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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 28 September 2020

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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

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OFFICIAL REPORT

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

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

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 681

THIRTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2019-2021

House of Commons

Monday 28 September 2020

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I am sure all Members will wish to join me in paying our respects to Police Sergeant Matt Ratana, who was killed in the course of duty on Friday, and in sending our condolences to his family. Yesterday was National Police Memorial Day. I ask all Members to stand and observe a minute's silence to mark that occasion and to remember Matt Ratana.

The House observed a one-minute silence.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cross-Channel Migrant Trafficking

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help bring to an end the cross-channel trafficking of migrants. [906704]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The whole House expresses their condolences following the murder on Friday of Sergeant Matt Ratana.

The UK Government are working with law enforcement and intelligence networks to address the issue of illegal migration and the cross-channel trafficking of migrants. Our work continues, and we are arresting and prosecuting those responsible for the illegal trafficking of people.

Sir Roger Gale [V]: May I, from the Back Benches, associate myself and, I am sure, all colleagues with the condolences expressed in relation to the death of Matt Ratana?

All the children, women and men who seek to cross the channel are the victims of criminal activity. Further to her answer, can my right hon. Friend tell the House how many perpetrators of these vile crimes, in either France or the United Kingdom, have been arrested and sentenced? Can she also tell us what discussions she has had with her German counterparts to seek to prevent the provision of the outboard motors and inflatable dinghies used in these crossings that I understand emanate from Germany?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend raises important points about the illegal trafficking of people via small boats. We have arrested 179 individuals, resulting in 24 convictions relating to people smuggling this year. There have been a further 296 disruptions of organised criminal gangs and individuals who are responsible for the organisation of immigration crime, 124 of which related to people smuggling. We also have 176 live investigations into illegal maritime activity.

My right hon. Friend also mentions Germany. It is not just Germany. Discussions are taking place with counterparts in not just Germany but France, Belgium and the Netherlands. The issue of boats also relates to criminal upstream activity. When it comes to convictions, we are of course working with the courts, the Crown Prosecution Service and our intelligence networks to ensure that more work is taking place to pursue those who are responsible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May I extend the condolences of the Scottish National party to the family, friends and colleagues of Sergeant Matt Ratana and mark our horror at this terrible crime and our acknowledgement of the debt we all owe to police officers across these islands?

On 4 November last year, when the Home Secretary was still a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Committee found that

“A policy that focuses exclusively on closing borders will drive migrants to take more dangerous routes, and push them into the hands of criminal groups.”

Does she still agree with that statement, and, if so, does she recognise that safe legal routes for people with a connection with the United Kingdom must be part of the answer to the problem we face in these channel crossings?

Priti Patel: I fundamentally agree that we need safe legal routes, and that is part of the work that the Home Office is currently looking at and working on. The fact of the matter is that too many individuals are coming to the United Kingdom and, it is fair to say, to other EU countries, because over recent years we have seen the mass movement of people. People are being exploited and that exploitation is fundamentally wrong. We owe it to everyone, including those individuals who are being trafficked, those who are vulnerable and those who are being exploited, to ensure that there are safe legal routes, but at the same time we have to go after criminals—the perpetrators of illegal migration and exploitation—and it is right that we do. We want to ensure that our asylum system is not abused by those who, quite frankly, are not genuine asylum seekers.

Online Hate Speech and Extremism

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling online hate speech and extremism. [906705]

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling online hate speech and extremism. [906722]

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling online hate speech and extremism. [906742]

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire): As a Government, we are committed to vigorously countering extremist ideology by making sure that every part of government is taking action. That includes ongoing conversations between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Home Office on the implementation of the online harms framework to tackle hateful content. We will continue to work across government to challenge extremism in all its forms.

Mick Whitley: At a Home Affairs Committee session last week, the national lead for counter-terrorism, Neil Basu, warned of growing numbers of young people being drawn towards right-wing terrorism. During this pandemic, social media have done much to amplify hateful extremism. What steps will the Minister take to prevent young people from being drawn into extremism?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman highlights an important point about the exploitation of the online world to attract the unwary and what that can lead to, which is why we are working with the companies concerned to see that content is removed. I highlight the online harms work, which will lead to a new regime to put new responsibilities on those companies to provide support in respect of the challenge of extremism and content that might not be illegal but profoundly is harmful.

Julie Elliott: A recent Home Affairs Committee session heard that Facebook had deleted 9.6 million posts about hate speech in the first quarter of this year. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-Committee on which I serve has considered online disinformation during covid. What assessment has the Minister made of the links between hate speech and disinformation? Is there discussion between his Department and the DCMS?

James Brokenshire: As I indicated in response to the previous question, we are in discussion with the DCMS about these issues. It troubles me that sometimes this disinformation and these conspiracy theories can be used to galvanise more extremist behaviour. We are very alive to that in terms of working with our colleagues at the DCMS and in terms of our broader work in the Prevent space where this issue can move into terrorism. The issue of the extreme right-wing and far-right extremists seeking to exploit the online world and trap some quite young people is something we are very focused on and conscious of.

Kate Osborne: For two weeks running, we have seen anti-lockdown conspiracy theorists clashing with police throughout the country, with four people having been arrested in Newcastle over the weekend. This behaviour is being fuelled online by far-right opportunists and some high-profile individuals, such as Ian Brown of the Stone Roses. Will the Minister outline what his Department is doing to build trust in Government information and in respect of scepticism and concern about vaccination?

James Brokenshire: I highlight to the hon. Lady the work that is being led by the DCMS, with which we are working on the cross-Whitehall counter-disinformation unit, which has been stood up during this time of acute disinformation to challenge some of the conspiracy theories and false information. I assure her that there is extensive work across government to analyse and then work with the companies to take false or misleading information down. Clearly, it is an ongoing challenge, but we are determined to take firm action where false narratives are being perpetrated.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The scale and accessibility of hateful extremist content online is deeply worrying and causing serious damage to society, and it needs to be identified speedily and dealt with. Last week, in her evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, the commissioner for countering extremism called for a more rigorous classification system for assessing hateful extremist material in the online harms Bill to get to grips with the vast spread of extremism online. Does the Minister support this call, and does he agree with the commission's report last year that the Government's counter-extremism strategy, drawn up in 2015, is insufficient, too broad and out of date?

James Brokenshire: The 2015 strategy was the first of its kind in the world in having a unit dedicated to countering extremism. I pay tribute to the work of the commissioner, and I read very carefully her words to the Select Committee last week. We will work with the commissioner—indeed, the Home Secretary met her last week—and we are working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Ofcom to consider the appropriate design for the regulatory framework. We will continue to develop this as we prepare to introduce the legislation, and we will consider the commissioner’s proposals as part of that work.

Domestic Abuse Victims

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to protect victims of domestic abuse. [906707]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): During lockdown, we continued to legislate on the Domestic Abuse Bill. This vital Bill and our non-legislative programme of work will support and protect victims and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. In response to covid-19, we have worked with charities, the police, local authorities and the domestic abuse commissioner to adapt to the pressures of lockdown and local restrictions, including additional funding for charities and the launch of the national advice campaign, #YouAreNotAlone.

Robert Largan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. It is no secret that lockdown was a time of heightened risk for victims of domestic abuse. I pay tribute to local charity Crossroads Derbyshire for the important work it does in providing support for people in my constituency. May I ask the Minister to provide an important point of clarification on the latest covid rules: can those individuals who are at risk of domestic abuse still leave their homes even if there are local covid restrictions in place?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend sincerely for his question. The answer is yes, they absolutely can leave their homes to seek help. Of course, if anyone is in immediate danger, they must dial 999 and the police will help. For longer-term advice and guidance, we have set out a range of services on the gov.uk website, but please can we all send the message to our constituents that, wherever they are in the country, they can seek help if they need it if they are victims of domestic abuse?

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I echo the calls of the Minister to get people to reach out, and we have to make sure there is help when they do so. On a call last week with the children’s sector, professional after professional told me that the availability of specialist community support for child victims of domestic abuse is at worst non-existent and at best patchy. Can the Minister tell the House if her Department has a strategy in place that will enable every child in this country who lives in an abusive household to access the support that they need? Can she share that strategy with the House, not just read out funding sums from her folder that she and I both know cover only certain select areas for a short-term period? Perhaps she could enlighten us all on how we can access the support for the children in our constituencies, because for many in this place services for child victims in their area do not exist.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She knows just how carefully the Government consider the role and the victimhood of children in abusive households. She will know that we have recently announced £3 million to help charities specifically that work with children who are victims of domestic abuse. [Interruption.] I know she writes that off as yet another funding announcement, but I think that the funding of these charities is very important. In addition, we have a range of strategies and funding across the Department for Education, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Home Office to help the most vulnerable children, and I am sure she welcomes the work that the domestic abuse commissioner is undertaking to map domestic abuse community-based services across the country so that we can build a sustainable programme of support for victims, whether they are adults or children.

Police Officer Numbers

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers. [906708]

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers. [906726]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): The Home Office, the National Police Chiefs’ Council, the College of Policing and all forces are working flat out to recruit 20,000 new police officers, supported by £700 million from the taxpayer.

Mark Menzies [V]: This Government were elected on a pledge to recruit 20,000 more frontline police officers—something that is very important to people in Fylde. Will my hon. Friend update the House on how many people have joined the police since the recruitment drive was launched? Will he confirm that we are on target to deliver on that promise?

Kit Malthouse: I well understand my hon. Friend’s impatience for his area to see an increase in police officers. That impatience is shared by me, the Home Secretary and probably everybody in the country. He will be pleased to hear that we have now had more than 100,000 applicants to be police officers and recruited a little over 4,300. We are ahead of schedule.

Mark Pawsey: With the tragic death of rugby player Sergeant Matt Ratana, we are reminded of the very dangerous work that police officers do on our behalf. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to Warwickshire’s Conservative police and crime commissioner, Philip Seccombe, who has used his own powers on top of additional Government funding to bring in an extra 216 officers, with new officers in vehicle crime teams and enhanced safer neighbourhood teams, more detectives and more 999 response officers?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right: it has been a sombre weekend for us all, with the tragic events of Friday reinforced by Police Memorial Day just yesterday. I am pleased to congratulate Philip Seccombe, with whom I have had many meetings in the last year or so, on his

efforts to increase the number of police officers out there, which will make everybody in Warwickshire and, indeed, across the country, safer.

Police Funding

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase police funding. [906709]

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase funding for rural police forces. [906723]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): The Government have announced a police funding settlement that sets out the biggest increase in funding for the policing system in a decade. In total, we are increasing the funding available to the policing system by more than £1 billion this year.

Dr Hudson [V]: Rural and wildlife crime sadly continues to affect our local communities. Theft of farm machinery, burglary, animal theft and cruelty, antisocial behaviour and vandalism are just some of the issues facing our rural areas. Cumbria has the excellent Cumbria Farm Watch scheme, a partnership between people and Cumbria police. What reassurances can my hon. Friend give my constituents in Penrith and The Border that the Government are supporting the police and communities in the fight against rural and wildlife crime?

Kit Malthouse: As a rural Member, I know exactly the type of concern to which my hon. Friend refers; it is shared by people in my constituency. Obviously, the provision of significant extra numbers of police officers to Cumbria police will help the chief constable in deliberations about where to put those resources. Although that is an operational matter, one would hope that some of it will be devoted to rural crime. I certainly hope that will happen in Hampshire. On wildlife crime, I am pleased to report that we are putting £136,000 into the National Wildlife Crime Unit so that it can continue its valuable work.

Danny Kruger: The extra policing that my hon. Friend mentioned is very good news. In Wiltshire, we are thrilled because we are getting more than 100 new police officers for Wiltshire police and even more police and community support officers to help with all the crime we import from Hampshire. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, so often, funding formulas designed in London have urban places in mind and sometimes that sadly applies to police funding formulas as well? Will he update the House on any work that is being done to review the police funding formula to ensure that rural areas are properly treated?

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for his question, though not for the aspersions he casts on my fellow county residents. I thought crime flowed in the other direction. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is right that the formula, while the best available funding formula we have, is quite old now and needs to be reviewed. It contains several indicators that skew funding towards urban areas and in the next couple of years we have to reflect on the fact that crime has changed and that rural areas are experiencing more

crime than they have perhaps been used to. Doubtless the Home Secretary and I will work on some form of funding formula review before the next election.

Cross-Channel Illegal Migration

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to stop migrants crossing the English Channel illegally. [906710]

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to stop migrants crossing the English Channel illegally. [906715]

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to stop migrants crossing the English Channel illegally. [906721]

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to stop migrants crossing the English Channel illegally. [906725]

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to stop migrants crossing the English Channel illegally. [906728]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The Government are committed to ending completely these dangerous crossings facilitated by ruthless criminals. These crossings are also unnecessary because France is a safe country. Our clandestine channel threat commander, newly appointed, is working closely with his French colleagues to stop these embarkations in the first place, and we are also working tirelessly to return people who have made this journey.

Henry Smith [V]: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. Can he say when legislation will be brought forward to update immigration and asylum law, and whether it will contain provisions such as stopping those who enter the United Kingdom illegally subsequently applying to stay in this country?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to the legal system. It is quite frankly not fit for purpose in this area when it comes to asylum and immigration enforcement matters. We are often frustrated by repeatedly vexatious legal claims, often made at the last minute with the express intention of frustrating the proper application of the law. I can confirm that we are working at pace on legislative options in the way that he describes, and that everything is on the table.

Shaun Bailey: My constituents in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton are rightly angry at the images that they are seeing of people arriving on our shores illegally, often in small boats. To solve this crisis in the long term will require co-operation, and, whereas we in this country seem to be gold-plating a lot of the regulations that would enable us to solve this problem, many of our European partners are not. What representations is my hon. Friend making to our European partners to ensure that they actually follow through with the obligations that they have made?

Chris Philp: We are working at the moment with other European countries to return people to those European countries where they have previously claimed asylum. Indeed, return flights went last week and are going this week as well. However, my hon. Friend is right to say that leaving the Dublin regulations creates new opportunities. We have already tabled a draft readmissions agreement for consideration by the European Commission, but he can rest assured that once we are out of the transition period on 1 January, this Government will be redoubling their efforts to make sure that people who come here from safe countries, for example, are rapidly returned.

Mark Eastwood: I know the Minister is working tirelessly to bring the criminals facilitating the illegal channel crossings to justice and to tackle this exploitative crime. Does he agree that, while we must uphold our obligations to genuine asylum seekers, there can be no justifiable reason for migrants to be crossing the channel, putting themselves and our Border Force at risk when France remains a safe option?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend puts it very well. We are pursuing the ruthless criminals who facilitate this wicked process. Twenty-four of them have been convicted so far this year. He is right to say that, where people are in genuine fear of persecution, we should protect them. Indeed, we do so and our resettlement scheme has been the leading scheme in Europe over the past five years. He is also right to say that, when people are in France, they are already in a safe country and if they want protection they can obtain it by applying to the French Government.

Robbie Moore: The channel-crossing route is clearly being promoted by people smugglers as an easy route in. These individuals do not give a damn about the welfare of those whom they exploit or the lives that they put in danger. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that this route becomes entirely untenable and illustrates loud and clear to organised crime gangs that Britain's border is closed to such illegal crossings?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that our objective, and the Home Secretary's objective, is to make this route completely unviable, so that nobody attempts it in the first place. It is dangerous, it is illegally facilitated and it is unnecessary. We are working with the French to prevent the embarkations happening in the first place. We are looking at tactics that we can deploy at sea to prevent the crossings from happening, and we are looking at what more we can do to return people once they make the crossing. Those measures, taken together, will make this route unviable and end these crossings.

Jack Brereton: People across Stoke-on-Trent are extremely concerned about the number of people we are seeing crossing the English channel illegally. Does my hon. Friend agree that asylum should be claimed in the first safe country and that we should deport those here illegally?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. France is a safe country and, as I said, people who wish to claim protection from persecution when they are in

northern France should do so by claiming asylum in France. There is no need at all to attempt this dangerous and illegally facilitated crossing. When people do make the crossing, we are using all the legal means available to us to ensure that they are returned—for example, to countries where they previously claimed asylum under the Dublin regulation—and flights doing that took place last week and will take place this week.

Refugee Resettlement

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What plans she has for refugee resettlement after September 2021. [906711]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The United Kingdom, over the past five years, has, I am proud to say, run Europe's leading resettlement scheme; we have resettled more people directly from conflict zones than any other European country. It is currently paused owing to coronavirus, but as soon as we are safely and properly able to resume activity, we will do so.

Gill Furniss: The UK's refugee resettlement schemes have been a lifeline to many thousands of people who have come to the UK after escaping some of the world's most brutal conflict and regimes. However, the Government have still not allocated any funding for these schemes beyond September 2021. What assurances can the Minister give me that the UK will continue to provide safe sanctuary to those fleeing war and persecution after that date?

Chris Philp: The hon. Member will know that we are going through a spending review process, where questions of funding will be considered. Although the resettlement programme is currently paused owing to coronavirus, it is our intention to appropriately recommence it when circumstances allow. I thank her for the tribute that she paid to the scheme that has operated for the past five years. As she said, it is the leading scheme anywhere in Europe.

Rural Crime Reduction

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the level of crime committed in rural areas. [906712]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): We are determined to drive down crime in rural and urban areas, which is why we are recruiting an extra 20,000 police officers and, by the way, investing £85 million in the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that the criminal justice system can deal with the results.

Andrew Griffith: Will the Minister join me in thanking the Sussex rural crime team, which I long campaigned for and which was set up by police commissioner Katy Bourne in June this year? It is now doing excellent work, protecting our rural communities, farmers and isolated towns and villages in Arundel and South Downs.

Kit Malthouse: I am aware that my hon. Friend has made a huge impact in his constituency since he was elected recently and that this is a result of something that he has campaigned on for some time. I applaud Katy Bourne—who is one of our leading police and

crime commissioners and is always innovating—on the establishment of this unit, and I hope that it will make a big difference.

I am reminded with rural crime of that interesting philosophical question: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? If a crime happens and no one reports it, do the police see it? I urge my hon. Friend to encourage his constituents, particularly in rural areas—we have had a number of questions on rural crime today—to report every single crime, because modern policing is driven by data, and if a crime is not reported, as far as the police are concerned, it probably never happened.

Mr Speaker: Look out for those trees.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): As a Croydon MP and the shadow Policing Minister, I pay tribute to Sergeant Matt Ratana for his years of service in my community. Our community spoke as one on Friday both in our grief, but also in our gratitude for the many years of service from a wonderful officer, who was the very best of us, and we will not forget him.

Community policing is the bedrock of our communities, but it has suffered deep cuts. Those cuts have an acute impact in our rural areas, where vulnerability and isolation can be particularly severe. Only one in 14 crimes leads to court proceedings. Most victims get no justice at all. The Government have overseen a cut in the number of police community support officers by nearly 50%, and there are no plans to replace them. What does the Minister say to the victims of crime who deserve justice but under this Government are just not getting it?

Kit Malthouse: I acknowledge the hon. Lady's words about the awful events of Friday. I know that it hit home hard in Croydon for her; I think she was due to visit that very custody suite that day or the following day. It was a terrible time, and hopefully justice will follow that awful crime.

On the hon. Lady's wider point, she and I have had this discussion a number of times over the Dispatch Box. Although repetition is not infrequent in this Chamber, I urge her to reflect on the fact that for the first half of the coalition and then Conservative Government, we were struggling with a difficult financial situation nationally, and crime was falling. That required a different kind of response to the one we see today. She is right to point to the fact that we have seen a rise in crime over the past couple of years, albeit different kinds of crime from those we have seen previously. That is why we are massively increasing police capacity and bringing enormous focus, through the National Policing Board, the Crime Performance Board, which I lead, and the Strategic Change and Investment Board at the Home Office, to the national systemic problems that she raises in the hope that, over the next three years, we can drive them down significantly.

Asylum Seekers: Resettlement and Relocation

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What her policy is on the resettlement and relocation of refugees and asylum seekers to the UK from (a) Greece and (b) other countries. [906713]

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): If she will relocate a number of unaccompanied refugee children affected by the recent fire at Moria refugee camp on Lesbos from Greece to the UK. [906714]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): As another Croydon MP, I would like to add my words to those of my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), and pay tribute to Sergeant Ratana and his long track record of service to our local community. Everybody in the borough, from north to south, feels it deeply. Our sympathy and condolences go to his family at what must be an agonising and heartbreaking time.

On the question of resettlement, we are continuing to welcome family reunion cases, as we are obliged to do under the Dublin regulations, including from Greece—in fact, particularly from Greece. Already this summer, three flights have brought in refugees to reunite them with family members in the United Kingdom, so we are continuing to discharge our obligations.

Stuart C. McDonald [V]: Conditions on the Aegean islands were an overcrowded living hell for asylum seekers, even before the fire at Moria left 13,000 homeless. Given what the Home Secretary said to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) about the importance of safe legal routes, surely the Government must now join Germany and France in offering to relocate some of the most vulnerable asylum seekers from the Aegean islands, even beyond those for whom they have responsibility under family reunion rules.

Chris Philp: We are investigating ways that the United Kingdom Government can help our colleagues in Greece. That includes the possibility of using overseas aid money to assist them, as well as looking at people who are entitled to be relocated to the UK under the Dublin regulations, and at what we can do to assist and expedite that process.

Stella Creasy [V]: I have some numbers to put this issue in context. Some 13,000 refugees are without any shelter as a result of the recent fires in Greece, 3,800 of whom are children. There are 21 confirmed cases of covid in the camp, which has a quarantine capacity of just 30. Ten countries, including France, Germany, Croatia and Portugal, have already agreed to take some of the hundreds of unaccompanied young minors in the camp. At present, we have taken just 16, but this place promised to take 3,000 under the Dubs scheme. Will the Minister give me and others who are concerned about this issue just one meeting to discuss what more we can do on our obligations to those vulnerable young children?

Chris Philp: We have fulfilled our Dubs obligation in full: 380 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have been brought to the UK from European countries, in addition to 3,500 who came here last year. That is higher than any other country in Europe. In addition to that, we are honouring our Dublin obligations to Greece. It is not 16; well over 100 people have been taken from Greece directly back here. Where we have further obligations, we will do everything we can to make sure we meet them. In addition to that, as I said in response

to an earlier question, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is looking at ways that we can help to provide the kind of shelter that the hon. Lady referred to. There is a lot that the Government have done and will continue to do. If she would like to meet me to discuss that, I would be delighted to do so.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I understand that on 15 September partner agencies were notified that the Home Office was lifting a ban on asylum evictions with immediate effect. I appreciate that the pause in the system cannot continue indefinitely. However, to evict people into destitution and homelessness as we enter a second wave of infections completely undermines public health efforts to keep everyone safe from the virus, especially in areas like mine that have local restrictions in place. Can the Minister share with us the plan to ensure that these risks do not become a reality?

Chris Philp: As the shadow Minister says, on 27 March we paused cessations whereby people leave asylum accommodation when their decision is made positively or negatively. On 11 August, we resumed those for positive cases where they have been granted asylum, in a very phased, very careful, week-by-week, step-by-step way, moving them, where necessary, into local authority and other kinds of accommodation. We are now just beginning the process for the negative cases where asylum has not been granted, because clearly we cannot accommodate people at public expense indefinitely when their asylum claim has been rejected. We are doing this in a very careful, phased, week-by-week way to make sure that the sorts of risks that she describes do not come to pass. Where there are safe routes home to the country of origin for people whose claims have been rejected, we are working to make sure that those safe routes home are taken.

Public Order: Covid-19

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to maintain public order during the covid-19 outbreak. [906716]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Throughout the pandemic, our police officers have been on the streets every single day working tirelessly to stop the spread of coronavirus. I am in contact, virtually every day now, with the National Police Chiefs Council and policing leaders to ensure that we have the right plans and the right approach to make sure that the police play their role in stopping the spread of the virus and maintaining public order.

Dr Spencer: During the lockdown in Runnymede and Weybridge, we saw a huge community response and support to get through some of its real challenges. Unfortunately, though, a small minority have been making life miserable for people through antisocial behaviour. I have already heard that, with the new measures coming in, this is starting up again. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the importance of tackling antisocial behaviour and assure me that the police have the support and resources necessary to do so?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the full impacts of antisocial behaviour previously that are manifesting again. That is why police leaders

are working with local authority partners to address many of these issues. He is right to point out that we must back the police to have the tools, the powers and the support they need. We will back them all the way to make sure that we deal with issues such as antisocial behaviour.

Emergency Services: Assaults

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to protect emergency service workers from assault. [906717]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I have said before in this Chamber and will say it again: in my view, anybody who lays a malicious finger on a police officer, or indeed any emergency worker, should face swift and severe retribution through the criminal justice system. We recently announced our intention to double the maximum sentence for assaults on emergency workers.

Huw Merriman: I am encouraged by the Minister's response. Last week, Sussex MPs met the south-east coast ambulance service team, and we were disturbed to hear of an increase in assaults where drink and drugs seems to be a factor. Can the Minister, through his Department and across Government, work to ensure that when it comes to policing, prosecution and sentencing of these individuals, drink or drug abuse is an aggravating factor, not a mitigating factor, and that we stand by our ambulance personnel and ensure that those who abuse them go behind bars?

Kit Malthouse: There is absolutely no excuse for assaulting any kind of emergency worker, whether one is on drink or drugs or completely sober. I have to confess that I do not comprehend what goes on in the twisted mind of someone who would commit an assault, particularly on somebody in an ambulance who is coming to the medical aid of a fellow citizen. My hon. Friend raises a good point about aggravating factors. When we shortly consider, hopefully, the doubling of the sentence in legislation, I will certainly take that into account. The Sentencing Council is about to start a review of the sentencing of assault, and I urge him and others to make a submission to that forum as to aggravating factors.

Asylum Accommodation: Covid-19

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What her policy is on the provision of asylum accommodation during the covid-19 pandemic. [906718]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): As I have mentioned, during the coronavirus pandemic we have been allowing people to remain in their asylum accommodation even after their asylum decision has been made, positively or negatively. We started cessations in August for positive cases, and more recently in England for negative ones. As a result, the number of people we have been supporting has gone up hugely, from about 48,000 to about 60,000 across the UK. That has put enormous strain on the system, but we have been working night and day to accommodate that strain.

Martyn Day [V]: As covid's second wave hits, the Minister must recognise that evicting asylum seekers into destitution will be a disaster for both asylum seekers and the communities into which they are evicted. Will she reverse these utterly reckless plans and confirm whether public health directors and bodies were consulted about this specific decision, and what they advised?

Chris Philp: I am a he, not a she. We will not reverse the decision, because we need to make sure that when their asylum decisions have been made, people are moved on into the community. We cannot accommodate people indefinitely. As I said in answer to the hon. Gentleman's first question, the number of people we are accommodating has gone up from 48,000 to 60,000 as a result of stopping move-ons over the summer period. The system is under huge strain, and it is not reasonable to ask the taxpayer to accommodate people on an indefinite basis. We are doing this in a very careful and measured way. We are not doing it all in one go; we are doing it week by week, very slowly and carefully, and at all times in consultation with public health bodies.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I wonder whether the Minister could make me two promises today: first, to publish in Parliament the report of his evaluation of asylum accommodation and support in Glasgow, including the use of hotels and the tragic deaths that have occurred; and, secondly, to provide a copy of that report to the Lord Advocate, who is considering whether to initiate a fatal accident inquiry into the tragic deaths of asylum seekers in Glasgow during the lockdown?

Chris Philp: As the hon. and learned Lady says, formal investigations are going on, and of course the Home Office will support them in any way that we are asked. In relation to the internal review that is taking place, I have not received that report yet, but when I do, I will look at it carefully and consider how best to proceed thereafter. On the question of hotel use, I think we all agree that it is not ideal. We are working as rapidly as we can to reduce and eventually end the use of hotels, not just in the city of Glasgow but across the whole United Kingdom.

Topical Questions

[906674] **Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Last Friday, we saw the senseless murder of police sergeant Matt Ratana while he was on duty in Croydon. His tragic death in the line of duty is a reminder to us all of the risk that our brave officers take each and every day to keep us all safe. I know the House will join me in paying tribute to his courage and service, and also in sending our sincere and heartfelt condolences to his family, friends and colleagues.

A murder investigation is now under way, and I remain in regular contact with the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police. The entire policing family are grieving, and they have my full support. I will continue to do everything in my power to protect them, including spearheading work to double sentences for attacks on

emergency workers, and legislating to introduce a police covenant to enshrine in law support for our officers and their families.

Richard Burgon [V]: The PCS union has raised fears that Serco could be handed contracts to carry out the very sensitive interviews of people who are seeking refuge here in our country. Serco's disastrous handling of much of our test and trace system shows once again why such giant outsourcing companies should not be running key public services. Does the Home Secretary accept that we must protect vulnerable people who are seeking asylum, and that that means not handing sensitive asylum interviews over to Serco, or other private contractors, to make money from?

Priti Patel: As the hon. Gentleman has already heard throughout oral questions, the fact of the matter is that we are totally committed, and rightly so, to protecting the way in which those who seek asylum are treated in our system. He has already heard about strains and pressures, and it is right that we undertake all interviews in the right and proper phased way. That is exactly what we are doing, in a responsible manner.

[906677] **David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con):** Proportionately, the UK is not a major destination for asylum seekers, but those who have a legal claim here face a Catch-22 situation. Currently, someone must be in the UK to establish a claim, but what plans does my right hon. Friend, and her Department, have to create safe legal routes, so that we are able robustly to disrupt traffickers who are trying to bring people in illegally?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right about the greater need for safe and legal routes, but it is right that as a Government we pursue those individuals who are facilitating criminality. Hon. Members have already heard the figures for arrests and numbers of convictions, and we will continue with that. We are working right now to look at new, safe and legal routes for the protection of those who need our help.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I know that I speak for the whole House in saying how devastated we all were to hear of the death of Sergeant Matt Ratana on Friday. The tributes we have heard have been heartfelt and deeply moving, and our deepest condolences are with his friends, family and fellow officers, and indeed the wider community in Croydon. His death gave National Police Memorial Day yesterday particular poignancy.

The level of violence against police officers is worrying and it is rising. As John Apter, national chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales, said at the weekend, "we are seeing more firearms out on the streets and we are doing a lot to try to combat it... More and more are being seized."

What additional steps are being taken to deal with that increase in the possession of firearms and keep our officers safe?

Priti Patel: I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman's comments following the appalling death of Sergeant Matt Ratana. I spoke yesterday to the chair of the Police Federation, John Apter, on a number of issues. First and foremost, I restated this Government's commitment and determination to address assaults on emergency workers. Like many others, he was right to point out—we

know this when it comes to policing—the risks that our officers face every day, which also relates to the number of firearms in circulation.

The Government are working to address the issue of firearms entering our country, and we are working with our national intelligence agencies and services, as well as the National Crime Agency. A great deal of work is taking place on firearms that have been imported to our country—not just weapons, but component parts—as well as on ways that criminals who are facilitating firearms, and the harm that they cause, can be intercepted and tackled. We are developing greater legislation to look at more police powers, and at ways that they themselves could do more work to tackle serious violence and high levels of harm, including with firearms.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I, too, praise the work of the National Crime Agency, and we will of course carefully consider any legislation that comes forward. However, as I am sure the Home Secretary appreciates, help is needed now. The work of our police has become harder and harder as numbers have fallen, and violent crime has risen in every part of our country. I have written to the Home Secretary pointing out that the violent crime taskforce has not met for more than a year. It has not been replaced by a similar, specialist body, which leaves a vital strategic element of addressing violence missing. Will the Home Secretary commit to working on a cross-party basis to convene a replacement strategic taskforce that can address violent crime and the issues that drive it?

Priti Patel: As the hon. Gentleman will know, issues of serious violent crime are addressed at the National Policing Board. We are looking at those issues and working on them day in, day out. The Government are not just committed to that; we are spending and investing the money. We have the serious violence reduction taskforce, and right now, funding is going directly to policing, and money has been materialised and operationalised on the streets of our country. We are tackling serious and violent crime, and leadership is also coming from the National Policing Board.

[906679] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps is the Home Office taking to tackle the demand from sex buyers that drives the sex slave industry? Will the Home Secretary meet me and colleagues from the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission who have produced a report on this subject entitled “The Limits of Consent”?

Priti Patel: I welcome the hon. Lady’s question and also the report that she is referring to. We have seen the report and I will absolutely commit to a meeting with her and her colleagues. It is quite clear that we as a Government and we as individuals are committed to tackling the harm and exploitation that is associated with prostitution. Of course our priority is to protect those who are exploited and to protect vulnerable people, and there are certainly some very practical ways in which we can do that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join the tributes to Sergeant Matt Ratana. No one should ever underestimate the bravery of police officers and the risks they take to keep us all safe.

Last week, the Select Committee heard evidence from the counter-extremism commissioner and the national counter-terror chief on the way in which extremists have exploited the covid crisis, and they called for new, co-ordinated action against extremism to be set up through a taskforce led by the Home Secretary. That is something that was first recommended over a year ago. Does the Home Secretary agree that we need this co-ordinated action as part of the vital work to protect our national security, and if so, why has the taskforce not yet been set up? Why has it not yet met?

Priti Patel: I met Sara Khan last week and had a very constructive discussion with her about ways of working—not just the work of the taskforce but the entire field of counter-extremism, the work that is associated, and the lessons to be learned from the past. Obviously we are using the expertise of the Committee itself to look at learnings and how we can address the threat spectrum across the board. We have many experienced practitioners in this field and I am working with Sara Khan and others to develop learnings and look at the approach that we are going to take.

[906680] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): We owe our frontline police officers a debt of gratitude. I recently saw at first hand the great work that they do when I joined Thames Valley police for a night shift as part of its ride-along scheme in Bracknell. Home Secretary, is it now time to enshrine the police covenant in law?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to Thames Valley police. It is an exceptional and outstanding police force, and I know his community is served well by it. He has heard my remarks on the police covenant, and it is absolutely right that we do much more to protect our frontline officers and their family members and provide the welfare support that they all need as well. I absolutely concur with all Members of the House in recognising that Friday’s murder highlights why we need to put that into law.

[906675] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: My constituent Angela was detained in 2011. She was abandoned in the UK as a child with a man who imprisoned her. He and others beat and repeatedly raped her until she escaped as a teenager. Two clinical professionals and a human trafficking expert have reported to the Home Office that her story is credible. The Home Office refuses to consider this evidence, insisting that Angela is covering up her true identity, and it has attempted to deport her. Will the Home Secretary conduct an urgent review of Angela’s case, please?

Priti Patel: I ask the hon. Member to contact me directly with the background and history of this particular case, and I will look into it.

[906681] **Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): This summer, my constituency has seen a real spate of antisocial motorcyclists causing real distress and potential danger to my constituents. Does the Home Secretary agree that such dangerous driving needs to be robustly challenged?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to his police force in particular and his police chief for the outstanding work they do. I know

that rural crime was mentioned earlier, but when it comes to tackling nuisance driving and, frankly, the wrong kind of driving—speeding and all those types of issues, including on mopeds and scooters—we need to ensure that people can go about their daily lives. We are already providing more funding for more police activity through police uplift, and the police have powers under the Road Traffic Act 1988 and the Police Reform Act 2002 to seize vehicles that are being driven illegally.

[906676] **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Last year, the Treasury Committee reported on economic crime, finding that an estimated £90 billion of dirty money was laundered through the City of London every year. As the Home Secretary will know, economic crime is not victimless; it includes human trafficking, child sexual abuse and exploitation, the sale of illegal drugs and firearms, and much else. In the light of the recent FinCEN—Financial Crimes Enforcement Network—report, as reported by “Panorama”, what action will the Home Secretary take to redouble her efforts to get a grip on this kind of financial crime?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She has highlighted the gross severity of what is taking place, not just with economic crime, but with how our financial systems are associated with the facilitation of dirty money. Of course, we as a country do not want to be associated with that, and much more needs to happen. The FinCEN example was a very strong indication as to where there have been gaps in the system, and extensive work is taking place right now. I would be more than happy for her to discuss with officials more of the work being undertaken in this area, because there are far too many sources of illegal economic finance and perpetrators of economic crime. There is no doubt that, through our international financial system, we can all do a lot more.

[906682] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Our frontline police officers have performed an incredible service throughout the pandemic, keeping us safe while putting themselves in the line of danger, as we saw so tragically with the killing of Sussex officer Matt Ratana. That job is not made any easier when groups of demonstrators take it upon themselves to

flout social distancing regulations and take their anger out on the police. Does the Home Secretary agree that there is no excuse for such irresponsible gatherings at this time, however worthy people think their cause is, and that they should desist? May I also echo the calls by my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) for us speedily to enshrine the police covenant in law?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right to point out a number of key facts. Assaults on police officers are thoroughly unacceptable, and I am afraid that this weekend alone we saw a range of assaults on officers serving in the Metropolitan police when they were policing protests. Those were ugly and unacceptable scenes, and there is simply no excuse for assaults. The other point to make is that we are in a national emergency—we are still in a health pandemic—and the police are working valiantly to attempt to stop the spread of the virus. The public are acting brilliantly by being conscientious, undertaking the measures and safeguarding in the right kind of way. It is right that we all play our own role, but to turn our fire on the police is completely wrong. It is inappropriate at every level, and the public, not just when it comes to protest but in their conduct in respect of coronavirus, must be conscientious and respect the police in every way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but that was the final question, given the length of time we have taken. May I just advise Members that questions and answers should be short and punchy, as we are defeating the idea of topicals, which is why we have not got very far today? I hope that we can learn from today.

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.

3.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

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

Point of Order

3.37 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder if I might seek your advice. Exactly a week ago in this Chamber, I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the efficacy of vitamin D as an extra bit of armour against coronavirus. He said that he had conducted a trial and there was no effect. It turns out that there was no trial. Apparently it was a National Institute for Health and Care Excellence review of secondary evidence on 1 July. The word “trial” implies fresh evidence, not reheated leftovers. The Secretary of State is here, so I wonder if he can correct the record.

I put this matter in as a written question to the Department of Health and Social Care and the answer came back that it had not been able to answer in time. It was the press office that told me about the secondary review of evidence. Is it not unsatisfactory when we do things through the correct channels and it is the spin doctors who end up answering? Can we do better by not embellishing the facts and by getting things in the proper way?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of her point of order. The Secretary of State is here if he wishes to make any comment.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The evidence is as described. I would be very happy to take the hon. Lady and any other Member through the existing evidence and to listen to any further evidence she has. What matters is getting the best and the right clinical advice. I am enthusiastic to hear about all possible scientific advances that might be helpful.

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order for the Chair, but I think the hon. Lady can be satisfied that a meeting has been offered. That is important. The only other thing she put on the record—and I know the Secretary of State is well aware of this—is that we do need speedy replies to MPs.

Covid-19

3.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I beg to move,

That this House has considered covid-19.

Today’s debate comes at a critical moment, as coronavirus continues its deadly march across the globe. Too many lives have been cut short and there has been too much hardship and suffering. Here at home we have seen a sharp rise in the number of cases, and this must concern us all. We know from bitter experience in so many countries that the nature of exponential growth is that, once the virus is spreading, it accelerates, with all the consequences that brings.

It is the first duty of Government—of any Government—to keep people safe. Our duty—that of each of us here in this House—is to seek to represent our constituents to the best of our ability in their interests and in the interests of the nation. In tackling this unprecedented pandemic, we must each of us seek to balance the cherished freedoms on which people thrive with that duty to keep people safe, balancing in each judgment the economic, social, educational and, of course, health needs on which our nation’s future depends.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If the first duty of Government is to keep people safe, will the Secretary of State remember that the first duty of Parliament is to hold Government to account? I know that he wants to take public opinion with him, but will he therefore reassure us that he is also determined to take Parliament with him? In that respect, may I urge him to meet with my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and come to a compromise to ensure that, if there are further national lockdowns, Parliament will be fully involved in the process?

Matt Hancock: I thought this might come up. I was going to develop the argument further before coming to the nub of that particular point, but, since my right hon. Friend gives me the opportunity, I strongly agree with the need for us in this House to have the appropriate level of scrutiny. As the Prime Minister set out last week, we have already put in place further measures. The aim is to provide the House with the opportunity to scrutinise in advance through regular statements and debates, questioning the Government’s scientific advisers more regularly—that has already started—gaining access to local data and having the daily calls with Ministers, including my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General.

We are looking at further ways to ensure that the House can be properly involved in the process—in advance, where possible. I hope to provide the House with further details soon. I will take up the invitation to a further meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), whom I have already met to discuss this matter, to see what further progress can be made. I hope that that, for the time being, satisfies my right hon. Friend.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): If the right hon. Member considers the efficacy of parliamentary scrutiny, has he looked at what the New Zealand Parliament has done? It has set up a special Select Committee, led by

[Ms Angela Eagle]

the Leader of the Opposition and with an Opposition majority on it, to subject the Government's performance to more direct and transparent scrutiny. It appears to have worked very well indeed. Perhaps he would consider that this Parliament could behave in that way.

Matt Hancock: The structure of Select Committees is a matter for the House, of course, and far be it from me to impinge on the business of the House and the proper responsibilities of the Leader of the House. I welcome the scrutiny that this House gives. I have answered seven urgent questions, given 12 statements and taken 800 interventions since the start of the pandemic. I am committed to continuing the engagement.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): More!

Matt Hancock: That includes some brilliant interventions from my right hon. Friend, who calls for more from a sedentary position. So there is further work to do, and I look forward to engaging with colleagues to ensure that we have the proper parliamentary scrutiny.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): To develop the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), I accept the points about scrutiny that the Secretary of State makes, but it is about not just scrutiny but the laws we are making. The laws that came in at midnight, for example, were 12 pages of laws, with lots of detail, criminal offences and duties not mentioned when they were set out in a statement last week. That includes duties on employers, directors and officers, with serious criminal penalties. We need to scrutinise the detail of the legislation before it comes into force and give our assent, and not, I am afraid, just allow the Secretary of State to put it into force by decree.

Matt Hancock: Of course, sometimes in this pandemic we have to move fast. Sometimes we have had to move fast, and we may need to do so again. The challenge we have in this House is how to ensure proper scrutiny while also being able, when necessary, to move fast in response to the virus. That is the challenge that collectively we all face.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I reassure my right hon. Friend that I am going to praise him later, but the Constitution Unit at University College London tweeted earlier about the regulations mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) that

"this policy was briefed to the media 8 days ago. Was it really not possible to schedule proper, detailed parliamentary debate during that time, given the far-reaching consequences?"

It added:

"Given the current mood, it seems very likely MPs will ask this."

Well, I am asking. Surely it was possible, in eight days, to have the debate that my right hon. Friend has called for.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for the tone in which my hon. Friend has engaged in this issue. He is a great supporter of parliamentary rights, and I am a fellow traveller in heart. The challenge is how to do that and

also be able to move at pace. I would be very happy to talk with him, along with others, about how to make this happen. I would say, however, in respect of the laws that came into place overnight, that I set them out in a statement—in fact, the Prime Minister set out many of them in a statement last week—so we have been clear about the policy intent. The question is how we can make sure that we deal with this appropriately in the future.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I praise my right hon. Friend for what he has done through this pandemic. He has an impossibly difficult job. He has had to take decisions quickly, and he is right to take decisions quickly. But when it comes to new national measures, many of us represent areas where the incidence of the virus remains very low. In the southern part of my constituency—in that district—there were no cases last week. Before we embark on measures that affect everyone, as opposed to firefighting in individual areas, it is really important that this House has the chance to scrutinise, hold to account and challenge. We know my right hon. Friend wants to do the right thing, and we want to help him do the right thing.

Matt Hancock: Help like that is always very welcome. What I can say is that we want to ensure that the House can be properly involved in this process while also allowing the whole nation to move fast where that is necessary. What I would say to my right hon. Friend and others on this point is that I welcome the rightful recognition that sometimes we do have to decide at pace. This is an unprecedented situation and the truth is that the secondary legislation procedures were not designed for a situation like this. The question is how we can have the appropriate level of scrutiny while also making sure that we can move fast where that is necessary.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): On another point—with the leave of the Chair, we may debate these matters around process in a couple of days' time—may I focus the Secretary of State on the positives? Although there are many challenges, which I will come to if I catch the Speaker's eye later, we have many things to celebrate in this country about how we have approached the response to this pandemic—not least the brilliant scientific community in this country, which has produced the only known effective treatment for covid-19 and is doing great work on getting us closer to a vaccine. We like to beat ourselves up—or, rather, the media like to beat us up—but is not the truth that we have many things that the rest of the world follows us in?

Matt Hancock: That is right, and in fact my hon. Friend leads me to where I was going to come next. He is right: whether it is producing the only known treatment, dexamethasone, or having a leading vaccine candidate around the world, or the work that our staff in the NHS did to protect the NHS in the peak of the crisis, or building the Nightingale hospitals in nine days—they told us we would never get that done, but we did—or sorting out the huge problems we had in the provision of personal protective equipment. With the PPE strategy that we set out and published today, we have made it clear that, on all but one line of PPE, by the end of this year we are on track for 70% of our PPE to be produced here in this country. When I got this job, it was 1%. These changes are all huge areas of progress that we have

made in tackling this virus, and I am very proud of the whole team who have come together to make them happen.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Matt Hancock: I will take one more intervention on this point, and then I am going to make some more progress.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is nice to be informed, nice to be consulted and nice to be able to scrutinise, but in the end it is about who decides. Can the Secretary of State explain why he is so against Parliament's making the decision, even if he argues for urgency and immediacy—within two days, for example—to either confirm or revoke those regulations? Why is he against Parliament's being the one that finally decides on this? It is quite clear that this is not even being decided in Cabinet, but just by one or two Cabinet members. Let Parliament decide.

Matt Hancock: I have said what I have to say on this. This is clearly an area on which I am very happy to engage with the right hon. Gentleman and everybody else, along with the Leader of the House and the parliamentary authorities, to try to find a way forward.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): May I have a progress report on something we have talked about before: infection control? This time round, will there be isolation hospitals so that we can control the infection in the hospital sector better, and will there be good controls to prevent the seepage of people with infection back to care homes?

Matt Hancock: The answer to both those questions is yes. We have learnt a huge amount about those and put in place improved procedures, but I am going to come on to the question of the impact of that on our strategy.

The virus has shown beyond all possible doubt that the health of one of us begets the health of us all. Without a doubt in my mind, the central question about the control of the virus, and one that I ask myself every day, is, "How do we best keep people safe from this virus while protecting liberty and livelihoods and the things that make life worth living?" I believe that in reality there is not a simple trade-off between those things, because the exponential growth of the virus means that there are in reality only two paths: either to control the virus or to let it rip.

There is no middle option, because once the virus is growing, it accelerates. To the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), I am convinced that no matter how effectively we protect the vulnerable, and protect them we must, letting the virus rip would leave a death toll too big to bear. In reality, the only question is how to control the virus and when to put measures in place.

That comes directly to the question that we have been debating about both how to control the virus, and how we must act fast. The best thing we can do for schools, for our economy and for both lives and livelihoods is to act fast, together, to control the virus and to keep the rate of infections down. From that goal flows our strategy, which is to suppress the virus while protecting our economy and education until a vaccine arrives.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is this not why we need evidence-based interventions? The Secretary of State will have seen clips of what happened in my constituency on Saturday night at 10 o'clock, as the streets filled out with young people enjoying themselves and partying with no social distancing, clearly creating the worst of environments. Will he now review the policy of the 10 o'clock curfew to ensure that our streets and neighbourhoods are safe?

Matt Hancock: We always look at the effects of these policies. We have to take everything in the round, including the level of social distancing that might have been going on, were that to continue all through the night. One reason we brought in the policy is that we have seen it work in other countries, as the hon. Lady knows. None of these interventions on social distancing are ones that we take lightly or want to put in place. The central question is how we keep control of the virus in the best possible way, while reducing the impact on the economy and on education as much as possible.

Mr Harper: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his indulgence in taking a second intervention. I agree with him: unlike some people, I think we need to take tough measures to deal with the virus, and that we sometimes need to act quickly. The really important question is: will the measures be effective, and do we have the evidence to support that? Therefore, I gently say to the Secretary of State that that is why I think that Ministers coming to Parliament, marshalling the arguments and laying out the evidence, means that we get better decisions that are likely to be more effective in dealing with the virus and protecting our economy. I think that is the general view of many colleagues, on both sides of the House, and I hope he will reflect on that when he meets my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady).

Matt Hancock: It is a view that I very largely share. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the number of times that I have stood at this Dispatch Box and taken into account points made by Members, from either side of the House, is beyond what I can count. Listening to points that have been made has been part of the rhythm of the response. I therefore caution against the idea that there has not been parliamentary scrutiny, and I know that because I have been at this Dispatch Box usually several times a week when Parliament has been sitting. But I understand the concerns—of course I do—and I hope we can find an appropriate way forward.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): The Secretary of State has said that there are essentially two strategies, but there is, of course, a third strategy, based on elimination, which is what New Zealand has pursued. It had succeeded, although there has been a slight resurgence over recent weeks. Is elimination a viable strategy for the UK?

Matt Hancock: I would love it if elimination were a realistic strategy, but everywhere in the world that has tried an elimination strategy has, sadly, seen a resurgence. New Zealand attempted an elimination strategy and saw a resurgence. Scotland attempted an elimination strategy and saw a resurgence. The virulence of this disease and its prevalence globally—we are almost at the point of

[*Matt Hancock*]

1 million deaths around the world—mean that our two realistic options are suppression until a vaccine comes and letting it rip, and I know which of those two I support. The Government's position is based entirely on the goal of suppressing the virus while working as fast as we can towards a vaccine.

The truth is that many things have gone well. I thank everybody who has been doing the right thing, following the rules, clicking on the QR codes, washing their hands, wearing a face mask and keeping their space. I thank the people who have been involved in the successes, including the Nightingale hospitals, which I have mentioned, and the NHS and care teams. I thank those who built, almost from scratch, the biggest testing capability of all our peers. Today we are on track to process our 20 millionth test, which is more than the number of tests conducted in France and Spain together. I thank everyone who has played their part, just this weekend, in the fastest download of an app in British history, with 22.4 million downloads as of noon today.

We have done those things together. Never has it been more true to say that no man is an island. None of it would have been possible without a huge team effort. The challenges, as we have discussed, have been legion—I have no doubt that this is the biggest crisis in my lifetime—and we know that we can rise to them only if we do so together.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On testing, is the Secretary of State as appalled as I am that scammers are calling vulnerable people and suggesting that the NHS wishes to charge £50 per test? When the constituent queries them, the scammers insist that they are calling from the track and trace service and that they should give them their bank details. Will the Secretary of State condemn that and raise the issue with the Home Secretary so that these scammers are prosecuted with the full force of the law?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I am aware of these sorts of scams, and we have a programme of action to take against them. It is an outrage that people should try to take advantage of a global pandemic in this illegal way.

I want to update the House on the changes that we have brought into force on requiring and mandating self-isolation. From today, we have introduced a £500 support payment for those self-isolating on low incomes. On top of that, I can tell the House that we are providing £15 million so that local authorities can make discretionary payments to people who do not meet the criteria of the scheme but may also face financial hardship if they have to self-isolate and cannot work. We know that self-isolation works, and we know that the vast majority of people want to do the right thing, so we will enhance support for those who do and come down hard on those who flout the rules.

Our second line of defence is testing and contact tracing. The 20 millionth test today means that we will have processed more tests than Italy and Spain combined. We are expanding our testing capacity all the time, on track to 500,000 a day by the end of the month. Of course, testing only provides the information. What matters is that people act on it, so we have built a

veritable army of contact tracers at enormous scale, and they are complemented by the app. It is a cross-party app. I am grateful for the huge support that it has received, and I urge everybody, including every single Member of this House, to join the 12.4 million.

We have so much more information about the virus than we had in the first peak, which means that we can take a more targeted and localised approach. Over the past few months, local restrictions have allowed us to home in on areas where cases are high and rising and put targeted measures in place.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Secretary of State talks about testing being so important in providing data. Does he therefore regret that in recent weeks, we have seen 40% of testing capacity taken out of London? We are now seeing hospitalisations rising, with talk about further restrictions in London, but we cannot base it on reliable testing data because there has not been enough testing done—people in my constituency and across London are still struggling to access tests. Does he agree that that was the wrong move to make?

Matt Hancock: We ensure that testing is prioritised in the areas with the greatest prevalence, and we look at not only the number of positive cases but the surveys and the positivity rate. Those all inform the needs. I understand why the hon. Lady rightly fights for more testing in her constituency, but we have to ensure that testing is used in the places where it is most needed. We know more about this because we now have mass testing, with capacity for over a quarter of a million tests a day, which means that we can take a more targeted and local approach.

Unfortunately, as case rates have gone up, we have needed to introduce more local measures. On Friday, we introduced new restrictions on household mixing for Wigan, Stockport, Blackpool and Leeds, and today, I must announce further measures for the parts of the north-east where we introduced local action a fortnight ago. Unfortunately, the number of cases continues to rise sharply. The incidence rate across the area is now over 100 cases per 100,000. We know that a large number of these infections are taking place in indoor settings outside the home, so, at the request of the local councils, with which we have been working closely, we will introduce legal restrictions on indoor mixing between households in any setting. We do not take these steps lightly, but we must take them now, because we know that swift action is more likely to bring the virus under control. The quicker we can get this virus under control, the quicker we can restore the freedoms that we all enjoy in the north-east and across the country.

All the time that we have been fighting to suppress the virus, so too we have fought to protect people—through the furlough scheme, the bounce back loans and funding for social care, the charities, the arts, as well as unprecedented support for the NHS, so that we could protect it through the peak and now work through the backlog that the peak inevitably caused. Through the huge challenges, we secured the supply lines for vital PPE, and hence we can now launch our PPE winter plan. I would like to pay tribute to Lord Deighton, his team and all the businesses that are stepping up, because their work has put us in such strong stead to protect those who are performing heroics on the frontline.

Finally, the best way to protect us in the long term, for our lives and our livelihoods, is a vaccine. Work progresses as fast as is safely possible. On Friday, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation published its interim guidance on how we propose to prioritise access to a vaccine as soon as one becomes available. A huge planning effort is under way, led by the NHS and with the support of the armed forces, to ensure that we are ready for a roll-out as soon as is feasibly possible. Building on years of experience of the annual flu vaccine roll-out, the national effort to come brings hope to us all.

All the way through this pandemic, I have welcomed debate and scrutiny in this House. On Wednesday, we will debate and vote on extending the vital measures in the Coronavirus Act 2020, which provides powers that are critical to the control of the virus. I urge all colleagues to work together to ensure that we come through this in the best possible way, because ultimately, wherever in this Chamber we may sit, we are all on the same side, steadfast in our determination to defeat this deadly virus.

Mr Speaker: I am aiming for five-minute speeches after the Front Benchers.

4.5 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Almost 1 million people worldwide have died from an illness that no one had heard of 10 months ago. Here in the United Kingdom, almost 42,000 have lost their lives.

Last week, I spoke to bereaved families who want justice. They have shared with me heartbreaking stories such as Tony Clay's. He was 60, fit and healthy, with mild blood pressure. He had returned from France to be with his family and grandson. He travelled through airports and train stations. He was under 70, so he did not think he was at risk. After 12 days at home, he felt flu-like symptoms. After 14 days, he was admitted to hospital. He deteriorated. He died, leaving behind devastated loved ones and a heartbroken grandson. There are thousands and thousands of stories of shattered families from these past six months. We cannot bring back lost loved ones, but we must ensure that lessons are learned, and an inquiry must take place at the appropriate time.

We are now facing a resurgence, or a second wave or second tide—whatever we call it, we know that prevalence is rising. We are seeing an increase in admissions to critical care: according to the latest data from the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre, September's critical care admissions reveal that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are over-represented in admissions, as are people from the very poorest backgrounds. That is a sobering reminder that covid thrives on inequalities, interacting with a number of long-term conditions such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes and other non-communicable diseases—conditions that we know disproportionately cluster in the most disadvantaged groups of society.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, despite the evidence on the disproportionate impact on BAME communities and poorer communities, the Government have yet to take the steps required to improve their outcomes? A potential second wave could be further devastating for those groups who have already been hit hard.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. We had the Public Health England report before the summer; we need those recommendations to be implemented. The point I am coming to, which reinforces the point my hon. Friend makes, is that yes, suppressing the virus depends on a vaccine and its distribution, but it is also clear that we need a health inequalities strategy as well.

We face this second wave knowing more about the virus than we did earlier in the year. Treatment has improved and continues to improve—I pay tribute to the national health service and our medical science base for that—but exposure to the virus remains dangerous. Indeed, many who catch the virus are left with serious debilitating conditions—the so-called long covid. The Secretary of State has promised us long covid clinics, but we are still waiting for them to open.

The Opposition reject those siren voices who say that we must let the virus rip through the population while the vulnerable shield. That may suit those with financial security and support in place, but for the disadvantaged it could be lethal. Others say that we must put the economy first, but controlling the virus and protecting the economy are linked objectives, not in conflict with each other. There can be no economic renewal without a healthy population, so taking action now to save lives and minimise harm is in our long-term economic interests.

Mr Steve Baker: The hon. Member is making a very interesting speech, but I just wonder which Member of this House has said the virus should be allowed to let rip? I have not, and I am not aware of any other Member of Parliament thinking it should be let rip?

Jonathan Ashworth: I was not directing my comments at any particular Member, but the hon. Gentleman will know that there is a debate raging on that very point and I was repeating a comment not a million miles away from the remarks the Secretary of State made at the Dispatch Box.

We support a strategy to suppress this virus to save lives, minimise harm and keep children in school, which brings me to the debate raging about restrictions and the role of the House in imposing these restrictions. Neither the Secretary of State nor I came into politics to impose curtailments on our liberties, but when faced with a virus that spreads with speed and severity and when faced with the biggest public health crisis for over 100 years, we understand the need for restrictions: these restrictions are about preventing harm.

That is why, in March, when the Prime Minister invited the then Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and me to Downing Street to discuss these restrictions, we offered our support and co-operation. That is not to say that we do not have deep concerns about the Act to be debated on Wednesday—the Coronavirus Act 2020. We believe the Care Act easements, because of how they affect people in receipt of care, must be switched off. We maintain deep concerns about the rights of people detained under the Mental Health Act, and we need reassurances about the rights of children with special educational needs and disabilities. We will be looking to Ministers to offer us such reassurances on Wednesday.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

However, this House should of course play a greater role in the scrutiny of legislation. As the Member for Leicester South, I share Members' frustration when restrictions are imposed, when the rules for our constituents are unclear and confusing because the relevant statutory instrument has not yet been drafted, or when rules come out at 11.30 at night. Indeed, I share the incredulity of Members when instruments come so late to Committee that they are out of date—my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) was debating the measures to close zoos on the day that zoos were reopening—and I of course share the frustration of Members when fines are imposed and there has not been proper debate across this House.

If this House can find a way for better scrutiny of these measures, we would of course be extremely sympathetic, but we will not support attempts to scupper restrictions that are clearly in the public health interest. Our priority will always be saving lives, minimising harm and keeping our children in school. Until a vaccine is discovered and distributed, that depends on driving the R value to below 1 with containment measures, social distancing and an effective test, trace and isolate strategy.

John Spellar: There has been much mention of the success of a vaccine, but, first, it is unclear when that is likely to be and, secondly, surely even if we have a vaccine, it will not be 100% effective.

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend is right to raise his worries about when a vaccine will be available, but there are many who feel a vaccine could well be available next year. The key thing is that we have a process in place to ensure that that vaccine, when discovered, is distributed rapidly across the country.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way, but I will not take more interventions because I am well aware that there are plenty on the list to speak.

Mr Speaker: Order. Those who keep intervening are also on the list, which I think is unfair when others lower down the list will not or may not get in.

Tom Tugendhat: Briefly, does the hon. Member recognise that, although he is quite right that nobody came here to restrict liberties—in fact, most of us came to this place to promote liberties—the whole point of promoting liberty in this place is that we must balance liberties? There is obviously the liberty of individuals who are seeking to work, and he spoke about the poorest members of our community, but many of the poorest members of the communities I represent are the ones who are suffering from lockdowns in different ways. Would it not therefore be right for this House to debate—quite rightly not to reject all lockdowns, but at least to debate—the different political choices that are being made as these questions are being asked?

Jonathan Ashworth: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. Many of my constituents are particularly affected by the restrictions that we have put in place—I

will develop this point in a moment—but I will not take any more interventions, because I am well aware that the huge number of Members are seeking to catch your eye, Mr Speaker.

Heading into the first wave, we were too slow. The first cases reached the UK on 31 January. On 5 March, the Prime Minister talked about taking it on the chin and boasted about shaking hands with people. On 7 March, people were advised to self-isolate. A pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation on 11 March. On 12 March, testing and tracing in the wider community was paused. On 16 March, advice was issued against non-essential travel. On 20 March, pubs and restaurants were shut, but throughout, infections continued to climb. Finally, on 24 March, we went into a national lockdown. We could see what was happening in Italy, Spain and France, but we waited and waited, and, again, we can see what is happening now in parts of Europe. Let me be clear with the House: a second national lockdown would be catastrophic for society, for families who have spent so long apart, and for our economy. What is needed is action to avoid that, alongside clarity about which restrictions work and how long they will be in place.

Across vast swathes of the north and the midlands, families have been denied the chance to see each other in homes and private gardens. Restrictions have been placed on visiting loved ones in care homes. Many ask why they cannot go to see their grandmother, but can sit with strangers in the pub. There are parts of the country, such as Leicester and Bradford, that endured lockdown and that, more or less immediately on its lifting, had another four months of restrictions imposed on them. There will be huge long-term implications in terms of mental health and loneliness.

We understand the need for restrictions, but people need reassurance that there is an end in sight. Families want to know that they will be able to enjoy Christmas together. When will Ministers outline the criteria that will allow a daughter in Bradford to hug her elderly parents, or grandchildren in Leicester to cuddle their grandmother? If after a certain time limit, infections have not abated in cities such as Leicester or Bradford, where they have had restrictions for four months, will the Secretary of State instead impose alternative restrictions, so that families can visit their loved ones again? I urge Ministers to consider that.

I understand that tracing data show that infections spread in households, but that the virus is caught outside and brought into the house. The most recent Office for National Statistics surveillance report states that

“eating out was the most commonly reported activity in the 2-7 days prior to symptom onset.”

Hospitality accounts for one fifth of all covid transmissions. We support the restrictions announced last week, but many are now questioning how effective they will be in containing the virus. This weekend, we have seen pictures of people piling out of pubs at 10 o'clock on the dot into busy streets, public transport packed, and supermarkets busy as people buy more drink. How does that help contain the spread of the virus?

I ask the Secretary of State to undertake a rapid and transparent review of all the evidence on the 10 o'clock rule and to report back to Parliament this week. I also ask him quickly to publish a strategy outlining what

further containment steps could be introduced to avoid a second national lockdown, keep our children in school, and allow families to see each other.

Secondly, both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State last week referred to airborne transmission. Emerging evidence now suggests that there is greater aerosol transmission than we earlier thought. That has huge implications for ventilation in sites, which often use circulated air—for example, student halls of residence. I urge Ministers to come forward as a matter of priority with new guidance on aerosol airborne transmission for buildings.

Avoiding a second national lockdown also depends on an effective test, trace and isolate regime. The problems with testing have been outlined by Members across the House for weeks now, so I do not need to repeat all the stories. We have rehearsed the arguments back and forth week after week, but, in responding to the debate later, will the Minister give us some more details about so-called Operation Moonshot? Apparently, the Government intend to deliver millions of tests a day with a plan for 4 million a day by December. It is set to cost £100 billion, which is more than 70% of the NHS England budget, with more contracts for the very firms that have failed to deliver an effective test and trace system today.

Instead of moonshots that cost the earth, why not invest in our network of NHS and university labs? I have asked the Secretary of State this before: will he validate quickly pooled PCR—polymerase chain reaction—testing, and will he invest in universities such as Southampton and Leicester to expand the saliva-based testing that they are piloting? We have urged him, and NHS providers urged him today, to introduce regular and routine testing for all frontline NHS staff? Will he deliver on that before the winter to improve infection control in hospitals?

Will the Secretary of State update the House on the plans for university halls of residence? We have seen the pictures on our TV screens in the past 24 hours.

Just as people have struggled to access tests in recent weeks, for those who receive a test, it is taking longer to get the result. Care home staff report that it takes days to receive a test result. Rather than the 24 hours to turn around a test that the Prime Minister promised us, in some instances it is now taking 35 hours. Will the Secretary of State tell us when the Prime Minister's promise of 80% of tests being turned around in 24 hours will be met?

The Secretary of State knows that we think that his tracing system is not as effective as it should be. Ministers should have invested in shoe-leather epidemiology; instead, we got a Serco call centre. For decades, our local health protection teams kept us safe, testing, tracking and isolating infectious disease. They are trained in the fundamentals of infectious disease control, and they should be leading this work, not Serco. That would be much more effective.

Communication in a pandemic is absolutely key, but over the weeks we have had hyperbole: “world-beating”, sending it packing in 12 weeks, and so on. I urge the Government to commit to regular televised briefings from the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Not them!

Jonathan Ashworth: Yes, them, because they provide the details of what is really happening. Will the Secretary of State set up a website on which the Government can publish clear, location-specific instructions so that people can tap in their postcode and know what is allowed and not allowed in their local area?

We talked about building surge capacity in the NHS and the Nightingales, but it was built on the back of delayed treatment and often postponed cancer screening. Throughout the first wave, staff were sent to the frontline with inadequate personal protective equipment, and many are now exhausted. They need more than rainbows in windows and applause rippling down our streets; they need wellbeing support and fair pay.

Patients need reassurance that they will get the care they deserve. The waiting list is at 4 million, more than 83,000 wait beyond a year to start treatment, and the numbers getting cancer screening have plummeted. Many who have lost a loved one will need extra mental health support. We are seeing more drink abuse and no doubt more substance abuse in this crisis. I pay tribute to the Unison drug and alcohol support staff in Wigan who are striking at We Are With You. They deserve their “Agenda for Change” pay, and I hope the Secretary of State ensures that they receive that pay award. The Chancellor promised us that the NHS would get whatever it needs. It now clearly needs a funded recovery plan, alongside a plan for social care to get us through this second wave.

We should have been better prepared for this pandemic, as pandemics were the No. 1 issue on the Government's risk register. We entered this crisis more vulnerable and more exposed, after years of restricted growth in health expenditure, cuts to public health budgets and infrastructure, and failing to build meaningful integration between health and social care. Fundamentally, years of austerity left us with widening health inequality and growing poverty and disadvantage—the conditions on which pandemics thrive. Because of climate change, deforestation and urbanisation, we are set to see more pandemics, not fewer. When we overcome this virus—and we will—let us honour the lives lost and build a society that puts people first.

4.23 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is a great privilege to be called so early in such an important debate. This is my first opportunity to address the House since leaving the Government earlier this month, so I want to pay tribute to those I worked with in local government and my former Department. It was a great privilege, and they are exceptional people.

Having stood recently in my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's place, I can testify that this is a difficult time to be in government. I pay tribute to him and his colleagues for everything they are doing on our behalf at a moment of national crisis. I know how exacting it is.

This is clearly a very important moment in our national debate about our strategy on coronavirus. It is a time for clarity, consistency and courage. I welcome the measures that the Prime Minister announced last week. Covid-19 is an awful disease and it is essential that the public respect the rules that are in place for their protection,

[Mr Simon Clarke]

from the rule of six to the guidance on hands, face, space, which will undoubtedly save lives. I supported those measures precisely because they are limited and proportionate. Fundamentally, we owe it to the British people to be totally honest with them about the situation. Until we have a vaccine, we are going to be living alongside the threat of the virus and some of those we love may die. We do not know when a vaccine will become available or precisely how effective it will be.

Faced with that reality, we need to be clear sighted about the choices that are open to us. It is therefore right that, as the Government have chosen, we should seek to keep as much of our economy and society open as we possibly can. If we could say with confidence that by holding on for just a few weeks or indeed a few months, we would reach a certain cure, the calculus might look very different. Given that we cannot do that, to return to a national lockdown would be not only untenable but wrong.

The toll such a lockdown would exact would be stark and serious. It would manifest itself in grim statistics and it would fall to us in this House to reflect on them in the years ahead: the cancers undiagnosed, the jobs and businesses lost, the soaring demand on our mental health services. It would also creep in like sea mist in less tangible ways: the opportunities forgone by a generation of young people, the loneliness of millions parted from their loved ones again. It is therefore my firm belief that now is a time for resolution, when we must do our utmost to live without fear, even in the most dangerous times, as generations of Britons have done before us.

That is not a counsel of despair. As my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary said, thanks to the hard work of so many people, we are incomparably better placed than we were in March to live alongside the virus. From the Nightingale hospitals to new treatments such as dexamethasone, to new capabilities such as the outstanding NHS covid app, we grow stronger almost every week in our ability to defeat the virus. That is reflected in the improved mortality figures this time round.

As I am sure colleagues across the House have done, I visited my local major hospital this summer to hear first-hand from them about how they have responded to the situation. I pay great tribute to all those at The James Cook University Hospital for everything they have done.

Although I respect everything that the Government are doing, I want to raise several points about the issues thrown up by local lockdowns. Today, my Conservative colleagues from the Tees valley and I have written to our local authorities asking them not to seek to go further than central Government require when it comes to the restrictions that are currently in place. The new measures that the Prime Minister announced need time to bed in.

That leads to a very important question for the Government. As the number of local lockdowns across the north of our country continues to multiply, are we in effect seeing a national, or at least semi-national lockdown imposed by default? Some 16 million people are now living under the shadow of those restrictions. What is our exit strategy from this situation? As we look at the likes of Leicester, Greater Manchester or West

Yorkshire, we see that none of them are leaving the restrictions. What hope can I offer my constituents, as we stand on the brink of further intervention in the Tees valley, that there is a way out? It will be a long, hard and lonely winter if there is no such exit strategy. That is why my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Jacob Young), for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and for Sedgfield (Paul Howell) and I have taken a stand today.

How long can we realistically expect people to comply with those measures? As lockdown fatigue worsens, we must address the growing risk that tighter restrictions will punish the law-abiding while others are unable or unwilling to comply.

Tom Tugendhat: Given that my hon. Friend is addressing the legal aspects, has he thought about the implications for other aspects of criminal law?

Mr Clarke: Indeed, the restrictions place a significant burden on our law enforcement agencies.

I will close by dealing with the slightly different local lockdowns that are in place across the country. The lack of consistency makes compliance harder and I urge my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary and Government Front Benchers to reflect on possible options to try to establish the clearest possible protocol so that we can get uniformity of decision making across those areas. I clearly recognise that we are trying to make the most effective intervention in each area, reflecting the local circumstances. However, I worry that a slightly different situation in the north-east, compared with West Yorkshire and compared with Greater Manchester, risks making it harder for those who want to do their best to get behind the Government's measures to do the right thing. Better observance must be our collective goal.

I offer my right hon. Friend and our health service every good wish as we try to overcome the challenges. At a moment when there are no easy choices, let us ensure that we enable our country to live rather than simply exist in the period that lies ahead so that the country we return to on the other side of this dreadful situation is happy, healthy, successful and free.

4.29 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). I had the pleasure of shadowing him when he was at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. I always found him to be incredibly courteous and I wish him well for however long he is on the Back Benches—I know he has plans to return to Government at some point.

We know that Governments all around the world have faced the same challenges with this pandemic, whether that is understanding how the virus transmits, how a lockdown should occur and, indeed, under what circumstances, or obtaining PPE. For many, this was unknown territory. For most of us as politicians, no one or nothing truly prepares us for a global pandemic.

It would be remiss of me not to start by mentioning the successful measures put in place, including the public's overwhelming co-operation with the lockdown restrictions, the unity we have seen in our neighbourhoods and constituencies, especially in offering a helping hand to

those who are shielding, and the countless community groups and volunteers who have mobilised during the outbreak. I also acknowledge and say thank you for the brave commitment of so many of our NHS and care staff, who continue to battle the virus every single day.

However, with the stark warnings offered by the Prime Minister last week about a second wave of covid-19 cases and the further restrictions put in place to keep as many of us as safe as possible, we must therefore learn the mistakes made in the earlier half of the year. It is imperative that we all move forward looking at what works best and, most importantly, what we urgently need to improve upon. It is clear that the three most difficult aspects of the coronavirus pandemic have been controlling outbreaks in social care settings, providing enough PPE to those who need it, and setting up a functional and effective test, trace and isolate system. The economic response to covid and the mental health crisis and its legacy are much bigger issues that I am sure other colleagues will focus upon. In the interests of time and of being courteous to other Members, I will confine my remarks to the public health aspects of today's debate.

I will start with the issue of test and trace. The Scottish contact tracing system, Test and Protect, was based on traditional public health teams, who have managed to reach over 98% of cases and 97% of contacts. Unfortunately, that success has not been mirrored by the British Government's implementation of its testing and tracing. *The Times* found that in England, the percentage of successful searches between 1 pm on 16 September and midday on 17 September was just 43%. In comparison in Scotland, it was 97%. The Scottish contact tracing system is the best performing in the UK, particularly compared with the outsourced Serco call centres in England, which are barely reaching 60% of contacts. People are, on average, asked to travel 27 miles to the nearest centre, and at the peak of the shortages, a fifth of all UK postcodes were being directed to sites in another nation. We heard anecdotes in the Chamber only last week of people in Bolton reportedly being told to travel 90 miles to Wales to get a test. In Cambridge, residents were being told to go to Birmingham, Heathrow or Bradford. The ineffective tracing system in England means that thousands of people who may currently be infected with covid-19 are not being advised to self-isolate and, as such, are continuing to spread the virus at a rate leading towards a second wave.

The Scottish Government have also launched the Protect Scotland app, which I have spoken about in this Chamber and have urged people to download. I have downloaded the app in England. As somebody who spends probably half the week in England, I am more than happy to use my position to encourage as many people as possible to download the app. Over 1 million people have downloaded the app in Scotland, helping to effectively trace the virus across Scotland. That figure of 1 million represents 18% of the population, meaning that the figure is already above the 15% threshold required to make a measurable impact on viral spread.

Despite the Scottish Government's success, however, there are still challenges from the UK Government—mainly, that the Scottish NHS has increased its testing capacity considerably for hospital patients, but instead of funding testing of the public through the expansion of NHS labs, the UK Government set up an entirely separate

system organised by Deloitte. As it is a UK-wide system, we have seen an increase in demand in England, leading to appointments being cut in Scotland. In fact, there are multiple reports over the last week of people resident in England being advised to enter a Scottish postcode to obtain authorisation for a test, even though the test was carried out in the south of England. If not dealt with, this could seriously undermine Scotland's well thought out and effective contact tracing system, and the incorrect data could give the impression that there is an outbreak somewhere where one does not exist. It is vital that we prepare for the second wave. In doing so, we must do everything possible to test as many people as possible, so that we have the most accurate figures and our contact tracing can prevent the transmission of this deadly virus.

I turn to the issue of personal protective equipment. One major challenge from the outset of the pandemic has been the hugely increased need for PPE such as masks, gowns and gloves, amounting to some 485 million items so far. In Scotland, we have had the advantage of central procurement and delivery being part of the Scottish NHS, along with having our own stockpile. Naturally, given the sheer quantity of PPE needed in the first few weeks of the outbreak, there were difficulties in transportation, especially to extra sites that needed additional equipment, including community clinics, GP surgeries, pharmacies and care homes. Our Trade Minister, my good friend Ivan McKee, worked tirelessly to maintain imports of PPE, which came in through Prestwick airport. The Scottish Government invested in the development of our domestic industry so that 50% of our PPE is now manufactured in Scotland, making our future supply more secure.

When we compare the availability, transportation and supply of PPE under the SNP Scottish Government with the situation under the Tory Government here in Westminster, in every regard the SNP Government have been better prepared. The SNP Government put in place clear plans for the future in the event that we faced a second wave—as now, sadly, seems inevitable. The Conservative Government privatised the UK national stockpile and then ran down the stock, with some items up to 10 years out of date, putting at risk the lives of key workers in the NHS—the very same workers we went out to clap for every Thursday night at the beginning of the pandemic.

In 2016, the UK Government was found to have failed woefully in pandemic preparedness. Exercise Cygnus accurately predicted that the NHS would be pushed into a state of crisis if an infectious and deadly disease ever came to the shores of these islands. It highlighted that an effect of such a pandemic could be a shortage of intensive care beds, vital equipment and even mortuary space.

Such predictions became a reality with the covid-19 pandemic, but even after the stark warnings of 2016, no action was taken. Instead, the Government chose effectively to hand out hundreds of millions of pounds in contracts to companies with no experience of providing PPE. The truth of the matter is that the British Government have used this public health crisis to benefit their friends. A contract was handed out without any public tender process to Public First, a company that is run by a former aide to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and an associate of Dominic Cummings. It should be

[David Linden]

no surprise to anyone that millions of pieces of PPE were substandard and even unusable. Much of it never materialised and was never delivered to the countless NHS workers who needed it so badly.

John Redwood: Can the hon. Gentleman think of any area where the Union Government, or England and Wales, have done better than Scotland, and that Scotland might be able to learn from?

David Linden: It will come as no surprise to the right hon. Gentleman that I am not in a position to be particularly complimentary about how the UK Government have handled this pandemic. I am sure that if he has looked at any of the statistics, he will have reached a similar conclusion, but that is something for him to consider as he prepares to speak this afternoon.

I will deal now with the distressing issue of deaths in social care settings. We simply cannot ignore the fact that the death rate in care homes across the UK has been utterly devastating. In my own constituency, Burlington Court care home in Cranhill saw 13 deaths in just one week. That number can never be regarded simply as a statistic. Each and every one of those residents was a family member and a loved one who will never be forgotten.

The attacks that have suggested that that problem was specific to Scotland are incorrect. In May, the London School of Economics highlighted that more than half of covid-related deaths in care homes in England were not being reported. The Scottish Government made a sustained effort to report all care home deaths so that our figures were as accurate and up to date as possible. Indeed, the data published by the Office for National Statistics clearly shows that deaths in Scotland were not significantly higher than in the rest of the UK. It highlights that excess deaths in care homes in England and Wales were 45 per 100,000—almost exactly the same as Scotland at 44 per 100,000.

Some have blamed the covid outbreaks in care homes on patients being discharged from hospital, but studies actually suggest that there were multiple entry points into care homes from the community via visitors and staff, particularly staff working in several care homes. It would arguably have been even more dangerous to place already-vulnerable care home patients in hospitals, with space already being a valuable commodity in our busy hospitals, particularly in intensive care units. The Scottish Government were quick to step in when it became clear that the social care sector was struggling, providing considerable support in the form of extra funding and supplying additional PPE from NHS supplies. Until this intervention from the Scottish Government, some care homes were not even paying sick pay, which meant that staff could not afford to stay home when they might have had covid symptoms or, indeed, were a contact. To further assist with this, the Scottish Government offered NHS staff to care homes, preventing them from being forced to use agency staff who could arguably be seen as spreading the virus.

The covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated some of the underlying problems within the social care system in the whole of the UK. Currently Scotland is the only UK nation to provide free personal care, which allows two thirds

of those who need it to stay in their own homes, but the vast majority of care homes are private businesses, and, until now, they were, without doubt, less connected to the rest of the health and social care sector. In the light of the pandemic and the devastating losses from our care homes, the Scottish Government plan to carry out a review of social care provision and consider developing a national care service, which I warmly welcome and see from my constituency experience as being a good thing.

Globally, the pandemic is still raging, and we must listen to health experts who are very clear on the dangers of a second wave. Summer was our time to learn and prepare for winter. We now have the relevant experience to learn from all the mistakes made in the first part of the year, and they are legion. In the public health response, it is vital that we focus on these three issues: outbreaks in care homes, the availability of PPE, and having an effective test and trace system in place. We know that a second wave is now upon us, and we all know what we need to do. We must all play a role. My party—Scotland's Government—is committed to playing its part in helping to defeat this deadly virus.

4.42 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Less than a year ago, I celebrated what I thought was the election of a sceptical and liberal Conservative Administration. Now, I am left wondering if the Prime Minister has not been abducted by Dr Strangelove and reprogrammed by the SAGE over to the dark side.

The purpose of politicians is to impose a sense of proportion on science and not to be in thrall to it. I will make myself very unpopular, but I believe that the appearance of the chiefs last week should have been a sacking offence. When they presented that graph, it was with the caveat that it was not a prediction, but nevertheless it was clear that they presented it as a plausible scenario, with its 50,000 cases per day by mid-October based on the doubling of infections by the week. Not on one day since March have there been infections on a day that were double that of the same day of the week preceding—not once. Where did this doubling come from? What was their purpose in presenting such a graph? It was the purpose of the fat boy in "The Pickwick Papers":

"I wants to make your flesh creep."

It was "project fear". It was an attempt to terrify the British people, as if they had not been terrified enough.

I have been banging on about this since March, and with every criticism I have made, I have been told that the Government were relying on the best possible science. So I was delighted by the letter one week ago today with the nuanced criticism of Professors Heneghan, Gupta and Sikora. I believe that the Government now have to answer that criticism. I am glad that the consensus in the scientific community is broken and the critics are speaking out.

I do not underestimate for one moment the horrible nature of this disease and its post-viral syndrome, but in terms of the United Kingdom's killers, it is 24th in the league, accounting for only 1.4% of deaths. As a consequence, I believe the Government's policy has been disproportionate. By decree, they have interfered in our private and family lives, telling us whom we may meet, when we may meet them and what we must wear when we meet them. We have the cruelty of elderly people in care homes being disoriented, unable to see

the faces of their loved ones or to receive a hug. We have the tsunami of deaths that we may experience shortly as a consequence of undiagnosed cancers and heart disease, and the discontinuation of clinical trials.

John Redwood: Has my right hon. Friend looked at the advice given to the Swedish Government and the different policies they have followed? What does he deduce from that?

Sir Desmond Swayne: I deduce that it was much more proportionate. All sorts of criticisms are levelled against the Swedish Government that, on examination of the data and comparing like for like, are without foundation. I certainly hold up the Swedish model as an alternative.

We have seen the eye-watering costs that we must now all face for a generation, having closed down our economy for all those months as a consequence of the Government's policy. We face the crushing of enterprises, the destruction of livelihoods, and unemployment among young people, all as a consequence of an overreaction. I understand that there is now some question as to whether students will be allowed to return from university at Christmas. I say most gently to the Minister that the last Administration that sought to restrain celebrations at Christmas was during the Commonwealth, when the Lord Protector was left musing in public whether, if he were to arm one in 10, that would be enough. How many marshals will be required?

I conclude by saying that the policy of the Government has been disproportionate in response to this threat. There may be a virus one day that threatens our very way of life, but this is not it, even if we are behaving as if it were.

4.47 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I agreed with precisely zero of what he had to say, but this is not the first time that has happened in our time in this House.

As the first wave of the covid-19 pandemic in the UK began to recede over the summer, some sobering truths became evident. The UK had suffered one of the highest per capita death rates in the world and taken a far larger economic hit than comparable developed economies. Many attribute that dismal double whammy of failure to a Government who were too complacent at the beginning and too slow to lock down and prevent the death rate spiralling so badly out of control.

UK resilience to the threat of pandemics has been badly undermined by a decade of austerity, which weakened the ability of the NHS and both national and local government to react in time to prevent the disease taking hold. This failure became all too evident in the chronic shortage of personal protective equipment, which put key workers at unnecessary risk and led to the deaths of all too many, especially in the NHS and social care sectors.

The abandonment of testing so early in the pandemic meant that those charged with protecting us were effectively blind to its development in the community. That increased the chances of a total lockdown being the only viable response the Government could turn to. The Prime Minister recognised that all too belatedly on 23 March.

It is unclear how many lives the Prime Minister's personal struggle with his libertarian instincts and his complacent reaction to the looming threat cost.

Steve Brine: I listen carefully to what the hon. Lady says in this House. She is very experienced and she sat on the Front Bench when the Labour party was in government. May I clarify what she is saying? If I understand correctly, she seems to be suggesting that there was a way to avert a national lockdown, which most other countries in the world have had, by different actions being taken prior to March this year. Is she seriously saying that?

Ms Eagle: I was trying to say that complacency at the beginning caused many more deaths; it caused us to have a higher death rate and a bigger economic hit than other countries. From the beginning there has been a problem with mixed and often contradictory messaging from the Government about the rules they wish people to follow, and a lack of transparency about how those decisions are made. Not only has that undermined the efficacy of public health messages, but it has genuinely confused people who wish to do the right thing.

The Government's moral authority to order the greatest restrictions on personal freedom since the second world war has been completely undermined by two things. The first is the revelation of Dominic Cummings's rule-breaking trip to Durham, and the Prime Minister's refusal to sack him. That prompted public anger on an unprecedented scale, persuading many that there was one law for them and a completely different one for the Prime Minister's friends.

The second is the lack of transparency and parliamentary oversight surrounding ministerial pronouncements on the rules. All too often the rules appear to be contradictory, almost arbitrary, and difficult to justify. The public were asked to work from home one minute, only to be urged to return to work and save the high street the next. Now, as evidence of a second wave of the virus emerges, people are being ordered back home again, but not before the Government spent half a billion pounds on subsidising meals out in August, and opened air bridges to half of Europe, only to reimpose unenforced quarantine requirements on those who had been trusting enough to believe them.

We are now told that we cannot meet people at home or in their gardens unless we are in their bubble, but we can go to the pub with six households, as long as we leave by 10 pm. All those rules are different in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Respect for the rules will evaporate if the Government do not do a better job of justifying them, and ensuring that they are coherent and understood.

The Government have centralised all decision making, and outsourced procurement for test and trace, leading to a failing system. They have not involved local public health or local authorities in the decision-making process. Only two weeks ago I asked the Health Secretary about sudden increases in infections in Wirral. He replied that that issue had been considered by silver and gold committees, but no one bothered to tell Wirral Council that that was happening, and at the height of the pandemic it was reduced to watching daily press conferences to try to discern what was happening.

[Ms Angela Eagle]

We cannot fix test and trace without more local co-operation. In Wirral, pillar 1 tests now take 48 hours, and we have an infection rate of 157 per 100,000, and rising. Pillar 2 tests—when people can get them—take between five and seven days to get results, thereby rendering their effect, which is to get people to isolate, much less likely to work.

How can we get less centralisation and more transparency into the Government's response to this pandemic? When considering parliamentary accountability, perhaps we should look at what New Zealand has done. It set up a special committee—it is called a Select Committee but it does not have to be—and it has a majority of Opposition Members on it, although it is a rotating membership. The committee is led by the Leader of the Opposition, it has unusual powers to subpoena witnesses and papers, and it can subject any Government decisions to that unusual but timely form of scrutiny. That worked well in New Zealand, because it allowed policy making to be improved by parliamentary scrutiny and accountability.

As we move to discuss the new measures on Wednesday, I believe that this House should carefully consider doing what the New Zealand Parliament has done. We should allow the Government to give Opposition Members that duty so that we can get some air, transparency and accountability into the decisions that the Government are currently making behind closed doors.

4.54 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who made useful points as to how we, as a House, may scrutinise and be involved better in some of the decision-making process.

I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this subject today—it is the first such occasion. Let me start by thanking everyone who has worked so hard, not just people on the frontline, but Ministers, to try to grapple with this awful virus. I do not envy them the burden of their responsibilities, and I know they are doing their very best at this difficult time and that not all will go well first time around. They deserve our thanks, from across this House.

It is widely accepted that covid is here for the long term, which means we have to learn to live with it. As the Chancellor said so eloquently last week,

“we must learn to live with it, and live without fear.”—[*Official Report*, 24 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 1155.]

We know that lockdown is not a cure. The restrictions give us temporary respite, but we are waking up now to the full cost of what that temporary respite means, not just in terms of livelihoods, jobs and people's futures, but in terms of the suffering and sacrifice that so many have endured, in different ways. Long-term lockdown is not a solution; it is not living with covid. In many ways, it is hiding from covid and simply hoping it will go away. We know that there is much we can do to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our communities. We have seen the measures that shops, schools, pubs and restaurants take to stop the spread, and individually we have learnt to adjust our behaviour.

What we now need is a long-term strategy. It is a long-term problem and we have to approach it from first principles. We need a sense of perspective. The measures

we introduce for the whole population need to be proportionate to the risk. Understandably, decision makers felt a sense of panic back in March, but now we know much more about this terrible virus. We know about the groups most affected. We know that the horrifying worst-case-scenario numbers we were given were never realised, so now we can be smarter and more targeted in our quest to prevent avoidable deaths. There is no need to impose indiscriminate, and sometimes arbitrary or capricious, restrictive measures on everyone.

This is a new virus, and the science is young. Unlike the scientists, the Government have to consider wider issues and not just the science. The Government have to consider not only the impact of lockdown on the economy and our health, but the social and moral consequences. They have to grapple with the big-picture issues such as the value of freedom, and to decide whether a covid death matters more than any other preventable death—I say it does not. The Government also have to bring the people with them. We all know which people are most in need of protection and we can understand why they need protection, but it is far less easy to understand why we are locking down students who can be safely exposed to the virus when we do not place similar restrictions on the people most at risk.

We need to understand risk and probability, and that robust, evidence-based data really matters. It is very uncomfortable being frightened to death by scientists presenting charts to the nation that they must know are wrong; that chart last Monday undermined public trust, as it was quite clearly pushing a worst-case scenario without telling us the probability of such a scenario occurring. Was it designed to instil fear in order to control the public? Is that how we want to govern?

Emergency powers were given to the Government when this was an emergency, and that was the right thing to do, but we all accept that we have moved on from there. I urge the Government to understand that we now need to involve Members of Parliament in this process in a different way from that which has happened so far. We may not be experts in science but we are experts in the people we represent. Day in, day out, we are engaging with our constituents, and their needs and concerns, and it is to our constituents that we owe a duty. I ask Ministers to allow MPs to bring that knowledge and expertise to bear, as I genuinely believe it would aid decision making.

I wish to end by thanking every member of this Government who have worked on this in recent months—they have my total admiration. It is not possible to get things right every time, and I applaud them for being so brave in keeping going despite the difficulties and challenges they have experienced. But I ask that they challenge the science with pragmatism and are not blinded by it; science is often as much about opinions as politics is, and we should never disregard the people we were sent here to serve.

4.59 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): We should be grateful to the Secretary of State today for his frankness, but we should not necessarily accept his binary choice between his way and a mass spread of the virus. Frankly, I am concerned about his basing everything on waiting for a vaccine. That may take some time—it may take years—and

it will almost certainly not be universally effective. Manufacturing and distribution will also have to be effectively managed. Today, in effect the Secretary of State told many businesses—particularly those in the hospitality, entertainment, sporting, gambling and leisure industries—and their employees that they have a very uncertain future. That is hundreds of thousands of jobs. Of course, we need to have some restrictions, but they must be balanced, proportionate, based on firm evidence and include those involved, who really know their own businesses.

I have to ask whether the Government have the data on what is going on. Last week, I tabled a question to the Health Secretary asking

“how many cases of acute respiratory infections which resulted in at least one positive test for covid-19 there were in the most recent week for which figures are available; and what proportion of those cases occurred in...care homes...the workplace...education settings and...pubs and food outlets.”

The reply I got was that

“it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period.”

They have not got the data. Incidentally, I also asked

“which university and college laboratories in the West Midlands”—

I did not want a national answer—

“have been commissioned by NHS Test and Trace”.

Back came the answer that

“it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period.”

Again, the Government do not seem to know what is happening in their own business. It is quite absurd. Either they are flying blind without adequate and current data or the figures would reveal that they are thrashing around, trying to be seen to be doing something .

In earlier interventions, we dealt with the question of seeking to bring renewal and variations on regulations under parliamentary control so that our constituents can give their views and hold us to account for our votes and decisions. That is how it should work in a democratic society. At present, not only do we not have parliamentary government but we do not seem to have Cabinet government, either. Even Cobra is meeting intermittently. Policy seems to be made by a small clique that seems to comprise the Health Secretary and the Minister for the Cabinet Office, with substantial input from Dominic Cummings and some involvement of a debilitated and marginalised Prime Minister. It is not good constitutional theory and it is not working in practice. That is why Parliament needs to take back control.

What do the Government need to do to get the economy going? Governments have a number of roles. One is as a legislator and another one is as a funder along with the Bank of England. They are undertaking those, but national and local government have another role as a massive customer, and they should be looking at how they can bring orders through to get our industry moving again. I find it extraordinary that the Defence Secretary seems to be dithering around with the fleet solid support ships. I find it amazing that the Department for Transport, with great fanfare, announced funding for electric and hydrogen buses earlier in the year, but when I talk to the local passenger transport executive and the local bus company, I hear nothing is happening. We need that

money flowing through, we need those production lines running, and we need those supply chains up and running, so we can be ahead of the world.

Aviation is an industry in which, both in construction and in airports, we are currently in a major position in the world. The airports are offering solutions that have been tried and tested in other jurisdictions to get themselves moving, yet this panic-stricken Government have locked down on aviation. It is damaging people’s holidays, but it also means that, when the recovery comes, it will be in Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt and not in London or, indeed, our regional airports.

There are no easy choices. Cuts to diagnosis and surgery cost lives, a broken economy and high unemployment crush hopes, and education, or the lack of it, blights generations. That is why we need a more effective Government and a more effective system of governance, and that is frankly why Parliament has to take back some control to get this country moving again.

5.4 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Government rightly want to get the virus down and limit deaths, but they also need to promote livelihoods and economic recovery, and it is proving difficult to get that balance right. I do not accept the criticisms that say, “Well, the Government change their mind.” Of course the Government change their mind, because the virus waxes and wanes and the situation changes on the ground. They have to study the data and do the best they can.

What I would like to hear from Ministers is more in various directions where I think they could improve the position more quickly. The first is the issue of treatments. There has been some excellent work done in the United Kingdom, and it is great that a steroid has now been discovered that can make a decent improvement for various patients. That is great news and I welcome it, but what about the tests and trials we were promised when I raised this, many months ago now, of other antivirals, other steroids, antimalarials and clot-busting drugs? All those may have possible efficacy and they have their scientific and medical support around the world. We have great science here, so can we hear the results, please, Minister? Where have we got to? Are any of those going to work? The more and better treatments we can get and the more we can understand the different strands and features of this disease in different patients, the better it will be for keeping people safe.

We have learned that the Government now agree with me and others that they need to do a better job on isolation hospitals and on segregating patients who have this very contagious disease from all the other people who need to use our health service. I am pleased about that, but can we have some more details? Why cannot we simply use the Nightingale hospitals for covid-19—let us hope we do not need anything like that number of beds for this second wave—and keep all the other hospitals for non-covid? Or, if they are going to have shared facilities, certainly in urban areas where there is more than one hospital, can we have covid-19 hospitals and other hospitals that are open for other conditions? We do not want to see all the death rates for other things shooting up because people feel they cannot get access to their hospital or they are worried about going to their hospital because of covid-19.

[John Redwood]

We then have the issue of the damage this is doing to the economy. I understand the strategy, but it seems that the damage is going to fall unduly heavily on hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism, the areas where we need more social contact and where that is thought to encourage the transmission of the disease. As someone who does not normally recommend subsidies, I do think that when people are banned from going to work, running their business or doing their job, they deserve some public support. They are doing that in the public interest, because their Government have told them that their activity is particularly damaging to the public good. If that is true, surely we the taxpayers have to pay for that.

I assume that the Government think we will come out of this sometime, and we want to go back to a world where there are theatres, cinemas, entertainments, good restaurants and all the other things that make life worth while and give pleasure to families. We do not want to live in a world where they are gradually all closed because there is no support and they are not allowed to function at all. We need more intelligence to work alongside those sectors, to see how they can get ways of working and living alongside this virus all the time it is out there and causing us trouble.

There have already been hon. Members today requesting exit strategies, and I quite understand why it is very difficult for the Government to give us one, because they are all sorts of unknowns that I do not know any more than they or their advisers do. We understand that their preferred exit strategy is the discovery of a vaccine and the roll-out of massive quantities of that vaccine for sometime early next year, so that we can then come out of lockdown.

That would be great, but we cannot bank on that. There are ifs and buts in that and it may not happen, so there needs to be a strategy for a situation where we do not have a magic vaccine. That is why we need more work on safeguarding people who are most at risk and more work on how we can get other people back to work, to save those livelihoods and those businesses and to wean them gradually off subsidy, which they are going to need all the time they are banned from doing their job and keeping things ready for us when times improve.

Above all, the nation needs some hope. It needs a vision of a better future. It needs to believe that, in a few months' time, something good will happen. It certainly does not need the threat of cancellation of Christmas or the threat that thousands of students will be locked away in rather small accommodation in their universities because there is a fear that they might spread the virus more widely.

5.9 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am glad to be able to speak in this debate, but the only reason I feel able to do so is that we are unlikely to have a Division today. Last year I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I had to have surgery and radiotherapy. The radiotherapy caused damage to one of my lungs, and the advice from my doctors is to reduce my level of contact during the pandemic. That would be difficult, if not impossible, to do with the current voting system.

We had the absurd situation last week where a debate was held about proxy voting for MPs during the pandemic in which those MPs with proxy votes were not allowed to speak. As one of the MPs affected, I support a return to remote voting during the pandemic, which would help MPs who cannot vote safely in the present system and those in areas under local lockdown. I feel safe coming to the Chamber, where Mr Speaker has ensured that social distancing is observed, but because I cannot take part in voting, I cannot normally speak in debates. I hope that that can change.

There are, of course, many damaging consequences of this pandemic, one of which has been the way that people in care homes and mental health hospitals have been cut off from the outside world. At an early stage of the pandemic, most of these settings put in place a blanket ban on visiting. Six months on, we are hearing of the devastating impact that this lack of contact has had. Vic Rayner of the National Care Forum and Caroline Abrahams of Age UK have described the impact as

“residents going downhill fast, giving up hope and ultimately dying sooner than would otherwise be the case.”

They also point out that the social care winter plan outlines measures already in place that have created a blanket lockdown of care homes in areas of intervention. That is nearly 20% of all care homes in England, and even more than that are now covered by a blanket ban, after further restrictions were imposed over the weekend and today. There is a risk that needs to be managed in allowing visits, but there is also a risk to the physical and mental health of those being deprived of contact with the family members who mean the most to them. There is a balance to be struck, and I am arguing that we must move away from blanket bans.

The impact of banning visits is no less worrying in mental health hospitals. As well as social contact, visits from friends and families act as a check on the power of staff, who can otherwise have near total control over their patients. I am particularly concerned about this given the pausing of regular inspections by the Care Quality Commission. Having both inspections and family visits suspended has led to a deficit in accountability. We always hope that staff in such units act in the best interests of their patients, but we have seen a number of scandals where patients—particularly autistic people and people with learning disabilities—have been subject to cruel treatment and abuse at the hands of staff. Most shocking were the revelations of abuse at Winterbourne View in 2011 and at Whorlton Hall last summer, but last week, 10 staff were suspended at the Cygnet Yew Trees Hospital in Essex after they had been filmed dragging, slapping and kicking a patient, among other abuses.

It is unacceptable that there are any cases where autistic people and people with learning disabilities are subject to abuse, but it has become too common in the units where they are detained. Units like this should be closed down, and the people should be moved back to their own communities. A solution to this has been promised since 2012, but more than 2,000 people are still trapped in these units. Ministers first promised to close these units, then they modified that to say that the numbers would halve, but since 2015, the number has fallen by only 300. We now know that female residents

at Cygnet Yew Trees were exposed to abuse during the pandemic when there were no inspections and no family visits.

I call on the Health and Social Care Secretary to set out what steps he is taking to investigate abuse in those settings during the pandemic. What is he doing to ensure that scandals such as those at Whorlton Hall and Cygnet Yew Trees Hospital become a thing of the past, as he and his predecessor both promised? I also ask him to lift the blanket ban on visits to care homes and to work with Age UK, the National Care Forum and John's Campaign to develop guidance and support for safe care home visiting during the pandemic.

Finally, I want to support the comments made by our Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, today that the 10 pm curfew caused many problems at the weekend, with crowds on the street and on public transport. I support the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), the shadow Health and Social Care Secretary, for examination of the evidence on that. Further, in areas with extra restrictions such as Bolton, there is a need for extra financial support for the businesses that the Government have closed.

5.14 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) back in her place safe and well. I am sure that all of us welcome her back to the House. Seven months and 42,000 deaths after the first person in the UK died from covid on 2 March, there is still great uncertainty about how we should best respond to the pandemic. We do not have a deployable vaccine against covid, and we do not have treatments effective enough to make it a condition not to worry about. We do not know whether the rise in the number of infections in recent weeks is petering out or whether it will do so. Neither do we know that it will not follow the pattern of last winter and spring of doubling, doubling and doubling again, and whether that happens over a week or 10 days it has the same ultimate impact in terms of running out of control. We do not know whether infection with covid this time will have as severe consequences as it did last time in terms of hospitalisations and deaths. We do not even know whether having covid is a guarantee, or makes it more likely, that someone cannot catch it again.

As we approach winter, there is still much that we do not know. What we do know is that good hygiene, social distancing and the isolation of people with covid worked in arresting the exponential growth of the virus last spring and that they are the only ways that we know how to control it again. I understand, therefore, the decision that this Government and the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments have made to introduce or reintroduce some of the measures that impeded the spread of the virus the first time round. Winter is a bad time to be risking losing control of the virus. But that must be it. We must combine the restrictions that are being imposed with the prospect of relief from them.

By the spring, we must embark on a clearly different course. We cannot forever live in circumstances in which the way we live our lives can be upended without notice.

By the spring, many of the unknowns will switch to being known. We will know whether a vaccine has been discovered and validated in trials to allow it to be deployed. We will know, after a full year of experience, whether research into treatments has established whether any of them can give us confidence that contracting covid is manageable.

By the spring, we should—frankly we must—have increased our testing capacity to the level at which we can quickly test and isolate anyone who has symptoms of the disease, and test the asymptomatic contacts of people who test positive. We should have developed testing technology to the point that rapid self-administered tests can be deployed at mass scale to allow people to have greater confidence in working in more crowded places and attending events with large audiences. If we gather and analyse data intensively during the months ahead, we should enter next spring with a much clearer idea of whether covid is becoming less dangerous in general and among which people it is a particular threat.

By next spring, we will know enough answers to adopt a settled strategy and to move beyond playing it by ear, so when we reach the spring and summer months—a more benign time for covid than the winter, with fewer illnesses whose symptoms can disguise or exacerbate covid—we must embark on a sustainable policy. We can either arrange the mass vaccination that will eliminate or at least substantially reduce the threat, if the production of such a vaccine has been successfully achieved over the winter; or if no successful vaccine has emerged, it is at that point that we will need to adjust how we live our lives and to live alongside the virus for the foreseeable future, taking the steps that we need to protect the vulnerable from infection while releasing the rest of the population to live their lives without unending or ever-changing restrictions.

My Committee, the Science and Technology Committee, will be taking evidence throughout the autumn and winter and co-ordinating our work with the Health and Social Care Committee, so that every week there will be an opportunity to have sustained questioning of the scientists and decision makers on the conduct of the pandemic here and overseas. From this intense period of inquiry and analysis of the evidence, we will put before Parliament, Ministers and the public our best recommendations, aimed at ensuring that the weeks ahead will be the last time that our lives have to be upturned, our economy stymied and our young people's prospects blighted because of a virus that a combination of science and good policy should be capable of containing without the severity of the disruption that, sadly, we seem destined to endure this winter.

5.19 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I have to admit that I have had to rewrite my speech in the light of the events that have occurred today in my area, Cleveland, with respect to covid-19.

I thank and pay tribute to all the NHS workers, care workers and key workers who keep the people of my constituency, Hartlepool, safe, well, protected and fed. I also pay tribute to all the local volunteers who have been relentless in their efforts to keep our communities going, to keep them together and to keep our citizens

[Mike Hill]

supported. I am very pleased—so pleased—that one of the national vaccine trials is taking place at our very own University Hospital of Hartlepool, which deserves much more Government investment to protect operational services. It is playing its part in this national crisis and I am proud of the people who work there.

I have changed my speech because of the Secretary of State's announcement from the Dispatch Box of local restrictions for the Cleveland and Tees Valley area. On the letter written by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), who is not present to hear this speech, and his fellow Conservative MPs in the area—they are known as the Cleveland Conservative collective of MPs—to all local authorities in the Tees Valley area to say that they feel the authorities should not proceed with voluntary local restrictions, it would have been much better for them to have spoken to all Tees Valley MPs, rather than construct what is little more than a local, party political and divisive missive at a time when we should all be working together for the greater good in the Tees Valley. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not present to hear me say that.

Local restrictions are the last thing we want—they hurt business and keep families and loved ones apart—but where the R rate is so high, protective measures and local restrictions are put in place to protect people and stop the spread of virus, as we have seen in other areas. I have often disagreed with my local council—for example, it has a bizarre plan to stop traffic going up and down a local high street known as the York Road but it cannot explain why; it just says that it is because of covid-19 reasons. I will disagree with bizarre local plans like that and be vocal about them, but I have spoken to the council today about local restrictions and I have listened to our local public health authorities, and I understand why they feel that more resources and more support is needed to get Hartlepool through this crisis.

Until now, Hartlepool has been given only ad hoc provision, yet we persistently sat at the bottom of the fatalities league in the north-east—something we should rightfully be proud of. Even so, we had been in the red zone—the watch zone—for more than two weeks before routine testing materialised. I am no apologist for my council, which is a Conservative-backed collective, but in order to get a grip of this virus, and with a distinct lack of direction and leadership from the other side, on balance taking local control appears to be the way forward. People in Hartlepool—or anywhere else, for that matter—should not be made to drive miles just to get a test. It is absolutely ridiculous and my constituents rightly feel outraged by it. We need Government leadership and positive direction from the Government; unless we get that, the local option is the better option.

5.24 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), and I am sorry to hear about the problems afflicting so many of his constituents in Hartlepool.

It was great to be in the Chamber when my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) addressed us earlier. I am privileged to be one

of his constituents, and I can tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that when he speaks in this Chamber in the way that he did today, he speaks for tens of thousands of his constituents, not to mention hundreds of thousands elsewhere in the country.

I welcome this debate, but I note that it has come almost as a panic measure by the Government because they suddenly looked at the promises that were made at the time they introduced the Coronavirus Bill six months ago. In their introduction to that, they said that there would be

“safeguards to ensure proper oversight and accountability”

by Parliament. There has not been that proper oversight and accountability, and now, two days before a crucial vote on the renewal of the Coronavirus Act 2020, they come forward with this welcome debate.

I will support the amendment to the motion on Wednesday tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) if it is selected. If it is not, I still hope that the Government will respond positively to the spirit of that amendment. However, even if the amendment is carried, I am not yet persuaded that I need to support the continuation of the Coronavirus Act. Why am I not persuaded of that? Because the Government are guilty of covert mission creep.

You will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that when we were told six months ago that it was necessary to rush legislation through, it was on the basis that we wanted to prevent our NHS from being overwhelmed, with people dying from covid in hospital corridors and not being able to access the care that they needed. Fortunately, as a result of the emergency measures that were taken, that scenario never arose. People were taken to hospital, and they received the very best treatment in hospital and continue so to do.

The original objective of the legislation has been achieved, but, as so often happens with regulation brought in by Governments, they want to keep it. They say, “Oh, we need to keep it just in case.” That is why, in an Adjournment debate on 2 September, I demanded that if the Government were going to keep the regulations, it should be on the basis that there were proper regulatory impact assessments for them. We do not have those regulatory impact assessments. It is all most unsatisfactory.

I quote again from the introduction to the original notes on the Coronavirus Bill, which states:

“For many of the clauses, it is difficult to predict how a power would be used in a specific context, and therefore what the monetised costs would be. Thus, discussion of impacts is largely focussed on unmonetised considerations.”

However, it says that each individual case brought forward

“would require judgement on the specific impacts at that time.”

That has not been provided, and it means that we have had a whole lot of unintended consequences.

When I was at university in Scotland, closing time was 10 o'clock. I could have told somebody that if we returned to a 10 o'clock closing time in a Scottish university city or town, it was likely to result in the consequences we have seen. Why were the rules in relation to early closing in Scotland changed? Because that restriction was leading to people coming out on to the streets having got themselves totally drunk, and to a lot of violence. By extending the opening hours well

beyond 10 o'clock, that violence was mitigated. That was common sense—but we are not allowed to look at that now.

I was much taken by the article in today's *Times* by Clare Foges, who talks about the approach in Sweden—not just the technical side of it. In Sweden, they think of public health not just in terms of death and awful problems in hospitals but in terms of living life to the full. That is why I believe that the Government must now make it their strategy to enable us to live with the virus and without fear.

5.29 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Coronavirus presents a very real threat to the health of our constituents and must be controlled, but we must also recognise that measures to control its spread are having a huge impact on our constituents' lives and those impacts are not evenly felt. They have a disproportionate impact on particular groups, particular places and particular sectors. There is only a short time available, so I intend to restrict my remarks to three matters.

The first is the system for test and trace. If this is not working effectively, there is a likelihood of further restrictions, which none of us wants to see, yet we know that, over the last few weeks, many of our constituents who are unwell and who suspect they have contracted the virus have faced huge problems in accessing a test. When they do get a test, results are too slow. Last week, fewer than one in three people tested in person got their results back within 24 hours, and that proportion was lower last week than the week before. Once positive cases were identified, only around three quarters of those they were in close contact with were asked to self-isolate—again, a smaller proportion than in previous weeks.

The Prime Minister might say that testing and tracing has “nothing to do” with the spread of the disease, but everybody else understands that rapid testing, effective contact tracing and self-isolation are absolutely vital to identifying and containing any outbreak. The Government must acknowledge that there are problems, identify the source of those problems and then take swift action to fix them. Please can we get the Department of Health and Social Care to start working with others that can help? Numerous universities, including the University of Nottingham, are undertaking asymptomatic testing to control outbreaks on university campuses and protect the wider community. Those universities are now working together to share information, but the Government have gone AWOL. Where is the strategy?

That brings me to the second issue I want to raise—the need for Government support for universities and their students. The Government of course have had to act fast on some issues, but when it comes to universities, their action has been glacial. I asked for a statement from the Universities Minister on 9 July, and we still have not had one. Tomorrow, I understand, we are going to have an urgent question, but only because there are serious problems. Young people who are starting university this autumn were promised a mixture of online and face-to-face learning, but an increasing number of students want or need to study remotely, and to do so they need access to the right equipment and connectivity. We know that students from disadvantaged backgrounds

already face a digital divide, so what are the Government doing to bridge that divide and ensure that every student can access high-quality education, whether they are on campus or at home in self isolation?

Having seen some of the very worrying reports this weekend, what are the Government doing to ensure that students are properly supported at university, particularly if they are required to self-isolate? Many young people already experience anxiety and poor mental health. What are the Government doing, alongside universities, to ensure that young people—many away from home for the first time and now experiencing extra pressures as a result of restrictions—can access mental health support, and can the Minister assure us that there are systems in place to ensure their well-being? Will she also assure us that students will not be forced to remain in student accommodation, away from their families, when it comes to the end of term?

Thirdly, Nottingham does not just benefit from having two universities—it is a regional centre with a rich and diverse cultural sector and a thriving night-time economy, sectors that are vital to the city's economy and provide employment for thousands of people. I am deeply concerned that the Chancellor's economic plan simply ignores the disproportionate impact on these sectors. Pubs, bars and nightclubs are either still shut down or operating at reduced capacity, and the 10 pm curfew has made things even more difficult. Our theatres, arts venues and cinemas are reopening, but at far reduced capacities.

These businesses and the people who work in them need and deserve Government support, but the job support scheme simply does not provide it. If a business remains closed, it is impossible to access. For businesses that can access the scheme, it is cheaper to have a fewer number of full-time staff than to keep more people on in part-time work. My Labour colleagues have repeatedly called for a more targeted approach for a job recovery scheme that incentivises bringing more staff back part time and includes a training component. Of course it is welcome that the Chancellor has finally accepted the need to move away from the furlough cliff edge, but he is still letting down those sectors and those workers who most need support. Without a further change of direction, we can only see further job losses hitting my city hard.

5.34 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I rise to do three things. The first is to praise the Government for everything they have achieved on PPE, on testing and on the track and trace app. In my libertarian soul, and in my instinct, my heart and my reason, I consider the Government's track and trace app to be the very apotheosis of my worst fears. Yet over the weekend I studied what the Government have done. They have moved away from the first version, to the Apple and Google-distributed model, with all the private data remaining on the user's phone. They have released a source code, both for the server side and for the client, which I very much welcome as a software engineer, although I doubt I shall be grinding through it. Against all my instincts—and in the knowledge that I am not the Member of Parliament for dogmatic libertarians across the country, with whom I generally agree, but in fact the MP for Wycombe—I have done the right thing: I have, against my expectations,

[Mr Steve Baker]

installed the contact tracing app. I ran out of excuses, I have installed it, and I am allowing it to run even as we speak. I hope that will be of some reassurance, even to those libertarians who might condemn me for it.

Secondly, I want to say something about the science. I am not going to engage in amateur epidemiology, much as I have been enjoying picking it up, but I will praise my constituent and friend, Dr Raghieb Ali, who is an epidemiologist. Unusually, he is an academic epidemiologist and also an acute medicine consultant who works in Oxford, so he is perhaps uniquely positioned to comment on the disease. He has been tweeting and writing about the disease. He is a very reasonable man. He has really helped me to keep my feet on the ground. I say to all Members who, like me, really hate and despise these restrictions on our freedom to look at what Dr Raghieb Ali is writing. He has helped to keep me anchored in the truth that this is a very dangerous disease for people who are older and people who have pre-existing conditions, and we have just got to deal with it.

On the science, I wish my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State were present. As he framed the problem between either suppression or letting it rip, I thought that our friend Mr Osborne was back framing the issue in terms of what I think is a false dichotomy. I think we need to take another look at the scientific advice. There are professors out there telling us that this is an optimisation problem—we need to maximise the lives saved and minimise harm. There is, I think, going to turn out to be a third way that enables us to minimise harm. The Department's own figures have shown, as reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, that the cost of lockdown in quality adjusted life years, adjusted for comorbidities, was greater than the cost of the disease thus far. So if we wish to maximise human flourishing and save lives, we have to look extremely carefully at the science.

I am working with my friend Professor Roger Koppl, from Syracuse University and author of a book titled, perhaps unfortunately, "Expert Failure", looking at what actually happens with expertise. I wrote a brief for the Prime Minister, which I have also tweeted. My covering letter points out:

"Pandemic policy making has been asking the impossible of scientists, economists and politicians. There are solutions and they are fundamental to the success of a free society in an era of accelerating complexity and change.

There is a structural problem rooted in the division of labour which, when combined with bad incentives, causes inevitable failures of expert advice. The problems are acute, delicate, dangerous and long-standing. They do not arise from faulty expertise or bad actors."

I am not going to call for anyone to be sacked.

So I hope people will look at the brief I have put out, which includes concrete suggestions. I will put on the record the Harold Macmillan quote with which the brief leads:

"We have not overthrown the divine right of kings to fall down for the divine right of experts", however brilliant they may be.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does my hon. Friend agree that what he has just said applies particularly to the university environment, where this year more university students will probably die from meningitis than from covid-19?

Mr Baker: I do not know the facts about meningitis, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his point. I particularly welcomed the debate between scientists on this Sunday's Ridge programme. We have seen that the science actually involves a great deal of uncertainty and debate, as brilliant people, well versed in their lifetime's work, try to make their way through uncertain knowledge, to predict the future. We must all proceed with great care if we are to be concerned for our constituents' wellbeing.

In a sense, what I am saying to the Government today is that we need to fix two parts of this process. We need to change the structure within which expert advice is provided. I have provided a brief to the Minister. I have tweeted it out and would happily give it to the Minister. We also need to deal with the problem that has been the subject of so much news this week. We need to deal with the issue of this House voting on restrictions of the people's liberty before it is taken away. That is surely the fundamental point about democracy. I can say, hand on heart, that all Members of this House appreciate that, in an emergency, it is necessary for Ministers to use the powers they have to protect life, liberty and property and I do not condemn anyone, but we are now into a different phase of the disease. It really is time to reach an agreement—I am happy to say that we have just had a constructive meeting with the Secretary of State, the Chief Whip and the Leader of the House—and to reach a constructive way forward. I know it is inconvenient for Ministers to come to the House before they take away people's liberties, but I say to Ministers: it is supposed to be. It is what keeps us a free people.

5.40 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), especially as, unusually, I agreed with much of what he said. If I have the time, I want to talk about three issues: the return of universities, support for closed-down industries and communication for areas in lockdown. But I have to start with the urgent question of the 10 pm hard closure for pubs and restaurants. There does not appear to be logic behind the measure or a convincing rationale for it, and predictably it led to a chaotic situation in Manchester at the weekend as people were turfed out of venues where they were being managed and were socially distanced on to crowded streets and into crowded takeaways and shops. It comes at a time when hospitality venues are already struggling. The landlord at my local in Withington told me that his pubs have largely been full in recent weeks, but he is losing money because of the capacity restrictions. The 10 pm closure makes it hard for restaurants to include two sittings. Those industries were struggling before the 10 pm closure. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth): we need a review of the measure because it does not appear to meet our needs.

On universities, I could just say that I agree with everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said. I will be brief—unfortunately, I have been unlucky in the draw on tomorrow's statement—but I just want to talk about testing. Three weeks ago in this Chamber, I asked for a national plan for the return of universities, including guidance on how to protect communities around universities

and comprehensive testing. That has not happened and we have hundreds of students self-isolating in halls in Manchester. It is going to be only the start of a very difficult time for students, university authorities and local communities such as mine around universities. I echo the call for a proper testing regime for universities, because it will not be practical or acceptable to keep students cooped up in halls over Christmas.

The main issue I want to talk about is the Chancellor's package and the support, or lack of it, for some of the industries that are completely shut down—industries that I worked in before I came to this House, including the nightlife industry, and the music and festivals industries. I am not against tough restrictions to suppress the virus, but they have to come with support, and some of those industries are getting little or no support. The nightclub industry employs 6,000 people in the north-west—I used to be one of them. Many are self-employed, and many have fallen through the cracks in the self-employed scheme. I will not dwell on the fact that there is still no hope for those excluded people in the Chancellor's measures. It is a desperately disappointing omission.

This is about support for businesses as well as individuals—the businesses that keep our cities thriving and vibrant. They have been built up over years and, without covid, will be viable—world leading, in many cases. We are world leading in the event industry and the live music industry. At the moment, nightclubs are sitting empty with no support for rent and rates or the other overheads. Live concert companies cannot promote concerts. They provide work not just for the technicians, roadies and musicians, but for the promoters, office staff, accountants and graphic designers—all the people who work for these companies, which are not making any money at the moment. They are viable, thriving, world-leading businesses without covid, and they will get through it. We need some help for some of those industries because they may not make it through this period. I point the House to the £1.4 billion underspend in cash grants that the Government have just clawed back from local authorities. Those industries should be at the front of the queue for that money.

Finally, on local lockdowns, restrictions and communication, according to the media this week, we are about to see the introduction of a new system of tiers, which would allow people to easily understand what the local restrictions are, and what tier they are in. That sounds like quite a good idea. It could well make it a lot easier for people to understand the restrictions they are under, but surely there needs to be some support. If someone is in a tier, which means that business is closed and that people are unable to work, surely that needs to come with extra support for those businesses, or increased access to testing, or enhanced local contact tracing. There needs to be some support for those businesses and people who are subject to the restrictions.

Let me say in my final few seconds that test and trace is clearly not working. In Greater Manchester, we have a very low quality of information from the national system. Local control of that test and trace system would work for us much better than the national system.

5.45 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow both the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker).

In my interventions on the Secretary of State earlier, I made the synopsis of the argument that I want to make about why Parliament should be involved, but I have some very specific examples. My own view is that it would have been wiser if the Government had stuck to guidance as opposed to putting every single one of the rules into law, partly because we could then have acted faster and there would not have been the same issues about putting things into the criminal law, but, secondly, because we could have kept the language much more straightforward and simple. Some of the complexity that is inevitable when we legislate is part of the reason why citizens find quite a lot of this difficult to follow. The Government have made that decision and we are putting things into the law, but that does mean that, when we are legislating, it is important that this House scrutinises the Government. I alluded to the two reasons for that in my interventions. One is about evidence—about what works and what scenarios we are facing—and the second one is about the detail of the law.

Let me give an example on the first one from last week. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) set out his views about the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser. I do not share those views, but in a press conference last Monday they talked about the doubling time of this virus. Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, said he thought that the epidemic was doubling roughly every seven days. He said that it could be a little bit longer, or perhaps a little bit shorter, but let us say roughly every seven days. That was the underpinning of what my right hon. Friend called “the graph of doom”, which set the tone for last week. When the Prime Minister came to this House on Tuesday—the day after the evidence was presented at the press conference at which there were no questions permitted—he said that, the day before, the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer had said that the doubling rate was somewhere between seven and 20 days. That is really quite a dramatic difference.

The difference between 10,000 cases by the middle of October or 50,000. I do not know which of those two scenarios is correct, but the point is that they are not the same. The reason why Ministers should have to come to the House is so that we can interrogate them on the evidence, understand the problem facing us and understand the efficacy of the solutions.

The second reason is on the regulations. The regulations, which came into force at midnight last night and which were only published, or made, at five o'clock yesterday, contain some very serious powers that were not in the statements made to Parliament last week. For the avoidance of doubt, I broadly support those measures because they are about making sure that people self-isolate when they either test positive or when they are a contact. There are duties that are put on employers that create criminal offences both for the company and for individual managers in that company. I do not know how many businesses in this country are aware of the fact that these duties have now just landed on them—I would hazard very few. There are also measures that give the power of using “reasonable force” to enforce self-isolation not just to police officers and police and community support officers, but to any individual appointed by the Secretary of State and also to employees of local authorities, supposedly these covid marshals. That raises issues about who can use reasonable force, what training they have

[Mr Mark Harper]

to use it in a safe manner and also if they are, by definition, using reasonable force on someone who is very likely to have coronavirus, how they exercise the reasonable force in a way that is safe for them. Do they have proper training? Those are all questions that no one in this House has been able to ask a Minister, because the regulations came into force last night. They have to be debated within 28 days, but that could be a month away and it could happen after they have been amended several times, as we have seen with other regulations. I do not think that is the right way to make the criminal law and introduce important sanctions in a democracy.

The changes were announced last week. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe, I do not buy the idea that there was no time between last week and this week when they could have been debated. When the Government want to, they can change the business of the House rapidly. They can also arrange for the House to sit rapidly. I urge Ministers to take those steps to make sure that these laws are better scrutinised.

5.50 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper).

I will make a few brief observations from the point of view of a Welsh MP for a constituency on the border of Wales and England. Last Friday, we took our younger daughter to start at university for the first time, having taken our elder daughter back to her university two weeks earlier to start her second year. Therefore, the debate about covid restrictions for students is a major reality for us as a family. As with so much else in this debate, it revolves around finding a balance between keeping people safe and letting life and the economy function with some degree of normality.

I believe that the Government have got the balance right with the measures announced last week by the Prime Minister. As an MP on the Welsh borders, I am very pleased that he prepared them in consultation with the Welsh Government and the other devolved Administrations. The differences between the measures taken by the UK and Welsh Governments to combat covid-19 are relatively narrow at present. That is a welcome situation for my constituents, for whom a disparity of measures creates many practical complications.

The Welsh Government's approach to combating coronavirus means that the Labour Opposition in this House have a practical record, albeit in a devolved context, that deserves as much scrutiny as that of the UK Government. Such scrutiny shows that there is no monopoly among political parties on getting every measure right, whether it be on local lockdowns, testing or the delayed adoption in Wales of face coverings in shops and on public transport.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I speak to my hon. Friend as a fellow Conservative MP whose constituency is on the English-Welsh border. He is making a very good speech, but does he acknowledge that some of the differences emanating from the Welsh Senedd, which contrast with legislation made here in London, have led to additional complications and confusion for constituents who, like ours, live on the border?

Simon Baynes: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I have tried to take a constructive approach to such differences throughout the crisis. We live in an environment where we have a devolved Government in Wales. The point I am trying to make today is that it is important for Labour Members to consider how the Welsh Government have dealt with many issues. There have been all sorts of comments about how we were late to lock down and on testing and tracing. To be honest, similar approaches were taken by the Welsh Government. It is important to consider that in this debate.

That supports my point that we are all learning as the pandemic evolves. Implementing major projects such as test and trace on a scale and tight timescale unprecedented in peacetime does create problems. Of course there are bumps in the road, but I commend my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary for the enormous progress already made, particularly with the 12.4 million downloads of the app this weekend and the 20 millionth test today, which he mentioned earlier.

Like those who spoke before me, I would like to sing the praises of all those in the health and social care sectors and key workers, particularly those caring for people with illnesses and severe conditions other than coronavirus. For example, the health centre in Llangollen in my constituency is praised by everybody locally for providing thousands of flu jabs in a highly efficient manner. They and other doctors' surgeries across Clwyd South are triaging patients' conditions and providing medical care via different routes, ranging from face-to-face meetings to online e-consultations. That is to be praised.

I am encouraged and satisfied by the assurances that the Secretary of State gave at the start of the debate about the scope of scrutiny of the Government's measures, particularly the need for the Government to take quick and decisive action at critical moments in the crisis.

5.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As my party's health spokesperson, I have been asked to highlight many issues in the short time I have to speak. However, I also need to stress the effect that the pandemic continues to have on struggling businesses in my constituency. Only this morning, in my office, before I left for the airport, I had a very upset lady with a viable dog kennel business, who had her best year ever last year. With all that has happened, and people unable to holiday, she has no bookings, yet she is precluded from the rate relief scheme in Northern Ireland. She is not considered part of the hospitality sector. I know that is not something the Minister can answer—it is not her responsibility—but I wanted to put it on record.

I have spoken up for local papers and I was interested to read in *The Times* today the correlation between higher turnout in elections and areas that have a thriving local paper. That underlines the importance of local papers and the need for the Government to support them and keep them running.

We are asking people to go into what has been called "lockdown light". We are asking them to give up freedom and their normal lives. Yet as they look around, people are dying—loved ones are dying—not of covid-19, but of other illnesses. Let me read out an email that touched me—I hope it will help in the debate. This person wrote:

"I have already lost one member of my immediate family in May due to the NHS's reduction of normal service. My elderly next-door neighbour has now been diagnosed with spinal cancer

which was not detected for months leaving him unable to care for his wife with advanced dementia. A work colleague is in the last weeks of his life yet can only see one member of his young family until his final hours. Just today I learned a close friend's father has been given a year to live with cancer that was not diagnosed due to the fear clearly portrayed by the media."

It is lovely to see the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) back in her place. I wish her continued health and strength.

Some people resent lockdown. They have seen too many loved ones slip through the net, with the response being, "Coronavirus problems". We all accept that it is hard to deal with and unprecedented, but with a vaccine not on the horizon, we cannot have another six months of screenings not taking place, of surgery being cancelled and people dying when this time last year, they would have lived. As always, it is nice to see the Minister in her place. I ask her what can be done to ensure that we can safely screen, test and operate as needed in the next six months, which will be a critical time for us all.

The Alzheimer's Society has asked me to raise the valid concern that people with dementia have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. I can vouch for that in my constituency. Over a quarter of all coronavirus deaths between March and June were of people with dementia. We cannot ignore that. There is real concern that social distancing guidelines have left people with dementia without social interaction, causing distress and a loss of cognitive skills. The prevention of visits to care homes is having a very detrimental impact on the lives of people with dementia. With dementia, early diagnosis and intervention is key and family contact is vital.

Another massive concern of mine is mental health. In Northern Ireland, we have the mental health legacy of the troubles, which has been exacerbated by the social distancing regulations, not simply for the young, but for people of all ages and every class. A new study in *The Lancet* found that a significant number of covid-19 patients suffered neurological and psychiatric complications. Those conditions range from mood disorders such as mania, depression and psychosis to more complex conditions such as cognitive problems and catatonia. During the peak of the crisis in April, 30% of adults reported high levels of mental distress compared with 20% in 2017-19. Also, 34% of adults reported a high level of anxiety. Those things cannot be ignored.

The Centre for Mental Health predicted that if the economic impact of the covid-19 crisis was similar to that of the post-2008 recession, we could expect half a million additional people to experience mental health problems, with depression being the most common. Those figures are frightening and worrying.

Analysis of Public Health England's latest data on the indirect effects of covid-19 found that 8.4 million people are now drinking high-risk amounts, up from 4.8 million in February, so alcohol is an issue as well. We need funding for mental health. That is critical and needed urgently. We need to consider the long-term effect of every restriction that we place on those who struggle daily.

I put on record my thanks to the NHS staff of all sections. What they have done is not only an inspiration to us all, but has shown the best of British. There is a responsibility on the Government to gain from what they have learnt. Hairdressers have changed their

arrangements and have no waiting rooms, with appointments made and people waiting in their cars. If hairdressers can do it, health can do it as well. We must do better, and we need to do so before one more person dies needlessly when their life could have been saved.

6.1 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The threat and consequences of this dreadful pandemic are so wide-ranging that I will not attempt to cover all the issues that concern me and constituents in Harrogate and Knaresborough. I will focus on one of the current challenges for care homes: their visiting policy.

We all know the real problems that care homes dealt with during the early stages of the pandemic. Caring for and protecting their residents is absolutely paramount for them. We must never forget that we are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. It was not, and is not, easy to keep people safe, with staff coming in daily and goods arriving daily. I recognised the need for strict isolation at the time but was glad to see rules relaxed to allow visits, including garden visits and visits through glass or windows, but we are seeing situations where no type of visit is, or will be, allowed. I recognise, of course, that care homes have been setting up video calls and doing very good work in trying to help people to stay in touch.

The need to protect people does not go away, and I am not being critical of anyone. I want to highlight the emotional consequences and impact on broader health, including mental health and wellbeing for older people and their families. I am sure that we have all had cases in our constituencies where we have been contacted by families desperate to see their loved ones. Nobody is suggesting an open-door policy, but right now, the restrictions are profound.

A further dimension of this is that many people in care homes suffer from some form of cognitive impairment, often dementia, as the hon. Gentleman just highlighted. In these circumstances, the capacity for residents to understand what is going on and why they cannot see their loved ones is almost inevitably limited, yet the need to see their loved ones is so important. It works the other way, too; the need for families to see their loved ones is important as well. Several constituents have raised this issue with me—I am thinking about Dr Ridpath, Judy Bass, Helen Owens, Anna McIntee and others. Balancing wellbeing and isolation is very difficult, but the emotional consequences of no visits are absolutely profound. These families are just desperate to see their loved ones and have truly heartbreaking stories.

Perhaps the reintroduction of visits—through glass or window visits—could be possible, and while this is impersonal, it is clearly better for people to see their loved ones than not. Perhaps designated very close family members in limited numbers could be given staff status, which would allow them access to testing and could then allow a degree of home access. My point is that there could be ways of allowing visits in some form that would materially help residents and families. While never losing sight of the need to keep homes safe, I ask that Ministers and officials consider this issue in the widest of contexts, remembering the benefits of seeing loved ones.

[Andrew Jones]

We have had many statements and questions at the Dispatch Box and I commend Ministers for their diligence. I am very grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue today. This is an astonishingly hard time for Ministers, as the pandemic and our understanding of it has been developing fast. In Harrogate, we have seen the construction of the Nightingale for Yorkshire and the Humber, which happened astonishingly quickly and was welcomed within the community. The focus on vaccines has been impressive. Also impressive has been the scaling up of PPE production following the clear global shortage, which impacted the UK, at the start of the crisis. When he opened the debate, my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary said that at the start of his tenure, just 1% of UK PPE was manufactured in the UK, but the contracted figure is now 70%. That is a huge and positive turnaround, and I am sure that a nimble response with short supply chains will help to provide continuity and a guaranteed supply.

What the Government are asking of people is hard. Civil liberties are being compromised—I do understand that that is for the best of reasons—and restrictions must be in place only for the shortest possible time. Decisions are being taken in good faith, but those decisions still need parliamentary scrutiny; that is our role here as safeguarders of our national liberty. A transparent approach to the science and decision making is necessary to ensure that we take people with us. If we do, and if they understand why a decision has been taken, I think we will see greater compliance, allowing people to resume their lives safely. The greater the compliance, the quicker we will get through this crisis, and the less pain it will cause. We all know that the level of pain has already been very high.

6.5 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who raised a crucial point about the need to be able to see loved ones in care homes. He is quite right.

I begin by taking the opportunity to put on record my thanks to all those working on the frontline in Newport East during an extremely difficult year, with challenging months ahead of us. I thank the NHS workers, emergency services, local authority staff, civil servants, those in retail and food banks, and many more who have gone above and beyond to help.

My constituency includes communities in Newport, who are entering their second week of local restrictions, and in Monmouthshire, who are under the general Welsh restrictions. There is some evidence that the more cautious approach represented by these restrictions is working, and I am grateful to constituents for adhering to the rules, however challenging that might be.

In Wales, we are doing some things differently, and I know from constituents that the clear majority appreciate the measured, careful, thoughtful, and considered leadership of First Minister Mark Drakeford and the Welsh Government. As an example, while I was driving down today, I listened to a representative from UKHospitality on 5 Live talking about the 10 pm curfew for pubs and bars, which has been referred to a lot today. The UKHospitality representative pointed out how much more sensibly it had been implemented in Wales to

avoid a hard cut-off time of 10 pm and the kind of mass exodus on to the streets that has been seen in other places; my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) alluded to it earlier. My constituents have appreciated the clearer and more sustained messaging from the Welsh Government, in contrast to the genuinely confusing messages from the UK Government to go out, go back to work and go on holiday, which has now been followed by the reverse.

The Welsh Labour Government are working on plans to prevent evictions in Wales, and we are spending triple the funding that is being spent in England on avoiding rough sleeping, but in England the Government are lifting the ban on evictions just as the second wave strikes. We are continuing provision for free school meals for those who are shielding or self-isolating into the autumn. It is not clear that the same is being done in England, so there are differences. In Wales, bonus payments have been made to care workers in recognition of the sacrifices they have made. The UK Government have decided to tax and make deductions from those payments, leaving some who are on universal credit with just £125.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington said, the measures announced by the Chancellor last week to help those who are in work fell short of what was required. There is nothing for those who have lost their jobs, or for those in professions in which the Chancellor has deemed jobs to be non-viable. There is no covid recovery plan or strategy for retraining. There is no strategy for the young, who, as we know from previous recessions, will be hit hardest. Everyone under 25 should have the chance to get a job, training or education. The job support scheme should have incentivised employers to keep more staff on, rather than incentivising them to bring some back full time and let others go. The gaps in the job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme have not helped those highlighted by the campaign for the 3 million excluded, including new starters, those who pay themselves dividends and those who earn half their income from self-employment. Then there are whole sectors that have been left out, be it the creative sector, the hospitality supply chain or the exhibition and events industry. For those having to claim universal credit, the five-week wait causes huge debt problems. Now is the time for the Government to fix the in-built failings in that system and turn advance payments into grants, not loans.

It is clear from my casework in Newport East that, for obvious reasons, the pandemic is having a severe impact on the operation of key Departments such as the Home Office, and especially UK Visas and Immigration. Can Ministers look at the fact that processing times have skyrocketed to up to two years for some people? I ask that on behalf of a young constituent who cannot take up a place at medical school this year because he has not had a decision, at a time when we desperately need his skills.

Can Ministers also look at the issue of holiday companies and airlines refusing to pay refunds for pre-booked holidays, as local and devolved lockdown restrictions are not covered by UK law? Ministers have said that this is an anomaly, but we need the Government to take action quickly. Finally, as the USDAW campaign has highlighted, since the start of the pandemic the average retail worker has been assaulted, threatened or abused every six-and-a-half days—more than double the rate in 2019. Can we address that issue?

6.10 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). I, too, want to thank all our frontline key workers.

This has no doubt been a very difficult job for Ministers, especially those in the Department of Health and Social Care. They have done tremendous work to try to understand this new virus and manage the spread of covid. I want to put on record my gratitude to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). She has taken my phone calls in the evening, at weekends and during the day. Sometimes my requests on behalf of my constituents have not even fallen in her portfolio, but she has always tried to track down the right response, and for that I am incredibly grateful.

We have had some successes. We have had successes on testing—we are testing more than the rest of Europe—but we now need to get the tracing element right. I had huge concerns about PPE early on. There is now a PPE strategy, and 70% of PPE will now be produced here in the UK compared with 1% earlier on. And who can forget the huge efforts to get the Nightingale hospitals up and running?

However, I have huge concerns about how the Government want to progress with the extension of covid laws. I do not feel it is appropriate that Members of Parliament read about new restrictions in the press—restrictions that cover criminal offences, duties and penalties that can reach up to £10,000—and I am hugely concerned about the role of covid marshals. I am sent to the House of Commons to represent my constituents in Wealden, and I cannot do that if parliamentary democracy is suspended. That is why I will support the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and share the concerns of many Government Members about the lack of scrutiny.

I do not doubt that Ministers want their arguments to be tested, so that they can be assured that these laws will have minimal side effects. We need to understand more of the evidence, and we need more diverse scientific evidence put in front of us. I do not feel that I am in any position to tell my constituents that they cannot see their kids for Christmas—I do not understand how we can even implement that. I do not feel comfortable telling my constituents that they cannot visit their loved ones in care homes whose mental health is deteriorating fast because we do not have the track and trace or testing in place.

I want to touch on three themes that we should be focusing on. We need to get back to basics and focus on what we can get right. I had an email recently from Peter Appleton, who oversees a care home and said that once again, the issue of getting testing results back in time has reared its ugly head. If care home staff do not get their test results back in time, they cannot provide a service to the residents, who are already struggling without the support of their families.

I turn to the impact on our young people, who have not had access to formal education for many months, and now we are making decisions that mean they will not get any sort of educational activity outside school. In my constituency of Wealden, we have two outdoor centres: Bowles Rocks and Hindleap Warren. They enable youngsters who may not even have access to a

garden to experience a bit of outdoors, whether it is climbing or doing a bit of mentoring or leadership training. They could do that within bubbles, and they have all the covid-safe protections in place, but once again, broadbrush restrictions based on covid are undermining not only businesses but young people's experiences outside the classroom.

I will conclude with an issue that the Minister will be familiar with, which is Public Health England. As the Minister will know, I have put on the record my belief that Public Health England lacks transparency, accountability and leadership. We have had three times more deaths among the BAME community, and higher deaths among BAME medical practitioners. At one point Public Health England claimed that it did not have the data. One can hope only that it has the data now, but I have yet to see what changes it has made to ensure that vulnerable groups within the BAME community are kept safe. As we introduce new restrictive laws, I am concerned that we are not applying the laws we already have in place.

Last Wednesday I was at a funeral in my village of Nutley—of course, only 30 people were present. A member of the family gave a very moving speech, but nobody was allowed to hug her. That is the state we are in. The Government need Back-Bench support from across the House, and we need parliamentary scrutiny for that. I hope the Government will understand why we would support such an amendment.

6.16 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): On 23 January, a full two months before the national lockdown, the Secretary of State came to the House to give his very first statement about a virus that none of us had heard of. He said,

“while there is an increased likelihood that cases may arise in this country, we are well prepared and well equipped to deal with them. The UK is one of the first countries to have developed a world-leading test for the new coronavirus.”—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2020; Vol. 670, c. 432.]

Reading that eight months later, following the loss of almost 42,000 lives in the UK, unprecedented restrictions on our freedoms, and the biggest recession since records began, we know how tragically wrong that turned out to be.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and I fully accept that no Government could have predicted the covid-19 pandemic and been fully prepared for what was to unfold. However, we did have some warning from China and our European neighbours, and pandemics have long been at the top of the country's risk register. The Government had responsibility to think the unthinkable, and plan and prepare accordingly. Sadly, I do not feel that they did.

That first statement was the start of a pattern that we have seen throughout the crisis, and it exposed the deep chasm between rhetoric and reality. Back then, the Secretary of State boasted that we were the among the first countries to develop a test for the virus, yet levels of testing were initially far too low, and too slow to ramp up. Six months on, yes, capacity is up. I accept that and congratulate the Government on that.

The Secretary of State bats away all criticism, with claims that we have the highest testing rates in Europe, but that means nothing if someone cannot access a test

[Munira Wilson]

when they need one. Just this morning I heard from a local mum whose 13-year-old son is running a 39° temperature. She tried all night to book a test, and when she finally got offered one, it was on the Isle of Wight. She lives in Teddington in south-west London. That tale is replicated across the country, and particularly in London, because 40% of our testing capacity was taken away in recent weeks. Other measures suggest that cases are now rising, but we do not have hard testing data to inform the decisions we need to bring the situation back under control.

Centralised tracing has been poor, with tracing rates centrally barely hitting 60%. Local tracers have had much higher tracing rates of well in excess of 90%. Despite all the advice, the Government insisted on a centralised top-down approach, even though local authorities the length and breadth of the country have the expertise and local knowledge to trace effectively. The long-promised app has been beset by numerous problems. Today the Secretary of State hailed the great success of the app's launch, but thousands could not register their test results, and older Apple iPhones and newer Huawei phones are unable to download it. Six months on, the so-called world-beating test and trace system is an utter shambles.

The other chasm between rhetoric and reality has been social care—an issue I have been raising in the House since March. We hear time and again that the Government have put a protective ring around care homes, yet the numbers of deaths speak for themselves, and it was clear that social care was an afterthought. Stories from care workers tending to residents who have contracted the virus and comforting them in their dying days back up this picture. I wrote to the Minister for Care in mid-August but I have yet to receive a reply. I am delighted that Conservative Members are getting such access and great responses from Ministers day in, day out, but Opposition Members write letter after letter and table question after question, and fail to get replies or get replies months later.

I highlighted testing challenges locally, but these issues are relevant across the country. Care homes are now able to access tests, but turnaround times are too slow. Learning disability homes have finally now got access to testing, but it is still patchy and turnaround times are too slow, and we have yet to see a full roll-out of testing in supported living. A new problem that has emerged is that community nurses going into homes to give residents a flu jab are not being tested, and guidance on this issue has been delayed.

We have heard from Members on both sides of this House about the tragic situation of people in care homes whose mental health is suffering because they cannot have visits from a family member. We must—must—get regular testing for a nominated family member. I have heard that from my constituents who cannot access their family members and can see these people withering away before their very eyes. If we really have the largest testing system imaginable and we have put a protective ring around our most vulnerable, Ministers must be able to find a solution to this problem, and we need one urgently.

6.21 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): We have heard a lot about testing. I have been talking to the Secretary of State about testing for some months now, because I have a company in my constituency—SureScreen—that has developed an antigen test and an antibody test, but for some reason Public Health England will not speak to it. It can do 1 million tests a week, ramping up to 2 million a week. These are 15-minute tests. I have written to and talked to the Secretary of State about it, but nothing has come back—nothing at all. I do think that there is something wrong when a company can do this at a very reasonable cost and we are struggling with testing. We should be using every company that we possibly can.

I have supported the Government on the new measures that we have put in place as a country, but I feel that this Parliament should be sovereign and we should make some decisions. It is no good the Government, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State just saying out there, “We’re going to do this.” We need to ratify it and we need to agree with it. I probably would agree with it, but I would like to have a say in what we are doing. I have had dozens of constituents say, “Enough is enough. We want to be able to go and see our grandchildren.” We are now talking about Christmas being cancelled for students and for people who cannot go into groups of more than six. That means that I will not see my grandchildren because it will be a group bigger than six—but I want to. There are many pensioners who wish to see their family rather than live a long life. They would like to be able to make that choice. This Government have a responsibility to listen to those people, some of whom feel passionate because they fought in the war, or their parents fought in the war, for the freedoms that we want.

We are not, in this Parliament, given the opportunity to decide whether we think that these decisions have been made correctly. They may well have been, but I would like to see the evidence. I have not seen any evidence other than on the broadcasts—no more than any other member of the public. It is important that we do see and hear the evidence so that we can make a well-judged decision. After all, when we go to war we make a decision, but this is a war against a pandemic.

The Government really do need to think again and to accept the Brady amendment. They need to work with all the people who signed it—I am one of them—to be able to go forward so that the public feel that their representatives are representing them. I am trying to represent my constituents in many different ways, and this would be one of them when I could say to the Prime Minister, to the Secretary of State and to the Minister what I believe and what I feel. I feel passionately that we should be having a say. I urge the Government to accept the Brady amendment now, and in the future to look forward and say, “Actually, Parliament can make a decision.” Although we are told we have to make these decisions quickly—I accept it has to be relatively quick—we can change the business in this House so that we can all take part.

We have previously been recalled back for debates. It may be that we would not want to be called back every Saturday to make a decision, but we could be when there are big changes such as those of the last couple of

weeks. This big change is affecting millions and millions of people, not least students. I feel passionately about those students who have left home for the first time and gone to college. They want to party and do all those things, and I accept that, but to be told they probably cannot go home at Christmas to see own family is outrageous. I would say to those students, “Probably defy what the Government say. Go home and see your family.”

6.25 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I welcome the debate as it allows me to raise a number of issues of concern relating to the City of Durham, although I suspect that they are shared by constituencies across the country. County Durham, like many areas, has been subject to greater coronavirus restrictions to reduce the spread of the virus. While I support measures that protect public health, it is important to remember that it is the incompetence of Government that has made them necessary.

We have all witnessed the testing shambles and the shortcomings of the privatised track and trace system. We have a dodgy app and testing delays while important Government contracts are being handed out to private companies like confetti, yet the calls from public health for localised test and trace systems fall on deaf ears. How on earth do the Government plan to stop the virus if they do not know where it is?

As I said in my maiden speech, the policies of Government greatly affect the lives of ordinary people. We can see that illustrated during the pandemic. The continued failure to sort out test, track and trace has made the coronavirus crisis worse; that is undeniable. To add to that, many of my constituents are concerned about how the Government’s botched approach to the reopening of universities will affect them in Durham. Currently, thousands of students are returning to Durham, an area in local lockdown. People are worried about the impact that will have on the infection rate in the region as a whole, while students fear that once again they are being forgotten by Government. Given that the Government failed on exam results and failed on reopening schools safely, it is incredible yet unsurprising that the return of students was not properly planned for in order to protect them and the communities in which they study. What on earth has the Education Secretary been doing for the last six months? Clearly, not his job.

Finally, we have the economic impact on Durham. Businesses have closed and shops shut while jobs have been lost and hours cut for many who rely on that income just to get by. The measures put in place have been welcome, and I thank Durham County Council for its speedy and efficient response to businesses in need, but it is a fact that for millions there has been no support at all. Sectors that need specific intervention have been largely ignored and job losses that could have been avoided are now almost inevitable. Protections for renters have been withdrawn, while our welfare system, after years of Government cuts, can no longer be described as a safety net. Incredibly, extra support has had to be dragged from the Government by the Labour party and trade unions, although those concessions have repeatedly been too little too late.

It is time for the Government to stop ruling by U-turn and get a grip. They need to sort out testing, fix care, address the education crisis and stop our economy

falling apart. A second wave is not inevitable, but the incompetence of this Government is making it more likely by the day.

6.29 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I supported the Government in the decisions they took in March, at the start of the covid-19 outbreak, when scientific understanding of this virus was not at the point that it is today. Tough decisions had to be made as to how to protect human life, because we were still learning how the virus could be transmitted and who was most vulnerable to becoming critically ill if they were infected. I commend Ministers for acting as they did and when they did, as well as everyone who has gone the extra mile during this terrible time, in Northampton and elsewhere.

The steps the Government took in the spring stopped the NHS being overwhelmed and saved lives. However, no Member of this House could be in any doubt that they also had a significant impact on our country in terms of the economy, society, the policing of our civil liberties and the devastating effect on people’s mental health. As data published by NHS England on a daily basis outlines, the number of people testing positive for covid-19 is rising, yet the death rate is staying low. “Yes, at the moment,” will be the response, and I acknowledge that, but I urge that that remain the key statistic either for further steps or for reeling back.

It is therefore imperative at this time that all areas of our lives affected by current restrictions be taken into account. Changing the Government’s response in line with the rates of infections if there are significantly lower death rates should not be viewed, as some might like to shout from the rooftops, as a U-turn. Changing tack in response to the statistics is rather a response to the reality of the situation we currently find ourselves in or may come to find ourselves in. That is not a humiliation or a repudiation, but adapting to circumstances.

I am concerned about the impact on the economy, not only in terms of people’s livelihoods—I thank the Chancellor for the unprecedented support he has given there—but in terms of the economy being able to provide for public services, particularly in non-covid health, notably cancer and mental health services. In addition, I am concerned about the impact there has already been on people attending vital appointments at their local hospitals and receiving urgent medical treatment. Earlier today, a constituent sent me an interesting link to an open letter by 394 medical doctors and over 1,300 healthcare professionals in Belgium, touching on this exact point: a cure must not be worse than the disease.

In essence, the dystopian nature of some of these restrictions has already caused a considerable deal of damage in society. I recognise the difficult balance and approach the Government had to take, but if we look at some other countries—Sweden, yes, but others too—it becomes evident that there are alternative approaches to controlling the virus without as significant an impact on civil liberties or as damaging an effect on the economy, with shielding the elderly and vulnerable more specifically than via general lockdowns being the approach.

I turn from the current challenges and dilemmas, the current agonising choices, blizzard of statistics and analysis of infection rates versus death rates, to a time—we hope and pray it will be soon—when we emerge from this, hopefully with a vaccine, I want to be very clear

[Andrew Lewer]

that any temptation on the part of the Government to attempt to keep any aspect of the restrictions, even if they have been determined to have been beneficial in some way, must be totally rejected. Any restrictive measure that has been implemented to fight coronavirus must go when a vaccine has been developed and distributed among much of the population.

At that point, a bonfire of restrictions must be metaphorically set alight. My inbox has seen a huge increase in people who now share that position with me. That goes back to my point on the damage—necessary though it may have been felt to be, and not to denigrate that—that these restrictions have done to society as a whole. This has been a national trauma, and it has eroded our nation's civil liberties to a level that we have not seen in this country during peacetime. It is therefore crucial that every opportunity for public and parliamentary scrutiny is availed of.

6.34 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think the fact that the Government have made this time available for scrutiny is welcome. I want to start, as others have done, by thanking all the care workers, NHS staff, support staff and council staff who have responded so courageously to the pandemic in Glasgow North.

I particularly want to express my solidarity with and send my best wishes to many of the new constituents in Glasgow North who have been affected by the outbreak at the University of Glasgow and have found themselves confined to their halls of residence. I am grateful to the principal of the university, Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli, for taking the time this morning to speak to me and my MSP colleagues Bob Doris and Sandra White about the situation and the steps the university is taking to support students who have found themselves in difficulty. I know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you take a particular interest in the University of Glasgow and the wellbeing of its students.

The pandemic is going to bring flare-ups and flashpoints, and some of them will be easier to see than others, but, as others have said, nobody is to blame for this. Catching the virus is not something wrong or in itself a breach of the regulations. It is not a question of blame, but there is a question of responsibility and where the duty of care lies, and that is what I want to look at in my short contribution.

That is particularly important, in Glasgow North, for people who are in the creative sector and who are self-employed. They are literally the heart and soul of our city. Creativity means so many different things: it is the musicians, the artists, the sound and light engineers who support them, the pop-up shops, the artisan producers, the wedding dress makers, and the event organisers and co-ordinators. These are individual self-employed self-starters, and they have been left behind by this Government. I thought the Tories were supposed to celebrate and support entrepreneurs, and instead they find themselves excluded, but it does not have to be that way.

This comes back to the question of responsibility, and that was the point I was making to the Prime Minister last Wednesday. The costs and the consequences of covid are unavoidable. Somebody has to meet them,

and that somebody has to be and can only be the state—the Government. The Government have already had to borrow an unimaginable amount of money. Governments around the world have had to do that, and an independent Scotland would be able to do that.

The question is how the money is used to the best effect. The Government can either pay through job retention schemes, through income guarantees and through investment in preventive healthcare and support for people's mental wellbeing, or they can pay through long-term mass unemployment and through the social security system, with the costs that come with that—from the health service to social work, the police and all the rest. That is why we have to see this moment as a chance to do things differently and to set a different path, whether that is a universal basic income in whatever shape or form it might take, or prioritising green, sustainable alternatives to working practices, transport and service delivery.

However, the Government's vision seems to be a return to the rat race and a return to trickle-down economics—that we will know we have beaten the virus when things go back to the way they were before. They already want to take us back to some notion of empire with their Brexit obsession, and now they are harking back to the days of Thatcher, where mass unemployment is fine so long as some people get to be filthy rich. They should not think that we are not wise to the idea that the disaster of a no-deal Brexit can be hidden behind the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic. That might suit some of the Tories, but it is not what people in Glasgow North want to see. They and we in the SNP want “Build back better” to be not just a slogan, but a genuine direction of travel.

In reality, we cannot go back and we will not go back. There is not going to be a light-bulb moment, even in this Chamber, when suddenly we stop washing our hands, keeping our distance and wearing masks, and we all just pile back into offices instead of working from home. We are moving to a new kind of normal and to a different way of how society and the economy will work in future. If that direction does not come from Westminster, then people in Scotland will seek it and find it elsewhere. The virus will not be defeated by grandiose rhetoric about moonshots and world-leading apps; it will be defeated by everyone working together, by making careful judgments based on the best scientific advice and by admitting—as the Scottish Government and the First Minister have done from the start—that mistakes will be made and learning from them for the future. Ultimately, of course, the future for Scotland will be in Scotland's hands. It always is.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Chris Bryant.

6.40 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Goodness—thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. What a delight it is to be called to speak so suddenly.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I should explain, lest there be confusion, that it is of course unusual for the Chair to call two people from the same side of the House consecutively—I hope the hon. Gentleman is getting his breath back—but the hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales

(Miss Dines), who would have spoken from the Government Benches, has withdrawn from the debate, so I am obliged, under the current strange rules, to go directly to the hon. Gentleman—whether I want to or not.

Chris Bryant: Well, there was a bit of a sting in the tail there, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will take that up with you later. Incidentally, I can perfectly well disagree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady): even though he is theoretically on the same side of the House, he is on a different side from me in respect of many other arguments.

Government in this country can only ever be by consent, and when the Government start to lose consent in a pandemic or at a moment of national crisis, there is a real problem for the nation. As much as the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), knows that I am I am very fond her and deeply respectful of what she brings to bear in this House, I none the less worry that the Government are presently losing the consent of the British people.

My inbox is full of people who now subscribe to all sorts of mad conspiracy theories. They elevate wild scientists they have discovered somewhere on the web to be the great international experts in the field. They point to things that the Government have done in respect of which there are anomalies; sometimes they are inevitable anomalies, but none the less they pick holes in all that. It feels to me that, slowly but surely, people are beginning to lose confidence in the Government's handling of this situation. I want to make sure that as a nation we work together—there is no party political advantage to be gained on either side—but we need the Government to do better.

There have been too many mixed messages. It is terribly difficult for an individual member of the public, whose job is not to follow every latest announcement from government—whether it is from their local authority, the Westminster Government, or the Government in Cardiff Bay or in Edinburgh—to understand which specific rules apply to them. Every Member present will have had hundreds of emails and requests, asking “What am I meant to do in this set of circumstances?” I do not know about others, but I often scratch my head as to what the precise answer is. It is therefore difficult for ordinary members of the public. The broadcasters have often not helped: they announce things as if they are for the whole UK and they turn out actually to be for part of England. We need to do much better at this.

The Government's exaggerated boasting has not helped. I would ban the words “world-beating”. It is not a competition with other countries; it is a competition with the virus. Honestly, I would just bin all that. This is not about trying to win some popularity contest, either; it is just about trying to do the right thing.

I know this is a painful thing to say, but the Dominic Cummings moment did immeasurable damage to the Government's ability to deliver their own strategy. I know that most hon. Members on the Government Benches think that as well, because they say so in private, and in many cases they have had more emails about that than Opposition Members have. If it feels as if there is one rule for one set of people and another for everybody else, it undermines confidence in the Government.

The test and trace system barely works at the moment. The Government said four weeks ago that it would be sorted in two weeks but it still is not sorted, and I do not think it will be sorted until the end of October.

On the financial problems for pubs, it is not that we are killing pubs, it is just that we have knecapped them. I can see no logical reason why we would want to chuck everybody out of a pub at 10 o'clock, at the same time, in all the pubs in the whole of the town. It is illogical. We have not done that in Wales; we have done it differently, allowing for drinking-up time and things like that, which is a perfectly sensible, long-standing tradition in Britain. That is what we should have done more widely.

There is no money for the 3 million freelancers, musicians and so many others. We have not sorted out the problem of people going on holidays who were being told by holiday companies, “No, this isn't really the law; it's just guidance,” so they will not offer compensation.

The Government must do far more in Parliament. As I said way back, earlier this year, legislation that sits on the statute books for two years that we have to take up and down, yes or no, with no amendment allowed, is no way to govern by consent.

6.44 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my old sparring partner the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). Although I do not agree with everything he says, he does talk some sense. We face a particular challenge: everyone has become an expert in this, and for the first time in the social media age we are experiencing the pervasive presence of extreme theories. We have seen them to some degree before, for example, in respect of the tragic airline disaster in Ukraine, but, perhaps more than at any other time, we are seeing the emergence of theories that come from nowhere. People are latching on to them because they are desperate to see a way through this.

In defence of this Minister and the ministerial team, let me say that this is a tough time to be in government, there are no simple answers and some of the things they have done are remarkable. For all that we complain about the issues on testing—and there are some—the reality is that six months ago we had no testing capability but we have now tested more people than any other country in Europe, and we continue to do so. There are, therefore, things Ministers should take credit for. There are, of course, others that have not worked as well as they should, but that was always going to be the case, as it has been in almost every other country. This is an extraordinarily difficult time to be in government.

I wish to make two points tonight. In the coming months, we must make sure we do only what is absolutely necessary to keep the virus under control. I know there are differing opinions—some want us to lock down everything and others do not want us to lock down anything—but every step that is taken curtails someone's life and freedoms, and does damage to individuals, businesses, our economy and the mental health of the nation. There are things that we have to do, but let them be only the minimum. I have said it before, but I say it again: we must not take national measures, except in extremis. The difference in the incidence of the virus across the country is marked. In parts of my constituency there have been no new cases in the past couple of

[Chris Grayling]

weeks, whereas there have been many cases in other parts of the country. We should not apply one-size-fits-all measures unless we really have to—I hope Ministers will take that on board. It is much easier for all of us to defend what the Government are doing—the difficult steps they are having to take—if we can see that they are applying the rules where they are most needed and that they are not applying them where they are not needed. It is really important that that happens.

The other point I wish to make relates to the businesses and sectors that cannot operate, not because the economy has taken a nosedive, but because they are not being allowed to operate as a result of the rules, guidance and regulations that we have imposed. That applies to the music industry, of which mention has been made, the entertainment industry and the events industry. No business exhibitions or concerts are taking place. There are no crowds at live sporting events. Aviation, a particular concern of mine, given the threat to jobs all around the country, is barely able to operate. We must make sure in the coming weeks that we do not simply bring to a halt the processes that have been put in place to allow some of these activities to start again. I do not see why business exhibitions cannot take place in a controlled environment, why a small number of thousands cannot attend a football stadium that can seat 40,000, or why a theatre or concert performance cannot go ahead where careful social distancing measures are in place. I do not think we can go through the next six months with none of those things happening. I urge Ministers to keep the process going that they had started of allowing those activities to resume in the right controlled environments.

I particularly wish to stress the issue of aviation. We are going to see massive job cuts around the country in what has been one of our most important sectors, but it does not need to be like that; there are ways in which we can get at least part of this industry going again. I call on Ministers to work with the industry to carry out at least a trial of testing at the airport before people fly. I understand their concerns and that this may not solve all problems, but nothing we do at the moment is going to be perfect. At least let us try testing on some key routes, track carefully what happens to the passengers on those routes, see whether there really is a problem and establish whether we can make airport testing work, to allow the airline industry to get going, not just locally within Europe, but on some of the international routes that are so important to it.

We must not allow our economy to close down. We have to do everything we can to help those businesses that need it, and we must do the minimum that we can get away with to keep this virus under control.

6.49 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to the many NHS workers, care workers, retail workers, civil servants, hospitality workers and so many more who have helped to support the residents in my constituency over the last few months and, of course, for many months before that.

The Government have had months to improve the effectiveness of test, track and trace, which we all know is essential in combating the spread of the virus, but they must stop presiding over a strategy that has handed

responsibility and funding over to management consultancy firms and outsourcing giants, bypassing our NHS and established public health networks.

Over the last month, there have been signs of the near collapse of what exists of the Government's testing system, with many people in virus hotspots such as my constituency of Jarrow having absolutely no access at all to testing. Numerous examples can and have been given by Members on both side of the House, and that view is shared by colleagues on the ground at Gateshead Council in my constituency, who tell me that the consistency of support and information from the national track and trace system remains variable and that the national system is currently fragmented, placing additional pressure on local Public Health England health protection teams.

If we are heading towards a second national lockdown, this needs to be sorted now. This time wasting simply is not good enough. We know the devastating impact that a second national lockdown would have on the economy, jobs and people's mental health. It is a national scandal that students are currently being locked down in their university halls because there is no effective testing and tracking system in place. Throughout the summer, the University and College Union warned that this would happen, but private profit and the needs of landlords have been prioritised over our young people's education and wellbeing. On top of what many students went through with the exam fiasco, and with the uncertainty now around Christmas, this is a mental health crisis in waiting.

Not only do we need the Government to step up and sort out testing; we need them to sort out communication. We have had endless mixed messaging. Just last month, people were being encouraged to go back to work and to eat out to help out. The Prime Minister even said that it was our "patriotic duty" to go out for a pint. Obviously, we all want to see the hospitality sector reopen and thrive, but alongside that we need effective testing, tracking and tracing. Because of the Government's incompetence and the lack of effective testing, infections have inevitably risen alongside the increase in human interaction. Instead of offering any self-reflection, the Government pin the blame on people for not following the rules; we are effectively seeing the Government gaslighting the nation to absolve themselves of any blame.

It is not just effective testing and communication that is needed; the Government must also lay out an effective plan to recover jobs, retain workers and rebuild businesses. Industries teetering on a cliff edge, such as aviation, which the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) mentioned, retail and hospitality, need further support now to avoid a jobs wasteland.

In conclusion, the Government's approach is failing and they must quickly get a grip of the situation. We need effective test and trace, improved communication and targeted support to prevent a further jobs crisis. The people of this country are exhausted. They need and deserve better.

6.54 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The unprecedented events that stopped us in our tracks six months ago have led to this wide-ranging debate today. The coronavirus has had an effect on almost every aspect of our lives, and the debate is important for that reason. Every single death from coronavirus is a

tragedy and every excess death as a result of the measures that were taken is a tragedy as well. The good news is that, thanks to the hard work of our medics, we have a better understanding of how to treat the virus, which is welcome. I would like to pay tribute to all the public services, not just in my constituency but throughout the country, that have done so much to keep us in a reasonably good place as a country, and also to the volunteers who have ensured that people who were shielding and isolating had the food and support that they needed. I pay tribute to Basingstoke Voluntary Action and all the emergency hubs in my constituency, which were funded by our local authority. We are very grateful to them.

The House has not lost a single day of sitting, and although I do not like the fact that our proceedings are curtailed at the moment or that we do not have Westminster Hall debates, the staff here have ensured that we can continue to exercise some sort of parliamentary scrutiny. As I am sure colleagues will agree, our constituency offices have also played a blinder in supporting our constituents with the information that they need. What our constituents want now, however, is that we not only suppress the virus but enable them to have confidence that their families will have a financially safeguarded future. That is the challenge that the Government face, and that is why I am heartened that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is often at the Dispatch Box outlining the work that he is doing and the relentless work that his team is doing. The idea that this is being done behind closed doors does not bear much scrutiny, because so many statements are being made here. I also want to mention the work of the Chancellor in putting in place some groundbreaking schemes right from the beginning, including the furloughing and the kickstart scheme to try to get people back into employment.

When measures were put in place in March, we were dealing with the unknown, and with a virulent killer virus, but now we are dealing with things that we perhaps understand a bit more about. I would like to suggest to the Minister on the Front Bench that we look not only at how we geographically target the work that the Government are doing, but at targeting specific groups, some of which have been touched on today. Before I get on to that, I will say to the Minister that we have all turned into virology experts now. We used to be international trade experts, and now we are virology experts, but I have to say that I would really rather like the Minister to continue to deal with the highly complex issues that the Government are dealing with now, rather than having them debated in front of the House. A level of scrutiny is needed, but let us be real here. These are complicated issues and Government Ministers have the details of the arguments to hand to ensure that they make the right decisions on our behalf. They can then come before us at the Dispatch Box to justify them.

There are two issues that I would like the Minister to take away from the debate today. First, there is the issue facing disabled people. We know for a fact that there has been a 134% increase in deaths among people with learning disabilities, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, who is doing an excellent piece of work in that area. Can the Minister please confirm that he will work better, and with better transparency, on looking at the recommendations of the Committee, particularly on local authority use of easements in the Care Act 2014?

Secondly, we need more targeted support for women. Across the globe, women have been more adversely impacted than men by the coronavirus. We have record numbers of women in work in this country now, but we face critical problems with women, particularly pregnant women and new mums, being made redundant and not being able to get back into work because they are disproportionately represented in those sectors that have been hardest hit. Please will the Minister look carefully at the 10-minute rule Bill that I have introduced, working on measures that are already in place in Germany, to better protect this group of women? Otherwise, the Government will not realise their ambition of eliminating the gender pay gap in a generation.

6.59 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Tonight's debate has been characterised by the frustration of Members across the House and their constituents at the poor messaging around the covid virus and how it should be dealt with. People across this country want and deserve clarity and certainty about the basis of Government announcements, whether in the devolved regions or here at Westminster.

My mailbox is being filled, as I am sure are colleagues' mailbags and email inboxes, by people questioning the application of regulations in their area. A matter of weeks ago in my constituency, Ballymena was told that part of it would be in lockdown. It was then told, "Actually, no you are not in lockdown. It only applies to certain postcodes. It applies to households and does not apply to business or town centres." But the damage was done by the uncertainty of the messaging.

Two weeks before that, a crucial food producer was closed down for two weeks because, in the words of the Public Health Agency, it wished to fulfil a criteria and process. Even though that company did not have to be closed down, it was put out of business by the Public Health Agency. Last week, up to 100 businesses had asked the local Minister of Health for a meeting, so that he could understand the impact of the closures. So far, that meeting has been shunned by our local Health Minister.

Whenever a very prominent public figure questions Government statements, the Northern Ireland health service has been reduced to a press pronouncement by its head of PR on his social media account, who basically says, "Well, we all know that person is just an arse." That is what the public statement from the health service in Northern Ireland actually said. When that is what someone is reduced to in responding to people's opinions, we know they have lost the argument. That is what has ultimately happened in that situation.

Ministers have broken the rules in Northern Ireland. For example, the Deputy First Minister is under a police investigation for breaking the rules, yet at the same time she gets up on a public platform and tells people they should obey the rules. All of that has destroyed public confidence and frustrates the public in Northern Ireland, especially in respect of how the Government signal these messages.

The public in Northern Ireland are very concerned about perspective. In the next 24-hour cycle, 500 people across the United Kingdom will die of cancer. In the same 24-hour cycle, 480 people across the United Kingdom will die of heart disease. In Northern Ireland, no one

[*Ian Paisley*]

has died of coronavirus in the last 72 hours, thankfully. Twenty people will take their own lives in the next 24 hours in the United Kingdom—suicide. And yet we have all these special measures being put into place to deal with coronavirus, many of which have not been used since March. It begs the question: why do the Government need these special powers? Surely they should be rolled back.

Under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, the Government have enough power to deal with people who are not behaving themselves appropriately. I hope the House agrees that we need to start coping with coronavirus, not cocooning ourselves away because of it. Many of my constituents are alarmed by the special powers, which they see as draconian. I am not saying they are, but my constituents are concerned about draconian powers. They believe that they have proved unnecessary and would like to see them rolled back urgently. I do not know if the Government have an exit strategy from the course of action we are on, but they need to find one fast.

People in the print sector have said that the current course of action will bring their industry to an end. Our local newspapers will effectively be out of business by next March unless action is taken to save them. In the past week, more than 300 churches have written to the Prime Minister demanding that they are never locked down again. We need clarity for them. This week, Liberty has produced a report stating that the precedent that has been set is completely wrong and must be addressed.

Let us educate the public, not alarm them.

7.4 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I would like to start by paying tribute to all the fantastic public sector workers in the health service, our local authorities and the police, who have worked so hard during the pandemic so far, and of course have many months yet to face.

Over the past six months, we have learned that this pandemic impacts people's physical, mental and financial wellbeing, and I wish to turn to each of those individually. I am a little disappointed that my the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), has left her place on the Front Bench, because I have been in correspondence with her over the past few months about the impact it has had on women seeking treatment for other conditions—specifically breast cancer patients who are perhaps waiting for reconstructive surgery. She has received a long list of written questions from me on that subject, highlighting that the delays are in some cases well over a year for women who have had drastic surgery for cancer and are waiting to have their reconstruction. One constituent who contacted me could not even get an appointment for a breast prosthesis, and there was no indication of when that date may come. It is imperative that our health service is protected from the worst ravages of this pandemic so that it can bring back in all those patients who are waiting for treatment.

Numerous constituents have contacted me about the issue of mental wellbeing. We are very blessed in Romsey to have an active community of choirs and orchestras.

Everyone who contacted me from one of them has made the point that that activity is about their mental wellbeing. It is an opportunity to get out and do something that they find rewarding and that gives them social contact and a sense of community. I urge Ministers to think carefully about how restrictions on that sort of activity can lead, in the most extreme cases, to the tragic suicides that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned. We are very conscious of the fact that the pandemic has had a terrible impact on people's emotional and mental wellbeing, including all those 18-year-olds who have just disappeared off to university and found themselves in very difficult circumstances.

I also want to talk about the financial circumstances of companies up and down the country. I echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) about the events industry. Just last week, I visited Beat the Street and Phoenix Bussing Services—the country's largest supplier of tour buses. I was given a tour of Lady Gaga's schedule tour bus. That company made the point that it has 66 buses laid up in its yard, each one of which represents an investment of half a million pounds. It has had a £24 million turnover each and every year apart from this one, and there is no end in sight. It is deeply concerned about what that will mean for its viability.

Some industries have worked brilliantly to address the situation they find themselves in and, indeed, to help. Polystar Plastics in Southampton, which is run by a constituent of mine, is now producing millions of PPE aprons—something it had never done before. Of course, it is looking for contracts and at how the Government's tendering system will make sure there are opportunities for UK suppliers so that we do not maintain our dependence on those from overseas.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned people with disabilities. We waited far too long for the equalities impact assessment of the Coronavirus Act 2020. When we are asked to renew the Act in just a few days' time, there will be a binary choice. On the Care Act easements, which only a handful of local authorities have used, we will be asked simply yes or no, not whether we can put a separate time limit on them or whether they are needed at all. On the easements to the Mental Health Act 1983, which have not been used, we will again be asked whether we accept the whole package and renew it. I argue—as the Women and Equalities Committee has—that there is no case to renew that *carte blanche* with another six-month extension. We need to drill down into which part of the Coronavirus Act are need and which parts could be repealed. I echo the comments that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made about that point.

I finish with a plea for mothers—expectant women who cannot have their partners attend a scan or antenatal appointment with them. I accept that that is a local decision made by individual trust, but we need to find ways to support mothers who face horrendous decisions and want their partner by their side or, worse, go into a scan expecting good news and receiving bad. If the message has not gone out loudly enough from the Department of Health and Social Care that trusts must help them, it should now.

7.9 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I want to immediately pick up on the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) about mothers. This is not just about mothers; it is also about fathers. I am sure that many Members were there for their child's first scan and the birth of their child and cannot imagine what it would have been like to miss it. Indeed, my son was very ill when he was born, and the inability to hold him that early on, when it was not immediately clear what the outcome was going to be, would have been extremely painful. I echo strongly my right hon. Friend's words: this is about families, not just women.

This is a very difficult period for everybody in this country. In fact, it is a very difficult period for everybody around the world, but some people have done well. I do not mean that they have done perfectly, but they have done well because they have sought to do their best in extremely difficult circumstances. Those people are, of course, our healthcare professionals, who time and again have pushed themselves further than they knew they would have to. They have done better than anybody imagined they could and improved circumstances and situations that many thought lost or futile. They have taken us from a situation early on where we thought coronavirus was fatal to one where, for many people, it is survivable. They have changed the nature of the treatment, innovated and transformed the life chances of those who are suffering from this disease and those who will catch it. They have done so with extraordinary good grace, courage and professionalism.

Others have also done well. I pay huge tribute to the civil servants in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Treasury, who have been innovative, thoughtful and creative, and to Ministers, who have listened, encouraged and no doubt innovated themselves. This debate is part of a process that is our responsibility—not that of the Department of Health and Social Care or the Treasury, but ours. That responsibility is to listen to the people who sent us here—the people we represent—and to enter into what is, I am afraid, a fundamentally political argument.

Chris Bryant: I would argue that one of the most dangerous innovations has been the ability of Ministers to switch on and off regulations without any say-so from Parliament. Does the hon. Member agree?

Tom Tugendhat: I do agree, and that is exactly what I am coming on to. We are sent here because the decisions we are taking are, as the hon. Member recognises, political. Those decisions are about where to allocate resources, about people's liberties and about care and treatment. They are fundamentally not party political, but political. They depend on an understanding of what is going on in this country, what people's priorities are, where they wish to see investment, how our country wishes to be governed and what risks we are willing to take.

Because it was an emergency, many of us gave the Government the space to take those emergency decisions under the Coronavirus Act 2020. Sadly, this is less of an emergency now and more of a chronic condition. It has lasted for the best part of nine months. Although I hope I am wrong, there is a serious possibility that the vaccines being tested may not be successful and that the supplies may not be ready as quickly as we hope.

As a country, we must have the conversations that allow us to sustain the protections that we need, because the Government are right: we must protect people. We must protect the economy and education because we must protect people not just today but tomorrow. We must deter this disease. We must find the vaccines that will fix it, that will stop it, and we must rebuild because the damage that is being done to our country is serious and severe, and the damage that is being done to our world and to our friends is equally severe. The Government are right: we must protect, we must deter and we must rebuild. I absolutely agree with that, but we must do so together. As the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), knows, democracy is not just about elections, but about how we deal with each other as citizens. It is about how we talk to each other in this country. We practise democracy every day in this place, of course, but actually we practise it every day in this country, because it is not this place that is the mother of Parliaments, it is our country that is the mother of Parliaments. It is so because we believe in the freedom to discuss, to debate and to challenge.

For six months or more, we have had emergency laws because we needed them. The time is coming, I am afraid, when we need to have debated laws, because liberty matters, too.

7.15 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I start by paying tribute to all NHS key workers and volunteers in my constituency for their care and commitment over the past seven months.

I will focus my comments on the economic health of my constituents this evening. For many months now, my constituents have been contacting me to express their fears and concerns about the end of the furlough and self-employed income support schemes. They told me how they were at serious risk of redundancy, and they are worried that their livelihoods will be at stake if the scheme ended prematurely. The Chancellor's announcement last week simply does not do enough to support those people whose jobs are at risk due to the pandemic. Dropping the Government contribution from 80% of wages to 22% of wages in the transition from furlough to the job recovery scheme means that firms that could still be viable but are not yet able to resume business activity now face the awful choice of closure or mass redundancies.

Scottish Government analysis suggests that this move could result in the loss of 61,000 jobs in Scotland when compared with an eight-month extension to the previous furlough scheme. This kind of extension would place Scotland on a similar footing to the French and German furlough schemes if it had the power to extend furlough in its own right. The same considerations apply to the self-employed income support scheme, for the cut from 70% of average earnings to 20% of average earnings does not reflect the reality of many self-employed constituents who contacted me to say that their work is not picking up at a high enough level to survive without the support offered by self-employment income support.

Unfortunately, the Chancellor's announcement comes far too late for some of my constituents. Tom, a sales rep from Blantyre, was placed on furlough at the end of

[Margaret Ferrier]

March, but his company made him and 45 colleagues redundant as a result of restructuring due to the pandemic. He cannot get support through the jobs recovery programme, and there is not an option for him under this scheme to retrain, unlike in Germany, where Kurzarbeit would give him that opportunity to obtain new skills. Kurzarbeit has been established for more than a century in Germany, and it is a great example of using preventive spending to create a safety net during tough economic times.

When recessions have hit the German economy, the Germans have been able to keep skills within the workforce for when times get better, adapting the scheme to reflect the prevailing economic circumstances. As much as the Chancellor would like to think that his jobs recovery scheme achieves similar outcomes to those of the Kurzarbeit scheme, the design of his scheme still makes the inherent assumption that if a job cannot be sustained at a minimum of a third of the hours at this point in time, then it is not possible to retain that job at all. Given that some sectors, such as the events industry, are continuing to rely on furlough because they cannot reopen substantially, cutting the support available to them risks mass lay-offs and will trigger a loss of skills in those industries, which will be felt for years to come.

I think we have to ask ourselves at this moment in time whether the UK Government have truly done everything they can to avoid mass redundancies due to the coronavirus pandemic. Given the history and experience of the 1980s, I believe that this Tory Government will again fail my constituents and fail communities across Scotland by drastically cutting back the levels of support that were offered by the furlough and self-employed income support schemes. That will only strengthen the desires of the people of Scotland to have the powers needed to support our economic recovery and avoid a lost generation.

7.19 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I want to cover just three things. I will start by making a plea to Members of the House, to elements of our beloved media, and indeed to the great British public: step back at times, understand a little more, and possibly condemn a little less. We must remind ourselves that there is nothing normal here. This is an unusual event; this is a pandemic. Today we have heard calls for clarity—indeed, we hear that from the Opposition all the time—but in my experience of sitting on the Front Bench in a public health job, all too often calls for clarity are calls for certainty, and that is not how it is in a pandemic.

Just this weekend we heard that the university experience is not as billed. No, it is not—it is awful for freshers going to university and away from home for the first time, in a strange city with people they do not know. On the whole, however, universities are doing their best in an impossible situation. This will not be universally popular, but we should take great care about saying that universities should be refunding all those tuition fees, because those fees will keep universities in business, and keep them going so that they are there once this awful business is over. When we change the quarantine rules for this country or that on a Thursday, especially during the summer months, we see news bulletins full of people

saying, “There was no notice.” No, because it is a pandemic. Of course there cannot be two weeks’ notice, because things change quickly in a pandemic.

I sit on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and we hear the arts sector say, “Give us a date. We want a date for reopening.” We would love to give people a date for reopening, but it would mean very little. We cannot be sure of where we will be in a month, let alone in three months when a big west end performance could be ready. We hear this all the time, but I ask Opposition Members to please think before they scream “U-turn!” Do they really want a Government who are not prepared to change their mind when the facts change? The previous Labour Government U-turned many times when the facts changed, and they were right to do so.

Policy making in normal times—I have done it—takes time. It is a slow process, and it is meant to be. We go through consultation and scrutiny—that is how normal policy making works—but in a pandemic that is not possible. In March some quick decisions were taken, and they are still being taken as the facts change. It will not be perfect, but that is what a pandemic will do.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think that what we were doing in March was very different from what the Government are dealing with today?

Steve Brine: Unquestionably. The quick decisions that we had to make back in March were about whether we should have a national lockdown or not. We had to make those quick decisions, but we now know an awful lot more about the virus, and we have much better treatment. The only effective treatment that we know of comes from scientists in this country. My point is that we are not doing any of this to upset our constituents; we are doing this to try to keep people safe.

My second point is about Parliament. He is no longer in his place, but I agree with much of what was said by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). This is about consent, and as I said to the Prime Minister last Tuesday when he made his big announcement in the House, we must have the ongoing consent of the British public, or we are in trouble. I fear that that is slipping away. I am getting a constant stream of emails from constituents, questioning the decisions being made because they cannot see the evidence or logic behind them. They do not know where we are going or what is the destination. Yes, we have had a lot of statements from the Health Secretary, and I give him credit for that, but statements are not debates which, like tonight, become an exercise in how many Members the House can accommodate, and then the poor Minister of State on the Front Bench will probably get five or six minutes to wrap the whole thing up.

There is an old adage in this place that one should never ask a question to which one does not already know the answer, but I will ask two questions to which I genuinely do not know the answer. Perhaps the Minister can help me when he sums up the debate. Why are young children included in the rule of six—of course, they are not in Scotland? I do not know the answer to that, although many of my constituents have been asking me. Please can we hear the evidence behind that?

What is the evidence for the 10 pm curfew? I agree with what Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, said today about the knock-on effects. If we are going

to have a 10 pm curfew in our pubs and restaurants, we will have to have a 10 pm curfew on selling alcohol in our off-licences and supermarkets. I would just say this on alcohol, as a former public health Minister: if people are so desperate to drink until 10 pm and then to get loaded with more booze in the off-licence so that they can carry on until 3 in the morning, what does that say about the unhealthy relationship that this country has with alcohol? It is an elephant in the room and we overlook it at our peril.

Finally, on the vaccine, when it comes, if it comes—and I pray to God that it does—could we please, Minister, consider the economic case for the vaccine? Yes, of course we have to give priority to our health and social care workers, but there is a covid generation that I mentioned with regard to university. They have had a rotten deal in the last six months and they are going to have a rotten deal in the next six months. I think that we should consider our young people—as the earners and the backbone of our economy—as the economic case for the vaccine when we get there.

7.26 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), but I must disagree with what he said on having to respond to a pandemic. While I absolutely agree that the pandemic brings up new situations, the truth is that we were slow into lockdown. The Government were slow in testing and they were slow with PPE. Those facts are well documented.

It is absolutely right that the British people want the Government to succeed in fighting this virus. This is a time for leadership, but leadership also requires integrity. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned the issue of Dominic Cummings. That was a time when the Prime Minister fractured the relationship with the British public, in terms of them looking up to him for the leadership that was required. At times like this, the leadership needs to step up, but sadly, the Government and the Prime Minister have lost that control.

The rate of infection is rising. Our testing system is not fit for purpose. Our university students should be having one of the best experiences of their lives, but hundreds are describing their current experience as like being locked in a prison. Schools in my constituency are being forced to partially close, and I agree with the hon. Member for Winchester about the ill-thought-out 10 pm curfew, which has been described as shambolic by Tory MPs and the Mayor of Manchester.

Test and Trace is massively important, and on just about every measure, the Test and Trace system is going backwards. It is clear that the Government have wasted the last few months and have failed to get Test and Trace ready for the increase in cases that they should have anticipated. I have had numerous emails from parents, key workers, the elderly and the most vulnerable, all desperate to get an appointment for a test. If they do get an appointment for a test, it might be hundreds of miles away. The truth is that there is no availability, and that is simply not acceptable. The Government need to get a grip on fixing the system before things get even worse.

On care homes, back in March, we saw the Government's strategy to enable hospitals to cope with the anticipated number of coronavirus cases lead to the elderly and

most vulnerable being discharged from hospitals back into care homes without testing for infection. On 15 April, I wrote to all the care homes in my constituency, offering them support and asking about their experiences. In every reply, I saw the same themes emerging over and over again: a lack of PPE, concerns about no testing provision being available, people deeply concerned about the risks to their most vulnerable patients, a lack of financial support from the Government—the list goes on. The Government cannot fail care homes once again. Weekly testing of care home residents and staff is critical to saving lives, yet there have been repeated delays to the roll-out of testing, and care homes have waited days for their results. That cannot carry on.

Labour has repeatedly called for additional resources for social care, so we welcome the news that the adult social care infection control fund will continue, but the real test of the plan is whether the Government deliver on weekly testing for all care staff, first promised in July but still not delivered. We have serious concerns about delays in getting results back.

Reports that infection rates are beginning to rise in care homes once more are extremely concerning. Getting on top of the challenges that social care faces before winter is vital. We cannot afford action to protect care homes and other services to be as slow and chaotic as it was at the start of the pandemic. There are also serious concerns about vacancies in the care sector in the months ahead, particularly if there is a second wave of the virus as care providers prepare for winter. The Government must provide an immediate plan to better support care workers in all settings, including the 70,000 who are employed by direct payments and the 9 million unpaid carers.

I know that local businesses and workers in Bradford West are extremely worried about what the future holds. With the furlough scheme due to end on 31 October, the Chancellor announced the job retention scheme. The new scheme seeks to support only jobs with a viable future under covid-19 restrictions. That means an increase in job losses. Given that Bradford West has the seventh highest unemployment rate in the country, I am extremely concerned—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I was going to allow the hon. Lady her last line.

Naz Shah: I thought my time limit had expired. The Government must do more. The new measures will not help more than 4,500 newly unemployed workers in my constituency, 2,140 of whom are between 18 and 24. We need more support for Bradford West.

7.31 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and to take part in this overdue and heavily subscribed debate. Parliament must have its say on behalf of our constituents.

I want to talk about recent experiences in my constituency through meetings with leadership teams in local councils, regular briefings with health departments and contact with constituents. It is fair to say that since the start of the pandemic six months ago, Rugby residents have done the right thing and followed Government guidance. As a result, statistics for between March and September show Rugby in a positive light. However, as we came

[Mark Pawsey]

out of lockdown and testing increased significantly, the number of cases in Rugby rose sharply. We are currently running at 63 cases per 100,000 of the population compared with a Warwickshire average of 36. That is quite a shock, given where we had been, and a challenge to us to understand what has changed.

We recognised the change with the reopening of pubs and schools and we have separately identified some other outbreaks. Parents in Rugby desperately wanted their schools to open safely and we should pay tribute to the teachers who enabled that to happen. The significant long-term damage to our children's life chances if they miss out on education is clear, as are the negative effects of being out of school. To date, transmission among young children in Warwickshire is minimal. There have been only 60 confirmed cases in the nought to nine age group and a further 175 confirmed cases in the 10 to 19 age group. We know that children under the age of 18 make up only about 2% of cases worldwide. Getting children back into school has been important.

I mentioned the increase in cases in Rugby. Our rolling daily average has increased from 1.6 new cases on 20 August to 8.4 on 17 September, with 64 new cases recorded over the last seven days, and 610 cases in Rugby borough out of a population of 108,000. Public health officials have been quick to act and we have been able to identify that the vast majority of cases are in the 17 to 19 age group, with real concerns about the knock-on effect on transmission to older age groups, particularly their parents. As a consequence of test and trace, we have been able to identify the origin of those transmissions as young people congregating in the car park of a local retail park. Youngsters have always done that. It seemed to disappear but has recommenced. They have been isolated; they have not been able to communicate. One of the things they have done is to show off each other's cars, and they have moved in and out of their cars. Generally, young people have been supportive of the rules, but they have had their freedoms constrained for many months. It was inevitable that when the stricter regulations were lifted, they would look to meet up with their friends and socialise.

What action is Rugby now taking? We are working very hard on social media messaging and targeting the areas of the town where the highest number of cases have been confirmed. Through test and trace, we are able to identify transmission in pubs, particularly where small groups have moved between venues while enjoying a night out. I share the concerns that many Members have raised about the arbitrary nature of the 10 o'clock curfew. Despite the rise in cases in Rugby, it remains important to keep the statistics in perspective, with only 0.6% of the population having confirmed cases of the virus and 0.7% of the population having tragically lost their lives. There has not been any significant increase in hospitalisations. We must do what we can to ensure that we get our town back to the level we were at in March and April, in the early stages of lockdown, with the community coming together. We have set up a weekly multi-agency management team, and we will have a daily walk-in test centre in the town within a number of days. My message to Rugby residents is to be vigilant, follow the guidance, and do all we can to protect and shield the elderly and most vulnerable.

7.36 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The coronavirus pandemic has turned our world upside down. It is the biggest global threat to health and wellbeing in our living memory, with so many lives cruelly taken. The pandemic has had far-reaching consequences beyond the spread of the disease itself. It has had a catastrophic impact on the global economy, decimating whole industries and putting livelihoods at risk. More than ever, the coronavirus pandemic has shown huge gaps in our health and welfare system after a decade of austerity. We need to protect our public services and to support our communities and our economy through this crisis and beyond.

No one can deny that this pandemic has presented unprecedented health and economic challenges. Labour Members have acted in a spirit of constructive opposition and supported the Government when it was the right thing to do. However, the Government have squandered the good will across parties and out in the country through incompetence that has got worse week in, week out—whether it is PPE shortages, mixed messages about lockdown restrictions, double standards over enforcement of such restrictions, or the fiasco of the mismanagement of GCSE and A-level results over the summer, causing huge misery for young people when they should have been looking to their future and being able to plan for it. There is also the appalling mess over testing and tracing. More recently, thousands of students have been sent to university without the support that they need. We have had 23 U-turns and counting: it is a risible record of incompetence that goes on and on. You couldn't make this stuff up, Madam Deputy Speaker. Our country, unfortunately, has had the worst death rate in Europe—nearly 42,000.

Coronavirus has also laid bare the deep inequalities faced particularly by black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, and those from white disadvantaged communities. People are twice as likely to die in deprived areas as in affluent areas. Those of Bangladeshi origin are twice as likely to die as their white counterparts. Black men are three times more likely to die. Following the Public Health England report on the disproportionate impact on BAME communities, the Health Secretary said that black lives matter. Well, he has a funny way of showing it. His Government have yet to provide an action plan on how disparities in death rates can be prevented in future. With a second wave looming, that is completely irresponsible, and the Government need to act now.

Naz Shah: Does my hon. Friend agree that during the covid crisis the Government's comms strategy to target Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian heritage elderly people who were more at risk was an absolute, abject failure, because we had to do lots of that communication?

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more. I hope that Ministers learn from the things that could have been done better and ensure that those lessons are learned quickly. That is all we want. That is what we all care about and it is imperative that the Government learn those lessons. We stand ready to support the Government, as we have done, wherever possible, to make those things happen, but sadly we have seen the Government go from one crisis to another. I hope that the spirit of listening, responding and working together that we saw at the beginning of the crisis can be resumed as we face another crisis.

When we see the death rates among care workers in the NHS and the incredible sacrifices they have made, we need to ensure that the hospitals and care homes that do not have the tests they desperately need get them as a matter of urgency. There are many reports of that not happening. The Government need to act fast.

More than 620 NHS and care workers have already lost their lives. They have paid the ultimate price to save others and protect all of us. We owe it to them to give their colleagues the testing and protections they desperately need. The Prime Minister promised a “world-beating” track and trace system to prevent a second wave, but instead he delivered world-beating incompetence. The Government had months to prepare the system for the winter period but failed to act.

The Government have made a habit of missing targets, botching results and underperforming when it comes to testing. In May—four months ago—I raised testing with the Health Secretary. I received a response from him four weeks ago, in which he boasted that the speed at which the Government have set up the testing infrastructure is a real success. That could not be further from the truth. We have heard colleagues, one after another, speaking about their constituents being sent to places far, far away from where they live. We have heard that week in, week out.

On the economy, the Government’s incompetence has cost lives, harmed communities and damaged our economy beyond the damage caused by the pandemic. We have seen thousands of people laid off since March, unemployment has risen and a million young people face unemployment. While the Chancellor promised that no one would be left behind, 3 million UK taxpayers were excluded from any kind of support during the pandemic. In my constituency, 47,000 people are on the job retention scheme, but unfortunately not enough of them will benefit from the programme that the Chancellor announced. We need a radical plan to protect the hundreds of thousands of jobs that are likely to go in the coming months.

We need support for local authorities. In my local authority, £30 million of resources is needed to make up for the income lost and the costs of covid. Local authorities up and down the country, whether Conservative-run, Labour-run or run by Liberal Democrats and other parties, desperately need support. I hope that Health Ministers as well as Treasury Ministers will act quickly to save lives and protect the jobs that will continue to face risks.

7.43 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Since covid-19 began, sadly in Herefordshire we have seen 128 deaths and 1,008 people have tested positive. However, looking to France as an example of where we could be in just a matter of weeks, there have been 14,412 new cases in the last 24 hours, compared to just 5,693 in the UK. In the past week, 4,102 people in France were admitted to hospital, 763 of whom needed intensive care; here, there were some 1,727, with 262 on a ventilator.

Should the UK experience a similar fate, we must restructure how the Coronavirus Act works. In March, we did not know what we were dealing with and how best to manage a fast-spreading virus. The Italian handling of the crisis made us believe that it threatened to overrun the NHS. Parliament granted the Government

emergency powers, which at the time was a sensible course of action. Six months on, things have changed. The NHS has been saved and Parliament is sitting.

The press report further covid plans that, as a Conservative, I find possibly draconian, curtailing freedoms, but I am sure we would give parliamentary approval for life-saving precautions. We need to remember that both sides of the House are united in wanting to beat this disease. I know we would be complaining if we sat on the Opposition side of the House, so we need to involve all MPs to get the necessary actions approved. Decisions are being made at ministerial level, such as closing pubs at an early hour, despite Public Health England saying that only 5% of outbreaks occur at pubs and restaurants, based on the advice from SAGE and various other experts.

Let us get those experts approving vaccines. We are only three months away from the final approval of the first vaccine. That is why we do not need a six-month extension to the powers granted by the Coronavirus Act. Vaccines for covid-19 are the key to eliminating the virus. The faster one is distributed, the more likely we are to protect the most vulnerable in our society, and that is the area we should be working on. Do we really need to wait till the end of the year? Do we need to follow the existing testing regime so religiously? Is there an opportunity to hurry things up? Perhaps we can look at people who feel most at risk and may be willing to volunteer for an early vaccination—and do not tell me it is impossible, because that is what we are always told just before it becomes possible.

Worldwide, there are a total of 320 possible vaccines in development. Today, roughly 280,000 trial participants across 470 sites in 34 different countries are racing to find a vaccine for covid-19. It is a global search, but we should be rightly proud of the British institutions at the forefront of these efforts. The UK Government have pledged £250 million to the Centre for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovations, the largest contribution of any nation.

In total, four vaccine candidates have entered the final steps of the regulatory approvals process. The leader is the joint AstraZeneca and University of Oxford team. They have reached phase 3, which makes it the most advanced vaccine in development, and the study should be complete by December. The speed at which that is being done is outstanding, but we need to do more. The Government have invested £131 million to support vaccine development at the University of Oxford and Imperial College, on top of the £2.3 billion to GAVI and the wider international effort to fight the virus. In doing so, the Government have secured early access to a total of 190 million doses of covid vaccine candidates.

Steve Brine: That is all true, but is it not the point that, in the same way as we are all dependent on each other doing the right thing at the moment in the absence of a vaccine, we have a responsibility, as a country that leads on GAVI, to take on the anti-vaxxers and those who will deny a vaccine to themselves and thereby put others at risk? When the vaccine comes, we need to roll it out and we need to roll it out everywhere.

Bill Wiggin: My hon. Friend is right, but everybody who takes the vaccine reduces the risk proportionately for everybody else. It is all about the R number, as he knows. That is why the Government have been right

[Bill Wiggin]

to pre-book the vaccines: 100 million doses of the AstraZeneca and University of Oxford vaccine, 30 million doses of the Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine, which is the next one in evaluation stage 3—we should have doses by the end of 2020 for that—and 60 million doses from a company called Valneva, whose vaccine will be provided in the second half of 2021.

The Government have a great story to tell on the work that they have made possible. We are all doing all we can to save lives, and we should now restore parliamentary democracy too. In these difficult times, my constituents want hope. After the sacrifices they have made, the vaccines that we have funded and the lives that have been saved, we all deserve it. We need to start voluntary vaccinating now, and we need to get life back to normal.

7.49 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Like some of my hon. Friends, I rise to give qualified support to the Government. It is qualified inasmuch as we all have reservations about one or two of the decisions that have been taken but, overall, we recognise the enormous challenge presented over the past six months. For those such as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and his colleagues, who are instinctively libertarian and freedom loving, the decisions to restrict the freedoms of the British people have been very difficult. The Government have, on the whole, acted rationally and proportionately in their decision making, and the public have clearly recognised that: only a few days ago, a YouGov poll showed that 78% of the British public supported the most recent restrictions. It is fair to say that in a constituency like mine, which has been fortunate to have a very low infection rate, another 5% could be added to that proportion, without any doubt.

If we are to move forward, we will have to retain the good will of our citizens, and to do that we have to be honest and straightforward with them. To some extent, that may involve admitting the occasional error in the past. We also have to take them forward by bringing them into the debate. We need to explain our policies, and when announcements are made, we need to give reasons. If we do not, we leave an open goal for our critics. Of course, there will always be anomalies in the various guidance that is provided, because guidance cannot cover every individual circumstance, but when we are talking about restricting people's freedoms, we do need to bring them onside.

The availability of tests has been a great challenge. I urge Ministers to ensure that no one enters a care home unless they have been tested and cleared. The other particularly vulnerable group with which I have had dealings in my constituency are those who live with clinically vulnerable people. They have made additional sacrifices—perhaps they are not going out as much or enjoying even the limited leisure activities that are currently available—and we need to give them additional support.

My Cleethorpes constituency is, partly, a tourist destination. It is particularly important that we recognise that another lockdown would mean some businesses going under. We have to recognise that if, by Government decree, we prevent someone from carrying out their normal business, which is perfectly legal and successful, we need to take action to support them. That applies in

particular to the self-employed and freelancers, whom we have heard about during this debate but who have fallen through the net in recent debates.

Let me turn to sporting activities. A couple of weeks ago, I met the chairman of and the majority shareholder in Grimsby Town, which is my local football team. Grimsby Town is a league two team with its home ground in Cleethorpes, and very much part of the local community—for example, it is involved in the delivery of the National Citizen Service. The club needs half a million pounds to survive this season, but it is realistic: although it is a financially sound club, it recognises that it should not be the taxpayer who supports it. We have only to look at the football sector, with the transfers in recent weeks, to realise that adequate resources are available in football to support the lower-league teams. If the Premier League is not prepared to take action—I know that negotiations are taking place—I urge the Government to force it to take action.

With some reservations, I have supported the Government's approach up to now. I say to my colleagues that although this may be a time to give the Government a nudge in the right direction, it is not the time to defeat them. We need to hear from the Government a strategy for the coming months. We do not need to hear definite dates—we cannot give definite dates; it is no good saying that on 1 January we will do this or on 1 March this will happen—but we can lay the foundations and put in place markers so that we know that when we get to certain points, we can release of some of the restrictions we are placing on our citizens.

7.54 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers).

I had great sympathy with the Government and have no argument with how they handled the early days of this virus, but some very eminent people, including Dr Mike Yeadon, a veteran research scientist for the pharmaceutical industry, are now voicing their concerns. We must listen to other sides of the argument. Dr Yeadon says that the virus is both manageable and nearing its end. He reminded me that right now the elderly are dying from respiratory diseases at the same level as Professor Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance are predicting in a worst-case covid scenario.

We must deal with this virus proportionately. The NHS, for which I have huge admiration, and all the staff who work in it are more than capable of meeting a rise in demand, should it happen. Encouragingly, Dr Yeadon says that a lot more has been learned about treating the virus since its emergence, and doctors are now using the less invasive ways of treating patients, which is very good news.

Dr Yeadon's voice, as I have said, is not a lone one. Nearly 400 medical doctors from Belgium signed an open letter to the Belgian authorities and media, and it makes for fascinating and sobering reading. I cannot list all the points, but on lockdown it says that

“there is no link between the imposed lockdown and the course of the infection. Lockdown has not led to a lower mortality rate.”

It also states that mortality is

“many times lower than expected and close to that of normal seasonal flu (0.2%)...There is a difference between death by corona and death with corona.”

The significant point is that those who developed serious symptoms suffered from additional illnesses. The letter also notes that social isolation led to an increase in depression, anxiety, suicides, violence in the home and child abuse.

The letter states that masks are appropriate with “proven at-risk groups or people with upper respiratory complaints”, so hospitals and care homes are an obvious place. On the issue of a vaccine, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) mentioned earlier, the letter notes that survey studies on influenza vaccinations show that in 10 years there have been only three occasions on which a vaccine had an efficiency rate of more than 50%. A vaccine is not, therefore, necessarily the complete answer, although obviously it will be welcome as soon as we get it. I could go on.

I ask myself daily: if we lock the country down again, locally or nationally, will the virus disappear, as it clearly does before popping out to strike us all down at 10 pm? What are we doing to our country? We are seeing lives and livelihoods ruined, families torn apart, our economy falling into an abyss, students worrying whether they can go home for Christmas, curfews and restrictions. A major rethink is needed, and fast, before we do irreparable harm.

This disease, like any other disease, is here to stay, whether we like it or not, and we must learn to live with it. Our resources must, of course, be aimed at the most vulnerable, including those over 75, but let us remember: we must allow those who can make their decisions to make them. My parents, who have sadly passed away, would have had no truck with all these draconian restrictions. Finally, it is interesting to note that SAGE itself estimates that all these interventions to tackle the virus could cause 75,000 avoidable non-covid deaths.

I listened to the Health Secretary on the radio as I drove up here—sadly, not all of us are able to fit into the Chamber, and that is another issue—and, like him, I want to safeguard my constituents and our country, but I want to do so with pragmatism and common sense, and not out of fear. We have had fear, doom, gloom, death and destruction rained down on us every single day, from television and the media. Where is the hope, for goodness’ sake? Let us stand up as a country and fight this. We have never, ever before lain down in the face of disease or war. Let us get together, fight this and get our country back on her feet.

7.59 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to take part in this debate.

It does strike me that the mood of the House tonight is very different from the mood that we saw back in March when we first anticipated having to take measures to deal with this. I have to say that the mood of the House is actually reflected in the mood of the population more widely. There is a palpable sense of frustration that we have reached this point, and I think that has come for a number of reasons. I would say gently to those on the Treasury Bench that if that frustration is to be tackled and dealt with, it is going to require a different approach from our Governments, because what is true of Government here in Westminster and Whitehall is also true of Government in Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff.

As the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) said, we do need to have again the sense of joint endeavour that we had in the early days, but which we have lost.

I think that the public mood, while there is that frustration, is one that is still prepared to do what is necessary and to take the threat posed by covid seriously, but I think that the public are, quite rightly, less likely to tolerate any inconsistencies or illogicalities in the measures put in place. I have to say that, later this week, I would in normal circumstances have taken my parents, who are both in their 80s, to a meeting—with people in relation to the management of their business—in my car. I am not going to be able to do that because it is against the Government’s guidance in Scotland. I can, however, put them in a taxi, although the taxi driver will doubtless have seen some, possibly dozens, of people that day. When we look at the more draconian measures that have been put in place, the element of what we might call “whataboutery” does come into play, because people do ask, “Well, what about this, what about that and what about the other?”

The frustration also comes from the fact that, again, as the hon. Member for North Herefordshire said, we did not know what we were facing in March, but we do know an awful lot more now. Revisiting the provisions of the emergency legislation that we put through, I see so little of it being used and so little of it being justified. The role of this place is in holding the Government to account and saying, “Yes, we were prepared to give you these powers when we did not know, but now that we know what we know, we need better justification than we have had from you.”

The other source of frustration is the inability of all our Governments to deal with things that surely ought to have been foreseeable. It surely ought to have been foreseeable that, when we took students back on to campuses, we ran the risk of seeing spikes and hotspots of the sort that we have. It was surely foreseeable that there would be some sort of lockdown locally as a consequence of that, and it was surely foreseeable that for many young people—yes, it is a great time in their lives, but it is also a time when they are most vulnerable, living away from home, many of them for the first time, in strange communities—there would be a greater need for mental health support in those circumstances. Despite the foreseeability of all those things, none of the measures has been put in place and, yes, I have tremendous sympathy for those of our students who have been left simply swinging in the wind.

One of the biggest difficulties that we have had across the four nations, but especially in Scotland, has been the determination to centralise control. We have had different patterns of behaviour emerging in different parts of the country, but different patterns of behaviour surely demand different answers. The centralisation has got to stop.

8.4 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I agree with most of what he said; the mood of this House is reflective of the mood of the population. There is still good will on the part of the public, who want to support the Government to get this right, but the faith that was invested at the beginning of this process has been gradually undermined by things that have not gone as well as might have been expected.

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

He is right to highlight things that were not foreseen. This is quite a moment for the Government; to continue to maintain the good will from the public, they need to reflect on how they do things in future. As a country, we are prepared to make sacrifices with our liberties to support our fellow human beings and do the right thing, but we will lose that commitment if we do not see that those things are effective. When the Government introduce a 10 pm curfew with no solid rationale for doing so, it undermines the trust that the public put in us and thus their compliance will be reduced. If the public choose not to be compliant because they do not trust the Government's advice, we are in a difficult place. My message to the Government is that they think about how they employ their tactics.

My criticism is not with the Department of Health and Social Care. Health Ministers are doing the best job they can, to make the most of the resources at their disposal. This is an issue for the Government as a collective, because we are expecting our Health Ministers to deliver the best possible health service and meet all those challenges, and the Treasury to come up with an economic package that deals with all the fallout. Those are two huge challenges and it is for the Government to make sure that they are in balance. I am not sure that that balance is right at present, but I am confident that, with challenge from Parliament, Ministers will think again and get it right. That is what Parliament does; the effect of scrutiny makes for better decision making. What sort of Government are scared of having these debates in this place? Once you start to be scared of that, where is the moral authority for you to lead this country?

The past six months have been unprecedented, and the Government were right to take charge and use fleet of foot to try to take action, but we know a lot more now and we must take country with us. We need to think more carefully about how we do that in future. I am pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) is on the Front Bench. Having heard many people talk about the thanks we owe to public sector workers, I wish to pay tribute to the private sector workers in the NHS who have also kept it standing—I refer to our pharmacists. She has heard me say this before, but our pharmacists are independent providers at the sharp end of delivering healthcare; when the GP surgeries close, the pharmacies are still open. The current situation has been a huge challenge for them, as they have had to deal with GPs sending them extended prescriptions, which they have had to honour, and with pharmaceutical companies upping the price of drugs with no extra budget. I know that there has been a loan—an advance payment from the NHS of £300 million—to help with cash flow, but £300 million for keeping our NHS standing is small beer. We can make so much better use of our pharmacies as we continue to deal with this crisis, so I ask the Minister to demand from NHS England that it ensures that the right resources go to our pharmacies to allow them to continue to do the fantastic job they have been doing to date.

This is such a big subject, and it is such a shame that this is the first proper chance we have had to air these issues. That is reflected in some of the irritation and passion that Members in some parts of the House have shown.

My final message to the Government is that they have nothing to fear from scrutiny. Their decisions will have more respect and credibility if they are shared in this House. I hope that as we move forward we do so in the spirit of openness to Parliament.

8.9 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I completely agree with the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price): Parliament must be empowered not only to scrutinise Government but to aid them as we walk through this crisis.

The economic and health crises are accelerating, and national concern is deepening. There are many significant issues that I want to raise. The Chancellor's announcement last Thursday barely touches the economic crisis facing York because of how its local economy is structured. I am significantly worried that we will be one of the places worst hit by this economic situation. We need to resolve, and I need the Chancellor to understand, the particular issues facing my constituency. I am worried for the people I represent.

I would like to have a discussion with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), about local control over decision making under the auspices of our director of public health. In our city, we know that we can run a very effective testing regime and contact tracing mechanism. We know the flows of local people. I met scientists in my constituency on Friday who are leading the way in the delivery of testing. Their work could really aid the Government's programme, and I would be most grateful if the Minister would be willing to meet me to discuss that.

I witnessed shocking scenes in my constituency on Saturday night at 10 o'clock. As the bell struck, the streets filled. Had the virus been in that crowd, it could have spread across the people present and perhaps to some of the most vulnerable people in my city. The people of my city have worked so hard; they deserve better.

I want to talk about some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. We have heard much in the debate about people in care homes. Care homes became closed environments where family, carers, other health professionals and even the Care Quality Commission were locked out. One thing we know is that closed environments become unsafe environments, which is why it is so important that this situation does not arise again.

I carried out an investigation into care homes in York. The staff are tremendous, their efforts exceptional and the delivery of care outstanding, but we know that risks are introduced into the system. First, we must review the discharging of patients who are covid-positive into care homes and ensure that transitional arrangements are in place, so that infection is not introduced to the most vulnerable people. We also know that care staff are working above their professional competencies, particularly in the delivery of palliative care. To deliver the very best care, we need to ensure that proper training and proper staffing levels are in place.

In the light of the debate we will have on Wednesday about the Coronavirus Act 2020, I call on the Minister to review the recording of mortality. In one care home in York, 52 members of staff were sick during the peak of the crisis. Over that fortnight, 15 people died in the

care home. None of them was recorded as dying with covid or possible covid. We know that that is not true, because staff tell me that they were displaying signs of covid and they died rapidly. They had all the signs, but the way that deaths were recorded and the fact that no tests were undertaken means there is no way of verifying that. Clearly we need a testing regime to address that, but we also need to go back to how deaths were recorded in the past, which brings more independence into the system. I plead with the Minister to take that back to the Department. It will dignify the families to know the reasons why their loved ones passed.

It is the right of residents and their families to know whether there is infection in a care home. We need to ensure that that information is communicated, so that they can make their choices accordingly. We need data to be available. I had to jump through hoops to get data about my local care homes. That should not be the case. We need to ensure that there is proper governance in place. When governance switched to the director of public health, we saw safety improve and infection prevention and control measures brought in, and then mortality rates fell. Over the coming days, I trust that we will find mechanisms to ensure that visits continue risk-free, in order to support people's holistic wellbeing in the difficult period ahead.

8.14 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in the debate this evening. This has been an incredibly trying time for all of us. The restrictions on our hard-fought liberties and freedoms have been an incredibly terrible burden. People have been precluded from visiting relatives, from celebrating birthdays, weddings and religious celebrations and even from paying their respects at funerals, with places of worship closed across the country. I do not think any of us thought we would have to live through such a situation. I do not think anyone in this House, or even outwith the House, foresaw the time when a British Government and the devolved Administrations across the UK would be forced into taking the action they have taken to protect life. This has been tough, especially for those of us who see individual freedoms and liberties, along with personal responsibility, as the guiding principles of what we believe in. However, it has been necessary, just as it has been necessary for the state to take unprecedented action to support the economy and protect jobs and necessary to begin opening up the country once again in the summer. It was, and remains, important to strike the right balance between public health and the societal impact of the restrictions.

I believe that the Government have got the latest steps right, balancing the need to keep the virus at bay with keeping the country open and our economy moving. But crucially, we must keep our schools, colleges and universities open. The education of the next generation cannot suffer any more than it has already done. We owe this to the young people of this country, the next generation. They are the generation that has been most hit by the restrictions. They have had months of school life taken away from them, and they are seeing the beginnings of their university lives changed beyond all recognition. They are seeing their job prospects wither, and their chances of buying a property now seem even more out of reach, with the average deposit now requested

being 20%. This is the generation that will be paying for the economic response to this crisis for years to come. We owe it to them at the very least to give them as good an education as we can, and that means keeping school, college and university gates open.

The Government's economic response to the crisis has, as many hon. Members have said, been on an unprecedented scale. We only have to look at the figures to see the enormous contribution made by the UK Government to Scotland, with an extra £6.5 billion-worth of financial support being delivered to the Scottish Government so far. Sadly, this was not mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) earlier. In my constituency alone, 12,900 people were furloughed under the job retention scheme, making up nearly a third of all those in employment in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine. Across Aberdeenshire, 70% of self-employed people made a claim under the self-employed income support scheme.

I know there is consensus in the House that I represent the most beautiful constituency in the United Kingdom. As a result, it is a constituency that depends on visitors, foreign and domestic, as key drivers of the local economy. As the lockdown came into force in mid-March, many businesses saw a bleak outlook ahead, not knowing how they would get through what was, to all intents and purposes, a lost season. However, the success of the enjoy summer safely campaign and the eat out to help out scheme in giving the boost needed to get these visits going again cannot be underestimated, and I was pleased to do my bit, especially supporting eat out to help out at Castleton Farm, the Leys Hotel, Banchory Lodge, the Tor-na-Coille Hotel, the Deeside Inn, the Belvedere Hotel, Molly's, the Westhill Holiday Inn and many more. The most recent announcement to extend the cut in VAT to 5% through to March next year, instead of January as planned, which would have been the very worst time for tourism businesses, is extremely welcome.

For me, one thing that has been highlighted throughout the entire crisis has been the strength of our being part of one United Kingdom. We have shouldered the burden of this almighty crisis as one nation, with all four countries working together—for the most part—to get through the crisis and beat this disease. From PPE to testing, and from the Joint Biosecurity Centre to the support from our brilliant armed forces, the country has pulled together as one, and frankly, as we move on to the next stage of our fight against this sickening, liberty-inhibiting, life-changing disease, the whole world needs to do the same, as the Prime Minister so rightly said two days ago at the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Finally, I would like to take this brief opportunity to pay tribute to some of the fantastic local organisations and individuals in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, including the churches and community groups that have kept local people connected and reached out to help those who needed it. This is even more vital in a vast rural constituency such as mine. I pay tribute to people such as Thomas Truby from Torphins, who, at 10 years old, has continued throughout the lockdown and the crisis to pick up litter and keep his local area clean with his own group, the Rubbish Club. People and actions such as these give us all an abiding hope for the future. The importance of community has never been so evident, and as we head towards winter facing the prospect of

[Andrew Bowie]

the second wave, I am in no doubt that communities will pull together once more. I sincerely hope that we will see the spirit of co-operation across the political divide and among the four Governments of our United Kingdom as we move forward.

8.19 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). He claims to have the most beautiful constituency in these islands. I, of course, represent the most sophisticated electorate in these islands, as I have argued many times. He used to serve alongside me on the Work and Pensions Committee, and I shall confine most of my remarks to that subject. I thank him for the tone he adopted, because it was a lot better than some of the madder contributions earlier. One Conservative said that they thought the Government had turned to the dark side. Many of us came to that conclusion many years ago.

I will confine my contribution to ensuring that the Government support the least fortunate in our society. I was very surprised when I tabled a parliamentary question asking how many advance repayments there had been in the latest available figures. The latest figures available are for May this year—the height of the lockdown—and 1.6 million universal credit claimants had a deduction from their payments due to advance repayments. In West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, 800 individuals had an average of £61 deducted from their payments. In Glasgow South West, it was an average of £56 taken from 3,800 claimants.

Those statistics show that claimants had money taken off them at the height of lockdown. I think that is something the Government need to reflect on. I find it deeply troubling that the Government were taking money off people who were claiming universal credit at the height of lockdown. We have to make sure that people do not have to choose to heat or to eat. The consequences of such policies, as we learned on a webinar I took part in by Feeding Britain, of which I am a trustee, have put enormous pressure on food banks and other charities.

Where I do agree with the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine is that the local organisations in both our constituencies—the churches, food banks and charitable organisations—have stepped up magnificently during the crisis. However, they have stepped up to do some things that they would not have had to do if the Government had not taken deductions from individuals for advance repayments. That has put pressure on groups such as Drumoyne Community Council with its food project, the Govan Youth Information Project, Govan HELP and G53 Together, which brings together a large number of organisations in the Greater Pollok ward of Glasgow South West. They have done a magnificent job of looking after all the people who have needed help during the crisis.

I have heard the conspiracy theories. I am sure I am not the only one whose inbox is flooded with theories about covid—that somehow it is a conspiracy and all of that. It is not; it is a severe pandemic that attacks natural human behaviour. It is natural to shake someone's hand when we see them. It is natural to hug them if we know them well enough. We cannot do that in these troubled times, due to this disease and this pandemic.

I want to place it on the record, as I have done a number of times over the past few months, that a major round of applause should go to our constituency office staff—not just those in Glasgow South West, but those across these islands. They really have stepped up. Whether Members have been in this House since December or for decades, I am sure they would all agree that our constituency office staff teams have never been busier. I claim, with some justification, that mine are the best, but I know that every single Member of this House is grateful to the constituency office staff of every Member of this House.

Mr Steve Baker *rose*—

8.24 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): My hon. Friend can intervene on me if he likes; I will give way to him.

I join others in calling, six months on, for this place to have greater oversight as we deal with this pandemic. We face six more months of hardship, and it is absolutely right that this Parliament should play its role in scrutinising the Executive.

I would like to focus on the roll-out of a vaccine. That may seem a little premature, given that we are contemplating a second wave of the pandemic and further economic intervention, but a vaccine is potentially six months away. China is already mass producing a product, and it has another 10 others online. Oxford is heading into its phase 3 tests, with tens of thousands of people being tested, and other institutions around the globe are doing the same.

The scale and complexity of the challenge is up there with the D-day landings and Dunkirk. To put it politely, we must learn the lessons of the PPE roll-out, testing and track and trace. Mass vaccine roll-out is an enormous responsibility, and we need to get it right. Planning must start immediately, and I have written to the Prime Minister recommending that he consider calling on the Ministry of Defence to establish a small taskforce, led by a senior empowered voice of authority, to begin the planning and design of a draft blueprint. The armed forces have the capacity, the logistical experience and the national reach to take on this mammoth, incredible task, and they are not overburdened by any current duties involving tackling covid-19.

Let us pause to consider what is involved: the logistics of shifting millions of refrigerated vaccines across the country; creating regional distribution hubs, which then feed into mobile testing centres; developing a national database to track progress and issue vaccination certificates, which will probably have to be internationally recognised in order to allow international travel; establishing an order of priority for who receives the vaccine first—key workers, the vulnerable and teachers, for example—and answering more detailed questions about potentially using schools to vaccinate children. All those things must be planned for. With the co-ordination of Whitehall Departments, local authorities, the private sector, policing and security to consider, as well as military support, I hope I make the case for why we need to start thinking about this now.

I believe that the biggest challenge will be in managing the transition period—potentially up to a year—when parts of our society have been liberated from the threat

of covid-19 and seek to return to normality, but those who have yet to be vaccinated are still subject to social distancing rules. We need to get the planning right today so we can avoid the logistical challenges that we suffered with PPE and testing. In the spirit of global Britain, we can then share our blueprint and plans with other nations, especially those without such advanced logistical capabilities as ours.

I stress that there is huge scope for this to go wrong if we do not start to plan now. The west was slow to understand the impact of the pandemic, the pace at which it moved through society and its lethality, but Britain has an opportunity to be an exemplar in the management of covid-19's departure. Let us task the Ministry of Defence now, appoint a leader to plan and prepare for this complex and critical national project, and ensure that we efficiently defeat this pandemic when we are finally armed with a workable vaccine.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the next hon. Member, I should warn the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) and all those who will follow that I have to reduce the time limit to four minutes, which is still a long time.

8.28 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I want to make a short speech about two key issues that I am deeply concerned about. Like many others, I held a Macmillan coffee morning last Friday, and I heard about the terrible impact of coronavirus on cancer treatment. Macmillan research notes that cancer care provision was in crisis before the pandemic because of understaffing among cancer nurses, which has placed incredible pressure on an overstretched workforce and support services. NHS figures show that only 319 people began receiving cancer treatment in July after attending a screening programme for breast, cervical and bowel cancers. That is 65% lower than this time last year. As well as drastically low numbers coming through the system, only a quarter started treatment on time. That is far lower than the 90% standard. I do not believe that reciting figures reflects the urgency of the situation, as this problem is having a devastating impact on people and on the lives of their loved ones. Life-saving treatments are being cancelled or postponed. I heard on Friday from a Macmillan nurse that, due to accessing screening services late, some patients' cancer has progressed too far for treatment to be affected and they are now just following a care pathway.

The British Medical Association has already warned that thousands of people would suffer if vital routine care was shut down during a second wave. This should not have happened in the first place, but will the Minister outline what additional measures are being implemented to avoid potentially preventable deaths from cancer, particularly with regard to reducing waiting times and tackling the backlog of patients?

My second area of concern is related to humanist marriages. Today, Humanists UK flagged up the fact that the latest coronavirus regulations to come into force in England today allow religious and civil marriages to have up to 15 guests, but, initially, this did not include humanist weddings. Instead, the regulations said that humanist weddings must be limited to six attendees. However, within the last hour, it seems that the Government have

recognised that this would be discriminatory and have now said that humanist weddings can have 15 people. This is vital to many of our constituents. Just last year, a British social attitudes survey recorded that 52% of British people state that they have no religion. Will the Minister to confirm that this is the case and that there will be parity between humanist weddings and others as it stands?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With a time limit of four minutes, I call Mr Chris Clarkson.

8.31 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that colleagues will be delighted to know that my time has been shortened to four minutes.

First, I join colleagues across the House in thanking the great British public, including my constituents in Heywood and Middleton, for their continued forbearance, patience and public spirit as the pandemic wears on. After months of sacrifice, it would be nice to be able to say to them, "Mission accomplished. Job well done.", but we cannot and nor can any country, even those that the Opposition and their army of amateur epidemiologists on social media were holding up as examples at the beginning of the crisis. We must redouble our efforts, unbowed and unbroken. The same blitz spirit that saw Britain and the Commonwealth through world war two is still alive and well. It is in every one of the acts of kindness that I spoke of in my maiden speech. It is in people such as Michelle Eagleton and Clare Cartmel in Middleton, who planned a community spirit award to pay tribute to their neighbours who went the extra mile during lockdown, and in people such as Sue Coates and Annie Cooney of Heywood magic market who welcomed freelancers and sole traders to the market for just £28 a week, so that they could continue to earn a living through the crisis.

People in my communities know better than most how tough it is to endure long periods of restrictions. For weeks now, our infection rates have gone up by hundreds of thousands. Heywood and Middleton, Bamford, Castleton and Norden, along with much of Greater Manchester, have been under additional measures as we try to get control of the virus. For the most part, people have just got on with it. I am not saying that the rules have been enthusiastically welcomed. I am not sure that anyone would expect them to be, but people have got on with it. That is what we do in the north: we crack on.

We may soon be asked to vote on an amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). Sir Graham is well liked and well respected, not just in this place but across Greater Manchester, so when I say that I shall not be supporting the amendment, I say it believing that it is the wrong approach and not as a judgment on the hon. Gentlemen bringing forward the motion.

This country is facing an emergency. Even the most libertarian of us, and I count myself as such, have to recognise that, on occasion, the Executive must be given room to manoeuvre to make decisions in the moment. We already have checks, balances and safety mechanisms in place to ensure that decisions are appropriate and proportionate. What the amendment proposes is the

[Chris Clarkson]

equivalent of the House of Commons making Churchill come here to take a vote every time he wanted to send out Spitfires. It ignores the reality of the situation to satiate an ideological predilection and I cannot support that.

What if Parliament comes to the conclusion that the Coronavirus Act 2020 should not be extended, or that it should be watered down? It is a possibility, after all. There will be a caucus of politicians with one eye on the polls, telling those justifiably angry people who email us about their liberties that everything can go back to normal at the click of a finger. That would be hugely popular—it absolutely would—but the truth is that it would be like telling somebody to take their parachute off at 200 feet because the job of slowing their descent has already been done. It will, of course, be up to hon. Members as to how they vote when or if this amendment comes forward. I suspect that I will not have changed that many minds tonight.

Before coming here, I spent eight years as that rarest of the rare—a Tory member of Salford Council. The city's motto is rather ironically a quotation from one of the great Conservative thinkers, Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Salus populi suprema lex", which means the welfare of the people is the highest law. I urge Members across the House to keep that in mind as they choose what to do later this week.

8.34 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I welcome this debate as a crucial opportunity to review the measures taken by the Government, six months after the start of lockdown.

Since 23 March, the lockdown has imposed some of the most dramatic restrictions on our liberties since the second world war. The nation has stood behind the Prime Minister in a joint effort to save lives and protect the NHS from being overwhelmed. However, although we were able to reduce the prevalence of the virus during the initial lockdown, it is now clear that we will have to live with it for the foreseeable future, with no guarantee that a vaccine will be available any time soon.

In the meantime, every restriction we impose threatens more jobs and livelihoods, and reduces people to merely existing, without any prospects for the future. As we know, the economic consequences of the lockdown were severe, and the Government did an extraordinary job of protecting workers when they needed it most. People were encouraged to go back to work, and children to go back to school, so that the country could begin to recover from this unprecedented challenge.

Those steps were vital, and it is important now that we do not waste our efforts by taking disproportionate measures as we enter the winter months. That is not to say that we should not recognise the risks for the NHS or how dangerous the virus can be for some. However, any measures applied to an area need to be targeted and proportionate and to have the support of the majority of people in that area in order to be effective.

There is growing discontent, certainly in Redcar and Cleveland, and I am sure in other parts of the country, regarding the need for more evidence behind some decisions, whether they are taken centrally or mandated by local authorities, and I am grateful to the Health Secretary for agreeing to greater parliamentary involvement

in this debate. Equally, if we are to impose additional restrictions on a local area, they should apply within a clear timeframe, with a clear exit strategy in place, so that people know what to expect and areas are not banned indefinitely from the basic freedoms of community and family.

We know so much more about the virus now than we did at the beginning of the crisis, and patients have access to vastly improved treatments, which should allow us to respond differently as the situation evolves. The consequences of prolonged unemployment, isolation and loneliness should not be underestimated. Carrying on down the path of more restrictions would shut more businesses, forsake more jobs, aggravate the mental health crisis and push families across the country towards desperation and despair. We must balance the risks to our physical health with those to our mental health and our economic future.

Further restrictions must be proportionate, measured, targeted and, above all, humane. If we do not stay vigilant, we risk losing more lives through poverty, delayed treatments and operations, and the degradation of the nation's health. Let us make sure we strike that balance so that when we look back on these events, we can be proud of how we defeated this invisible enemy together.

8.38 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. This pandemic has given us all the opportunity to see at first hand the best of our communities and the best of our public services. I was pleased to welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to Darlington recently. We toured Darlington Memorial Hospital and saw the amazing work that the team there have done. Necessity is the mother of invention, and that was shown to us clearly by the innovative and creative way that A&E capacity and intensive care capacity have been doubled, making the hospital better able to serve my constituents.

I speak regularly to the chief executive of St Teresa's Hospice in Darlington, and I declare my interest as a trustee of hospices in both Northallerton and Harrogate, so I know how vital Government support has been to our hospices, with St Teresa's having received over £400,000. I again press Health Ministers to ensure that, as winter approaches, with reserves depleted and the usual fundraising opportunities scrapped, every opportunity to help our hospices continues to be taken.

Back in June, I mentioned the incredible work of the Mowden pub and Maggie's Place, which together provided more than 10,000 meals to the vulnerable across Darlington. I am delighted to report to the House that, last Thursday, Simon and Rachel Leadbetter from the Mowden received national recognition in the Great British Pub Awards. They truly are the best of us, and I am pleased once again to place on the record my thanks to them on behalf of the people I serve.

What Ministers have done to support our economy and protect livelihoods has been remarkable. In Darlington, 12,300 workers were furloughed, 2,500 self-employed workers accessed grants, and 1,581 grants, totalling almost £16 million, were distributed to small and medium-sized enterprises. I am keen to see the faith and trust in our Government continue; it has been underwritten by that financial safety net.

In the Tees Valley, we have had tremendous support from our Mayor, Ben Houchen. I also pay tribute to the phenomenal work of Darlington Borough Council, led by Councillor Heather Scott, who has ensured that all vital business support schemes were distributed swiftly. From improving treatments, ramping up testing, shielding our vulnerable, protecting our NHS and supporting our economy, much has been done, but this is not over.

The people of Darlington—the care home staff, the shop workers, the street cleaners, the postal workers—have worked hard to follow the rules and have kept infections relatively low, but putting my constituents in additional lockdown measures so soon after new national measures have been adopted will not give us the opportunity to see their impact. I urge caution before Darlington sees more restrictions damaging our recovering economy.

8.41 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Covid-19 has been really tough for people in Burnley and Padiham. It has rippled through our community and caused heartache and sacrifice, but it has also brought selflessness and a sense of community. It is particularly tough in Burnley and Padiham because we continue to have local restrictions and cases continue to increase. That means that households still cannot meet, grandparents cannot see grandchildren and parents cannot see children. I worry about the impact that that will have on the mental health of the children who went all that time without school and the families who were unable to grieve. I pay tribute to the outstanding work of my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), whose campaign for 1,000 mental health first aiders is a model for us all to follow to ensure that when people need it, there is mental health support for them.

I fundamentally believe that the Government's actions are right. We know that the virus can be fatal, and how it can be beaten; we therefore have a moral duty to act. We cannot allow it to roam through our communities unchecked, but the Government's job is to find a way of acting as unobtrusively as possible, allowing people to live their lives as freely as possible. That does not mean that everything will go back to normal, but it needs to be as close to normal as we can get. I urge the Government to find a way to make progress to allow people to visit their family members in care homes, to allow fans back into football stadiums, to allow people to attend the weddings of their loved ones, and to get conferences up and running again. All those things are about personal relationships, and it is personal relationships that matter.

We have the ability in this country to look at covid as though it is a British problem, ignoring the wide world out there and looking only at what is happening here, but every country is facing the same challenges and trying to find its own models and interventions to protect its people. When we look internationally and at what we have achieved in the UK, we find some real bright spots. Today, we heard that 70% of our PPE will come from UK suppliers by December. That is a fantastic statistic. Textile manufacturers in the north-west of England, in places such as Burnley, are securing jobs and ensuring that our care homes have security of supply. We have an app that has been downloaded more than 10 million times. That, too, is an incredible statistic. We have seen some of the most advanced biomedical developments in this country. Vaccines are progressing, and drugs that reduce the fatality rate are being researched here.

We know we have longer to go. We are not yet over this virus. I believe that the British people are willing to make the sacrifice, but to do that, the Government have to take us with them. We have to see light at the end of the tunnel, so with a clear, targeted and transparent approach to where we are going and how we are going to get there, I think the public will stay with us.

8.45 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I want first to thank the Department of Health and Social Care for responding so quickly throughout this and getting back to all colleagues across Lancashire. The people of Hyndburn and Haslingden have faced further restrictions imposed on them for a longer period of time than other areas across the country, and it has been extremely difficult for residents and businesses. This, again, raises concerns with regard to mental health, and we need to make sure as a Government that we do all we can to support the wellbeing of residents who are in the position that my residents are in. Family and friends are crucial when tackling this. Close contact services could not resume when others could. Household mixing was banned for some time and is now banned again due to the increase in figures and the evidence showing that this is due to household transmission. The childcare issue was one that was creating struggles for families and I was very pleased to see that the Government recognised that and acted on it.

It is necessary that as much of the science as possible is published so that I am able to bring my constituents of Hyndburn and Haslingden with us when measures are introduced. As I am sure the House can understand, when we face restrictions locally where we are unable to see loved ones in their homes, it is infuriating to my constituents to then see mass gatherings at protests, with no social distancing being adhered to. While many in Hyndburn and Haslingden are complying with the rules that are in place and taking personal responsibility, we have a minority who are not and who are blatantly flouting the rules.

We also need hope. We need to know what criteria need to be met for us to be moved out of these restrictions. I absolutely want local restrictions to be removed from us as soon as it is safe to do so, while also protecting the most vulnerable in our society. This is the feeling of many residents across Hyndburn and Haslingden. We need the balance between restricting the spread of the virus without infringing on civil liberties, while allowing the restoration of economic and social life.

Our cases are high locally and the threat of further restrictions looms. The prospect of a national lockdown is raising serious concerns. If that is to happen and further restrictions are to take place, further financial support will be necessary. Businesses are struggling. The 10 pm curfew is putting added strain on the hospitality industry. Further restrictions without further support will mean that many businesses in my area may close their doors for good. It is also very difficult to try to explain to residents how they are allowed only a certain number of people at a wedding or a funeral when they see events taking place that attract thousands of visitors each week to my constituency. That also needs to be addressed. If an area becomes an area of intervention, perhaps the restriction on numbers needs to be the same across the board.

[Sara Britcliffe]

The wedding sector has taken a particularly heavy blow over the past months. In July, weddings of up to 30 people were permitted and hundreds of couples seized the opportunity to get married. I want to wish those couples all the best, but also to outline that the change of rules from 30 to 15 wedding attendees announced by the Prime Minister not only forces couples to replan their weddings, but places further strain on our national wedding industry. At some point, businesses will start closing their doors for good and we need to do everything in our power to make sure that whole sectors do not collapse.

I am proud to have Accrington Stanley football club in my constituency. During the pandemic, it continues to support the players and staff and I am happy to say that they are back to doing what they are great at—winning games—but they need fans back through their doors.

I visited schools in my constituency, and they are telling me that the guidance needs to be implemented and given to them at an appropriate time. Finally, residents in Hyndburn and Haslingden and businesses want to support—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

8.49 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I want first to put on record, like many other speakers, my thanks to the Health Secretary and his team of Ministers for the outstanding work that they have done over recent months in very difficult circumstances.

Covid-19, as we all know, is a very difficult disease—it is a terrible disease. It can be fatal. My father got it. He is an NHS doctor/consultant, very much in the target danger range. He survived and is fit and well. My mother also got it—from him, she likes to add—and she recovered much faster. This is a dangerous disease, and we all know that our first act as Member of Parliament, or as Ministers, is to preserve life. This Government have tried to do that as best they can. I will not lie; I found the restrictions that the Government were forced to put on us over the past few months very difficult. I wanted to go to big events and have lots of people round. I wanted to go on holiday without having to quarantine when I came back. I wanted to do a lot of things, and I know that many of my constituents—many of whom got in touch with me in many ways over recent weeks and months—have felt the same. It is very difficult. As the Prime Minister said, we are a freedom-loving people. We want to do what we want within the law. We want social contacts and to work the way we want; we want to take the tube, and do all those things. It is very frustrating, but just because it is frustrating, does not mean that we do not need controls.

I have spent a huge amount of time thinking, researching, reading, and talking to people over recent weeks and months, about the different ways that we can go through this. Of course we can all point to a decision that we might have made slightly differently, or slightly earlier or later, but overall I think the Government's approach has been right thus far.

Going ahead and looking forward, there are things that I believe we must bake into our approach now. First, we must all remember that we might have to live with this virus for many months. We hope there will be a

vaccine, but there may not be. If there is one, it might not be very effective at first, and we must accept that from the start. We must ensure that we keep our children in school and keep businesses open, and due to the good work of the Government, whether in test and trace, improving testing capabilities, or the financial support given to many businesses, we are better placed to do that. We must keep those things.

We must also remember that social contact matters. It is not a nice ancillary to life; it is critical. We have heard from many speakers about how loneliness and bad mental wellbeing can hugely damage people's lives. I was struck by the number of people who have got in touch with me and said, "I live alone. I have no family. If there is a lockdown, I don't know if I can take that." We must bear social contact in mind as of critical importance.

I urge the Government—this appears to have happened during the course of the day with various discussions—that Parliament needs more of a say in these decisions at the appropriate time. That would help MPs to understand the requirements better, and it would also help the Government and the public if we explained those measures to the constituents we represent.

8.53 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami). I will start by paying tribute to everyone in Newcastle-under-Lyme for their fortitude in these extraordinary times. People have looked after each other. I do not mean just in the literal sense at the Royal Stoke University Hospital, the care homes, or with neighbours, but in a more general community sense, by their adherence to the many restrictions on liberty that the Government had to impose.

I spoke in the Chamber from one of those big screens during the debate on the initial health protection regulations that were set out on 26 March. That debate was held on 4 May, 39 days later. That day, many hon. Members were willing to extend to the Government a considerable measure of tolerance, given the circumstances at the time, but it is clear that that tolerance is wearing thin, not just in the House but in the country at large. I fear the mood is turning somewhat fractious. Conspiracy theories and bad science are swirling around my inbox, and that of every Member of the House—I know that because I know all Members have been copied in.

In the debate on 4 May, I said:

"Politics and Government are about trade-offs. That is always true because resources are not unlimited, but a crisis like this highlights it more starkly than ever. Science and its epidemiological models do not, by design, always capture all elements of those trade-offs. They can show us specific consequences of specific measures, but they cannot consider every dimension of the choices politicians must make."—[*Official Report*, 4 May 2020; Vol. 675, c. 464.]

I went on to discuss three dimensions of those trade-offs: covid versus the economy; covid versus other measures of health, such as mental health; and covid versus liberty. Each of those raise profound questions.

It cannot be the correct strategy simply to structure society to limit the daily number of coronavirus cases, but it is fair to ask what the correct strategy is, not just in this country but around the world. Are we all simply hanging on for a vaccine? That may be the best option,

but it would be good to have some probabilities and dates attached to that strategy while we recognise the uncertainty involved.

I have been privileged to serve on the Science and Technology Committee throughout the pandemic, and it is clear from the evidence I have heard that Britain is leading the world in its scientific response. As the Secretary of State made clear in his opening speech, the Government have made extensive preparations for the vaccine breakthrough we are all hoping for in terms of both procurement and planning for its distribution. But what strikes me most from the evidence we have heard on the Select Committee is that we are still dealing with profound uncertainty about so many variables, including: the nature of the virus; the efficacy of the measures we are taking against it right now; the likely epidemiological path this winter; and, indeed, the timeline for a vaccine. In dealing with uncertainty, we must all be careful not to succumb to optimism bias that the noble Lord Finkelstein wrote about last week in *The Times*. He called it the “San Francisco Error”: when lost in San Francisco, it is always tempting to think that the right way back must be downhill.

I, like many colleagues, find the restrictions we have had to place on individual liberty hugely unwelcome, and I fear the ongoing impact on the economy of any prolongation of lockdown and any further restrictions, particularly in those sectors that simply cannot trade at all at present. However, ultimately, and despite my fervent wish that it were not so, it seems clear from the data we have seen from elsewhere that those who would rather we were not taking these additional measures now—either nationally or locally—could be succumbing to that optimism bias. This remains a very dangerous disease, and we must not take it lightly this winter.

I would like to echo the excellent speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee. As he said, this must be the last season like this. By the spring, we will need a new plan, informed by the scientific evidence at the time and by what we learn over the winter, because we simply cannot continue to live like this forever. Finally, I urge the Government to share the burdens of the difficult decisions—these trade-offs—with the House, because doing so will increase the legitimacy of those decisions in the eyes of the public.

8.57 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I would like to talk about our long-term covid strategy. In doing so, I want to touch on the past, the present and the future. The past: in response to covid arriving in our country, the lockdown in spring saved lives, and the incredible financial and business support brought in by the Government saved many jobs and businesses. In my constituency, 40% of working-age adults have been supported by the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. The economic and financial support continues. The community response to support the NHS has been incredible. The lockdown gave us time to learn, to research, to understand the virus better and to find possible treatments, to set up track and trace and the covid app and to pivot the NHS. We also started from scratch a monumental testing service. Yes, there have been challenges and setbacks, but we are coming through them.

I turn to the present. We are seeing a rise in measured infections, and new measures and restrictions are being brought in. There are three hard truths that we need to consider, and cannot shy away from them. First, covid is here to stay. Rather than talk about a second wave, we need to talk about a seasonal resurgence of endemic covid infection. I am sorry that I cannot reference the columnist from *The Daily Telegraph* who first mentioned that as a term, but she is absolutely correct in how we should look at it. Covid is here to stay.

Secondly, there is no vaccine and there may never be one. There are many diseases for which we do not have vaccines, despite a monumental investment of time and effort over the decades, such as other coronaviruses, malaria and HIV. Sure, those are different pathogens with different challenges around vaccine development, but they illustrate my point that it is not a given that a vaccine will be invented. I hope to God that we can invent one. We have some of the best scientists in the world working on it, but we must be realistic about the prospect of success. Furthermore, even if one is invented, it may not be a game changer; it may simply reduce the impact and burden of disease, with other measures remaining necessary.

Thirdly, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Every measure we have brought in to tackle coronavirus has its consequences elsewhere. Pivoting the NHS will have an impact on cancer detection and treatment, and increases in socio-economic deprivation and poverty will have their cost in lives and disease in years to come. Let me emphasise that point: we should be in no doubt that the economic contractions we are seeing will have a long-term cost in lives.

Turning to the future, the Secretary of State has put forward two options: to “let rip”, or to suppress until a vaccine is available. I suggest to the Government that there is a third option that we could and should pursue, in which we continue to invest and research a vaccine, but acknowledge that until we have invented one, the default position we adopt must be to expect that one will not arrive and that, if it does, it may not be a game changer. That option is not to let rip nor to totally suppress, but to adapt, pivot and evolve to living and thriving in a post-covid world.

9 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I start by paying tribute to the Secretary of State and his excellent ministerial team, who have worked so hard in the most exceptional of circumstances.

It is clearly imperative that we protect those at risk from coronavirus—the elderly, the vulnerable and those with pre-existing medical conditions. We need to put a protective ring around them. However, it is also important that we allow the remainder of the population, as much as possible, to get on with their lives in a covid-secure manner.

Ultimately, there is a balance here to be struck. It is a question of managing risks. Even within the health sphere, we need to manage risks. If we simply focus on coronavirus, other health services will not operate efficiently. We are already in a situation where people are not going for cancer checks or following up with their GPs because they are so concerned about catching coronavirus.

[Felicity Buchan]

We also clearly need to put the economy into the balance of risks. I represent a central London constituency that is suffering badly as a result of coronavirus. Ultimately, we need an economy that, in six months' time and in five years' time, will pay for our excellent NHS. Our constituents need jobs to go to in six months' time, because there is a clear correlation between being in employment and good mental health.

Last week, we introduced new restrictions with the 10 pm lockdown, and we revised our guidance on working from home to recommend that people should do that if possible. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to closely monitor the impact of those new restrictions and to review them at the earliest safe opportunity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said, we need to live with this virus. There is no guarantee that we will get a vaccine, so we need to adapt, and to do so in a way that protects the most lives possible, while allowing our economy to function and prosper.

9.4 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to highlight the response in Aylesbury to the extraordinary measures that have been taken to deal with an equally extraordinary public health emergency. I pay tribute to those across my constituency who have shown resilience, compassion and imagination in adapting to live alongside the current pandemic. Just last Friday, I visited Aylesbury Crown court, which, under the inspirational leadership of His Honour Judge Francis Sheridan, has become the first in the country to be back working at 100%. Screens have been put in the courtroom to ensure jurors are covid-safe, video links connect with Amersham courthouse so that sentencing can be carried out there for offenders being held in a secure dock in Aylesbury, and some of the work of the employment tribunal has been relocated to the judge's own chambers.

There are countless other excellent examples from across the Aylesbury constituency of firms that have recognised that our lives can no longer be put on hold, as the Chancellor himself put it. Last week, the Prime Minister introduced measures that were greatly appreciated for treading a very fragile line in balancing public health with the needs of the economy. Like my constituents, I was relieved that we did not begin a second full shutdown. I agree with the Health Secretary, who said today that we are in a different place from where we were in March, when so much less was known about covid-19. Since then, our public services and businesses have been able to implement wide-ranging measures to keep us as safe as possible, while retaining a semblance of a normal life.

Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, and particularly Stoke Mandeville Hospital, is in a strong position to respond to an increase in cases of covid-19 and, crucially, to ensure that those with other health problems do not go ignored. People are still getting cancer, they are still suffering heart problems and they still have chronic conditions, and it must be right that we ensure our brilliant doctors and nurses are able to provide them with the treatment and care they need and deserve.

I have had a considerable amount of correspondence from constituents who say they do not want stricter measures. Notably, a good deal of this has come from

those who themselves are in at-risk groups, as they themselves acknowledge—particularly some of the older members of the community. Put bluntly, they are grandparents who do not want to be forced to live their final days free of covid but banned from seeing their families.

We undoubtedly face an arduous and gruelling winter. Covid-19 has not yet been conquered, as we had all hoped. We must confront the real prospect that this horrendous pandemic will be with us for a long time to come, so I am glad that we have had an opportunity to discuss these matters today in Parliament. I recognise that the Government need to act fast to respond to a crisis that is still unfolding and is unpredictable. Equally, I know there is a huge amount of expertise and experience on these Benches that could be harnessed for the benefit of all if we are given the opportunity to debate and propose improvement in a positive and constructive fashion.

This is not the time for sniping or point scoring and it is not the time to try to catch out Ministers who are doing their level best in desperately difficult times, but it is the time when sincere, practical advice and mature scrutiny are most needed to help avoid unintended consequences and steer the path away from foreseeable peril, because we cannot allow covid-19 to shut off every other aspect of our lives, our economy, our liberties or our democracy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call James Daly —[*Interruption.*] Sorry—Lee Rowley.

9.7 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to be able to contribute to this timely and important debate in the place where I thought I was supposed to be contributing.

I come to this debate as a self-professed libertarian Conservative, and somebody who strongly believes that states are most effective when they tend to concentrate on doing some things well, rather than lots of things badly. I want to explain why I as a libertarian can be supportive of the measures that have been taken by the Government, and I want to explain to those who share my ideological views or just those who are frustrated at the moment, whose views have come into all of our inboxes, why I think what we are doing is proportionate and appropriate.

There are two times when I think that big states and big governments are appropriate: one is in a time of war, which I hope none of us in this Chamber ever has to go through, and the second is in a public health emergency, and we are in a public health emergency. The virus exists; it is not flu, as some of my constituents seem to want to tell me. It transmits: it transmits well in social scenarios, and for a small but very important number of people, it creates very difficult outcomes and can be fatal at certain points. That is a public health emergency by any definition.

We can debate the approach, we can debate the enforcement, we can debate the scrutiny and we can debate the strategy, but I do not think we can debate those facts. We should debate the enforcement, we should debate the scrutiny and we should debate the approach, and when we are debating that, I look at it from two principles: one of liberty and one of risk. On the

liberty point, I am a strong proponent of freedom and choice and bringing them to as many people and as many constituents as I possibly can. But the ability to have the freedom to do things comes with the requirement not to harm others. It is that second part of the principle of liberty that we need to ensure that people understand. There is an externality in terms of what we do on a day-to-day basis. If we do not ensure that that externality is understood and regulated, then we are not only constraining our freedom but will potentially extinguish the freedom of others.

Mr Steve Baker: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lee Rowley: I would be very happy to give way.

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend's speech is so marvellous that I am just baldly going to give him another minute.

Lee Rowley: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend; I did not even ask him to do that.

The second point is one of risk. I recognise that this is a nuanced and difficult discussion where there are no clear-cut answers for us all. This debate, I accept, has been unbalanced over the past few months during coronavirus. We have had a focus on some of the short-term, hugely important and hugely tragic issues—my own family have faced some of those—whereas the more hidden, longer-term consequences of similar things that we are debating and discussing are often not brought to the fore because it is more difficult to do and more difficult to articulate. It is a question of the level of risk that we as a society are willing to tolerate.

We cannot tolerate zero risk. I have zero time for the members of the Independent SAGE who populate the pages of *The Guardian* with the idea that zero cases is somehow achievable. It is an impossibility, and we should cease to even entertain it as a serious idea in solving the problem that is in front of us. By the same token, we cannot have complete risk. We cannot have complete freedom to do things, because of the externality that I spoke about. That means, ultimately, that we need a proportionate approach. For now, based on what we know, and understanding the challenges that we face, the Government's strategy is proportionate. It accepts that there are challenges and problems, and it is trying to balance those.

We may find out more in the next few weeks about whether there will be changes to how the virus is moving, we may find out in the next few months whether we have a solution to this, and perhaps we will have to change strategy in the future as a consequence. But we have to be honest with people: there is no straightforward answer to this. There is no absolute science. There are no easy comparisons with other countries, and people should be very careful about making those. There is no constraint on liberty that can last for ever. Ultimately, no laws, no edicts and no enforcement can boil down to what we all need to do as individuals and citizens, which is to do our best for ourselves, our community and our society as a whole. For those who value liberty and agree to a temporary constraint for others, for community and for society, I support that, but not for one minute longer than is necessary, not for one more person than is required, and not for one more element of society that we need to change as a result.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I was going to give you some extra time as well, because it was my fault. Uniquely, for a second time in the debate, I call James Daly.

9.13 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I say what a delight it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley)? Every speech that he gives in this place is a delight. I cannot say any words of higher praise than that. He highlights a point that I would like to make in respect of this debate. We all have different views and we all articulate those views in different ways—many of us cannot do it in the way that he can—but we come from honourable standpoints.

The debate as it has sometimes been heard in the Chamber today regarding saying “X has done this” or “The Government have done this wrong” misses the point completely. Nobody can possibly argue that the Government have not done anything they thought was the right thing to do to address a unique problem that none of us had thought we would face. The Government have done everything they felt was appropriate, and I support them in that.

I would like to talk about the evidence. In March, at the start of the lockdown, we had no evidence. It was a unique situation, and ad hoc measures had to be put in place because there was no blueprint for what to do. We now have evidence, and we can weigh the risks that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire described on the basis of the evidence we have accumulated over the months of the crisis.

I use as an example pubs, restaurants and the hospitality sector in my seat. I am sure that all Members have faced pub landlords and proprietors of businesses saying to them, “If there is another lockdown, my business will come to an end.” Nobody can fail to be touched by that. The judgment that politicians have to make between the real risk of economic hardship and the threat posed by the virus is nigh on impossible, so we look to the evidence.

It was reported in the London *Evening Standard* that 3.2% of covid outbreaks last week were from food outlets. We must always look to the evidence to support our judgments. If the evidence does not suggest that pubs, restaurants and other hospitality venues are anything other than safe environments in which to respect social distancing and all the other guidance, we should not make an educated guess. The eminent scientists who advise the Government may take a view about the perceived threat, but I firmly believe that the pubs and other hospitality sector businesses in my seat have proved themselves to be safe, covid-secure environments. There has not been an outbreak in my seat, which has now been under restrictions for nearly eight months.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on covid. This is too important to all our constituents for MPs not to be able to debate these matters at length, but let us debate them on the basis of the evidence we have, not our gut feeling, what we think or educated guesses. Let us look at the evidence we have and where it points us. In my opinion, the evidence points to businesses that are currently at risk of being shut down being safe environments. Pubs, restaurants and the hospitality sector

[James Daly]

in Bury deserve our support, and I hope that after scrutiny of all the evidence, they will be kept open and no further restrictions will be placed on this very important sector within my area.

9.17 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. In North Devon, where we are known for our big waves, we have been fortunate only to see covid ripples to date. Devon and Cornwall have seen the lowest incidence of cases throughout the pandemic and continue to be the safest place in the country with regard to the spread of coronavirus. However, with an elderly population and numerous care homes, the risks of covid-19 taking hold in our communities should not be underestimated. I want to take this opportunity to thank the people of North Devon for their strict adherence to the rules. I also want to thank our businesses, which have implemented so many new procedures effectively, as shown by the huge number of tourists who have visited us in the south-west without an increase in cases.

We always have much to be thankful for, living in North Devon, but the wide open spaces I talk about in this place have given us much protection against covid-19. My constituency is 1,086 sq km—approximately four times the size of Birmingham—and is home to just over 96,000 people. Birmingham is home to over 1 million people. The population density of North Devon is just 88 people per square kilometre, compared with Birmingham's 4,055. That inevitably make social distancing easier. We have a distinct lack of public transport, which causes us no end of problems the rest of the time, but during the pandemic it is advantageous to preventing the spread of the virus.

In highlighting those structural differences and the very high compliance of the good people of North Devon, I want to ensure that they are widely understood before any further restrictions are imposed. Rural Devon is a very different place from any of our cities. Our pubs are community hubs, holding pop-up libraries and defibrillators, and for many villages they are literally the last business remaining in the community. Our pubs are smaller than most of their city counterparts, and our population is older. As we head into winter, the idea of spending cold, stormy nights at home, rather than with friendly faces by an open fire, is daunting for many. I hope that the differences I have outlined will be taken into account if further measures are considered, and as and when we eventually get to unlock.

Not only in North Devon but throughout much of the south-west and other rural parts of the country, our economy is structurally far more vulnerable than that in cities, with their wealth of different industries. We are very dependent on our tourism and hospitality industries. In my mind, that is no small part of why businesses in North Devon have ensured that the guidance is followed so strictly. Against the backdrop of such low population density and such high compliance, I find it difficult to understand how, according to the excellent new app, the risk of covid-19 in North Devon is the same as that in highly populated parts of the country with infection rates more than 10 times our own. I certainly do not want to do anything that puts the population of North

Devon at increased risk, but by the same token, it is a fine example of how following the rules can lead to better outcomes, and I hope that continues.

Understanding risk is critical to people being able to live something approaching a normal life as we wait for a vaccine against this dreadful virus. As the Chancellor said last week, we must learn to live with this virus, and live without fear. That can be achieved only if we are fully able to understand the risks we are living with. I fear how the assigning of the same level of risk to such different parts of the country may affect vulnerable residents who have already lived in fear and often isolation for more than six months. I hope that clearer guidance on assessing risk and rewarding communities that have seen such positive outcomes can be delivered. None of us wanted to live through a pandemic, but if we want our families, as well as ourselves, to live through it, we need to heed the guidance and better understand the risks.

9.21 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I pay tribute to many of the local people in my constituency of North West Durham, including the NHS staff, the care staff and those who have helped out in the community. In particular, I pay tribute to those who have seen their treatments postponed or diagnosis of disease delayed, including a husband who recently visited me in my surgery in quite an emotional meeting. Some of those people, particularly those who have seen their treatment delayed, are the ones who really put themselves on the line to save our NHS at the most difficult time for us in the initial stages of covid.

A lot of the Government's work has been very good. My constituents recognise the absolutely impossible situation that Ministers have faced at certain points in this crisis. I thank Ministers for the recent changes they made to childcare arrangements, helping people with unpaid family arrangements to be able to look after loved ones. I also welcome the Chancellor's unprecedented measures which, as we have seen in the past week, continue to save thousands of jobs in this country.

In thinking about going forward, I ask the Government to consider a few things. First, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said, we must consider the health effect of the restrictions on people. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) mentioned the mental health impacts on so many people across our communities. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned the business impact—particularly the issues for those in our hospitality sector, who have faced such difficult times over the past few months—and the need to explain some of the measures, such as the 10 o'clock measure, that the Government have taken.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) said, we cannot go on like this forever. But we do not have a clear way out. Victories—such as the changes made by treatments to the death rates in intensive care units over recent months—have been important throughout this epidemic, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said, a vaccine might not be a total solution either. As we go forward, with coronavirus still all over the country, I ask the Government to listen to us, because every decision they make without total

victory will be a judgment call. I would like them to hear the balanced and thoughtful words, particularly from these Benches, and from elsewhere, and to continue to consult the House so that we can speak up for our constituents at an incredibly difficult time for so many of them.

9.24 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Throughout the pandemic, we have seen unprecedented support from all our communities. I thank my community in Watford for their incredible work in coming together to tackle the challenge. Often, we talk about the concept of the fabric of society, but fabric is made up of woven threads and each individual thread is easily broken. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen a community woven together to make a much stronger fight against a real challenge across the country and the world.

Those threads are not just individuals; they are made up of our local communities, charities and pubs. Recently I visited the Partridge pub and the Badger pub in my constituency and chatted to people about the challenges they faced. They had been speaking to their punters, as they call them, as they tried to gather back together in socially distanced ways and start to feel part of a community again. We found that the problem is not just covid or communication, but one that threatens the heart of community. The lockdown created a real challenge for many of us.

All of us in the House—in this fantastic Chamber—have been challenged to look at the world differently, to look at our communities differently and to look at our own lives differently. Our constituents want to see how we can challenge our own beliefs to help others. The Chamber is a light and a beacon not only in this place, but to democracy in this country and perhaps even around the world. When we look at the lockdown measures, we must do so in a way that enables us to talk to our communities and constituencies about what we are trying to achieve.

When we look ahead to the coming weeks and months, we must make the argument in this place for why we need the lockdown measures. We may not always get to vote on them, but we need to be able to create the arguments so that people come with us and do not feel that we are against them.

Community is not just about getting together physically; it is about the spirit of how we work together and achieve things. This place has been a beacon of hope at times, but if we do not challenge ourselves to continue to have conversations here about the difficulties we all face, we risk losing people. The darkness that descended upon us has been broken by beacons of light in our community of fantastic volunteering and amazing work. We must now ensure that this Chamber continues to be a beacon of light—the light at the end of other people's tunnels, so that they know where we are heading, what we are trying to achieve and why we are doing it for their benefit.

9.27 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell). Most of what I wanted to say tonight has already been said. I would therefore like to give a voice to two important sectors in my constituency.

Arundel and South Downs has the enormous benefit of being one of the most beautiful constituencies in the south of England. As a result, I am pleased to say that we attract far more than our fair share of weddings, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) mentioned. In catering for the 400,000 marriages that take place in the UK each year, we are lucky to punch well above our weight.

However, last week's guidance has dealt an already struggling sector a weighty blow. On behalf of my constituents and businesses such as Cissbury Barns in Findon, where Etta and Geoff Wyatt run a wedding business, Mark McDavid's Fitzleroi Barn near Pullborough or the wonderful Pangdean Old Barn in Pyecombe, run by Nicky Currie, I point out that they are all struggling with guidance that says that there can be a service with as many people as can be covid-safely accommodated, unless it includes wedding vows, or that a restaurant can have as many covers as is covid compliant, unless there happen to be a bride and groom among them, in which case the number is restricted to 15. On behalf of the broader wedding industry, which is a really important sector for my constituency and for the wider rural economy, I ask the Minister to see whether, over the coming dark months of winter, we can help breathe life into it and keep our wedding venues and the wedding supply chain ticking over so that they make it through until the spring. They are having a very difficult time.

Secondly, I also apply many of those comments to the events and exhibitions business. I have some wonderful businesses in that space. I met Martin Bennett at Positive Images, which is based in West Chilton, just before this crisis hit, and I spoke to him again last week. He has had to make all of his staff redundant and he has now mothballed that business, with no potential respite in sight. The same is true of my constituents Lou Kiwanuka and Sara Macnae, who wrote to me about their business, the Shaper Group in Hurstpierpoint.

While commending the Minister for all of her and her colleagues' efforts—it has been a Herculean task to get the country to where we are today—we ask that, as we go forward over the coming months and shift away from the moment of crisis to sustaining our economy, she will continue to look at what can be done over time to modify the guidance so that sectors such as weddings and events and exhibitions can continue to thrive.

9.31 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): It is a real pleasure to be called so early in this debate. There are so many points I can speak about that no one else has mentioned.

We fought the general election on 12 December on the issue of Brexit, not on how any political party would handle the coronavirus pandemic, so the general public have not yet been given an opportunity to give their verdict on that. Of course, none of us said in our election address how we would deal with these matters. I understand what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, and I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). I feel for the Department of Health and Social Care, whose Secretary of State has worked his socks off. But what I want to hear about is a holistic approach from the Government. I want a plan from No. 10 Downing Street and some direction.

[*Sir David Amess*]

I say this to many colleagues who have just been elected. I thought I heard one or two say earlier that in war we do not need to scrutinise a Government, but that is not what happened. Judging by their emails, I feel that our constituents are getting very restless with this approach. Members of Parliament are getting restless with this approach, too. Why did we stand as Members of Parliament? We did it so that we could come here and scrutinise what the Government are doing, never mind whether we sit on the Government or Opposition Benches. This is not a real Parliament at the moment. It gives a false sense. We need only look around the Chamber to see that this is not as it should be. I say to the Government, not gently but robustly, that we need a much clearer plan.

No one has any experience of how to handle a coronavirus pandemic. If they did, we would have heard from them. It was very disappointing that in the recent World Health Organisation meeting, two of the biggest countries would not sign up to anything. I want the world to give us some leadership on this. Of course, three of the big leaders in my early years here really got the other people onside, to work together. We need the whole world to join us and come up with a solution.

I will be very quick. I have given up explaining to constituents why we are doing this. I want answers on flu jabs and the events industry. Why do we have the 10 pm curfew? I do not understand it. I am told that we do not have testing in our residential schools and foster homes. Limited company directors do not seem to be getting any help. The support for the self-employed has dropped to 20%. On weddings, I have two daughters getting married this year. It has not really happened, so I am much wealthier than would otherwise have been the case, but there is a lot of stress in my household at the moment. And poor Southend United have nil points in the league. We have scored one goal and that was an own goal. Unless we get some help soon, the beloved Southend United, which is going to be part of the moment when we become a city, are going to be humiliated and we will drop out of the league completely. So I say to the Minister, who has 60-odd speeches to respond to in her 10 minutes, that if she could get her wonderful officials to draft responses, I shall do a little chase-up letter. The point has come when we need proper scrutiny of these momentous decisions that we are taking in the name of our constituents.

9.35 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We have heard contributions from nearly 70 Members today. From the Labour Benches, we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), my hon. Friends the Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins). I am not going to be able to go through each contribution, but I wish to pick out a few highlights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda gave a thoughtful, considered speech, touching on a number of areas where there was a great deal of consensus across the Benches—I will return to that later. He also raised points where there will be less consensus, but I certainly agreed when he said that there was a tendency in government to focus a lot on boasting about what they were going to do rather than what they could do at this particular time. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow spoke for many on these Benches and across the country when she said that the Government had squandered a great deal of good will in their handling of the pandemic. She was right to raise the issue of the disproportionate impact on BAME communities and the urgency with which we need a plan to address that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey was right when she said that a decade of austerity had weakened our defences and that the Government needed to justify their decisions better. We have heard plenty of examples of that tonight and we will go on to discuss it later. Like many, she raised the issue of problems with test and trace. I was alarmed to hear that in the Wirral area, not too far from me and where extra restrictions are in place already, people are waiting up to seven days to get their test results. It is not difficult to see why that is a huge problem that needs fixing urgently.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley gave several examples of where ministerial replies to written questions are not being provided in a timely manner, and I can certainly sympathise with that, given my experience. That ties in with the concerns that many Members raised about accountability, an issue I will come on to shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South spoke candidly about her own health and how the crisis had impacted on her. May I say how pleased we all are to see her back in the Chamber tonight? Her campaigning on issues relating to social care and mental health came to the fore in her speech, and we needed to hear from her on those issues. We could not help but be moved by the heartbreaking stories I am sure we have all heard from distressed constituents who cannot see their loved ones because they are in a care home, and I hope we can see further action on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South also raised the issue of those needing cancer treatment, the shockingly low levels of people receiving treatment for the first time at the moment and how some people are receiving their diagnosis so late that it is too late for any treatment to be effective. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central spoke passionately, as she always does, about the situation in her city and the challenges facing the care sector, which I will come on to shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool was, once again, as he always is, a strong advocate for his local hospital and the people who work there, and he, too, raised the issue of the delays in testing locally. He also made the important point that the increased restrictions locally do require more resources to follow.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East gave an excellent and wide-ranging speech, contrasting some of the measures introduced in Wales with those introduced in this country. She also highlighted some of the broader issues that persist, including the 3 million people who

have been excluded from any support whatsoever and the continuing difficulty that the five-week wait for universal credit creates.

I certainly could not refer to Members' contributions without waxing lyrical about my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), given that he is my Whip. He spoke about the challenges the university sector has faced in his city and the lack of support for the entertainment industry, of which he has considerable personal experience. There is no doubt that that represents a massive hole in the Chancellor's winter plan that needs to be filled.

Virtually every Opposition Member talked about the well documented problems with the test and trace system, and about how the private sector national system is not working and how local public health teams should be given greater responsibility.

Many Members talked about the various sectors, including entertainment, where there is insufficient support and no immediate prospect of reopening. That concern extended to hospitality, and there was plenty of challenge of the Government's decision to introduce a 10 pm curfew in pubs and restaurants, and whether it is working.

That is a current example of the wider issue that Members on both sides of the House have raised tonight about the sidelining of democracy and accountability during the crisis. The Minister knows these arguments well—she hears me make them every week in Delegated Legislation Committees. She will know that the Opposition have said on more than one occasion that we are more than happy to convene at short notice to debate regulations before they become law. More than 200 statutory instruments to do with coronavirus have been introduced since March, and I do not think one of them has been debated and voted on before it has become law.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda was right when he said that we are in danger of losing the public's confidence when laws are introduced without scrutiny, debate and democratic consent. It is clear tonight that Members on both sides of the House are frustrated with the Government's approach—we heard the word "frustration" used on more than one occasion.

When does the need to act in an emergency cease and become instead a routine disregard for parliamentary scrutiny? In the early stages we of course accepted that there was a need to act quickly, but more and more regulations are being introduced that do not satisfy the test of urgency. The laws on face coverings were debated more than four months after the Government recommended the wearing of them. The increase in fines for breaching the various rules did not need to be rushed in. The offence had already been created and it was just the level of penalty that was new.

Evidence, explanation and communication are essential ingredients for a healthy democracy, never mind a healthy country. The Government should not be afraid of challenge, but should be confident of their arguments and ready to deploy them in debate. They should be prepared to show the advice that supports their decisions. If they do that, in the long-term the decisions will be better, public support will be stronger and the chances of limiting the virus will be greater.

When it comes to stopping the spread, the timing of today's debate is important. We all recognise that we are at a perilous moment, with the virus rising across the

country and new restrictions being applied on an almost daily basis. We will do what we can to support the national effort. If ever a Government needed help, it is now. They give the impression that they have lost control, lurching from one crisis to another, seemingly unable to reverse the rise in cases.

At the heart of this failure is a testing system that is collapsing just when we need it most. Every scientific adviser said that relaxing lockdown measures would work only if we had an effective test and trace system in place, yet on just about every measure we are going backwards. People up and down the country are unable to access tests. Those who get tests find that it takes longer and longer to get their results. The private testing and contact tracing service is performing more poorly now than in its early weeks. This is not the world-beating service we were promised. This is not where we should be.

No one can have failed to notice the immense strain the social care sector has been under throughout the covid-19 outbreak. Several Members raised this issue tonight, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for York Central. Reports that infection rates are beginning to rise in care homes once more should be of serious concern to us all, because it is vital to get on top of the challenges faced in social care ahead of the winter. We simply cannot afford for the action to protect our care homes and other services to be as slow and ineffective as it was at the start of the pandemic. We know that weekly testing for care home residents and staff, which the Government promised back in July, is critical to saving lives, but there have been repeated delays in the roll-out of testing and we hear that care homes are still waiting up to 15 days to receive their results. That is simply not good enough.

I want to say a few words about the workforce. Of course, we are all in awe of our wonderful NHS and social care staff and how they have coped throughout the pandemic. We pay tribute to each and every one of them, particularly those who have, sadly, lost their lives to the virus. They have worked under extreme pressure, and I know that they are dreading what appears to be heading their way. They will strain every sinew to provide the very best care; they always do. That is why they hold such a special place in our hearts.

In return, we owe it to those staff to provide them with the best support possible. No more scabbling around for PPE and having to bring in their own home-made items, while UK manufacturers sold their products overseas; no more hospital outbreaks because there was no routine testing of patients; and no more discharges into residential homes of people already carrying the virus. This time, let us make sure that there really is a protective ring around social care. The hollowing out of public health and social care over the last decade has left us horribly exposed to the worst of this virus, and we cannot allow the same thing to happen again.

I really wish we could say that things will be better this time around, but what do we see at the moment? Children who have already missed six months of education are forced to spend more time away from school because they cannot get a test. Young people, many of whom have moved away from home for the first time, are holed up in their flats with no support because the Government did not prepare properly. Local public health teams are still not getting the data that they need from national test and trace to identify and isolate local outbreaks.

[Justin Madders]

It did not have to be like this. The Government have wasted the last few months boasting about moonshots and millions of daily tests at some point in the future, when they should have been dealing with the here and now to get test and trace ready for the increase in cases, which should have been anticipated, with people returning to work and students returning to school and university. We need an urgent plan to deal with testing now, not in a few months' time.

We want the Government to succeed, and we will support them in whatever reasonable steps they propose to halt the spread of the virus, but we also want them to learn from their mistakes. It was not inevitable that we would have one of the highest death rates in the world, it was not inevitable that we would have the worst recession in Europe and it was not inevitable that we would see a second wave. And yet we are now on the cusp of one, but what do we see from Government? Confusion and ambivalence—the perfect Petri dish for the virus to thrive in.

The tension at the heart of Government is there for all to see. The Chancellor says that we should not be afraid of the virus, but the Chancellor should not be afraid of his own Back Benchers either. If scientists say that tougher measures are needed, let us see the advice, have the debate about what further economic support will be needed and then let this House decide on the right course of action. What we have now is the worst of all worlds: no transparency, no scrutiny and no leadership.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I start by adding my thanks to those of hon. and right hon. Members from across the House who have thanked frontline NHS staff and social care workers, key workers, businesses and communities from all their constituencies for how they have risen to the unprecedented challenge that has faced us. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) for highlighting the good work that our pharmacists have done on the frontline so far, and how they have adapted in this covid-tinged world to keep us safe.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) suggested, this is where we are now, and we have to learn to live with this disease. I am an optimist, but I am also a realist. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said at the beginning of the debate, the recent steep rise in the number of cases is something that should concern us all. Our first priority is to preserve life, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) laid out. We have to adapt, and we have done.

The excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) showed us that we have come a long way, and that was the theme running through the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge. We are continuing with our plan to slow the spread of the virus and balance very tough decisions about health, the economy and protecting individual freedoms. I would like to park one suggestion immediately: there are no plans to keep students at university over Christmas. I really do not think that it helps those young people, when they are

launching into a new phase of their life, for right hon. and hon. Members to suggest that those things might happen. It is, to quote the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), better to deal with the facts.

Colleagues' contributions to today's debate were wide ranging and thoughtful, and they were most welcome. There were too many speakers to highlight each individually, so I shall address some of the key themes that were raised by hon. Members across the House.

On access to this place, what I have heard today is that this House wants to debate the challenges and that Members want to put forward their and their constituents' views. I know that their words today will have been heard. As the Prime Minister said, the aim is to provide more opportunities to hon. and right hon. Members via statements. The Secretary of State has been here innumerable times—over 800 times answering questions—but we will have more debates, questioning of the Government's scientific advisers and access to local data. We are looking at further ways to ensure that the House can be involved more fully, and there will be more details soon.

We have, as a Government, supported businesses in an unprecedented way, which many hon. Members mentioned, with furlough, the bounce back scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their kind words, but it is tough out there. We know we need to balance the needs of the economy and our health needs. This covid-tinged world is the one we are now trying to live in.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) explained the challenges for his constituents, particularly in the wedding sector, and I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) somewhat gleefully suggesting that the delay of two weddings in his household was not the worst thing in the world. I know he did not mean that. As someone with a daughter who has delayed a wedding this year too, I think what came out from everybody's speeches was that they were personal—about the pain of love and the difficulty of decisions that have had to be made throughout this crisis.

We have had to make choices. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) highlighted positive interventions by the Government, but the most essential point that I took from his comments was why we must keep education going—why we must keep it open and why we must give the next generation that hope.

As I take those themes, I want us to hold in our mind the critical thing that we started with: that we must stop the NHS being overwhelmed. That is still our key objective. Although we know that people's lives have been disrupted, critical care has continued throughout, and I pay tribute to those in community care, primary care and the acute sector who have enabled that to happen. Our response to create surge capacity of over 2,000 beds through our Nightingale hospitals is the key to forward resilience, as are the more than 30,000 ventilators that are now available.

Many hon. Members spoke about cancer. I would like to mention in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood).

I reassure them that the NHS's recovery approach has looked to restore urgent cancer care immediately. The latest figures, from June, show that over 180,000 people have been seen, more than 90% of them in two weeks. We have formed a cancer recovery taskforce, which met on 22 September and will meet every month in this financial year. It involves charities, stakeholders and clinicians. The national recovery plan will be developed over the coming weeks and published.

We must carry on treating. Cancer hubs, where teams work together in covid-free environments, are up and running now. The message is clear: "Come forward still." We still need to get people to have confidence that we are there and we are open. The hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) mentioned the situation in her area. Certain areas, such as gastrointestinal and bowel, are particularly difficult because of the diagnostic pathway, but we are working hard to make sure those patients are seen as quickly as possible.

Many hon. Members raised the curfew. Several countries have, like us, introduced curfews at 10 o'clock at night. The contact tracing data indicating patterns of behaviour shows that our inhibitions reduce as the evening goes on because we have usually drunk a little more. Having a curfew at 10 o'clock balances the need for businesses to operate against people's ability to enjoy themselves, but we will, of course, keep the situation under review.

One or two Members said that we should have seen better—we should have been able to look into the future—while telling us how good they were at explaining the past to us. If only that were true. Several Members spoke about local challenges in testing, but it is important to remember that, when we started, all we did back in March was 2,000 tests a day. We passed the 20 millionth test today. It should be recognised that we have built the largest diagnostic network in British history. We have one of the best in Europe, and arguably one of the biggest in the world. I pay tribute to those who fought so hard to get us there. We have had mountains to climb, and every time we go up one side there is a dip on the other. None of this is easy. We have never said that we have all the answers, but we keep going because that is what makes us able to deliver for the people of this country. I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston for what the Government are doing.

We have risen to the challenges on each occasion, and every week driving the system to be bigger than the week before. We have five major laboratories, backing up 258 mobile testing sites, 76 regional sites and 122 walk-through sites. In London, we had eight local testing centres in August; we now have 22. Yes, there have been challenges due to unprecedented demand, but the curve of returning tests to people is beginning to go in the right direction. We are seeing huge improvements in data flow, and we are making sure the directors of public health, health protection teams, Mayors and local authorities are involved in these conversations. It is right that we are challenged, but it is also right that we recognise what has been done.

Mr Steve Baker: Would the Minister allow me?

Jo Churchill: No, I am terribly sorry. I have only two minutes left.

I say to my hon. Friends the Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) and for Wealden (Ms Ghani) that I understand the need to see loved ones, but there is a balance in protecting care homes. As I sat on the Bench, one of my care homes texted me and said, "All is well. I feel in control." May that long continue. We are getting 100,000 tests out to care homes every week. The strategy for winter is about having national guidance and local systems, and enabling care homes, which know their individual residents, to do their best for them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden for acknowledging how far we have come. We have delivered more than 3.5 billion items of PPE. The strategy was put out today, and I pay tribute to Lord Deighton for all the work he has done. We are building supplies, and we have resilient supply lines that we did not have before. We started distributing to 226 NHS trusts, and we now send to 58,000 settings. The PPE portal is a blueprint for rapid mobilisation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) highlighted how we are using local factories in this country—in these four nations. That is where new business opportunities have arisen; it is not all doom and gloom. In treatment, we have secured good supplies of dexamethasone, which has helped mortality for the sickest patients. We also have the recovery programme, leading clinical trials, which has been called—not by us—the most impressive on the planet. By 2021, we will know more about the good and bad treatments. Once again, we are showing how the NHS, private business and academia work successfully together. I congratulate everybody involved in those. The global vaccine industry has responded with a speed never seen before. We are at the forefront of the science for finding a vaccine for this novel organism. There is a huge amount of planning going on to ensure we are ready to roll things out. We are walking a tightrope, as many Members have acknowledged. There are no easy decisions and there is no silver bullet, but we know that the thing is: hands, face, space. If even my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has downloaded the app, I urge everybody to download it. It is the fastest download in British history, and all these small measures will help us get the virus under control.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No.9(3)).

Business without Debate

ENVIRONMENT BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 4)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the Order of 26 February 2020 (Environment Bill: Programme), as varied by the Orders of 4 May 2020 (Environment Bill: Programme (No. 2)) and 22 June 2020 (Environment Bill: Programme (No. 3)), be further varied as follows:

In paragraph (2) of the Order (conclusion of proceedings in Public Bill Committee), for "Tuesday 29 September" substitute "Tuesday 1 December".—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Ordered,

That Matt Western be discharged from the International Trade Committee and Lloyd Russell-Moyle be added.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Sir Edward Leigh be a member of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Fracking: Rother Valley

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

10.1 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is a great honour to secure this debate and speak on a matter of such huge importance to the people of Rother Valley. Needless to say, I am resolutely and absolutely opposed to fracking in any form, as are my constituents. My professional background consists of working for the WWF and Shell on environmental issues among others, so I know only too well how harmful fracking can be to local communities. Many hon. Members representing constituencies up and down the country will share my views, and I welcome their support.

Before I go any further, I wish to thank a number of constituents and local groups for their constant enthusiasm and support in protecting Rother Valley from the disaster of fracking. Les and Wendy Barlow and Harthill Against Fracking have been absolute stalwarts in protecting our area, as have Richard Scholey and the Woodsetts Against Fracking group. Helen Wilks, a local farmer, has contributed much in the way of her experiences of fracking's impact on her livelihood, on traffic and congestion and on farmers' mental health.

For those who do not know—I am sure that we all do in this House—fracking is the process of drilling down into the earth and injecting the rock with a high-pressure water, sand and chemical mix to release the gas inside. While it was hailed in the United States as the answer to their domestic energy supply shortage, the United Kingdom was late to the party. Thank goodness we were, for we have seen the harmful effects of fracking elsewhere and we are rightfully horrified. We have had the advantage of seeing the dangers from across the pond, and we need to avoid repeating the same mistakes by opposing this backward-looking technology.

Why is fracking so bad for Rother Valley and constituencies like it? The reasons are plentiful. There are, of course, the safety arguments pertaining to contamination of local aquifers by chemicals that escape in the drilling process. Who should monitor the sites? The Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive do not have the capacity to watch over every fracking site in the country, and few of us would trust the fracking companies to self-regulate and report any breaches. That is surely not acceptable to anyone.

The idea that such companies may poison the water sources of my communities is terrifying and not a risk that the Government are willing to take. Equally petrifying are the seismic activity concerns caused by fracking. Professor Peter Styles, a geophysics expert, presented a report in the other place on the difficulties in carrying out fracking beneath previously mined areas and his findings were compelling. He pointed out that even small faults have the potential to cause small earthquakes that would trigger the seismic traffic light system threshold and therefore halt fracking.

In Rother Valley, Harthill and Woodsetts are on top of areas of historical coalmining. They are riddled with old mine workings and fault lines already severely weakened by coal extraction, right beneath where the companies

intend to frack. I do not think I need to stress to hon. Members how dangerous fracking in this area would be, and how such risks simply cannot ever be taken. As if contaminated water sources and earthquakes were not enough, fracking negatively affects Rother Valley in other ways, too. Fracking is a colossal imposition on people's lives, many of whom are elderly or vulnerable. For instance, one of the proposed fracking sites in Rother Valley is very close to a residential home, causing much distress to its residents due to the noise and pollution potential.

Fracking sites are hives of industrial activity and, as such, the traffic movement associated with fracking will peak at up to 60 HGV movements per day. This is unthinkable on narrow track lanes around Harthill and Woodsetts, which are frequented by dog walkers, ramblers, horse riders and cyclists. In some parts of the lanes they are approximately only 3 metres wide. These rural lanes simply will not be able to cope with the vastly increased traffic demand. Proposals include widening roads and cutting down hedgerows for these juggernauts to pass through, which will destroy local flora and fauna. It is clearly unacceptable that my constituents' use of local roads would be usurped by large corporate fracking companies.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this really important debate to the House. Fracking itself holds no benefits for places of beauty such as North Yorkshire. I wholeheartedly agree with all that he says. Does he not also agree that the vast amount of traffic movement that is needed to build the networks across the constituency to transport water to and from the sites is a complete waste and really does tear up our environment?

Alexander Stafford: I thank the hon. Member for that contribution. I completely agree with her about these traffic movements. It is the effect of fracking as a whole and all the issues around fracking that have a huge impact. In Rother Valley, for instance, the residents fear that the local authority would have to impose strict traffic controls on local people to minimise congestion and to mitigate risks to public safety. They are losing out once again.

It is expected that it is the responsibility of the operator to pay for the decommissioning of a fracking site at the end of its life cycle. However, in March 2019 the Public Accounts Committee highlighted substantial fears that the taxpayer will be left to foot the bill for clean-up costs if the operator goes out of business. That is clearly an objectionable state of affairs given the wealth of the fracking companies. Furthermore, my constituents have worked hard all their lives to buy their homes, only for fracking to decimate the price of houses in the vicinity. Even laying the value of the houses aside, it does have to be asked: who wants to live next to an industrial site? That is particularly true in the case of Woodsetts and Harthill, to where many residents have moved because they want to live in a rural, idyllic location.

There is no doubt that this fight against fracking has exacted a heavy toll on my constituents' mental health. They are faced not only with the prospect of losing access to the country lanes around the proposed fracking sites, which are used for exercise to ensure healthy body and mind, but with continuous uncertainty. One of my

constituents has described this as "the great sword of Ineos" hanging over their heads—and he is absolutely right. Even though the Government have issued a moratorium on fracking, this has not stopped Ineos from circling around the sites in Harthill and Woodsetts like vultures, biding its time and waiting for the moratorium to be eased.

Exploratory drilling and acidisation are still not covered by the moratorium and we fear that fracking companies seek to exploit that. The ban needs to cover exploratory drilling and acidisation. We all know that Ineos is willing to outspend local community groups many hundreds of times over on legal fees and feasibility reports. This unjust situation is akin to David versus Goliath. The status quo is not acceptable. If we are headed towards a low carbon future, on which we all agree in this House, surely a permanent ban on fracking would send a clear and strong message to the world of the UK's commitment?

Time is of the essence for the people of Harthill and Woodsetts: no longer can we wait nervously for the threat of fracking to pass. I speak directly to Ineos when I say, "You will never be allowed to frack in Rother Valley. Your best endeavours will come to nothing. Leave my constituents in peace to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Do not come back."

I speak to Rotherham Council directly when I say, "This Government have been unequivocal in their opposition to fracking." The then Communities Secretary declared in a statement in May 2019 that paragraph 209(a) of the National Planning Policy Framework, which concerned the benefits of shale gas, had now been quashed and was therefore no longer relevant for planning purposes.

I say to Rotherham council: "Stop wasting taxpayers' money and your time and resources conducting traffic management plans and surveys on proposed fracking areas. There is no prospect of fracking taking place in Rother Valley, so you must now move on and focus your efforts on providing vital services for residents." Many of my constituents feel that the Labour-run council is not listening to what the Government are saying on key issues such as fracking in our areas, so I say to Rotherham council, "Keep fighting the frackers! Do not support them by granting permissions of any sort."

From a national perspective, fracking has no future in the United Kingdom. Prices for fossil fuels such as oil have completely collapsed, the Prime Minister has announced a green energy revolution, and around the globe there is consensus that renewables are the way forward. Even the Communist People's Republic of China has committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. We have our own net zero target of 2050 to meet, and we are hosting COP26 in Glasgow next year. Why on earth would we give the go-ahead to a fossil fuel industry practice that contributes to climate change and has no longevity?

Fracking is the technology of the past and is a retrograde step. We must not waste any more time looking back; instead, we must look to the future. Last week was Climate Week, which presents us with an opportunity to look ahead. Hon. Members will know that I have campaigned stridently in this House for the UK's green recovery and I am particularly enthused by hydrogen as the fuel of the future, which will power our cars, buses and homes. I am supporting the opening of a hydrogen electrolyser factory on the border of Rother

[*Alexander Stafford*]

Valley and urging the Government to adopt a bold hydrogen strategy. I am also engaging to push the Government to issue green bonds and to set up a green development bank, in a bid to make Britain the biggest green economy on earth.

I have always said that UK plc must steal a march on our competitors by exporting our green technology and knowledge to the rest of the world. By leading the green revolution, we shall create jobs, turbocharge business and rejuvenate our left-behind communities. We must act decisively or risk losing out. I envision this new industry being centred in Rother Valley. I want, for example, renewables plants in Dinnington and Maltby and specialist training colleges in Thurcroft and Aston. I want hydrogen factories in Orgreave and distribution networks in Hellaby.

The possibilities are endless, and my ambition for Rother Valley is limitless too. Our area has the industrial heritage, the expertise and the desire; we just need to be given a chance. We should not be focusing on yesterday's technologies such as fracking. How poetic would it be if Rother Valley were to transform from a centre of dirty fossil fuels to a hub of green renewable energy? That is the future I want for my constituency and the people who live there, and I am sure this Government will provide it.

As I draw to a close, I thank the House for its support and praise my wonderful constituents in Rother Valley for their tireless activism on the issue of fracking. I trust we have made it clear today that fracking has no future in Rother Valley or in the United Kingdom, and I look forward to leading the charge as Britain embarks on its green recovery and green economic revolution.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the agreement of Mr Stafford, the responding Minister and myself, I call Lee Rowley.

10.13 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you for the opportunity to contribute briefly to this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), whose constituency neighbours the one I have the privilege to represent, on securing this debate and on the strong words that he has used tonight. He is a doughty campaigner for his constituents, and I am grateful to see another hon. Member on these Benches to join me and many other hon. Members from the previous Parliament who opposed fracking and recognised that it was not the direction that the country should go in. I welcome him and thank him again for his contribution.

I would also like to say thank you formally to the Minister, who, since he came into his position last year, has listened very carefully to those of us who have concerns. I am immensely grateful for all the time he has given us, both in the last Parliament and this, to highlight those concerns and the impact they have on our constituencies. Most importantly, I thank him for the immensely brilliant decision that he took at the end of the last Parliament to institute the moratorium, which has made such a difference to my constituency and those who have been impacted, or faced the threat of being, impacted, by fracking.

Fracking was one of the big issues for me and my constituency in the last Parliament. We were one third of the unfortunate troika that my hon. Friend referred to, with our site in Marsh Lane, a beautiful village in the parish of Eckington. An exploratory drilling site was proposed in the middle of green-belt land, which had been untouched for several centuries, as far as we could tell. That was almost universally opposed by local residents, and I, along with many campaign groups, fought against it for three years. It was the Government's willingness to listen during that process and take feedback from communities such as mine that led to the moratorium last October. I am immensely grateful for that. It has made a transformational difference to my constituency, and we thank the Minister for it.

I will end my short contribution by saying that the strength of feeling in Marsh Lane, Eckington parish and North East Derbyshire about fracking and the need to retain this moratorium remains as it was in October. I ask the Minister, if he can, to reconfirm the Government's intentions in this regard and to confirm that fracking will not go ahead in north Derbyshire.

10.15 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): It is always a pleasure to conduct these debates with you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am pleased to see you in your rightful place.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for securing this debate on an issue that I know is of great interest to not only his constituents but the wider public. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who has shown real leadership and passion in his campaign against fracking. He has had an impact in the short time he has been here, in terms of changing people's minds and changing, to some degree, how the Government approach this issue.

I have to stress that the Government have always taken a precautionary and evidence-based approach to this issue. We will only support domestic shale gas production if it can be done safely and sustainably. I want to address that point because events last year led us ineluctably to the point where we had to have a moratorium, but I will address that later in my speech.

As I said, the Government have taken a science-led approach to exploring the potential of shale gas. We had an open mind, but we were absolutely focused on environmental and safety regulations. In principle, we have supported the idea of fracking in the past, but it was clear, as I will demonstrate briefly, that this was not a path we wanted to pursue.

In 2011, the Government introduced a traffic light system so that regulators could take action to mitigate the risk of seismic events. Four years later—I remember being a Back Bencher at the time—we passed the Infrastructure Act 2015, which required shale gas developers to obtain hydraulic fracturing consent from the Secretary of State. All the necessary planning, environmental and health and safety permits would have to be obtained before fracking could proceed. We have been clear from the start that fracking could only go ahead if it was safe and sustainable for the environment and, crucially, as demonstrated by my hon. Friends, for local people—their

constituents had to have a measure of consent. There also had to be minimal disturbance to those living and working nearby.

Last year, as my hon. Friends will remember, a number of events occurred in the summer that led us to the conclusion that we reached. In August last year, we had a seismic event with a magnitude of 2.9 on the Richter scale, which was a game changer in the story of fracking in this country. Cuadrilla, at its site in Preston New Road in Lancashire, reached that 2.9 Richter scale seismic event through fracking. I remember it vividly, as I was in France at the time—this was in the days when we could travel freely—and I had been in my post as Energy Minister for precisely three weeks. I kept a record of the daily calls I had with officials here in London and with people on the ground. We measured the seismic activity every day, and I got read-outs of the activity in the relevant area.

My hon. Friends will remember that the threshold at that time was 0.5 on the Richter scale, and that anything over that would require a necessary cessation in the fracking. So you can imagine my surprise, Mr Deputy Speaker, when one morning I was told that the Richter scale had hit 2.9. It was immediately apparent at that point that there would be no further fracking, as far as I was concerned. Obviously we had to look at the event, and we had to understand and appreciate the wider context. As I have said, we looked at the science, and in the light of the scientific evidence that emerged, we announced a moratorium in November 2019, before the general election took place. It was my duty to inform the relevant business people and investors that we would impose that moratorium.

As a consequence of the moratorium, the Government have made it clear that we will take a presumption against issuing any further hydraulic fracturing consents in this country. This sends a clear message not only to the sector but to the local communities concerned that on current evidence—I stress that it is on current evidence—fracking will not be taken forward in England. Nor is it likely that it ever will be taken up again unless

there is compelling new evidence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley implied, the world has rather moved on from fracking. He has eloquently championed the green revolution, hydrogen and a number of the new technologies that we think will get us to net zero. He described hydraulic fracturing as a technology of the past, and it is not something that we envisage in our future or in our progress towards net zero.

On that basis, the Government have no plans whatsoever to review the moratorium on hydraulic fracturing. We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically that it can be done safely and without inconvenience. As I have said, this is extremely unlikely to happen, as far as I am concerned. In fact, there has been no fracking since August 2019 and no applications for hydraulic fracturing consents have been made. There will be no fracking for the foreseeable future in the Rother Valley or anywhere else in this country.

I would like to conclude by praising both my hon. Friends. They have not been in the House very long, but they have clearly made their voices and, more importantly, the voices of their constituents heard in this place, and they have been listened to. The objectives for which they have campaigned passionately over a number of years—certainly in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire—have been attained. They have been successful and I just enjoin them graciously to accept victory in this particular debate. I commend them both for the level of passion and enthusiasm with which they have engaged with green issues, including the green economy, the green revolution and what my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley called the “hub of green renewable energy”. I look forward to taking part in debates with them on the green revolution and seeing how best we can ensure that we reach a net zero future for ourselves and for future generations.

Question put and agreed to.

10.24 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 28 September 2020

CABINET OFFICE

Electoral Commission and Association of Electoral Administrators Reports

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):

The Government have published our responses to the Electoral Commission's reports on the administration of the December 2019 UK parliamentary general election and May 2019 European parliamentary (and local) elections.

We have combined our response to the report on the general election and European parliamentary (and local) elections with the recommendations made in the positions statements of the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) where they are relevant to those polls.

We are grateful for the recommendations produced by all these organisations and thank them for their work. These reports aid the Government in monitoring the effectiveness of electoral legislation; help us to make improvements and to identify future policy challenges and possible resolutions.

The Government will continue to work with these organisations, as well as electoral administrators and other partners, to improve our electoral system and ensure the effective running of elections. The Electoral Commission research found that people were very satisfied with the process of registering to vote and voting at the 2019 UK general election. These were similar to positive levels of satisfaction that were found at other recent UK-wide elections or referendums.

The Government are committed to ensuring a flourishing and secure democracy, and through these measures, we are acting to promote the integrity of our electoral system. The Government take the integrity and security of our democratic processes very seriously. We will continue to safeguard against future risks, strengthen our resilience and ensure that the regulatory framework is as effective as possible.

Copies of these Government responses will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-09-28/HCWS472>.

[HCWS472]

TREASURY

Contingencies Fund Advance: Covid-19

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

HM Revenue and Customs will incur new expenditure in connection with the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £100,000,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a supplementary estimate for HM Revenue and Customs. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £100,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

In line with the OBR forecasts, further requests to the Contingencies Fund may be made as necessary to fund covid-19 activity delivered by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

[HCWS471]

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 28 September 2020

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Yemen

The following is an extract from the debate on Yemen on 24 September 2020.

James Cleverly: ... We recognise the concerns about our arms sales policy. We have reviewed it in the light of the Court of Appeal decision, and **all sales are measured against the revised set of criteria.**

[Official Report, 24 September 2020, Vol. 680, c. 1206.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa:

An error has been identified in my winding-up speech in the debate on Yemen.

The correct statement should have been:

James Cleverly: ... We recognise the concerns about our arms sales policy. We have reviewed it in the light of the Court of Appeal decision, and **all sales are measured against the criteria with a revised methodology.**

Occupied Palestinian Territories

The following is an extract from the debate on the Occupied Palestinian Territories on 24 September 2020.

James Cleverly: ... As I have said, the British Government firmly oppose boycotts of Israel, but we understand the concerns of people who do not wish to purchase goods exported from Israeli settlements **near the OPTs**. It was in order to allow consumers to have that choice that in December 2009 the UK Government introduced voluntary guidance to enable products from Israeli settlements **near the OPTs** to be specifically labelled as such.

[Official Report, 24 September 2020, Vol. 680, c. 1235.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa:

Errors have been identified in my winding-up speech in the debate on the Occupied Palestinian territories.

The correct statements should have been:

James Cleverly: ... As I have said, the British Government firmly oppose boycotts of Israel, but we understand the concerns of people who do not wish to purchase goods exported from Israeli settlements **in the OPTs**. It was in order to allow consumers to have that choice that in December 2009 the UK Government introduced voluntary guidance to enable products from Israeli settlements **in the OPTs** to be specifically labelled as such.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 28 September 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	1	HOME DEPARTMENT—continued	
Asylum Accommodation: Covid-19	14	Police Funding	7
Asylum Seekers: Resettlement and Relocation	11	Police Officer Numbers	6
Cross-Channel Illegal Migration	8	Public Order: Covid-19	13
Cross-Channel Migrant Trafficking	1	Refugee Resettlement	10
Domestic Abuse Victims	5	Rural Crime Reduction	10
Emergency Services: Assaults	14	Topical Questions	15
Online Hate Speech and Extremism	3		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 28 September 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	1WS	TREASURY	2WS
Electoral Commission and Association of Electoral Administrators Reports	1WS	Contingencies Fund Advance: Covid-19	2WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Monday 28 September 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	1MC	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—continued	
Occupied Palestinian Territories	2MC	Yemen	1MC

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Monday 5 October 2020

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CONTENTS

Monday 28 September 2020

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Speaker's Statement [Col. 1]

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for the Home Department

Covid-19 [Col. 22]
General debate

Fracking: Rother Valley [Col. 128]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 1MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
