad that before the March 2020 Budget, a review of airport passenger duty was announced. The scrapping of the duty would further support regional connectivity. As we build back greener, we must support our regional airports. They enable economic growth, maintain regional connectivity, and lead to job creation and retention.

2.29 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The north-west aerospace cluster is the largest in the country, contributing more than £7 billion to the UK economy and employing thousands of people, so this is an issue of great importance to my constituents, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for bringing this critical debate to the House.

I should declare an interest: before I had the great privilege of representing the people of Birkenhead in this House, I served as north-west regional secretary for Unite the Union. During that time, I represented many of the thousands of aerospace workers who now find their jobs under threat, including Rolls-Royce employees at Barnoldswick, from where many operations are being moved to Singapore. I am sure I will not be alone in condemning that decision as utterly shameful and as endangering the world-leading status of British aerospace.

At the height of the pandemic, I applauded the speed and enthusiasm with which British aerospace companies responded to the ventilator challenge. That demonstrated an industry that is versatile, highly skilled and able to diversify quickly to meet the needs of the nation. We call the industry world-beating for a reason. With British aviation facing unprecedented challenges, however, the

need for a comprehensive recovery strategy has never been clearer. The Government say they need to bring together trade unions and industry leaders to save jobs, protect apprenticeships and lead the charge towards a carbon-neutral sector. I would also stress the importance of mitigating job losses through diversification, focusing on socially useful production, especially the medical goods and green technologies that will be so essential in the years to come.

The Government have long recognised the pressing need for such a strategy, yet this week they have announced that their recovery strategy will be published some time in the autumn. That is utterly shameful. I call once again on the Chancellor to act against companies that accepted money from the job retention scheme and then cut jobs. The Government's inaction so far has already caused irreparable devastation. Thousands of jobs have been lost, many more are set to be offshored, and the industry is drawing ever closer to falling off the furlough cliff edge. Time is fast running out. The Government must act now.

2.31 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), on his new role—long may it continue—and I thank the Government for their £8.5 billion investment in the aviation sector,

What has been shocking in this pandemic has been the way aviation companies have responded and treated their employees, and by far the most shocking of those has been British Airways, which is what I want to speak about today. This is about fairness and the lack of fairness displayed in companies such as British Airways, which I feel has been using the pandemic as an excuse to liquidate its assets and move its transnational base out of Britain and overseas.

Today I want to speak on behalf of constituents in places such as Marlow, Beaconsfield, Flackwell Heath and Hedgerley who have worked for British Airways, some for 20 or 30 years, and who have been left with virtually nothing. As we move towards October, can we look at how businesses are going to respond when the furlough scheme ends, and at how we treat companies such as British Airways that hold valuable slots at Heathrow?

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I am sure that, like me, the hon. Member has heard many heartbreaking stories from constituents who have been treated appallingly by this nation's flag carrier. Will she call on her own Front Bench to ban this fire-and-rehire policy it is using? There is a private Member's Bill before us tomorrow. The Government should be taking this on, because it is a practical and obvious way in which they can step in to back BA employees.

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Member for raising the important issue of how we can hold companies such as British Airways to account. It is an issue of fairness. If BA is going to liquidate not only its assets but its British employees, we should look at which companies are retaining the highest percentage of British employees and think about how we can reallocate the slots to them. There should be a reward for fairness.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): We are continually being told by companies such as British Airways that the rationale for the current staff restructuring plans stems from covid-19, and covid-19 only. Does my hon. Friend agree that to prove that point, British Airways should undertake now to rehire its staff on their old terms once the good times return?

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, particularly as I believe British Airways pointed out to its shareholders that it planned to get back to levels of profitability and demand by 2023. It also plans, through its partner company IAG, to acquire Air Europa for an estimated €500 million off the back of the hard-working BA employees who have dedicated so much time to building up the assets the company as a whole is benefiting from. I hope we can look at landing slots, and how we can hold BA and other companies to account.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I have said before, and I say it again in this House, that I would like the steering committee to consider including an employment lawyer, an employment judge or a judge from the employment appeal tribunal to oversee the redundancies that are being conducted in the aviation sector, so that we get fairness and parity of treatment across staff in the coming months.

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which she raised in the first debate. Indeed, BA employees said it was an excellent point, and that they would like to see that. They have had no representation and no way to appeal against the practice that BA has used against them.

I hope we can move toward, a better approach to the aviation sector. I will fully support that. I fully support further tax cuts to aviation and further furloughing—anything to keep the sector going. However, we should not reward bad behaviour by giving in to companies that exploit British employees at the cost of transnational profits.

Patricia Gibson *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Is the hon. Lady taking the intervention?

Joy Morrissey *indicated assent*.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Lady rightly said that BA had behaved very badly towards its employees, and everybody agrees on that. Will she then explain why she is not willing, and her party is not willing, to back the fire and rehire Bill?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Ian Byrne.

2.37 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I congratulate Members on both sides of the House on securing such a vital debate.

The Airbus CEO has warned that this is the gravest crisis that the aerospace industry has ever known. The need for Government intervention is crucial for the survival of the sector and its 1.6 million jobs. Yesterday I met Jamie, a trade union rep from BWT Senior Aerospace, who was taking part in a “save our jobs”

[*Ian Byrne*]

rally. Jamie and the members in his factory have agreed to a four-day working week, resulting in the saving of at least a third of the planned redundancies in his plant. The agreement demonstrates that trade unions and their members are prepared to play their part to preserve employment during the pandemic.

I am now going to utter a sentence I never, ever thought I would utter: well done Michael O'Leary and Ryanair. After announcing huge job losses in May, Ryanair entered negotiations with Unite the Union and came to an agreement on a temporary pay cut for members which took redundancies off the table. In stark contrast is the behaviour, as has been mentioned, of British Airways. BA is responding to the pandemic by firing all its 42,000 staff and rehiring those who survive, roughly 30,000, on inferior terms and conditions of employment. Some face a loss of income of between 55% and 75%. BA received £200 million from the UK Government's coronavirus loan scheme and over £100 million in furlough payments, yet it is paying its outgoing CEO Willie Walsh a leaving bonus of over £800,000 as part of a total package worth £3.2 million.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that that £833,000 will stick in the craw of so many decent British working people across the country, and that the Government should immediately take action to look at the issue of the slots? It should also say to British Airways that it will be stripped of the right to have British livery on its planes for good unless it decides to treat its staff in a decent and proper way.

Ian Byrne: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Painfully for me, Willie Walsh is a Liverpool supporter who has obviously never learned the words of our famous anthem of solidarity, "You'll Never Walk Alone", because he has left his entire workforce to walk alone while he disappears into the sunset not fearing the prospect of using a food bank, which is where he has shamefully left many of his loyal workforce with his actions.

Is it too much to expect companies such as BA, which has billions in reserve, to show the same loyalty many of its employees have shown to it over the decades, and not to take advantage of covid-19 to launch an opportunist attack on its staff's terms and conditions? I call on the Minister to show the solidarity and empathy with the BA staff that the company has not shown, and to consider the following proposals. The BA plan to fire and rehire its staff on worse terms and conditions is undeniably a fundamental attack on the rights of its workforce. It is immoral, and, shamefully, it is spreading to other sectors of our economy, including British Gas, which with BA joins a list of dishonour in treating a loyal workforce appallingly.

Will the Minister pledge support for urgent legislative change, such as the Employment (Dismissal and Re-employment) Bill, a private Member's Bill that we may consider tomorrow, to outlaw this shameful practice once and for all? I also urge the Minister to amend slot regulations and put in place much more rigorous conditions for all the legacy slots to ensure that from 2021, the UK Parliament will use its power to set additional local criteria for slot allocations that incentivise internal investment, social responsibility and connectivity. We

cannot build a brighter future for our nation post covid while we have companies acting with such blatant disregard for their employees and our communities.

2.41 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I, more than many, welcome the new Minister to his place and wish him every success. Before continuing, I want to say that my thoughts are with all those affected by the bus crash in my constituency this morning. I praise those who responded so well, both the emergency services and the students. There are very serious questions to be asked about what happened and why it happened, and I am already asking them.

In three minutes, I will make three points, if I may. Like many Members here today, I represent a lot of British Airways employees who are nothing short of furious, upset and disappointed at how a crisis of no one's making became an industrial relations catastrophe. I have been contacted by constituents who are facing a loss of income of, in some cases, up to 70%. It is not fair to raise the issue without recognising that aviation has been decimated by the pandemic, and that is not of BA's making, but I add my voice to colleagues who have rightly said that it is no way to treat a workforce who have made it one of the most successful airlines in history and the flag carrier for the UK.

Secondly, I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's recent commitment to establishing a Jet Zero Council with the goal of making net zero carbon emissions a reality for flights in the future. We wrote to the Secretary of State in February this year with a decarbonisation roadmap from the organisation Sustainable Aviation—a detailed plan to achieve zero carbon by 2050 by investing in cleaner aircraft, engine technology, smarter flight operations, sustainable aviation fuels and high-quality carbon offsets. Post covid, all those actions remain essential if we are to achieve that ambition.

There are a number of things the Treasury could do to help, but I would suggest that they should be led by some £500 million of Government funding, matched by industry, to support the delivery of sustainable aviation fuel plants in the UK. That means partnership, jobs and building back greener.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Talking of going greener, does my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour know that Southampton airport, which is by our constituencies, needs to extend its runway to enable greener travel and stop constituents travelling to Gatwick and Heathrow? Will he encourage Eastleigh Borough Council to get on and decide? If not, it is time for the Government to issue a special development order to extend that runway.

Steve Brine: Yes. Many of my constituents rely on Southampton airport for their family income, and we have been decimated by the demise of Flybe, as my constituency neighbour knows. I know that he is working hard to get his local council to see some reality and not just be blinded by its ideology. That development is connected with my point about jet zero for exactly the reason that he said. The runway extension at Southampton international airport was already needed, but it is now actually needed to allow the airport to survive full stop.

As a neighbouring MP, I represent the southern parishes in the Winchester district, and we want to see a noise-preferential route, for which Southampton airport

is responsible in its own airspace up to 5,000 metres. That was left out the last time the airport was expanded and had planning permission. I need Southampton airport to understand that I will support it, but it needs to support my constituents too.

British Airways has many questions to answer. I know that BA slots at Heathrow are not in the Government's gift, but I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the debate. Jet zero is something that this Government can be proud of, and I look forward to seeing it develop in the months and years ahead. Air travel and meeting our climate objectives and climate commitments are not incompatible, and we should not fall into the silly trap of seeing them as either/or. Finally, I will work with Southampton airport, but it needs to work with me.

2.45 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank all those who have secured the debate, and I hope colleagues will understand my offering special thanks to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for helping to make it finally happen.

I cannot stress enough the urgency of the situation faced by airline and airport workers in Luton right now. For us, this is for not only our airport but our town's whole economy. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), to his place. I really hope that he takes this opportunity to listen and to act, with his first major act being to save thousands of jobs in Luton and save this vital industry.

The seriousness of the pandemic is an existential threat to our airlines, our airports and the workers who keep them running. People in my constituency who work at airlines such as easyJet and Wizz Air at Luton airport and across the supply chains cannot afford to wait for the Government to carry on dithering on support for the airline industry. As has been stated, it is not just specific sectors but specific areas like Luton that need Government support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and I have been calling for the Government to protect jobs and support our town since March. We have written to Ministers. I have lost count of the number of calls we have been on with industry leaders, workers and trade unions. I have had countless items of correspondence from airline and aviation staff asking what action the Government are prepared to take, and why Governments in France and Germany are supporting their workers but ours are not.

As the furlough scheme comes to an end, our workers face a cliff edge, and they are still wondering what happens next. The mixed messages need to end. We need clear, sector-specific support; increased testing, track and trace; and international co-operation, not competition. While the Government promised us that they would do "whatever it takes" to get people in Luton through the crisis, in so many ways, we are still waiting. When I say that I will do whatever it takes, I mean it. I will meet whoever it takes and twist as many arms in Government as I can until they listen to the sector, to Luton, to airline staff and to the trade unions, extend the furlough scheme and protect as many jobs as possible.

At the start of the pandemic, the Conservatives promised Luton that they would do "whatever it takes" to get us through this pandemic. There is still a chance to keep that promise, but the situation is urgent. Time is running out; they cannot wait much longer. The promise to do whatever it takes will be broken, more jobs will be lost and lives will be ruined if action is not taken now. We need to see the Government step up and provide sector-specific support for the industry, for workers and for towns like Luton.

2.48 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), to his place. This is an incredibly important debate for my constituency, as Buckingham is conveniently commutable from Luton airport and Heathrow airport and not too far to commute from Birmingham airport. Many of my constituents who work for airlines and airports have written to me with horror stories about the way they have been treated, particularly by British Airways but also by easyJet.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—the Chairman of the Transport Committee, on which I serve—on securing the debate. Time being short, I will not repeat the arguments made, but I certainly agree with the central premise that, to get aeroplanes in the sky once more, to get people flying and to save this sector, we have to look at increased testing capability.

I very much welcome the £8.5 billion that the Government have already made available to the aviation sector. While we look to save jobs, which is the most important thing, we have to accept that no change is not an option. Anybody who argues for simply no change is probably not going to win that argument. What we must look at most specifically is how we are going to get British Airways, in particular, to change its mind and its attitude to its employees. I add my voice to those of right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken on that subject. Let us focus on the balance sheet of British Airways: the company made a £1.1 billion profit, after tax, last year; it has £2.6 billion in cash reserves; and it has £5.8 billion in shareholder equity. All those facts were detailed in the Select Committee report, and all that is before we get on to the parent company, IAG, and its reserves. So, as BA takes a cold, hard look in the mirror, it could consider, having taken so much furlough money from the British taxpayer, being a little more like Barratt Homes in its approach to taxpayers' money.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I hope that the new chief executive officer of IAG is listening today and has heard so many different voices from across the Chamber. Does my hon. Friend agree that now would be the time for the company to think again and come to a reasonable agreement with its workforce?

Greg Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that British Airways has behaved appallingly throughout this crisis. Covid has brought challenges to every business, of every size, but when we look at some of those balance sheet numbers I just detailed, we see that British Airways really does need to take that cold, hard look in the mirror.

[Greg Smith]

In the minute I have remaining, I wish to talk about a particular issue that has come to my attention.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): You have 39 seconds.

Greg Smith: I will be quick. The issue relates to veterans who joined BA. The scheme that allowed them to leave the armed forces and go to BA is now being abused, in that although it is great news that some BA pilots have been able to go back to BA for secure employment, at the start of this crisis the deal was that they would be able to return to BA on a set date. Half of them now cannot do so, and I encourage BA to look at that again.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are moving on to the wind-ups now, and I have to say that 37 Members have not got in. More have not got in than have got in. Clearly, that is not acceptable, but it shows how popular this debate is. Perhaps one suggestion to make to the Backbench Business Committee is that where it has two debates that have a link, it could hold just one debate, so that more Members can get in. However, that is something for the Committee to look at.

2.52 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Let me, too, start by welcoming the new Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), to his place—if he is listening. He has a fantastic job, albeit an extremely difficult one, because the challenges facing our aviation industry are manifold and unprecedented. Our Committee managed to examine them in depth and detail, even though Members were scattered in spare rooms and at dinner tables around the country. That is a tribute to the Clerks, the staff of the Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who opened the debate so powerfully. I thank them for their generosity and hard work in ensuring that the Committee's report was as thorough as it was. Those challenges facing the industry are not going away, and as the decision to scrap the furlough kicks in over the coming weeks they are just going to get worse. Aviation faces a crisis the likes of which has not been seen since world war two.

As others have, I wish particularly to highlight the fact that regional airports across the UK are facing existential challenges. Too often, aviation policy and debate seem to be driven by the big London airports, particularly Heathrow. The local airports around these isles, such as Glasgow airport, in my constituency, provide not only domestic links, but connectivity to Europe and a world without a stopover in the south-east of England. That connectivity is now under serious threat. Many airports are teetering on the brink, hit by a double whammy of coronavirus and the collapse of Flybe earlier this year. Others still face short-term and long-term challenges that not only threaten their businesses, but risk having a severe impact on other sectors of the economy as well.

There is a real urgency to this issue, and recommendation 9 of the Committee's report urged the Government to commit to complete and publish their

much-heralded regional connectivity review by the end of the year. To say that the Government response is underwhelming is an understatement. It said:

“Workstreams focusing on regional connectivity will continue beyond the publication of the Autumn recovery plan”—

one that is already coming too late for many. The only action in response to the connectivity points was the support for some Northern Irish routes: nothing about support anywhere else in the UK; nothing about increasing use of public service obligations; and, on the review, nothing about a definite timetable, let alone the required acceleration. This simply is not good enough. I ask the new Minister to look at the issue, and to do all he can to bring this forward.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): On regional connectivity, the first airline to fall foul of covid was Flybe. Does my hon. Friend agree that in supporting the Flybe workforce as a result of the pandemic, EY and the Government have been completely neglectful? The workforce have been cast aside and completely ignored throughout this whole experience. They should have had full entitlement to the job retention scheme and should have been protected, because they are essential to the recovery post covid.

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. The Transport Secretary came to the Dispatch Box and said that he had saved Flybe. Furthermore, the Chancellor promised back in March that there would be sector-specific support for the aviation industry. The Secretary of State stood in the same room as me, looked the industry in the eye, and said, “I understand the enormity of what you are facing and this Government will stand by your side.” But where is he? Where are the Government? The loyal workers of British Airways, EasyJet, Menzies Aviation, Swissport and so many others look at their P45s or their shamefully slashed contracts and do not think that the Government have been by their side. What is left of the sector is waiting. As of now we have seen nothing, and, as we have seen, it is the employees who are bearing the brunt.

The Committee also recommended that business rates relief should be extended in England and Wales to aviation businesses. The only sector-specific support for the aviation industry has come from the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive in giving airports and ancillary firms a rates holiday for a year. The Treasury must step up and do the same.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: I will make some progress.

We also looked at problems faced by thousands of customers in their attempts to secure refunds from airlines after cancellations caused by the pandemic. It is unacceptable that airline after airline has decided that the law does not apply to them—although given the example set this week by the Government it is perhaps unsurprising—and tried to evade their legal responsibilities by fobbing customers off with vouchers. While welcoming the recent, belated announcement extending the protections under the ATOL—air travel organisers' licence—scheme, the reprehensible behaviour by some airlines has shown that we need to look at how the system operates and whether we should be keeping passenger fares in trust.

This PR disaster has been confounded by the actions of airlines such as British Airways/IAG. While making full use of Government finance, BA/IAG and its hatchetman-in-chief, Willie Walsh, who has just skipped off into the sunset with an £800,000 bonus pay-off, have sacked 12,000 staff and fired and rehired 30,000 more, with staff forced to take wage cuts of up to 60% and drastically reduced conditions, under threat of being thrown on the dole in the middle of the biggest economic crisis since the war.

We have also seen ground handler Menzies Aviation follow a similar path—this despite, during a phone call with me, assuring me that it absolutely would not be taking this kind of approach: an approach that we said would swiftly be followed by others if the Government refused to act. So it has proven, with blue chip company Centrica/British Gas making the same threats, along with many other companies across the UK. This sort of disreputable and despicable management tactic should be against the law, but is not. I again repeat my call for the Government to get behind my Bill or introduce their own measure to make these bully-boy tactics illegal. But despite the difficulties they cause for advocates like me, an industry should not and cannot be judged on the behaviour of its worst members.

At the start of this period, aviation supported nearly 1 million direct and indirect jobs. For those of us who represent airport constituencies, there is real danger that the flood of redundancies will become a tsunami, with a catastrophic impact on our local and regional economies. The effects on the supply chain are even more devastating when it comes to aerospace companies such as Rolls-Royce. At Inchinnan in my constituency, 700 jobs—over 50% of the workforce—are gone. These were high-skilled, high-value jobs, now lost from our economy, perhaps never to return. I fear for the long-term future of high-level manufacturing like Rolls-Royce if the Government continue to lift not a finger to save jobs and save local communities.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): At the Prestwich aerospace cluster there are 4,000 jobs, and over 10% have already gone. Aviation is a worldwide industry. How the aviation sector in the UK is going to come out of this depends on support from the Government. Other Governments are extending their furlough schemes. Is it not the case that this UK Government need to extend the furlough scheme and invest in sustainable technologies? We need to provide further innovations so that the UK leads the world—leads other countries—and comes out stronger and better.

Gavin Newlands *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Please reply very briefly, because you really do have to sit down at 3 o'clock.

Gavin Newlands: Okay. I recognise that when they are looking at our more successful and dynamic European neighbours, seeing such success is sometimes hard for those on the Government Benches. They must surely admit, however, that at least those countries have a plan that goes further than something scrawled on the back of a fag packet. France and Germany have decided significantly to extend their furlough schemes because it makes economic sense—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we are really constrained by time.

3 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Before I address the debate, and with Mr Speaker's permission, in my capacity as chair of the Co-operative party parliamentary group I want to place on record my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Chris Herries, who passed away during the recess. She served the Co-operative movement with dedication for many years, most recently as chair of the Co-operative party. She was a woman of great character and strength who made a huge contribution, and she will be hugely missed by all in the movement.

I welcome the new Minister to his place, and wish him every success in his endeavours for the industry. I thank Members across the Chamber for what has been a good debate. It has probably been a long time coming, but nevertheless the volume of interest—59 Members, many of whom did not have the chance to speak—shows the strength of feeling about the impact of this issue on local communities.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), the Chair of the Transport Committee—the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place; part of me wonders why the Government did not use their own time to allow it to take place a little sooner. I also thank the trade union movement—Unite, GMB, the British Airline Pilots' Association, and others—for giving a voice to workers in the industry during a difficult time. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) for his leadership in giving detailed support to the sector on our behalf.

We have heard about a number of concerns that the Government need to address. First, the impact on jobs has been significant. We heard about that impact in the opening speeches, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). We heard about it from the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and the former Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). I hope he takes this in a good spirit, but if the current Transport Secretary is being given advice on performance from the former Transport Secretary, I would say we are in pretty grim territory. With respect, the issue of literally ordering ferries that did not exist gives me a bit of room to say that.

This is a serious issue, and for so long Members have been crying out for concerted Government action to ensure that further job losses do not take hold. I am afraid, however, that the Government have been found wanting, because a lot of this was entirely avoidable. We heard in a powerful way about the impact on our regional economies if action is not taken. My hon. Friends the Members for Caerphilly (Wayne David), for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) and for Luton North (Sarah Owen) are all profoundly rooted in their communities, and they fully understand the impact of these job cuts.

[*Jim McMahon*]

We heard from Members across the House the strength of feeling about British Airways and the way it is treating its workforce. I wondered whether some Government Members were becoming trade union officials at some points during the debate, and it was a pleasure to hear that unity. Such behaviour has been outrageous, with loyal staff with decades of service being treated in such a way—that point was made powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine).

It stands out that England and Wales have not been given the resource to provide business rates relief to airports, as has happened in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Government should consider that—they should consider all options—and we must ensure that local authorities in those areas, particularly where there are rates retention schemes, are fully compensated for any intervention that may follow. That is critical.

Why is this sector important? It brings £22 billion a year into the economy. It is a critical part of the fabric of our economy. It supports 1.6 million jobs. We have all seen the impact of the cuts and what they have meant for staff: 4,500 jobs at easyJet; bases closing at Newcastle, Stansted and Southend; 12,000 jobs at British Airways; 3,000 jobs at Ryanair; and 4,500 jobs at Virgin Atlantic. The list goes on, including through the supply chain at Airbus and GE in south Wales. How many more? The warning signs are there.

We all knew that aviation would be profoundly affected, particularly because of its high operating costs and seasonality—and, of course, the quarantine measures that have been brought in. It will take longer to recover as a result, so in that context, why not extend the support? It makes complete sense, not least because the sector will be critical to our recovery. This country cannot get back to economic health if we erode the foundations of our economy. It is not that difficult to understand: we need action and certainty.

I do wonder, in respect of those who have already been given notice of redundancy: had the Chancellor given more confidence by declaring much earlier that he would extend the furlough scheme, would fewer people have been made redundant? A lot of this is about confidence and how long it can be sustained, given the quarantine uncertainty and the lack of sustained financial support. And it could get worse: some estimates put the potential job losses at 124,000. That is a significant impact.

It appears that everybody is calling for a sector deal for aviation—including, by the way, the Chancellor. It was not so long ago that the Chancellor reflected that the Government would have to make such an intervention. I am sure the conversation was had around the Cabinet table. So where is the plan that we all—including the industry—were expecting, to capture all this into a sector deal?

On the funding that has been given to airline operators, why has there not been the conditionality to protect the loyal workforce? It is on the record, in the response to my written question that was published on 3 September: there was no protection for the workforce.

Why have the Government not done more to protect the staff at British Airways? Significant public money has gone into BA, but there is silence on the Government

Benches. Why did the Government give £600 million to easyJet while turning a blind eye to £174 million being paid out in shareholder dividends—and when? When the virus was at its peak. Imagine saying there is no money and coming cap in hand, but paying out that amount in dividends. Where were the conditions to protect our environment and lead the charge to reduce carbon emissions? None of this is good enough. We need better and more concerted action from the Government.

And all that comes before we get on to quarantine. Before quarantine was introduced, more than 20 million passengers came into this country without any restrictions in place whatsoever. We were one of the last countries in the world to introduce either partial or full restrictions. Then, almost as a knee-jerk action, we saw the introduction of a 14-day, blunt-tool quarantine with almost no notice, causing absolute devastation to an industry already on its knees.

We were then promised air bridges. The idea of an air bridge is that two countries have an agreement about passenger transfer from one to the other. We did not get that: half the countries on the list had restrictions on British passengers on arrival. That is not an air bridge. This is why there was confusion: people were literally booking holidays only to discover that they would have to quarantine in the other country, potentially for 14 days.

There is now a refusal to take action on a pragmatic suggestion to have testing at airports, obviously with a test five days afterwards to make sure that the risk is captured. It will never be about one intervention by itself, so it is not good enough to say, “Well, you’ll only capture this percentage at the airport, and that wouldn’t be enough”; it is about the range of interventions that, taken together, put this country in the best possible position.

The Government need to do more. There will be more job losses if they do not take concerted action and have a coherent plan. A new Minister is in place now—step up to the plate, please.

3.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): May I start by congratulating the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), on securing this debate on the unprecedented challenges that the aviation sector faces as a result of the covid-19 pandemic? I also wish to thank everyone in the sector who has worked so hard to keep vital services running throughout—a sentiment that I am sure is shared by all Members across the House.

I hope that the House will indulge me if I say what an honour it is to represent the aviation and maritime sectors in government. Both sectors have a long and proud history, demonstrating the strength of the UK at home and abroad. It is also somewhat intimidating, and perhaps a little impertinent, as a new Minister with one complete day’s experience in office, to respond to a debate of such knowledge and passion. We have heard from a former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May); a former Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member

for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling); a former Aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard); a former Maritime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani); a former Health Minister; no fewer than two Transport Committee Chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle and the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood); and a great number of right hon. and hon. Members who have strong constituency interests and expertise. I am conscious that not all of those Members could be called to speak today, but they bring vast experience.

Heathrow alone has mobilised a large cadre of support from my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), the hon. Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), and my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey).

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) represents three airports. He also made a very good point about veterans, which I have heard. We also have the huge experience of my deeply respected hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who spoke on behalf of Gatwick. Southampton airport has been represented by my hon. Friends the Members for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) and for Winchester (Steve Brine). Exeter airport was ably represented by my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp), who has made a huge impact in a short time. Luton airport was represented by the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). Newquay airport was represented by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). Southend and Birmingham airports would have been spoken about, had time allowed, as would Glasgow airport, by the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands).

An enormous amount of regional expertise has been brought to the House today. In fact, the House even managed to bring a pilot into the debate, in the shape of my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell), who brings even more expertise. The House has brought out the big guns today, as we heard in powerful speeches as we considered the importance of aviation to the UK.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Robert Courts: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I hope the House will understand that I have a great deal to get through and will not be able to give way many times.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the Minister and am pleased to see him in his place; I know that he has the experience and interest to take things forward in the way that we need. This might be the first request he has heard, but would he be prepared to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and me as soon as possible to discuss the importance of the aerospace industry in Northern Ireland?

Robert Courts: Yes, I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and other honourable colleagues; indeed, I look forward to engaging with Members from across the House on this vital sector. He does very well to

remind me of the importance of the aerospace sector, which hopefully I will come to in a moment, and regional connectivity, which I will also comment on.

As Members are aware, this is an incredibly challenging time for the crucial aviation sector. It underpins our economy by unlocking trade, investment and tourism, and it provides regional connectivity, but it has been badly impacted by covid. The Government are clear that aviation will recover and will play a crucial role in driving our economy forward. We are helping it to do that by supporting it through the crisis.

The steps that the Government have taken have been truly unprecedented and have enabled airlines, airports and ground handlers to benefit from a very significant amount of taxpayer support. These measures include the Bank of England's covid corporate financing facility, which has enabled the sector to draw down £1.8 billion in support, helping airlines' liquidity, and the coronavirus job retention scheme, which has seen the passenger and air freight transport sectors benefiting from £283 million of support, with 56,400 staff furloughed. These support measures, as well as the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, have all been available to the sector. Members will be mindful that I cannot comment on any commercially confidential matters relating to individual companies, but I can remind the House that the Government have been clear that we have always considered providing support to strategically important companies that can reasonably be expected to have a long-term viable future and whose failure or distress would cause disproportionate harm to the UK economy or society.

The support that the Government have provided has gone far beyond financial. In addition to the unprecedented cross-economy package of support that the aviation sector has utilised extensively, we have put in place several other practical measures to help the sector. In June, we published safer air travel guidance for passengers and operators, providing information that enables passengers to travel confidently by following the recommended measures to keep themselves and others safe. We have ensured connectivity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. We have protected consumers and supported the sector by confirming that we will stand behind the air travel trust fund.

The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston asked what the engagement unit has done. Well, I will tell her: we were the first country to produce safer travel guidelines for passengers and operators; we have introduced a unique travel corridor system to support the reopening of the sector while other countries kept their borders closed; we and the unit are continuing to work to establish options for possible testing approaches, ensuring that the health of the country is protected while supporting the sector's recovery; and we have continued to work with the Civil Aviation Authority on regulatory easing during this unprecedented situation.

As we have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) and for North West Durham (Mr Holden) and the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), these are also challenging times for the aerospace sector. The Government will be providing the sector with more than £8.5 billion of support over the next three years through the covid corporate financing facility. I am particularly aware of

[Robert Courts]

the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) about job losses from Rolls-Royce in their constituencies. We have heard a great deal about job losses and redundancies.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Courts: I am so sorry, but I am short of time; I would give way if I could.

The Government do understand the scale of adjustment that the aviation sector has had to make and the tough commercial decisions that companies have faced, including redundancies. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Beaconsfield, for Bracknell (James Sunderland) and for Winchester and the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on this issue. The impact of redundancies on employees and their families is serious. As Aviation Minister, I expect companies to approach these matters sensitively, remembering the dedication and professionalism that their employees have shown over many years, as the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) quite rightly made clear; we have all met such employees in our constituencies. I commit to working openly with all sectors, as I hope companies will commit to working openly with their workforces to resolve these matters. I encourage companies to go beyond the minimum legal obligations at this time, and will be offering my support.

There are a number of things that I would like to speak about but cannot because I am out of time, including border health measures, travel corridors and testing. I apologise for not having given way to Members owing to the amount that I have had to say. I will conclude briefly by simply saying that the Government remain committed to working with the sector to ensure that this country remains the aviation nation.

3.18 pm

Huw Merriman: On behalf of myself and the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who

have spoken with such passion and determination for the aviation sector. I particularly thank all those who have waited so patiently after putting in to speak but have not been able to. It is incredibly frustrating that an aviation sector worth £28 billion to our economy that employs 230,000 people directly and over 1 million through the supply chain does not get more than two hours of debate in which we can show our concern, but I do hope that those voices have been heard.

I welcome the views, determination and commitment of the Minister and the Government to stand by the aviation sector. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead and I want to ensure that there is a collaborative approach, whereby we work with the Government to truly see better times ahead for the aviation sector.

I also thank all the amazing workforce members who have got in touch with the Transport Committee. They are the kindest, most loyal people and workforce that I have ever come across, and they are well represented by their unions.

I want to send a message not just to the Government but to employers. We have used BA as the poster child here, and it is not too late to turn back. There is a new chief executive of BA's parent group, and I say to them: please change your mind and stand by your workforce. Stand up for that great badge on your airliner, which is supposed to demonstrate the best of Britain, and do the best for your workforce.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the aviation sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are now going to suspend very briefly. Once both Dispatch Boxes have been sanitised and the main players are here, we will commence the next debate, and there will be a three-minute limit after the introduction.

3.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Tourism: Covid-19

3.22 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for the tourism industry after the covid-19 lockdown.

Tourism is so much more than just going on our summer holidays. I would like to thank everyone in the Chamber today who is clearly aware of the huge part the tourism industry plays in the whole UK economy, particularly in beautiful coastal communities such as mine in North Devon, where in places it accounts for 60% of jobs and income.

I applied for this debate many weeks before the Chancellor announced his excellent supportive measures on 8 July. The Chancellor acknowledged that the sector accounted for over 2 million jobs and 150,000 businesses, and while we cannot save every job or every business, he did commit to do “whatever it takes”. Indeed, his statement brought a tear to my eye in that so much support was coming forward: £4.6 billion in direct support through the VAT cut and the incredibly successful eat out to help out scheme, on top of the coronavirus job retention scheme, the business rate cut, grants, loans and so forth. There is no doubt that support has been forthcoming, and the three-winter scenario so widely discussed back in May does now seem a dim memory.

With winter now very much on the horizon again, however, has the sector seen enough of a bumper season to be secure through the cold, dark, stormy winter days ahead? Initial data reports suggest not, with spending on national UK tourism down 50% in August 2020 versus August 2019, hotel spending down 63% and even self-catering down 8%, while yesterday’s limit to six people meeting will badly impact tourism businesses dependent on larger gatherings.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Unfortunately, we do not have much time, but I will say this quickly. The council area I represent as the constituency MP is Ards and North Down, and the key core of the economic drive of that council is tourism, which is so important. Does the hon. Lady agree that where such councils have responsibility for the economic drive—and tourism is up there—those councils need help?

Selaine Saxby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

The pandemic has indeed shone a light into many of our economic sectors, highlighting the interconnectivity of so many activities. Indeed, the plight of the aviation sector—the subject of our previous debate—is inextricably linked to the overseas visitors who are most notable by their absence this summer. We need no statistics to know that for many of us here, it is far easier to get across Westminster Bridge now, without having to navigate through crowds of tourists. Overseas visitors normally spend in excess of £28 billion each year visiting our fantastic tourist destinations—more than our normal domestic tourism expenditure. That should start alarm bells ringing about the current situation in our tourism sector.

In Devon, we see over 35 million visitors a year; 11% of the population across the entire county are employed in tourism, and the proportion is much higher in some Devonian constituencies such as mine. Devon

alone estimates its tourism turnover to be down by £1.3 billion this year; nationally, the estimate is over £68 billion. I remember with alarming clarity, as we went into lockdown, despite my self-appointed role as the one-woman tourist board for North Devon in Westminster, calling for my tourism businesses to close their doors. Over 80% of tourism businesses closed, versus 24% of businesses overall; 75% of tourism employees have been furloughed, versus 27% of the working population. The sector was late to reopen, of course, and in many cases has not been able to open even by 50%.

Many sectors have had a difficult summer, and focusing on tourism in this debate is not to belittle the difficult experiences of others. Tourism has seen something of a resurgence, and the sun has come out this summer for some in the industry, much helped by the eat out to help out scheme. Self-catering and holiday parks have reported some great results, and forward bookings look robust. However, as I keep reminding people, winter really does not start until January in Devon. A stormy day at the seaside is worth travelling for, in its own way. I recall with great affection, as a child with my father, getting a soaking at high tide from a huge rogue wave, and I have enjoyed watching a few roar across the Atlantic coast outside my window, even during this summer recess.

Positivity is something we can bring to this debate, and I thank colleagues in all parts of the House who have visited my North Devon constituency this summer. We all have a role to play in boosting our tourist economies by encouraging visitors to come and see what many may have forgotten a British holiday has to offer. After being cooped up for months because of the pandemic, it has reminded many of us of the benefits of wide open spaces, and our beaches and moors have seen huge influxes of visitors; our city and town centres, however, have not. Indoor attractions continue to struggle to approach break-even with social distancing, not to mention the plight of the coach industry, conference and exhibition venues, tour operators, airlines and, unfortunately, many more businesses.

The tourism industry was in good shape before the pandemic, with annual growth over the past five years exceeding 4%; however, it remained plagued by low productivity, with a transient temporary workforce. Because of the nature of those working in it—from young people working a summer job to migrants trying to make ends meet—high staff turnover has hampered the growth of the sector. Hopefully, initiatives such as T-levels and apprenticeships will help more young people to see tourism as a career option and not just a summer job.

The cut in VAT will enable more small independent tourist businesses to stay open into the winter. Many in the industry were campaigning for a VAT cut long before the pandemic, to encourage coastal communities to extend their tourism season rather than close their doors for the winter. Perhaps that VAT remaining in place longer is what we need to help the industry to respond and rebuild.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I know that the Minister—an excellent Minister—is listening carefully. I think that we can all agree that the longer the 5% VAT reduction is kept in place, the more we can sustain and develop our tourism economies as we go into the years ahead.

Selaine Saxby: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We need to agree about what we want the tourism sector to look like in the future, but we must also ensure that it receives the support it needs to still be there when the pandemic is behind us.

The economic hit of the pandemic has further underlined the need to level up our regions. The productivity and attractiveness of beautiful coastal resorts, which we have in abundance in North Devon, are hampered by a lack of infrastructure, particularly broadband. Coastal communities were hit hard at the start of the pandemic by increased unemployment. Of the 20 towns with the highest increase in unemployment from March to April this year, eight are on the south-west peninsula and 18 are coastal communities. But other opportunities open up far more quickly in regions with many other lines of economic activity and more diverse local economies. The deprivation of our coastal communities is well documented, and the hit their tourism industries have taken will only make the situation worse. When we look to level up, I hope we can work to understand how our coastal communities, north and south, operate, and ensure that investment will secure long-lasting improvements in opportunity for our young people.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): We also have lovely coastal communities in north Yorkshire, particularly in the shape of Filey. My hon. Friend talks about postponing the reintroduction of VAT. I absolutely support that, particularly as it will coincide, if it is reintroduced, with the repayment of other amounts to HMRC and the payment of rates that restart. It would really help cash-flow pressures if it were delayed.

Selaine Saxby: Indeed. It is a far more complex issue than me standing here today and asking for more blanket support for the tourism industry.

Destination management organisations and industry bodies are working tirelessly in the background and are well placed to represent the sector. We need our DMOs to be more robust, with a sustainable funding mechanism. We need a clearer strategy, and we need those long-talked-of tourism zones to become a reality. As we leave the EU, we must also look at reducing red tape, with the removal of travel package regulations, for example.

Some of the tourism sector may have been slowly eased off life support this August, but it is not ready to be discharged just yet, as I have illustrated. I hope the ingenuity and creativity displayed by the Treasury and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to date will be replicated in the coming months to give the tourism industry the leg up it so desperately needs to ensure that we can welcome international visitors back, as well as those of us visiting parts of the UK to help out in the coming months.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con) *rose*—

3.31 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I am happy to give way to the right hon. Gentleman, if he has an opportunity to intervene on me.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on obtaining the debate and on how she set out her concerns. Tourism and the visitor economy

are one of the main pillars of the economy and regeneration of Liverpool, my city. This has been the case especially since 2008, when it was European city of culture.

The entire city region's visitor economy is worth more than £5 billion annually. The city region attracted 60 million visitors last year and employs more than 57,000 people. By the start of June, the lockdown and covid had cost the sector in Liverpool alone almost £1 billion, so the hon. Member is right to bring this issue to the Floor of the House. It is not only in our beautiful coastal areas that this has a major effect, so cultural tourism in Liverpool is not just a nice add-on; it is a fundamental part of the economy and the way forward in my city. To illustrate that, almost 50% of business rates revenue in Liverpool comes from the leisure, hospitality, digital, creative and culture sectors, so it is not just our beautiful seaside areas and counties where this is tremendously important.

Many aspects of this industry are likely to be the last to come out of lockdown. Even though the support that the furlough scheme has provided has been very welcome, I have still seen a doubling of unemployment in my constituency during lockdown. There are still 48,500 people furloughed in Liverpool, about one fifth of them in my constituency, and many of those jobs are at risk. They are in the visitor economy and the tourism sector, and will be at risk if furlough ends.

One of my main asks of the Government is this. There are aspects of this industry that simply cannot go back to work or life as normal, such as the events industry and production, including sound and light production, which are huge in my constituency. They cannot go back to normal. The arenas and theatres are not open, and even if they do open, they cannot make money because of social distancing.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I have been a regular visitor to her city over the years, and anyone who goes there will have a wonderful experience. The tour operator and travel agent sectors, both inbound and outbound, conform to exactly what she described. It has not only been difficult for them to conduct business. It was impossible to furlough many members of staff because they had a lot of work to do, taking calls from customers who wanted or needed to cancel bookings. Does she agree that we need to recognise the nuances and differences within the industry, while celebrating the return of visitors to many of our cities, towns and villages?

Maria Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is correct. Some organisations would have furloughed if they did not have so much work to do, not that it was necessarily productive work, in the normal sense, that would make money for the company. He is right to identify that issue.

If I have one ask for the Government, it is not to treat these industries in a one-size-fits-all way. When furlough ends at the end of October, parts of the visitor economy and tourism sector—the things that attract people to Liverpool—will still not be able to go back to business as usual or work at all. These are fundamentally sound businesses. Our events industry is brilliant, and it will be brilliant again when social distancing has gone—it will stand on its own two feet and make money—but it will not be there if the Government do not do something beyond the end of furlough to ensure that these fundamentally sound businesses still exist.

Once gone, these businesses will not come back. Their work will simply be done by other organisations in Europe and elsewhere, and we will lose the advantage that we have in lighting and sound production for gigs and tours. That will not be there any more, and it will not be making money for UK plc. Our visitor and tourism economy will not be able to attract the people it has done from overseas to our shores in future if those industries are not there.

3.36 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this timely and important debate on tourism, and I thank my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), for securing it.

As we all know, tourism has been one of the sectors worst affected by covid-19, and I echo a lot of what my hon. Friend said. Naturally, the sector had to be closed down by the Government because of coronavirus, but it has been hugely economically affected. In the south-west, we have a large tourism sector that supports our region's economy. Job losses will not be limited to hospitality. Significant losses will be felt in the food production and supply chains too, and of course, in rural areas, food, farming and tourism are intricately linked.

Despite an increase in staycations this summer and the help from the Treasury, with the eat out to help out scheme, the furlough scheme and tax holidays, the tourism sector has still suffered huge losses because of covid-19. VisitBritain has collected data from across the country and estimates a minimum loss in revenue of some £68 billion for the tourism sector this year. According to a survey by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in June, 92% of tourism businesses say that their revenue has decreased by more than 50%, and 62% say that they will not be viable businesses within six months. That survey was three months ago, so time is of the essence if we are to ensure that our tourism and hospitality businesses survive the winter. Owing to covid-19 and the lockdown, our hospitality and tourism sector missed out on half the holiday season. Even now, about one third of businesses in our region can only operate at 75% capacity, so viability remains an issue.

So what can we do? The first and most important thing is to maintain the VAT reduction for the tourism and hospitality sector through to Easter next year at the very least, because that will encourage visitors and keep businesses going. The reduction in VAT to 5% has reduced outgoings for our businesses throughout the summer, and I think it best that the Government continue giving that support, to help businesses to plan. Ahead of the autumn Budget, I ask Ministers to lobby the Chancellor to keep VAT at 5%. I also ask the Government to consider extending the business rates holiday beyond April next year. We have a very able and good Tourism Minister, but it will take the tourism industry some years to recover from these losses.

3.39 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Tourism in Wales is a matter for the Welsh Government, but it has always been a valued part of our economy and, as this pandemic has hit us, it lies at the centre of the relationship between England and Wales, particularly north Wales. There has been a trend towards tourism from other

parts of the European Union, but the bulk of tourism in the north is from English tourists—tourists often visiting for the day. Tourists climb our mountains, they swim from our beaches, they ramble on our countryside, and they eat and drink our wonderful Welsh produce. There will always be a welcome for those who come to experience our country responsibly. We have seen some confusion, as the media would have it—confusion over the rules in England on the one hand and the rules in the UK on the other. Responsibility for much of this confusion lies with the media themselves and with the Government in London. The UK Government must be more consistent by making it clearer when they are acting as the Government of England, and I urge the media to follow suit.

Tourism has grown over the decades and we welcome that, but covid has led to a sharp spike in numbers. The effect of a jump in the population of a seaside village from, say, 1,000 to 10,000 is as profound as hundreds of thousands of people heading for Bournemouth or for Brighton. This not only makes it more difficult for local people, but spoils the visitor experience for tourists themselves.

There has been a welcome push for quality in the tourist offering in Wales over the years. This is one of the key steps to our recovery after covid, which is why we as a party are advocating sustainable quality tourism in Wales, respecting our environments and our cultural and linguistic riches. The industry is losing half of its earning capacity this season, so while we welcome the UK Government's decision to provide VAT relief, I urge them to introduce a permanent VAT reduction to 5% for the hospitality industry, which is something that was allowed by the European Union in 2008 and which has been studiously ignored by Chancellors of both main parties ever since. But we need to do a good deal more. Time is short today, so I will say only that devolving real power and resources to support employment is an obvious further step and that it is truly deplorable that the furlough scheme is being withdrawn much, much too early.

3.42 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The great city of Edinburgh, more than most, welcomes people from across the globe. Members will be familiar with our city's wonderful arts festivals, but its year-round reputation attracts visitors all the time. Combined with that, the conference centre stimulates business tourism and, of course, the city is a gateway to the rest of Scotland.

Tourism and hospitality are vital for the city's economy—some 33,000 jobs depend upon it—so it is almost impossible to overstate the harmful effect that the public health restrictions due to the pandemic have had on that sector. Last year, 1.5 million people came through Edinburgh airport in July; this year, the figure was 170,000. Last year, more than 3 million people visited Princes Street in August; this year, it was less than a quarter of that number. Half our hotel rooms were empty this summer. Our visitor attractions were down 90%, and, of course, our venues and theatres remain dark.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a passionate defence of Edinburgh, but he will share my concern that our

[Patricia Gibson]

islands, such as the Isle of Arran and the Isle of Cumbrae, have also suffered particularly badly. Despite my pleas to the Chancellor, the requests for extra help for these islands have gone unanswered. Does he not agree that sometimes support is needed because it is a question of sustainability for our island communities?

Tommy Sheppard: Indeed I do, and I shall come on to that. At the core of this dilemma is the fact that the essence of these industries—hospitality and tourism—is bringing people together. Social distancing is the antithesis of what these industries grew up for, yet they are going to have to try to manage the problem. Everyone understands the necessity and requirement for the guidelines to be enforced, nobody more so than those working in these industries. The question is how we can manage.

We have all seen firms in our cities and towns trying to operate with reduced capacity. I have seen it myself in my constituency. Last month, in Perthshire on a family holiday, I stayed at several hotels and ate at several restaurants, all doing their utmost to conform to the guidelines that are to be enforced and, indeed, taking pride in their ability to keep their customers safe.

Behind the brave faces, however, there is a deep and dark despair. It is the despair that comes from knowing that, at the end of a hard shift, more money has left their bank account than went into it, no matter what they do. The truth is, for pretty much all those businesses, those reduced capacity operations are unviable in the longer term, although they do two things: they postpone the date at which money runs out completely, because they slow the rate of loss; and, more importantly, they retain some jobs, and capacity and expertise in the sector, so that when the restrictions change, they can spring back.

That is why I believe that the No. 1 priority now must be to look at those businesses and see how we can support their reduced capacity operation through to next spring. That means we have to abandon this silly, one-size-fits-all blanket policy that treats all businesses as if they were the same. We need a more sophisticated, more tailored and more targeted approach that works with individual businesses and tries to get them through to a position next spring when they will be no worse off than they are now. Support will also be required beyond that—even if the restrictions are lifted, it will take time for public confidence to return and for the market to get back to where it was at pre-covid levels. We should be planning for two to three years of further support.

It is right that the public purse should do that, because businesses are closed and closing because of public policy and a public imperative. That must be the priority. The Government cannot abandon support on 31 October, stand back and watch the sectors decline.

3.46 pm

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this debate on the tourism industry. It is much needed and most welcome.

I am encouraged by the continued low level of cases of coronavirus in Devon, despite the number of visitors to East Devon, who provided much-needed cash flow into our economy. Exmouth, Budleigh Salterton, Sidmouth,

Ottery Saint Mary and Topsham enjoyed summer safely, with people flocking to East Devon to lap up the sunshine, and to enjoy many culinary delights with a discount, thanks to the eat out to help out scheme from the Chancellor.

In fact, I did not manage to visit as many restaurants as I would have liked, as many were fully booked all week—great news for the businesses and, arguably, my waistline—and 202,000 meals were discounted in East Devon. Speaking to many people who work in hospitality on my travels, I heard that the scheme helped to show the wolf the door and to bolt it shut. I, too, regularly speak with tourism industry leaders, and they tell me that the scheme had an astonishingly good reception from businesses in Devon, some of which were cynical at the start.

Devon is not just famous for food; it is also famous for our beautiful countryside, rolling hills and stunning cliffs. However, our tourism industry still faces a cliff edge that few want to see. It is estimated that about £2.2 billion of anticipated tourism business turnover has been lost in the south-west in the first six months of this year. If we also consider the tourism supply chain, that is a further loss of £468 million to our economy. Business turnover has halved. Only 30% of businesses in the south-west anticipate that they will survive beyond summer 2021. Let us give them hope and optimism, and reassure them that we are on their side every step of the way.

The temporary 5% reduced VAT rate, supporting tourism, hospitality and leisure businesses, comes to an end on 12 January next year. That measure is helping businesses to survive, as they stick to the guidelines and adjust their businesses to keep staff, customers and guests safe. I understand that the Treasury keeps taxes under regular review, and I sincerely hope that it is reviewing this measure and considering an extension. The measures put in place by the Government undoubtedly saved thousands of jobs across the south-west, but sadly our tourism industry is not out of the woods yet, and further support is needed to help it to survive and thrive. We simply cannot afford the alternative.

3.49 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): In 2018, tourism brought in 5.5 million visitors, 3.5 million of whom were from overseas, and with them came £5 billion to the Scottish economy, but I want to look at the heart of the tourism industry: the coach sector—the wheels on which the tourism industry literally runs. Tourists do not come here to see our outstanding airports, vital though they are—and I know they have their own challenges; they come to see our country, and they see it on a coach. The haulage industry is rightly proud that whatever we purchase in a shop, it got there on the back of a lorry, and so is with our tourists. Wherever they go—hotels, visitor centres, theatres and restaurants—they get there by coach, yet the coach industry has received negligible support, especially when that is compared with the billions that the Government have spent on their covid response. And let us not forget that it is coaches that are the first and only port of call when trains disrupt and flights divert. That is a further warning that the Government take this industry for granted at their peril.

Many coach operators are family enterprises, not run for vast profit or easy money, but instead reinvesting in the long term in their fleets and their drivers.

Jim Shannon: One of the important things about the coach companies is that many of them are family owned. There are three or four in my constituency and they are all family owned. The impact on those families has been dire, so does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is where the help is needed?

Dave Doogan: I agree entirely with the hon. Member. The nature of the business is absolutely exceptional, with its organic growth and investing to ensure that passengers get absolutely the best experience. These businesses have paid handsomely into the Exchequer for decades, while never troubling the taxpayer for Government support. These are the businesses that the Government must now stand behind—if not for them, then for the 40,000 people employed in the coach sector. And if not for them, then for the £14 billion generated for the UK Exchequer every year by the sector. There is nowhere left for the Government to hide on this issue.

I would like to share with the Minister the example of one such company in my constituency, Black's of Brechin. It has been family owned across the generations, proudly operating a modern fleet of luxury coaches that reflect very well on our outstanding tourist offer in Angus and more widely across Scotland. The managing director, Robert Black, was the first Angus business representative to contact me at the start of the pandemic. Black's is a business with a focus not only on daily operations but on the strategic, looking for the threats and opportunities lying ahead. Not long after that phone call, all opportunity for Black's of Brechin and every other coach operator up and down these islands evaporated, being replaced by overwhelming risk.

With lockdown, tourism stopped overnight. There were mass cancellations of coach tours, wedding hires, golf trips and football hires. Every single booking was cancelled, and although the tourism market theoretically reopened in July, that will not facilitate a recovery for the coach sector any time soon. What Robert Black said to me in that phone call in March has come to pass. He said that the coach industry would be the first to be hit, that it would be one of the hardest hit, and that it would likely be the last to recover. I would add that without Government support, many operators will almost certainly not recover, although, as we have heard, these are viable businesses. There is scarce time left to save the coach sector. The industry is in the midst of an 18 to 24-month winter, and furlough is due to end in the coming weeks. The Government told us that they would do "whatever it takes". The fiscal levers rest here in Westminster, and the Government must act now.

3.53 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this debate.

The hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) will be pleased to know that I am going to speak on the same theme. What is tourism? The word "tour" comes from the Old French, meaning "round" or "circuit". In essence, to tour means to complete a round trip—to visit and then return. Modern tourism, with the traveller in pursuit of recreation, naturally involves a round trip. A round trip needs transport, and transport needs infrastructure and vehicles.

County Durham and Sedgefield include the birthplace of public transport itself, in the form of the first passenger railway in the world. Locomotion No. 1 is the first and oldest passenger train in the world, and it still rightfully resides next to me in Darlington. With County Durham giving birth to rail travel, dare I say that we also gave birth to the possibility of widespread tourism and the great British tradition of the staycation? In the current climate, I encourage all to revisit this tradition, and invite you to come and enjoy the wealth of what Sedgefield and County Durham have to offer, including preparations for the bicentenary of the Darlington to Stockton railway, which was the first passenger railway in the world, as I said.

My constituents also like to travel elsewhere and need the means to do that. We need to make a concerted effort to retain and enhance our travel infrastructure and to allow the industry to recover and grow. We need to keep up the momentum that covid has threatened to slow. On this topic, I must mention Ferryhill station, the two words I probably mention most in the Chamber. Rebuilding stations such as Ferryhill will support the sector and, following covid-19, provide much-needed momentum for the future, but that is in the medium term.

In the short term, I would like to highlight the problems of coach travel, one of the more immediate fixes that the tourist industry needs. Ninety-eight per cent. of coaches that would normally be on the road this summer were mothballed owing to a lack of demand. One coach operator, which normally carries 40,000 passengers, carried 200. Mr Neville Jones of J&C Coaches, a family-run business in Newton Aycliffe in my constituency, is illustrative of so many coach operators across Britain. The company has also suffered because of the closed schools—it provides the same service to them. Coach operators are the glue that holds the tourist industry together. They are vital to the local, national and international tourist markets. They get us to Durham, to Devon, to cruises, to flights—and even to Angus.

The Confederation of Passenger Transport, the trade association for coaches, has made recommendations to potentially buffer the effect on the sector, and I encourage Government action in consideration of the following: extending finance holidays to ensure that no coaches are repossessed; grouping the coach travel sector with the leisure sector to give it better support; and providing protection to those families whose livelihoods rely on coach travel. There needs to be a moratorium on lenders seeking to repossess family homes.

Although I have talked specifically about coach travel in Sedgefield, I am sure we can agree that it is important to the whole country. Coaches need to be supported to help British tourism. Without coaches, tourism is devastated.

3.57 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to be called in today's debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thirty thousand people in York work in the hospitality, tourism and leisure sector. That is one in four jobs in my constituency, and we are really worried about the impact that this virus has had on our local economy, for obvious reasons, and particularly on the small and independent sector. Normally, we would see 8 million visitors come to enjoy York, and it is understandable why that is—whether it is indoors or out, visiting the minster, the museums or visitor other

[*Rachael Maskell*]

attractions, taking part in the small independent retail offer that we have, walking the walls of the city, enjoying the green spaces, or simply wandering through the medieval streets or around the snickets. But with covid-19, our streets became silent and doors shut, and many have yet to open. Of course, this was just at a time when our city was picking up from the floods. Our city describes this as entering into our third winter in a row, and we desperately need help now.

I have three requests for the Minister. First, the reputation of our city will be built on our city being safe, and that is why we need an excellent test and trace system in York. I ask him to make representations to the Department of Health and Social Care for our city to have a walk-in centre for testing. It would be a game-changer for tourism, because we cannot expect visitors who come in by train to then go out to a drive-in centre for testing. We also know that many people in our city will want to get out again quickly, so I ask not only for a walk-in centre, but that we become a pilot for the rapid tests that are to be introduced.

Secondly, there is the issue of furlough. Yes, we did debate it yesterday, but it seems that a bit more persuasion is needed. We absolutely need furlough to be extended. Currently, in my constituency alone, 17,700 people are furloughed. They are facing a cliff edge unless there is further support. When Government Members say, "How long?", I would say to the Minister: let us extend and then review. Let us extend it beyond Christmas and review it in the new year, and then take it forward from there. We do not know what is going to happen over the next few months. There could be a national lockdown or local lockdowns. Perhaps the virus will die out. Perhaps the vaccine will arrive. Therefore, let us take this step by step as we go.

Thirdly, I ask the Minister to meet tourism leaders in my city to understand the rescue package we need, because this recovery is going to take time. So much money has been lost from the sector to date, and we really want to make sure that we are a success going forward. If he would be so kind to do that, I am sure our sector leaders would really engage with him and help him to put the right package together for the future.

4 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing the debate. Since her election in December, and throughout the pandemic, she has consistently spoken up for the tourism sector, securing guidance and support. I commend her for her efforts.

I understand the value of tourism, having grown up in New Zealand, a country that remade itself in the 1980s and '90s by making tourism its biggest export—apart from the All Blacks, of course. The history of tourism in this country, however, goes back much further and has been a hugely successful part of our economy. British culture has an extensive reach around the world. In 2018, 37.9 million people came from abroad and spent £22.9 billion to experience that culture and history first-hand. Very sadly, covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown have had an inevitable impact on our tourism sector. I welcome measures taken by the Government to

help to mitigate that impact, most notably the business grants in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors; the business rates holiday for 12 months; the tax deferral scheme; cutting VAT from 20% to 5% until January 2021; and the enormous success of the eat out to help out scheme, which has been a lifesaver for many businesses in the tourism sector. I recognise the calls from colleagues across the House to extend the VAT cut, and I join them in that call.

The cultural rescue package put together by the Government, worth £1.57 billion and delivered through local community funds and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, has made a difference to the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre and the Watts Gallery in Guildford. Guildford may be renowned for its history, culture and heritage assets, but there are also wonderful family-friendly activities, with the Surrey County Show, the biggest agricultural event in the south-east, Wild Wood Adventure and swimming in the Guildford Lido, as well as stunning walks along the North Downs Way. Cranleigh, to the south, has made adaptations to part of its wonderful village high street, with outdoor eating displays alongside its famous attraction of independent shops, which have made it a truly enjoyable summer for visitors and locals alike. I hope that some of those innovations will continue into the future.

We have just had an amazing August bank holiday bonanza weekend in Guildford, where retailers saw their best ever trade since lockdown. I would like to put on record my thanks for the enormous energy of Stuart Alexander of Big Mouth Guildford, working in conjunction with Amanda Masters of Experience Guildford, Guildford Borough Council and the local radio station, Kane FM. The work that residents do to support local businesses and make our tourism destinations vibrant to ensure success beyond this global pandemic is truly heart-warming and encouraging. The partnership between Government and our community is vital for our future success.

In conclusion, as someone who came to live in this fantastic country over two decades ago and who understands what draws those from overseas to this green and pleasant land, I can say with confidence that as we come out of the global pandemic we will see a revitalisation of our tourism sector.

4.3 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): There are so many things that draw visitors from around the world to Bath. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the Roman Baths and Pump Room, and the Herschel Museum. Between them, they have recently won three of Visit England's 19 annual awards of excellence. We welcome 6.5 million visitors a year and employ approximately 9,000 people in tourism-related businesses. Covid-19, however, has been catastrophic for our local industry not just nationally, but globally. In Bath alone, the loss to the visitor economy in 2020 is estimated to be about £350 million. Our local authority has been particularly exposed to the financial impact of the pandemic. Tourist attractions are a large source of income for our council and it means less money for vital services for our residents.

Locally, we have had conversations about diversifying our economy and making it more resilient in the longer term, but businesses in this sector need urgent support

now to make sure they survive. Organisations such as the Bath Preservation Trust are working hard to safely reopen their venues, but they have to operate at a significantly reduced capacity. Reopening will barely be viable. It is a great shame that the Bath Christmas market will not go ahead this year. Visit Bath, Bath BID and Bath Festivals are working on an exciting programme of events to hold instead. It is great to see organisations looking at innovative ways to safely support our local economy. However, with many seasonal events postponed, this off-peak time will still be a big challenge. Destination management organisations will be essential in rebuilding confidence in the tourism industry. They provide crucial support for local businesses, including through marketing. They will be crucial in the recovery of the wider tourism economy, but they are very vulnerable now and they, too, need urgent support.

I must draw attention to the difficulties faced by the English language teaching centres, of which there are several in my constituency. For students at those schools, visiting the UK is about far more than learning English; it is a cultural experience. They stay with local families and they visit our attractions. More than 500,000 ELT students bring £1.4 billion to the UK economy annually, and that important industry anticipates that it will lose more than 80% of this year's business. I urge the Government to listen to the industry's call for short-term support by including ELT in the business rates holiday and supporting the Study UK campaign.

Bath brings so much to the south-west and the wider economy, and I look forward to working with the Minister to provide further support to this vital industry.

4.5 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing the debate. She and I and all members of the Devon community have been working together over the past six months to ensure that tourism and hospitality have a strong voice in this place. Groups such as the Devon economic recovery organisation are looking forward to supporting the sector further as we go into a troubling winter and 2021.

For many businesses across my constituency, it has been a successful summer, but one in which they faced great difficulties. Huge demand in areas such as Salcombe, Dartmouth, Brixham and Paignton has led to residents being faced with people visiting being rude, and trying to escape covid in certain cases. That is not acceptable, but those who work in our sector have been true heroes in trying to regain their losses from the lockdown, restore confidence in their sector and make sure they can see a path forward through this winter.

A few months ago, we put together a letter calling for the Government to cut VAT to 5% for tourism and hospitality, and I am delighted that the Government listened. I am also delighted that so many Members across the House have supported the calls for a continuation of VAT at 5%. That will provide the necessary breathing space for so many of those businesses. It will give them the chance to get through this winter and face 2021 with a great deal more cash in their bank account, but also the understanding that the Government are on their side.

The other suggestion that I want to make, which has been mentioned by a few Members across the House, is that should VisitBritain be rebranded from a worldwide

campaign to a new domestic campaign that will promote domestic tourism. We have great things on offer across the country, and we should be highlighting what they can provide for our own residents and citizens.

The third point I would like to touch on is flexibility between the rural and urban sectors of tourism. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) will touch on the issue, but there is a great distinction between rural and urban tourism, and there needs to be flexibility in how we engage and support those sectors. That is a call not just for more money, but for an understanding of how those sectors work and how we can support them as new measures come in around social distancing or as this virus plays out over the winter.

The hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) touched on transport and coaches and all that, but we must also look at how we can improve transport. The Government are improving local and rural transport links, and that can also encourage a drive in domestic tourism. Easier access to rail and more ability to get to those communities across our country should give us the ability to draw more demand.

This sceptred isle set in a sea of silver will surely welcome people back in the future, and I look forward to our communities all working together to drive such demands.

4.8 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I, too, add my congratulations to the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this important debate. The domestic tourism sector is what I want to concentrate on this afternoon. I tend to view it as a network of distinct micro-economies mutually supportive of each other. Just in Warwick and Leamington some 4,000 people are employed in the sector, and in south Warwickshire the number is 13,000. That accounts for three quarters of a billion pounds in GDP, so it is a significant contribution to our local economy.

We have in the constituency Warwick castle, which is clearly a destination of choice—perhaps preferable to other castles in the north of the country where certain people choose to go. I campaigned for its reopening back in June because it was being held back by legislation that was preventing the operation of its food and beverage outlets. Fortunately, the Government and local authority saw the sense in allowing the castle to reopen, but it lost half its key trading period and is now operating at 60% of capacity.

Nearby, we have the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford, which is not in my constituency but is mutually supportive of the local microeconomy. The RSC has really struggled, losing 75% of its income. Most worrying of all is that it now has to face going into a formal consultation with its staff and the unions from October.

I mentioned the local economic system or ecosystem; both the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan), and the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) mentioned the coach industry, which lubricates the tourist sector. I spoke to Riddleys, which is based in Warwick. Some 75% of its business was in the touring sector; it has now had to switch to providing services for schools. Riddleys has been lucky—other coach companies have gone to the wall—but the staff there are really angry because they

[Matt Western]

do not see any consistency from the Government. Why is it that 300 people can get on an aeroplane and sit cheek by jowl for three hours, but people cannot get on a coach and do the same thing? I urge the Government to revisit that issue urgently; it would be one of the simplest things they could do to support the industry.

In summary, I would like to see more targeted support—specifically, the extension of the furlough scheme—and I urge the Government, as have others in the Chamber, to extend the VAT cut beyond January next year. In fact, I ask the Government to consider a permanent VAT cut, sitting at 10% going forward. That is the sort of thing that could underpin the tourist and hospitality sector for the future.

4.11 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on having secured this debate. I offer my apologies: I have been scrutinising the Fisheries Bill, but look forward to reading her speech and the speeches of others in *Hansard* tomorrow.

Tourism is a vital part of west Norfolk's economy, with visitors coming to enjoy our wonderful coastline, countryside, heritage, food attractions, drink and a lot more. The local visitor economy is worth around £500 million, with tourism and related jobs making up a fifth of all employment. Last year, 2019, was a record year for tourism in Norfolk, and this was meant to be another year of growth, but the covid lockdown has hit the area hard and had a disproportionate impact among young people, who hold around a third of the travel and tourism jobs in the sector, compared with just 12% of jobs more generally.

My constituents are grateful for the bold package of support that the Government put in place for tourism and hospitality businesses; it provided a lifeline and desperately needed cash flow. Despite firms being able to trade in the late summer, that has not mitigated the time when they had no income—especially as 70% of business activity normally takes place between April and October. My hon. Friend the Minister, who is a great champion of the sector, knows that the business rates holiday and the cut in VAT have been warmly welcomed. I join others who have spoken today in support of the calls from the sector to extend both those measures to help to boost it.

As well as fiscal measures, one of the best things we can do to encourage people to support tourism is to have staycations and visit coastal and rural areas. I was pleased and delighted when the Prime Minister, in this House, encouraged people to come to sunny Hunny for their staycation. I took his advice and had a lovely week in a camper van, going around my constituency—including Hunstanton, Brancaster and Burnham—and enjoying the wildlife, pubs, historic King's Lynn and all that it has to offer.

My hon. Friend the Minister will know from his visit to Norfolk—I invite him to venture into west Norfolk next time—that all the local authorities and marketing organisations are working together for the first time on the Unexplored England campaign, to boost this season and encourage bookings for next year. The extension of the all-year-round economy and off-season experiences,

and the reduction of the reliance on peak months, are all key to driving productivity and growth.

In addition to encouraging visitors, we should do all we can to reduce red tape, so I support the calls from Deepdale Backpackers & Camping in my constituency to waive or extend the 28-day farmland rule to provide more flexibility to take advantage of the home tourism market.

Finally, we need to look to the future, and a significant opportunity is to become one of the new tourism zones. Norfolk and Suffolk should be at the front of the queue, with much work having been done by Visit East of England. Our pitch will focus on being the most sustainable tourism destination, with a strong sector skills offer for young people. I will be championing that bid, and I look forward to discussing it with this and other Ministers.

4.14 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I apologise for not having been here for most of the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker; I have been trying to multi-task today and have been failing miserably.

I wish to pick up the point made by the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) about the reduced VAT rate, as I, along with many others, have been campaigning for that for many years. It is a welcome move, but, as he said, it requires a bit more consideration, with a view to a more open-minded approach from the Treasury to see it extended. I believe it is due to run until January or February of next year, but we are talking about people who have come out of six months of winter into spring of this year, when they were earning very little, and then been closed down for most of what would be their economically productive season. Accordingly, they simply have not opened up and they will be going back into their quiet season again, with a view to going back into their full productive effort around Easter next year, by which time the benefit of a reduced VAT rate is not going to be there for them.

I also say to Treasury Ministers, through the Minister on the Front Bench, that one of their objections to a reduced VAT rate for the visitor economy over the years has always been that they do not think it would have the effect on the tax take that is claimed for it. After a significant period at the reduced rate, if it is extended beyond that which we have at the moment, we will have reliable data that should settle that question once and for all. The case for a continuation of the VAT reduction period is strong.

As the local economy in the Northern Isles was opening up over the summer months, I was able to go out, and as the visitor economy is so important for us, I took time to talk to hoteliers. The thing that came across to me loud and clear was their frustration at having no control over so many of the things they need to rebuild their businesses and get money back into our community.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): As an MP for an island constituency, like me, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the financial packages provided by this Government are particularly important for island and coastal communities?

Mr Carmichael: They are absolutely important for island and coastal communities, because there are so many different ways in which we do not control our own destiny. I talked to hoteliers at the north end of Shetland, one of whom was particularly frustrated because they had had so many group bookings cancelled—NorthLink Ferries had cancelled the bookings from the tour companies themselves. That Government-provided service should be running for the benefit of the community, but, for reasons that were perhaps understandable but which came without the necessary consultation, these people had been left without the proper control. As we begin to rebuild the visitor economy, in the Northern Isles and elsewhere, the one plea I make to Government in London and in Edinburgh is that the communities that rely on the visitor economy should be given the power to do that for themselves. They are the people who know best what they need, and they need to be listened to. Give them the tools to rebuild our tourism industry and they will do the job for us.

4.19 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): With the greatest respect, Madam Deputy Speaker, you are an iconic global tourist attraction—we all are. We sit here in the Palace of Westminster, which usually welcomes thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of visitors every year. They are not here, and not here in central London now. That is why I am so delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) has secured this debate, because it is so important. Because I could not go and visit my brother in the States this year, owing to the crisis, I am delighted that I went and spent my holiday in her constituency. I went to Croyde, and to a holiday camp run by that well-known holiday operator, Unison.

Central London is home to hundreds of millions of visitors every year, but they are not here. Over this crisis I have learned how important the ecosystem of the tourism, hospitality, leisure and retail sectors is for central London and across the country. For every £1 spent in theatres, another £5 is spent in the local economy. Sadly, theatres remain closed, although I hope we can open them again soon. Other cultural and leisure visitor attractions such as casinos have just opened, and I know that the owners of the Hippodrome and Grosvenor Casinos are delighted with that.

I am delighted by the way the Government have supported those industries and sectors during covid. The outstanding eat out to help out scheme saw 890,000 meals eaten just in Westminster and the City of London. I am delighted that Grosvenor, a huge property estate owner in Mayfair and Belgravia, is now extending that scheme, and supporting small and independent restaurants and cafés in that area throughout this month. We all have a role to play. Westminster Council has just launched its new campaign, Sightsee crowd free, and I urge all Members to get out and enjoy the fantastic sights—there are 62 iconic sights in Westminster alone, let alone in the City of London. Members should enjoy those sights, support the local economy, bring their families, and have a great time. It is so important to support tourism in London and get Londoners out, as well as supporting the amazing attractions.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Nickie Aiken: I will not, if my hon. Friend does not mind.

Finally, I urge everyone to enjoy the special tourist attractions offered by central London, and the whole of London.

4.22 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I apologise to the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and other Members, because my time in the Scottish Affairs Committee prevented me from hearing some of their contributions this afternoon. The tourism industry plays an incredibly important role in my constituency, and every year from March to October, Fife is full of tourists who come to explore its beautiful beaches, the fishing villages of the East Neuk, and towns such as Cupar and St Andrews, the home of golf. Because of the pandemic, all that has been put on hold. Businesses planned and made investments over the winter, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, preparing themselves for a season that never started.

I wish to use my short time this afternoon to highlight a couple of specific cases from my constituency. The first is a small tourism business that operates from St Andrews. It drives golfers and tourists around Fife and all over Scotland from March to October. It employs three tour operators, and received a grant under the self-employment income scheme. When the schemes and grants started, it was all about making it through the summer, and trying to make the most of the rest of the season. In reality, however, there is no business for them. The business relies on Swedish and American tourists, and none of those have come. It is ploughing all its money into getting to March 2021, when hopefully the new tourism season will begin. If the support schemes end, however, it will not make it. It will go out of business. It told me, “It’s people like us who work and pay our taxes, and we will fall through the cracks with no help”.

The second case is a hospitality company that relies heavily on the tourism industry for events. It had difficulty accessing grants, but eventually it received one from the self-employment income scheme. Its staff have been furloughed, but my constituent tells me that the money is almost gone. If funding for the self-employed is not continued, or furlough kept on by some means until events can safely reopen and a portion of staff wages be reimbursed, the company will go down, and people feel as if they do not have a voice. My constituent told me that she had been shrewd all her life and always kept enough money in case something went badly wrong, but that is not enough to keep the business going for 18 months with no income.

I want to highlight the situation faced by the many seasonal workers in my constituency who work in hospitality and other industries, mainly from March to October. They never started their contracts in the first place, and have been left to discover that the safety net of welfare has many, many holes. The messages from all these businesses and many more in North East Fife is clear. These small businesses, their owners and their staff work incredibly hard year in, year out. The Government’s support has so far worked for them—these businesses are still running and their staff are still employed—but they are all clearly saying that unless there is further support for the tourism industry, it will be game over.

4.25 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as a former director of a tourism business that has benefited significantly from the Government's covid interventions. That said, which tourism business has not? As the former managing director of that tourism business, I operated in England, Scotland and Wales—in many of the constituencies represented in the House today—so I know at first hand the existential difficulties that leisure and tourism businesses have gone through during 2020.

Being closed down by the Government in March, at the very lowest ebb of their seasonal cash flow, had countless thousands of domestic tourism businesses, including my own former business, facing the certainty of liquidation in a matter of weeks. Time really mattered. Every Member of the House will recall the desperate pleas for assistance from fundamentally strong businesses at the very edge of a cash flow crisis, but no one at that time could have foreseen how magnificently the Government were going to respond, and how quickly.

The list of Government interventions is literally too long to fit into a short speech, but we all know that they have provided a truly remarkable lifeline to hundreds of thousands of businesses and protected many millions of jobs. Let me mention one intervention in particular: the temporary reduction in VAT to 5% for hospitality and leisure. That one intervention was transformational for the sector's recovery once lockdown was relaxed on 4 July, allowing vital cash flow to remain in businesses. It also demonstrates just how distorting high taxes are on the economy, as a 10% reduction has had such an impact, reminding us all that lower taxation directly stimulates economic growth.

The Government's support measures were designed to protect businesses and employment from the initial economic shock of a V-shaped recession, allowing them to adapt in order to survive and then thrive in the new economic climate. The Government cannot do more than this. I recognise that if a business no longer makes commercial sense in the medium term, they cannot pretend that it does. We cannot pay wages indefinitely for jobs that no longer exist in the real world, but that is not the case for many indoor tourism businesses including coaches, which have been referred to in the debate, English language schools and urban businesses. Can this not be recognised?

What we can do when jobs have gone—and what the Government are doing—is to shift economic assistance towards new employment and training, including in tourism. The kickstart project does exactly that. I have visited a business in my constituency that is already looking to take on 50 kickstarters. This will be a fantastic project that will work really well for the domestic tourism businesses.

4.28 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I rise to speak in support of many tourism organisations in the wonderful city of Glasgow, which I am so proud to represent. There have been real challenges for many cultural organisations in the city, not least Glasgow Life, the arm's-length organisation of Glasgow City Council that runs our art galleries, museums and sports

facilities. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and the Riverside Museum in my constituency, which have only just reopened, are only able to open on a limited basis and people have to book, so they are really struggling to make the money they need to keep going. Glasgow Life has seen a loss of around £12 million since March. I urge the UK Government to be clear about the Barnett consequential from the Housing, Communities and Local Government measures that were put in place for England, so that Scotland can see if it can get a share as well.

Smaller organisations such as the Sharmanka Kinetic theatre, the Trongate and Glasgow Police Museum have been able to keep going but their numbers are down, and the effect on the wider tourism economy has had an impact on all museums, whether they are large or small.

In Glasgow, we have benefited hugely for many years from event tourism through the Scottish Event Campus in my constituency. We have the fantastic SSE Hydro, a 14,000-seater venue that has been one of the top 10 venues in the world since opening in 2013, with over 140 events a year. Its closure at the moment has an impact on the surrounding area of Finnieston, which has amazing restaurants and bars, and on the hotels within the wider city as well. I understand from the Scottish Tourism Alliance that hotel capacity in Glasgow is sitting at only about 11% for the next few months. People are clearly put off from coming if they do not know what is going to happen and they cannot plan ahead.

The Scottish Event Campus has been hosting the NHS Louisa Jordan hospital over the past few months and has made a great contribution in that regard, but we need to recognise that we are losing out on £136 million a year to the Glasgow economy that the SEC normally brings in through not just music but conferences, exhibitions and other events, bringing half a million visitors per year to Glasgow.

Lastly, I would like to mention the impact on English language summer schools, such as St Andrew's College in my constituency. They are seeing a really serious impact, because lots of young people used to travel to Scotland to attend language schools and cannot do that now. They normally attract approximately 10,000 foreign teenagers and employ 500 temporary staff over the summer period. That has gone for them now, and they are very limited in terms of the support they have been able to have. I make a real plea to the UK Government to look more widely at support for the English language teaching sector, and to make sure that particular measures are put in place for support through the immigration system as well, so that people can come to Glasgow in the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Sally-Ann Hart—for, I am afraid, one minute.

4.31 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to endorse the comments made today about coaches on behalf of the coach companies in Hastings and Rye—Empress Coaches, Rambler Coaches and Nova Bussing. Tourism is very important to Hastings and Rye, but we are now seeing an increase in benefit claims, with over

14,000 individuals on universal credit as from July 2020. I would like to thank the jobcentre staff, who have been heroic in their efforts to support local people.

This Government have given vital support to tourism and tourism-related businesses throughout coronavirus, and many of my constituents are enormously grateful for that, but ongoing support is desperately needed. For example, Hastings normally has a buoyant English language school culture, with thousands of students coming every year to stay with families. As well as language tuition, trips are organised to our amazing tourist attractions, and local businesses such as the ABC Student Tours will struggle. I fear these businesses will not survive, which will have a long-term impact on our local economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson, Drew Hendry.

4.32 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, or is it now Madam Global Icon—I am not sure—given something said earlier?

What a tour we have had around the nations of the UK and the beautiful and haunting tourism destinations we have, and how appropriate therefore—I say, somewhat modestly—that we now land, at the end of that tour, at the best of all: Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey.

The debate has found an awful lot of commonality, and I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing it and giving voice to an industry that desperately needs to have its voice heard at this time. As we have heard from Members around this Chamber, it is facing very specific and difficult circumstances. I hope that the Minister will listen with his ears wide open to the difficulties that it faces owing to the pandemic and the restrictions that have been placed on it. The hon. Lady talked about the Chancellor saying, “whatever it takes”. Well, now is the time for the Chancellor to stand up and do whatever it takes to support the people, businesses and communities that are going to be affected.

As we have heard from Members on both sides of the Chamber, things cannot go back to normal in the short term. We have heard that supporting venues are closed and those streams of income are not available to support many parts of the economy. Specific sector support is required at this time, and there is the threat of the loss of specific skills, from which we may never recover. There will be huge economic effects.

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) talked about the need for responsible tourism. That is a two-way street. We want people to visit our tourism economies and support them, but we also want people to leave them in the beautiful state they found them in, without a repeat of some of the damage and careless behaviour we have seen—I have certainly seen it in my constituency. As he said, it is also important to have clarity on where constituents can get advice when Ministers say in the Chamber that Government advice is meant for England only, not Wales and Scotland.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said, we cannot overstate the harm of the restrictions to the industry or, indeed, the return

of public confidence that we will need to see to support the tourism sector. Several Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan), talked about the unique effect on the coach sector, which needs bespoke support to supply the infrastructure required to move people across the country so that they can enjoy the tourism on offer.

We heard, again and again, calls for the Government to either extend the cut in VAT or make it permanent. There is no excuse for not doing so. We are already one of the most highly taxed countries in the whole European Union. *[Interruption.]* Well, Scotland is a country, and it is highly taxed on VAT. There would be benefits from extending that cut or making it permanent, which I would like to see.

Tourism businesses across our constituencies are tackling the crisis with positivity. They are doing their best, and some are actually doing very well—they are rising to the challenge—but few sectors are directly hit as badly as tourism and hospitality, which effectively face three winters, with only an autumn of a few months in between to sustain them throughout that period. We welcomed the Government borrowing to fund the job retention scheme, but we need it to be extended now more than ever. Businesses will find it more expensive to be open without furlough during those quiet months when they have no bookings than when they were closed during the pandemic restrictions.

There will be a disproportionate effect on low-income families and young people unless some work is done. In Scotland, the Scottish Government have a youth guarantee scheme, but if furlough is not continued and that support will not be there, this Government need to ensure that Scotland has the powers devolved to take action itself, including removing restrictions on borrowing.

The Scottish Government have established a tourism taskforce to guide the industry towards a safe, strong and green recovery. If there is an opportunity here, it is to look at how we can change the industry to make it better for the future. The Scottish Government have introduced two new funding packages worth £15 million, including a hotel recovery programme and grants from VisitScotland for self-catering businesses.

The kickstart scheme is not easily available to small employers, and the geography of a rural economy prevents many from clubbing together to take advantage of it. For those who are employed—especially young people—there are further risks, such as being exposed to exploitation and not receiving a living wage. The UK Government should heed the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) yesterday and urgently provide further support for young people, including a real living wage for those on the scheme.

There is a need to protect the future of this sector and the work within it, especially for young people, and to provide support for those who have been excluded so far and face this winter without the ability to keep themselves going. The Government should seek to convert loans to grants or equity, furlough should be extended, and they should extend or cut VAT permanently. Failure to support businesses and people in this sector will cause lasting harm to the wider economy. If the furlough scheme is wound up, it will show people that they cannot trust this UK Government to protect them when the chips are down. If the Government are not willing to do those things, we must have the full powers

[Drew Hendry]

in Scotland to do them ourselves—or, even better, we must have the full powers of a normal independent country to meet the needs of Scotland's people.

4.39 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to sum up what has been, as such debates often are, a very informative debate. Hon. Members have spoken with great passion about the issues facing their constituencies. I particularly thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), who secured the debate and spoke passionately about the need to support our coastal communities.

The UK tourism industry is the sixth largest in the world. It employs 3.3 million people and generates revenue of £155.4 billion. In this debate, we have toured the nation, and this summer, I myself visited many different parts of our tourism sector to see the impact of covid, the effect of Government support and what additional measures the sector needed. We cannot truly understand the impact unless we have seen it at first hand.

I visited the zoos in London and Knowsley, close to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who made excellent points about reduced capacity first highlighted on my visit to Merseyside, and the zoo in Newquay. I see the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) in his place, but unfortunately we did not reach him. I also visited the Eden Project in his constituency and went paddle boarding on the Fowey.

I visited aquariums in Brighton and Plymouth, Hever castle and Powderham castle, the site of the proposed Eden Project North, in Morecambe, and the winter gardens there. I also went to the Manchester museums and galleries and Crownhill fort in Plymouth. I visited Brighton pier and the i360, and the Van Gogh immersive experience in York, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who made an excellent speech about the need to return confidence to our sector. Although I did not visit Warwick castle this summer, I did visit when I was a child, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) will invite me back again.

I also stayed at the Seven Bays caravan park in north Cornwall, and I am pleased that the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) stayed at Unison's Croyde Bay caravan park. I met hotel, restaurant and bar owners around the country, sometimes in person and sometimes on Zoom. Each had a unique perspective, but all had the same central problem: the huge financial black hole caused by the three-and-a-half-month closure of their organisations and the huge drop in visitor numbers. They all spoke about their fears about the coming winter and their future prospects.

Tourism was always going to be hit hard by a pandemic that meant people had to stay at home. When some of the restrictions were lifted in June, when the sun shone and the newspapers led with photos of bursting beaches and packed-out towns, it seemed to many that summer and the tourism industry underpinning it might just have been spared, but tourism reopened later than any other industry. Despite what the front pages might have

shown, it has been, and still is, operating at severely restricted capacity. The industry might have had an okay August, but it lost Easter, May half term, two bank holidays and the whole of June. Those four months are crucial to the industry. Some 92% of tourism businesses said that their revenue had decreased by more than 50% as a result—a point made by the hon. Members for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), East Devon (Simon Jupp) and Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). This means that the industry is effectively operating through three consecutive winters: the winters of 2019 and 2020 and the winter of coronavirus.

Visit Britain has forecast that tourism revenue in 2020 will decrease by £68.8 billion, which equates to a loss of more than 1 million full-time jobs. Including the 300,000 outlying jobs also at risk, the figure is close to 1.35 million—a third of all tourism jobs. That is 1.35 million full-time jobs that could be lost in the sector, 1.35 million people—people with bills, people with families to feed and people who need and want to work, to provide and contribute.

The Chancellor described his choice to end furlough next month as one of the most difficult decisions. I know the Minister, who is always very kind when we talk, is listening diligently, and I ask him to listen to the tourism industry and reconsider the decision to end furlough. The loss of more than 1 million jobs would be devastating, not just for individual families and households, but for the tourism industry and the health of our whole economy.

With much of the tourism industry yet to reopen and the main summer tourism season ending in September, ending the furlough scheme means two things: mass unemployment and mass business closures. It is easy to think about the tourism industry from the perspective of the consumer—we can all imagine ourselves sacrificing our holiday to save lives during a deadly pandemic—but we must remember that tourism means jobs. We know that the UK tourism industry is one of our biggest employers and that it is worth 9% of GDP, but many people do not realise that it is also the largest non-governmental mechanism for transferring wealth from urban to rural and seaside communities—a point made by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams). These rural and seaside economies are important. Coastal tourism, pre covid, was valued at £13.7 billion in England and £17.1 billion in GB. Tourism employs 20% of the workforce in most coastal towns and more than 50% in many, including Newquay, St Ives, Skegness, Mablethorpe, Cleveleys, Whitby and Minehead. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) made the excellent point that the food industry is inextricably linked to the prospects of tourism. Jobs in coastal towns have been disproportionately affected during the pandemic, and covid has cost seaside towns across the country £10.3 billion in lost revenue, according to the National Coastal Tourism Academy. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) correctly made the point that destination management organisations need support to help these economies, and the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) spoke about promoting domestic tourism as a whole.

That is not say that things were rosy for these coastal regions before covid. It is no secret that many seaside towns in Britain have been struggling for many years. Poverty, inequality and deprivation presided over by successive austerity-driven Conservative Governments

have meant that many coastal towns have been in social and economic crisis since long before the pandemic swept ashore. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), when he was in Cornwall, said:

“We need a targeted extension of the furlough scheme for the hardest-hit sectors and proper support in place to help those who are unemployed back into work. People are worried about their job prospects. The Labour Party is focused on fighting for every job and every part of the country.”

He is of course absolutely right. He said that in a coastal town because he and we all know that this must include revitalising our coastal communities, reviving jobs and industries, and diversifying these economies. The current crisis has made it patently clear that that is more urgent than ever.

We cannot discuss tourism in earnest without acknowledging the hospitality industry, one of the key forces powering the UK’s tourism economy. Hotels, pubs and restaurants rely on the tourist trade, and vice versa. Equally, the coach industry that delivers the customers to the hospitality industry has been decimated by this crisis—a point well made by the hon. Members for Angus (Dave Doogan) and for Sedgefield (Paul Howell). While the Chancellor seemingly saved the day with the eat out to help out scheme—and it cannot be denied that the nation ate out with gusto—the fact remains that only half of restaurants are open and two thirds of businesses are still not making a profit. The number of staff furloughed remains similar to the number in July, with 51% of hospitality staff still not back at work in August. Given that over 80% of employees in the tourism industry have been furloughed, compared with 32% of the total UK workforce, it is clear that ending support for everyone at the end of October will be disastrous. It is a one-size-fits-all approach that is destined to fail. We need a targeted extension of the furlough scheme to protect our most vulnerable workers and industries through this critical time. I am pleased that the hon. Members for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) made those points.

As a party, we are also calling for a £1.7 billion hospitality and high streets fightback fund to help tourism and hospitality businesses that are unable to trade fully. We are calling for this because Labour recognises that the Government’s one-size-fits-all approach to jobs risks tourism falling through the cracks. As a minimum, the Government, rather than clawing back the underspend in grants, need to redeploy it to other industries, particularly those struggling in the visitor economy. While the epidemic has dealt a devastating blow to our tourism industry, with a swift and urgent Government intervention there is an opportunity not just for survival but for recovery and growth—an opportunity to limit the long-term impact of covid-19 not just on people’s livelihoods and businesses, but on our towns and our collective heritage and history.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Minister, Nigel Huddleston.

4.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Global icon, global goddess—whatever we need to call you when you are in the Chair, I would never question you.

It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government to today’s important debate as the truncated summer season comes to a close. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing the debate. She has been a great champion for tourism ever since she was elected last year.

I thank all Members from across the House for the constructive and positive tone of the debate, which shows that we can unite. It is a clear demonstration of how important the tourism industry is right across the UK. While tourism is indeed a devolved matter, as mentioned by many Members, I do have good relationships and frequent conversations with my counterparts in the devolved Administrations, and we are very much singing from the same hymn sheet. Owing to time constraints, I might not be able to respond to every question that has been asked, but I will endeavour to have one-on-one conversations outside the Chamber on any issues that I am unable to address today. I am also aware that some hon. Members were unable to speak today. If hon. Members wish to intervene, I will prioritise those who have not yet participated—

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nigel Huddleston: I should have seen that coming. [Laughter.]

Steve Double: It sounded like an invitation. May I first place on the record my thanks to the Minister for all his incredible hard work over the past few months to support the tourism and hospitality sector? He would not want to be outdone by the shadow Minister, so will he come to Cornwall soon? We have heard a lot today about the support that the Government have given the sector, but I also wish to place on the record my thanks to the many businesses in the sector that have played their part in helping us get through the lockdown, particularly those that provided emergency accommodation for homeless people and for key workers who could not go back to their family homes. Will he join me in thanking them?

Nigel Huddleston: Absolutely, and I hope to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency in the next week or so. He makes an important point, because those businesses, despite all the struggles the sector has faced, have stepped up to the plate in so many ways, whether through food distribution, helping local communities or providing accommodation for the homeless. I applaud the sector for all that it has done in these incredibly difficult times.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): There is a particular town in my constituency that has experienced a bit of a tourism boom this year, having gained international fame earlier this summer, so may I extend to the Minister my warmest invitation to visit Barnard Castle and see the best that the north-east has to offer?

Nigel Huddleston: I would be delighted to do so when I visit the north-east in the near future.

At the start of the year, the prospects for the tourism industry, and for all its important sectors—inbound, domestic and outbound—looked very positive. When I took on this role, I was looking forward to yet another

[Nigel Huddleston]

bumper year. Some 41 million visitors travelled to the UK from overseas in 2019, and it looked as if we were going to have 100 million domestic visitors for the first time. The outbound sector, which is a really important part of this economy, was also doing well. But covid had other plans.

The virus is undoubtedly the biggest crisis that the global tourism industry has faced since the second world war. It has had a far greater impact than foot and mouth, 9/11, the financial crisis and the 7/7 bombings. But the Government did act quickly. Many hon. Members have mentioned the interventionist measures that we have constructed, such as the job retention scheme, business rates relief, grants, a variety of loan schemes and many other measures, including support for destination marketing organisations, which are a really important sector that many hon. Member have mentioned today.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): May I place on the record my thanks for everything that you have done for me and for my constituents? I know that you have already visited, but you are very welcome to come back for a Cromer crab sandwich in the near future. I did not get to speak today, but I know that you will take on board many of the initiatives that have been put forward. Can you also spare a thought for the impact that last night's announcements will have on the tourism industry, particularly the effect of the six-person limit on larger holiday lets? Can I finally say—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman has had quite a good intervention. I really have to say to him that it is very important that Members remember to speak through the Chair, so he should not refer to the Minister as "you."

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes some important points, and I am happy to continue the dialogue outside the Chamber, where he can call me anything he likes.

The Government have put in place a number of measures and will of course continue to monitor the situation. In July, as lockdown restrictions began to ease, we wanted to ensure that tourism businesses were in the best position as they began to open. We therefore implemented a whole range of additional measures, such as the VAT cut for tourism, eat out to help out, the Enjoy Summer Safely campaign, the work that VisitBritain has done and its "We're good to go" standard, and of course changing regulations to allow bars, pubs and restaurants to extend on to the pavement and into the street, given the capacity challenges.

The additional arts and culture support package, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) mentioned, is vital to sustain the economy through the support it has given to heritage venues, theatres, museums, galleries and other draws for our tourism economy. Taken together, these measures have helped the tourism sector to reopen and start on the road to recovery, but there is much more to do.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): To fuel that road to recovery, will the Minister give favourable consideration to Visit East of England's bid for Suffolk and Norfolk to be a tourism zone?

Nigel Huddleston: Tourism action zones were proposed in the sector deal of a couple of years ago. As we approach the spending review, we are discussing with the Treasury how to execute those, and I will be having further conversations on the subject.

We have seen some positive signs in the past few months. The hotel and accommodation occupancy rates in coastal and rural areas have been relatively high—in some cases, back to 2019 levels by the end of August. Self-catering cottages, camp sites, caravan and holiday parks have generally reported a strong summer and many outdoor attractions have also seen high levels of footfall, but many outdoor and especially indoor attractions remain subject to capacity constraints. Many city areas continue to struggle, in part because they are especially reliant on and exposed to inbound tourism and business travel and, of course, we still have quarantine measures in place.

We will continue to monitor all this closely and take further action where necessary, but it is not true to say that the measures already in place will not help over the next few months. Businesses will continue to benefit from the VAT cut until 12 January; the furlough scheme continues until the end of October; Visit England and Visit Britain will soon launch a new domestic campaign; and we are encouraging local planning authorities to relax planning conditions on caravan parks, campsites and holiday parks to extend the season.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister has outlined in great detail the large amount of help offered to traders and businesses in seaside resorts such as Cleethorpes, but what we are interested in is extending that support. I would appreciate it if he developed that part of his speech. Also, bus and coach operators have been mentioned. Will he pay particular attention to the bonded coach holidays scheme, which is a real burden on many small operators?

Nigel Huddleston: Several hon. Members mentioned those points. On the coach sector in particular, I assure the House that we recognise its important role in the tourism sector, and we are engaging with the Department for Transport on the challenges it faces.

We are aware that a number of sectors are yet to reopen. Several hon. Members also mentioned the important events, exhibitions and business conference sector, and we are continuing to work with the sector. I had the pleasure of attending a successful event last week connected with one of the pilot schemes for the business events sector.

There is plenty of work to do, and many Members have offered good ideas. I will happily continue the dialogue with many of them. Perhaps the most prevalent request today was that the VAT reduction be extended—that was mentioned by my hon. Friends the Member for North Devon, for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), for East Devon (Simon Jupp), for Guildford (Angela Richardson), for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for North West Norfolk (James Wild), the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), among many others. Perhaps it would have been easier

to mention those who did not make that request, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think the message is well understood by me and, hopefully, by the Chancellor.

As for the extension of the furlough scheme, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) acknowledged, our right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said that the scheme cannot continue indefinitely. However, that does not mean that further intervention measures will not be taken where necessary.

I hope the measures set out by me and others today give the House confidence that the Government take the impact of covid on the tourism sector very seriously. We will continue to work closely with all stakeholders. I think today's debate shows that the industry's voice has been heard by the Government and Members of Parliament.

4.58 pm

Selaine Saxby: I thank the Minister for those encouraging words. I look forward to working with him and his team, who have been fantastic throughout the pandemic, to nurture the green shoots of recovery in our vital tourism sector.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this debate to take place, and all the right hon. and hon. Members who contributed. I also thank for their support those hon. Members who were unable to come into the Chamber this afternoon. On behalf of the tourism sector, I thank all the participants. As the one-woman tourist board for North Devon, I look forward to welcoming everyone to the beaches as the winter progresses.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for the tourism industry after the covid-19 lockdown.

Manchester Piccadilly to Rose Hill Marple Trains

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

5 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity this afternoon, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) did in the previous debate, to raise a matter that is of great importance to my constituency. It concerns the services on the Manchester Piccadilly to Rose Hill via Hyde line. This is of considerable interest to my constituents and is urgent given that, from Monday next week, there are plans for three months of complete service suspension on that route. I can also see a number of my constituency neighbours in the Chamber this afternoon, which indicates wider concern about this proposal—in addition to the concerns of my constituents in Marple, Romiley and Woodley.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op)
rose—

Mr Wragg: On that note, I happily give way to my constituency neighbour.

Jonathan Reynolds: First, may I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing a debate that is of huge importance to my constituency, his constituency and all the neighbouring ones? I have always believed that politics is about campaigning very hard for your side in an election. You do not always win—in our experience, we did not win several elections in a row—but after that you work with people around your area to try to deliver what is best for your constituents. That is why we are all so united on this issue.

As the hon. Gentleman knows and as the Minister, who has kindly already given us some time, knows, the case for Hyde is very simple. Hyde Central is the main train station for Hyde, with more than 100,000 journeys a year. To go from that to no service at all up to Christmas is just too significant a change. While we all recognise that covid has had a huge impact on a whole range of areas in British public life, to go to no service at all is simply too much.

Mr Wragg: I am in complete agreement with my constituency neighbour, which will come as no surprise to anyone at all. May I, at this juncture, mention my other constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who contributed to business questions earlier today, but who cannot be with us this afternoon? I wish to place on record my thanks to them both and say that it has been a pleasure, as always, to work closely with them.

We are all acutely aware of the variety of impacts the covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions are having on everyday life. We understand why things we have previously taken for granted are no longer possible, or must be done with appropriate adaptations and caution. However, while our railways have provided a vital service to key workers—indeed, those who work on them are key workers themselves—and now an increasing number of the general public, they, too, have been impacted by

[Mr Wragg]

this pandemic. Northern, which operates services on the Manchester to Rose Hill line, has announced a proposal to temporarily suspend services in their entirety for three months. It justified it on the following grounds, informing me that the driver training programme was suspended for nearly six months, a proportion of its workforce are classified as vulnerable and have been shielding, and a number of drivers have left the company or have retired and replacements have yet to be trained. All those points are understandable. A train driver cannot work from home. However, I cannot but think that these issues should have become apparent much earlier and could have been better planned for. Northern's reputation has suffered greatly from the timetable debacle and a series of strikes in recent years. Many of my constituents have said in frustration to me that they wonder whether Northern sees running a railway as an inconvenience. My constituents deserve better.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I know that he and my good and hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) are long-standing campaigners about the issues on this line. Although the line does not impact my constituency, it is very near to it, and I have been discussing it with the shadow rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, ever since the Government took over the Northern franchise in March 2020, things have actually got much worse than they were before, when the franchise was in private hands? I know that Northern is one of the most complained-about train operators in the UK.

Mr Wragg: There is no doubt whatever that Northern's reputation has been generally lamentable for some years. However, I gently caution the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour from Stockport, because March 2020 was also when the pandemic began, and that has brought a degree of pressure. Nevertheless, I entirely accept the thrust of his argument. Like his constituents, my constituents deserve better; they deserve an efficient, regular and reliable rail service. That is why we are here today.

It is completely unacceptable to make an announcement over the summer without consultation with passenger groups, local transport bodies or elected representatives. That is compounded by the apparent lack of notice given to the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), in particular given his Department's role as operator of last resort. At this juncture, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has made himself completely available to all colleagues in the House, to meet us virtually, to apply pressure to Northern and to ask the questions that need to be asked. I pay tribute to him for his work.

Jonathan Reynolds: I, too, thank the Minister. The most that any Ministers can do is make themselves available to listen to individual MPs about constituency issues. That is all we can ever ask, and the Minister has certainly done that, so I add my thanks.

It is also relevant to add something that our constituents say to us, as the Minister knows. Even in pre-pandemic times, Northern was a service with a substantial degree of public subsidy—quite rightly, because it could not be run on commercial grounds—and people therefore expect, in a sense, a greater level of respect because of that relationship. They are a partner, a contributor, through the taxes that they pay. I am a supporter of my local rail service, and I want it to have public support, but that makes it more difficult—there is no doubt about that.

Mr Wragg: Absolutely, that makes it more difficult. That is why Northern needs to know that the operation has changed. It needs to know that it has to improve, that it is perhaps doubly accountable, because of the involvement of the Department for Transport.

To remove all services on the Rose Hill line will cause serious problems for many of my constituents, including schoolchildren, in particular those who attend Marple Hall School, and commuters generally. It flies in the face of the Government's laudable desire to ensure that people can go about their lives using covid-secure public transport. The jargon of the rail industry—"securing timetables" or "keeping customers on the move"—is surely not achieved by wholesale suspension of services. It is high time that the line from Piccadilly to Rose Hill via Hyde was properly regarded by all as a valuable rail route, with enormous potential for the future. That ambition is already recognised by the public, given the increased passenger numbers over recent years. We cannot allow the line to be disregarded for administrative ease.

The excellent work done by local friends groups to champion and enhance stations must be recognised. I know how much work it was for the friends groups from my own area, including Rose Hill station, Marple and Romiley, to name but a few, and how much work they have done to oppose the proposals. Such groups are more than just responsible for the hanging baskets and the planters, even though—if I may plug this—Rose Hill station won the award for the best-kept station in Cheshire in 2019. Notwithstanding that, they are an integral part of understanding the needs and concerns of passengers. We must do all we can to engage with them properly and to value them.

I do not want to waste any more time this afternoon lamenting Northern's past record. Now is the time for change and action. I need to hear the following from my hon. Friend the Minister—I hope he will forgive my assertiveness—who has been very helpful throughout the summer in seeking a solution. What will he do to stop a complete removal of service from the Rose Hill line? What will he do to ensure that Northern prioritises the line for driver training and for new trains? What will he do to avoid my constituents of Rose Hill, and some at Romiley and at Woodley, being without services on that line for three months as of Monday next week?

Rose Hill station has faced many challenges over the years. Perhaps its greatest was seeing off the machinations of Dr Beeching. We must not allow covid-19 to become the Beeching of our age for the railways. On the contrary, we must do all we can to support them and to ensure a steady and safe return of passengers to the network.

I am grateful to everyone who has worked to get the best possible outcome today, including the thousands of local petitioners. I know that, like me, they will listen keenly to the reply from my hon. Friend the Minister, from whom it is now time to hear.

5.9 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for securing this important and timely debate. Indeed, I think it was through him that I was first informed about the issues addressed in his speech. It is fair to say that ever since, he has been fairly persistent in his contact with me and, indeed, Northern Trains and others to build a coalition to try to get services reinstated on the line.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I hope momentarily to draw the Minister away from Cheshire and the north-west. Last October, my constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), had an Adjournment debate on the subject of the Portishead line, which I also supported. We are very keen to see the line expedited. I wrote to the Minister further in August, and hope he can look into that so that I can share in the good wishes of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg).

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will honourably take up the hon. Lady's offer, because what is going on in Portishead is a very positive piece of news. I look forward to having conversations with her to move that forward.

We are, though, talking about Rose Hill and Hazel Grove. My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove has been building a coalition to reinstate his and his constituents' much-loved services. He has done a very good job. We know him in this place as a hard-working chairman of a Select Committee and a great parliamentarian, but now we also know that he is a hard-working, caring and great constituency MP. He has demonstrated how willing he is to work with others from other political parties to get a result for his, and their, constituents. I put on the record the work that I know has been done on these issues by the hon. Members for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra). I was pleased that we all had an opportunity to discuss this matter with the managing director of Northern Trains last Friday.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove knows, I was concerned to hear that the Rose Hill service had been temporarily removed until December 2020. Let me be clear that Northern took this unwelcome decision itself, to maintain operational performance by increasing services overall while it managed its recovery from covid-19. Alas, prior to the pandemic Northern already had an intensive driver-training-programme backlog, but extra delays caused by the epidemic, combined with staff self-shielding at home, have meant that Northern has had to take steps to prioritise its available-and-competent driver resource to where it is most needed.

Northern made the decision to temporarily suspend services from Rose Hill because it believed that, given the availability of other train routes, stations and public transport options for Rose Hill passengers, that would have less impact for local customers than for those of other stations and routes. Northern says that it did not take the decision lightly. It anticipated and hoped that the provision of a replacement bus service and the availability of train-travel options from other stations close by would enable Rose Hill passengers to return to

work and school with minimal disruption. None the less, Northern recognises that the decision, although made with the best interests of its customers network-wide in mind, caused significant concern and frustration among passengers, local friends groups and Members of Parliament.

As we have been slowly exiting from lockdown and seeing Britons get back to work, the railway has rightly been increasing services to meet passenger demand and expectations. This Monday, 14 September, there will be an additional service uplift for many passengers across Northern's network. Train operators overall have been asked to restore a timetable that maximises the opportunities for passenger travel while maintaining the excellent performance levels we see at this point in time. I assure all Members that the rapid return of a good, regular, resilient timetable on the line is our priority.

Having listened to Members' concerns, I can inform them that Northern has reviewed its timetable and outlined improvements. But I have challenged the operator to do more—immediately—for the passengers in the Rose Hill area. Moving resource around has enabled Northern to provide some glimmer of light for passengers on this line. Northern has prioritised the running of services for its customers that will be both resilient and reliable, rather than ramping up its services quickly. That is something I insist on: we need a reliable railway if we are to have a railway at all. It is focusing its efforts on the morning and evening peak times, using customer feedback to get essential workers to where they need to be. Literally moments before this debate commenced, Northern informed me that it intends to introduce two trains in the morning, Monday to Friday, for Rose Hill Marple from 14 September. They will arrive at 8.11 am and 8.36 am respectively to ensure that Northern can meet key school demand. There will also be an afternoon service to meet school demand, arriving at Rose Hill Marple at 3.14 pm and reaching Manchester Piccadilly half an hour later.

I would like to think that the coalition my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove brought together—the voices of his residents and the voices of Members of Parliament, hopefully amplified by me as the Minister—has been listened to by Northern in the conversations we have all had with the operator.

Jonathan Reynolds: Let me say on behalf of my constituents in Hyde that that is extremely welcome news. A service that focuses on peak demand will go a huge way to meeting the need that is there, putting concerns at rest and keeping people on the railway, which is what we all want. I thank the Minister on behalf of my constituents.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. He has played a great part in this, as have other hon. Members who have contributed today.

The impact of coronavirus means that the safety of passengers and staff must be paramount. That means the focus right now is on reliability and increased capacity to enable safer travel, with enough space for social distancing where possible. Northern runs a highly complex network and serves an enormous section of the United Kingdom. In fact, about one in five of all United Kingdom stations is a Northern station. It shares the network with nine other train operators, so the decisions

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

it takes, such as moving trains around to run different services, affect the journeys people make all around the country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove knows from our last meeting on Friday, Northern apologised for the removal of this service and committed to an internal review to learn the lessons from this issue. Northern is also reviewing options again to see how it can support affected communities until we get to the point where a full reliable service is restored.

More generally, the public sector operator will continue to work with Network Rail to make sure the railway delivers as one, with a single-minded focus on the interests of the passenger. As part of that, the newly created cross-industry Manchester recovery taskforce, co-ordinated by Network Rail, will deliver on recommendations on how best to boost capacity and performance in the short, medium and longer term.

Northern has already begun to deliver many improvements for customers, including the recruitment of more staff, a full train cleaning programme and improvements to many stations. However, there remains much more to do to provide the modern, reliable service that its passengers deserve. Northern really does hope shortly to update everybody further on its plans to transform the service, but until then it will continue to focus on getting the basics right: restoring reliability, increasing capacity, and rebuilding trust in the organisation by providing services that all passengers can truly rely on.

Mr Wragg: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for that announcement and for the work he has done to secure it. He mentions the short, medium and longer term. Without wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, I wonder if he could elaborate further. Will Northern prioritise this route for the restoration of services before the deadline in December? Might there perhaps be the potential for better news in the weeks ahead?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As my hon. Friend will recognise from my announcement—which was given to me only moments before I entered the Chamber—Northern is working particularly hard to ensure the restoration of service. I will continue to put pressure on it to continue to do that in the lead-up to 14 December, when the next timetable change comes in. I think we have already proved that, working together, we can bring about some change on our railways, and if we continue to do so, I am sure that that will continue to be the case.

I recognise that the decision by Northern has caused serious concern among passengers and the constituents of my hon. Friend and others. The coronavirus outbreak has affected the way we work and go about our daily lives, and that is no different in the rail industry.

I thank my hon. Friend for initiating the debate. I should say that, in doing my research for it, I came across some interesting claims by another local political party. Interestingly, considering its supposed level of concern, it is not represented here today. It claims to be running a campaign to get the service reinstated, so, thinking I might have missed something, I asked my officials to check whether any representations had been made to my Department by the local councillor concerned about reinstating the services. Unsurprisingly, the answer was no, not a thing. Not a sausage. As per usual, the Lib Dems are very good at moaning about something and happy to make a gripe fester, but in this case they were not interested enough to make representations to the Department that might have been able to help. Perhaps the collection of data in a campaign was more important to them than getting a result.

Fortunately, the people of Hazel Grove have my hon. Friend representing them, and from the very moment he heard about this issue, he made contact with me. Indeed, he did so before I found out about it formally. He has been forcefully and proactively asking the right questions of the right people to get the right results for the people he represents. He is a Member of a party in a Government who are going to level up the economic opportunities across our great nation. The Government understand the importance that communities across the country place on regular train services, and the social and economic benefits that these can unlock for local economies.

I hope that the measures being introduced by Northern that I have announced will go some way to assure passengers relying on the Rose Hill Marple services as we come out of the coronavirus outbreak that we are looking to improve that service greatly. Hopefully they will also be pleased with the massive multi-million pound investment in new rolling stock, which I very much hope will be serving this route in the coming months. I hope that that goes some way towards answering my hon. Friend's question. There is more work to do, but a lot of work has been done by the hon. Members present in the House today to restore some services on the line, and I thank my hon. Friend for all his help in doing that.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 10 September 2020

HOME DEPARTMENT

Changes in Immigration Rules

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

We have made changes to the immigration rules which will introduce the student and child student routes to replace the tier 4 (general) and tier 4 (child) routes.

The changes are being introduced to give effect to the Government plan to create a global visa system which applies equally to all individuals coming to the UK to work or study, including EEA nationals, with the exception of Irish nationals.

The student and child student routes, collectively referred to as the student routes, are for both European economic area (EEA) and non-EEA nationals who wish to come to the UK for the purpose of study. The routes are the first to be introduced as part of the new points-based immigration system, and the first to be simplified in line with the recommendations of the Law Commission in its report, “Simplifying the Immigration Rules”, to which the Government responded on 25 March 2020. We have consulted the Simplification of the Immigration Rules Review Committee, which represents several external stakeholders, on the drafting of the simplified rules. The immigration rules will eventually be consolidated in the new style.

As part of the new simplified style, we are introducing new rules on English language and finance—which will only apply to the new student and child student routes at this stage—with the intention of creating rules on themes which apply across several routes. These thematic rules include changes to:

- ensure applicants only need to prove the required level of English language to the Home Office once;

- update the majority speaking English language country list to include Malta and Ireland (where, for example a non-Irish national has a degree from an Irish university they can rely on this to show their English language ability);

- allow applicants who have gained GCSE/A-level or Scottish higher in English while at school in the UK to rely on this to prove their English language ability, replacing the ability of child students to rely on six months in the UK to prove English;

- no longer require applicants who have met the maintenance requirement on their current route to meet it again if they have been supporting themselves in the UK for more than a year;

- allow applicants to rely on electronic bank statements;

- allow applicants to show they meet maintenance requirements by relying on a wider range of accounts.

EEA nationals are subject to transitional arrangements until the transition period ends on 31 December. An EEA or Swiss national who makes an application in the UK under the new student rules before 1 January 2021 will have their application rejected since they continue

to have freedom of movement under EU law and are entitled to apply to the EU settlement scheme. EEA nationals who apply under the student rules from outside the UK will only be granted leave that commences on or after 1 January 2021, provided they meet the requirements of the route.

The list of countries whose nationals may submit reduced documentary evidence (formerly appendix H) has been updated to add all the countries which form part of the EEA and Switzerland. Appendix 15 of the immigration rules will be deleted and replaced with a new appendix ATAS which sets out requirements and conditions for the academic technology approval scheme (ATAS). EEA and Swiss nationals, and nationals of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore and South Korea will be exempted from having to apply for an ATAS certificate in order to study certain sensitive subjects in the UK.

The tier 4 (general) and tier 4 (child) routes will be closed to new applications after 08.59 on 5 October 2020. References to tier 4 have either been deleted from the immigration rules or amended where appropriate to reflect the new student and child student rules. All references to students or child students in the new rules must be read as including references to people who currently hold leave as tier 4 migrants, including in part 9, appendix AR and appendix W. All student and child student applications, including dependant of a student applications, which are made at or after 09.00 on 5 October 2020 will be decided in accordance with the new student rules, even where they are accompanied by a confirmation of acceptance for studies which was issued under the tier 4 rules and policy in place before 09.00 on 5 October.

[HCWS445]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Coronavirus: Renters

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I wish to update the House on the comprehensive measures that the Government are taking to ensure renters affected by coronavirus continue to be protected over autumn and winter.

The Government have already taken unprecedented action to ensure that renters were protected from eviction at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, including agreeing with the courts to stay possession proceedings for a total of six months.

I would like to express my thanks to landlords for their forbearance in many cases, and my sympathy to smaller landlords and buy-to-let landlords, who in some cases have experienced hardship as a result.

We have also put in place a major package of financial support to help communities through the pandemic. Through the coronavirus job retention scheme, we have provided support for businesses to pay staff salaries and have also strengthened the welfare safety-net with a nearly £9.3 billion boost to the welfare system. This includes an extra £1 billion to increase local housing allowance (LHA) rates so that they cover the lowest 30% of market rents, meaning we now spend £25 billion supporting households to meet the cost of rent in the private and social rented sectors.

For those renters who require additional support, there is an existing £180 million of Government funding for discretionary housing payments made available this year—an increase of £40 million from last year—for councils to distribute to support renters with housing costs.

We will keep these measures under review and our decisions will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice.

Whilst the measures we introduced were justified at the height of the pandemic, it is now right that we consider how we adapt our approach moving forward.

As we move forward, we will strike a balance of prioritising public health and supporting the most vulnerable over winter, whilst ensuring landlords can access and exercise their right to justice for the most serious cases, such as cases of anti-social behaviour.

On 28 August, we introduced regulations to require landlords to give tenants six months' notice before they can commence new eviction action, except in the most egregious cases, such as incidents of antisocial behaviour and serious rent arrears. These regulations will remain in place until the end of March 2021, and provide reassurance to responsible tenants that they will not face new court proceedings during this time. This approach ensures tenants will remain safe and have additional time to find new accommodation, while empowering landlords to take action where necessary, for example if a tenant's antisocial behaviour is severely impacting their neighbours' quality of life.

We have been working with the judiciary to consider new court arrangements within the current statutory framework, to be put in place once possession proceedings resume, to ensure appropriate support to all parties. I am grateful to the Master of the Rolls and the working group which he established to consider those practical arrangements, and extend particular thanks to Mr Justice Knowles and all the members of the working group for their work on these matters.

The new civil procedure rules, made via statutory instrument in July will come into force on 20 September. This will require landlords to set out any relevant information about a tenant's circumstances, including information on the effect of the covid-19 pandemic, when bringing a possession claim to court. Landlords

will also be required to notify the court and their tenant where they wish to continue pursuing a possession claim that was already in the system before 3 August.

When possession proceedings resume, it is critical to ensure court time is used effectively. The listing of cases is a judicial function. The judiciary will look to prioritise cases, reflecting those issues highlighted by a broad range of stakeholders represented on the working group as putting the most strain on litigants. We understand this will include claims issued before the stay commenced in March 2020, as well as cases involving antisocial behaviour, extreme rent arrears, domestic abuse, fraud and deception, illegal occupiers and squatters or abandonment of a property. This will provide assurance to landlords, their tenants and neighbours facing the most egregious cases.

We are also taking steps to ensure that no enforcement of evictions will take place in areas where local lockdown measures are in force which restrict access to premises. Guidance will be issued to bailiffs to ensure that no enforcement of possession orders will proceed where local measures are in place to protect public health. This will prevent tenants being forced out of their home at an unsettling time. In areas when the public health risks could be greater.

In addition, the Government are taking steps to prevent eviction action taking place over the Christmas period, other than in the most serious cases, ensuring vulnerable tenants are not forced from their homes at a time when public and local authorities may be dealing with the usual level of increased demand for services during this time. This too will be achieved through guidance to bailiffs that they should not enforce possession orders in the weeks of Christmas.

Comprehensive new guidance for landlords and tenants to explain all these new arrangements and how they impact on the possessions process in courts will be published shortly.

Taken together, these new arrangements strongly incentivise landlords and tenants to sustain tenancies as far as possible and to discuss their situation before bringing a possession claim to court. Where cases do end up in court, these measures ensure court time is prioritised effectively, that the most egregious cases are dealt with as a priority and that court users—both tenants and landlords—have the additional support they may need.

[HCWS446]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 10 September 2020

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