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7 October 2020**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 7 October 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER in the Chair]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Coronavirus: Employment

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting job retention in Scotland during the covid-19 outbreak. [906960]

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of self-employed people in Scotland who have not received support from the Government's covid-19 financial support schemes. [906961]

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting job retention in Scotland during the covid-19 outbreak. [906972]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues, including the Chancellor, on all aspects of how the UK Government continue to support Scotland's economy. The Chancellor recently announced a package of measures that will continue to support jobs and help businesses through the uncertain months ahead.

Mark Pawsey: At the height of the biggest economic downturn this country has seen in our lifetime, the UK Government stepped up and protected nearly 1 million Scottish jobs through the job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. Does the Secretary of State agree that those measures show that the UK Government have done everything possible to support people's livelihoods across the entirety of the United Kingdom?

Mr Jack: Yes, I do. The might of the UK Treasury has supported all parts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Ruth Jones [V]: I note that the Government's latest package of measures for the self-employed slashes their support from 70% of income to just 20%. And that is only for those who are eligible—many self-employed people have not received any help at all from the Chancellor. How many self-employed people in Scotland have fallen through the financial safety net, and what is the Secretary of State doing to help them?

Mr Jack: The hon. Lady will know that we have brought in a new set of measures, as she said. There is the self-employment support scheme and the new job retention scheme. We have made a cut in VAT for the tourism and hospitality sector, and introduced the kickstart scheme. The self-employment income support scheme was a broad scheme. By definition, in a broad scheme it is inevitable that some people will sadly miss out, but I should say that in Scotland 283,000 grants were given, which came to some £777 million of support. The scheme now continues for another six months.

Julie Marson: Many hard-working people in Hertford and Stortford are set to benefit from the introduction of the job support scheme, offering employers and workers a transition from furlough. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this job-saving measure will have the same impact north of the border, and that Scotland shares in this Government's focus on jobs, jobs, jobs?

Mr Jack: Yes. The whole United Kingdom will benefit from all the measures put in place by the Chancellor.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab) [V]: Businesses across Scotland, particularly in the hospitality, tourism and culture sectors, are still closed or nowhere near back to any sort of normality. With additional restrictions being reintroduced as cases have rocketed in Scotland, things are only going to get worse for those sectors. The high-profile case of Cineworld is the latest in a very large number of hammer blows to Scottish jobs. The Government do not seem to see that the health and economic responses to covid are one and the same thing. What message does the Secretary of State have for workers on the precipice of losing their jobs and business owners on the verge of losing their viable businesses, or is it simply the flippant response, as the Chancellor said yesterday to the culture sector, that they simply have to retrain and get new jobs?

Mr Jack: In this pandemic, the Chancellor has been very clear that he cannot save every business and every job. The hon. Gentleman mentions Cineworld. Independent cinemas were supported through the culture fund to the tune of £97 million in Barnett money. As I said, sadly we know we cannot save every business. Retraining programmes and the kickstart scheme are being put in place, and we have reduced VAT for hospitality, leisure and tourism to 5%. To protect the Scottish economy, I encourage the Scottish Government to make the restrictions coming forward as local as possible.

Ian Murray [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, but the reality on the ground is that the Chancellor's measures simply do not go far enough to protect jobs. The employees and businesses in the sectors hardest hit will need more support, and what they are getting from the Chancellor's announcement is less support.

Another area critical for jobs is the Scotch whisky industry. This week marks one year since the United States announced a 25% tariff on Scotch whisky. Figures from the Scotch Whisky Association show that that has led to a devastating 32% drop in US Scotch whisky exports, costing a massive £360 million. Given the thousands of jobs in the industry that this supports, rather than the Secretary of State just telling us that he will raise the issue again with the International Trade Secretary, what is he actually going to do to encourage the US to lift the tariffs on Scotch whisky, or is this just another example of what his new Scottish Conservative leader describes as the Tories not caring about Scotland?

Mr Jack: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue not just for the whisky industry, but for biscuits and cashmere. I am pleased that biscuits are now off the tariff carousel. The Boeing-Airbus dispute has been many years in the making. It is unfair. It is harmful to both industry and consumers. However, in the trade talks that have opened up with the US, we have now got agreement to a bilateral discussion—in other words, not using the EU negotiators any more—with the US. The good news I can tell him is that we have moved to a new phase. The Secretary of State for International Trade this week is starting discussions to try to resolve this problem.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I very much welcome the fact that 11,000 or more of my constituents have benefited from the furlough scheme. Covid is changing our economy. We therefore need to focus on creating new sustainable jobs. That is why it is even more important that we press ahead in the south of Scotland with the borderlands growth deal. Will my right hon. Friend agree that we need renewed impetus on, the deal, and in particular on delivery of the mountain bike innovation centre of Scotland in Innerleithen?

Mr Jack: I thank my right hon. Friend for the invaluable work that he did in bringing the borderlands growth deal to fruition. I am also delighted to inform him that the business case for the mountain bike innovation centre was delivered by the Borderlands Partnership only yesterday. It obviously has to go through further assessments in the usual way, but I am well aware of and support the initiative, because mountain biking in what is a very beautiful part of Scotland is an incredibly popular sport, and it is locally a very popular initiative.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP) [V]: Knowing as we do the negative consequences that the delay to the autumn Budget will have on the Scottish Parliament passing its budget, will the Minister tell us whether he made his Cabinet colleagues and the Chancellor aware of these negative consequences, or was he himself unaware?

Mr Jack: We have had one Budget this year in March. That was slightly delayed and, at the time, the then Finance Secretary in Scotland, Derek Mackay, said that that was going to be disastrous for Scotland and that it would be unable to set its budget, but that was incorrect. The Finance Secretary was able to set her budget, and the message goes out now from the Treasury,

as it did then: if she has any problems setting her budget, Kate Forbes should come forward and talk to us.

Mhairi Black: Just to ask the Secretary of State again, because I did not hear an answer in there: can he tell us if he made his Cabinet colleagues aware of the negative consequences that would happen, and what was the result of these conversations?

Mr Jack: I say to the hon. Lady that I do not agree that there are negative consequences. The Chancellor and I have had discussions on this matter. I make it quite clear that if Kate Forbes has any questions on setting her budget, she should come forward and ask us. The same offer was made to Derek Mackay when he told similar “cry wolf” stories back in March, when there was a delay, but no questions were asked and nothing came forward because they had all the information they needed to set their budget.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Union connectivity review announced by the Prime Minister will improve transport infrastructure across the country and bring jobs and investment to Scotland. I assume that Scotland's two Governments will work together on this ambitious programme, so will the Secretary of State outline what response there has been from the Scottish Government so that the two Governments work together to deliver jobs and progress right across the country?

Mr Jack: The Union connectivity review, which is being led by Sir Peter Hendy, whom I met yesterday, is a really important initiative for Scotland and the whole United Kingdom, and it will create very exciting opportunities. However, I am concerned that Transport Scotland has been told by the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Michael Matheson, not to engage with the review, and I urge Mr Matheson to think again and to ensure that his officials take part. It cannot be in Scotland's interest for the SNP to play politics with an issue that is so important to our economic future.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State says that the job retention scheme is a great example of their Union, but according to his boss, the ever-cheerful hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), the Westminster Tories are not interested in their Union any more. He says:

“The case for separation is...being made more effectively in London than...in Edinburgh”.

Is his boss right? Are the Westminster Tories full of defeatism about their Union? And if they do not care about their Union, why on earth should the Scottish people?

Mr Jack: First, the new leader of the Scottish Conservatives cares deeply about the Union, and that is something that we cannot say for the Scottish nationalist party. But I would go further: he was making the very clear point that Westminster should not devolve and forget. Huge sums of money and support go to Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, and he was just pointing out that Departments in Whitehall should stay focused, stay connected and follow up on those funds.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The Secretary of State and his colleagues are given to chest-beating about the tremendous amount of revenue flowing to Scotland to get us through the pandemic—every penny of it, of course, borrowed. Will he tell me and the people of Scotland why those borrowing decisions are better made here than they would be by the people of Scotland in Scotland, and why we are habitually browbeaten into being grateful for a service that we never asked for?

Mr Jack: The simple reason is that not only do we have a strong Bank of England underpinning a strong currency, in the pound, but we are one country with one currency, and because we have a strong economy, we are able to borrow money at much better rates.

Autumn Budget: Devolved Administrations

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): What discussions he has had with (a) the Scottish Government and (b) Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the delay to the autumn Budget 2020 on the finances of the devolved Administrations. [906962]

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with (a) the Scottish Government and (b) Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the delay to the autumn Budget 2020 on the finances of the devolved Administrations. [906968]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): I have regular discussions with my ministerial colleagues and Scottish Government Ministers on economic and fiscal matters. The Treasury has made an unprecedented up-front guarantee to the devolved Administrations, guaranteeing that Scotland will receive at least £6.5 billion in additional funding this year on top of its Budget 2020 funding.

Richard Thomson: Last year's delay to the UK Budget saw knock-on delays in the Scottish Government and local government being able to set their own budgets, with the result that many local authorities were forced to separate setting their council tax rate from settling their revenue budgets. Given this year's delay, which has united devolved Finance Ministers in condemnation across these islands, would the Minister like to take this opportunity to apologise for the further uncertainty and risk that his Government are about to inflict on local and national Government in Scotland?

Iain Stewart: First, I repeat the point made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that we have heard this "cry wolf" story before from the Scottish Government. The fact of the matter is that, as well as the guaranteed minimum funding for this year, the Chancellor has asked the Office for Budget Responsibility to provide forecasts next month. Together with the spending review, which will happen this autumn, that will give the Scottish Government plenty of certainty in setting their budgets.

Patrick Grady: This is just the disrespect agenda in action. The Tories never really wanted devolution anyway, and now they do not really give a stuff about whether or not it works properly. If they do not think that people in Scotland should not be in control of their finances, why

will they not give the Scottish Finance Minister the information she needs to be able to set the budget properly? If they will not give her the information she needs, why not just give her the power to set our budget properly, without any recourse to Westminster at all?

Iain Stewart: I shall make a number of points in response to that. First, the Scottish Finance Minister is very welcome to contact me and explain why she has underspent the budget every year since the SNP has been in control of the Scottish Government. I have already explained in reply to the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) that there will be plenty of information. The evidence is in the fact that this year we have guaranteed a minimum spend in addition to the usual budget of £6.5 billion. Only the separatists could call that a small amount of money.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Scottish Government's budget has been boosted by £6.5 billion to help to deal with the coronavirus. That is a true mark of the importance of the four nations working together. However, it was revealed last week by the Scottish Government's Finance Secretary that £500 million of that has yet to be allocated. Does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government should be prioritising that funding for those people most in need in Scotland just now?

Iain Stewart: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and it is not just last year: as I said earlier, in every single year since the separatists took control of the Scottish Government, they have underspent their budget. It may come as news to the House, but under the fiscal framework agreement, which was made between the Scottish Government and UK Government, underspends can be transferred between fiscal years.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): This week is Challenge Poverty Week in Scotland. Statistics show that almost a fifth of people in Scotland are living in relative poverty after 10 years of a UK Conservative Government and 13 years of an SNP Government in Holyrood. This should bring shame on both parties. Councils are critical to looking after the most vulnerable in society, yet they have seen their budgets slashed in recent years. It is not just the Tories who enjoy cutting budgets. The SNP has disproportionately cut local government funding since 2013-14, taking almost £1 billion out of those budgets. Will the Minister press the Chancellor to consider the impact of his economic policies on poverty in Scotland, and while he is at it, in his conversations with Scottish Ministers, will he ask them to stop disproportionately cutting local government budgets in Scotland?

Iain Stewart: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. When we recover from the coronavirus period, we will, to coin a phrase, build back better. To that extent, I have involved the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Scotland in my regular meetings with business groups and others in Scotland to ensure that all parts of Scotland can flourish once we emerge from this. He is also right to highlight the fact that the centralising separatist Government in Scotland suck powers and money from local authorities in Scotland. I have met representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and they are deeply concerned about this.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: The UK Government's decision to end the job retention scheme at the end of this month will throw tens of thousands of Scots into unemployment. What effect does the Minister think that will have on poverty levels in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran and in Scotland as a whole?

Iain Stewart: The job retention scheme was the right intervention at the right time and has supported tens of thousands of jobs in Scotland, but across the world it is right that we move to more targeted measures of support. The job retention scheme was just one part of a whole suite of policies and support that we are putting in place and that will help to support Scottish businesses and employees in the months and years to come.

Strengthening the Union

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [906963]

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [906967]

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [906969]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The Government have always stressed the importance of the Union. The UK is a family of nations that shares social, cultural and economic ties that, together, make us far safer, more secure and more prosperous. As we have seen throughout the covid crisis, it is the economic strength of the Union and our commitment to the sharing and pooling of resources that have supported jobs and businesses throughout Scotland.

Sally-Ann Hart: The Government are committed to their levelling-up agenda throughout the UK, as part of their plan to unleash the power of our Union. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK shared prosperity fund is an opportunity for our UK Government to be more ambitious in their pursuit of spreading the benefits of being part of our Union? Will the UK Government show their funding in the same way as EU funding has been prominently displayed?

Mr Jack: Yes, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Not only will the shared prosperity fund help, but thanks to the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, the UK Government will be in the place of the EU—where the EU previously spent money in Scotland and other parts of the UK, the UK Government will do that. The Scottish National party has a serious objection to that. It is a strange ideology from the nationalists that they object to money coming from the Great British Government but are quite happy to take it from the EU.

Alexander Stafford: I welcome the launch of the new UK Government trade hub in Edinburgh, which will not only strengthen the Union but help to support Scottish businesses so that they can thrive internationally. Does my right hon. Friend agree that expanding the export of world-famous Scottish products, such as Scotch whisky, will help to give our economy a much-needed boost as we recover from the coronavirus across the whole UK?

Mr Jack: Yes, absolutely. I am pleased that we have announced a Department for International Trade hub in the new Queen Elizabeth House in Edinburgh. It will help our exporters in Scotland and build on the excellent trade deal that we have already agreed with Japan.

Peter Gibson: Darlington is the birthplace of the modern railway. Stronger railway links between Darlington and Scotland will be vital for the success of our internal market. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the independent Union connectivity review, led by Sir Peter Hendy, which will look at how we can improve our transport infrastructure to bring our communities closer and level up access to jobs and opportunities?

Mr Jack: I absolutely will. The Union connectivity review will explore ways to build back better. As I said, I met Sir Peter Hendy yesterday, and it is extremely disappointing—it is worth making this point again—that Transport Secretary Matheson has instructed his officials not to engage in the review, to the detriment of Scotland and her economy.

Covid-19: Support for Businesses

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the economic support available to businesses in Scotland during the covid-19 outbreak. [906964]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): I have regular discussions with my ministerial colleagues, including the Chancellor, on all aspects of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in Scotland. We have taken substantial action to support the economy from the shock of covid-19—for example, more than 65,000 businesses in Scotland have benefited from more than £2.3 billion of support through Government-supported loan schemes.

Stephen Crabb: Productivity rates in Scotland are some of the very best in the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that the vital extra support going to Scottish companies at this time, as he just mentioned, plus the extra £6.5 billion that the UK Government have made available to the Scottish Government, means that Scottish business will be well placed to help to lead a UK-wide recovery?

Iain Stewart: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let me just quantify the support that we are giving on a per capita basis: it is around £1,200 extra for each man, woman and child in Scotland. He is absolutely right that Scottish business is in a good place. I have regular meetings with many companies that are putting forward very innovative schemes that we are supporting through the city and regional growth deal package to help us build back better when we emerge from this crisis.

Covid-19: Response Throughout the UK

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on co-operation in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [906966]

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to help ensure a co-ordinated response to the covid-19 outbreak throughout the UK. [906989]

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new Minister to the Dispatch Box.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (David Duguid): An effective response to covid-19 does indeed need to be a co-ordinated response across the UK. On 25 September, the UK Government and the three devolved Administrations published a joint statement on our collective approach to responding to covid-19. We reaffirmed our shared commitment to suppressing the virus to the lowest possible level and keeping it there while we strive to return life to as normal as possible for as many people and businesses as possible.

Jamie Stone: I raised this matter with the Secretary of State for Health yesterday, because of local concern that people in the south of England were being asked to travel to Inverness for covid tests. That is why I am concerned about the level of co-operation between the two Governments. May I press the Minister further to give me specific examples of co-operation between the two Governments?

David Duguid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Like me, although on a much larger scale, he has a rural constituency—I believe it is one of the largest rural constituencies, if not the largest. Pooling resources and using the strength of the UK economy enables the UK Government to support jobs and businesses, but the decision making on public health of Ministers in those devolved Administrations has been fully respected. There are examples of UK-funded measures that have been delivered but managed locally by the devolved Governments. We have six UK-funded drive-through testing facilities; four, or five as I believe it is, walk-through testing facilities; and up to 22 mobile testing facilities, some of which have been used to effect in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: Covid-19 has been rising rapidly in many parts of Scotland and, indeed, across much of the north of England, including my own constituency, leading to the introduction of tighter restrictions. Given the impact that these restrictions are now having on the economy, particularly on those hardest-hit sectors, will the Minister ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to revisit his previous refusal to continue the furlough scheme with a sectoral-based approach in those nations and regions of the UK that are worst affected?

David Duguid: The UK Government have provided a host of measures to support tourism and hospitality businesses throughout this crisis. As well as the job retention scheme, which has already been extended to the end of October, new measures announced in the Chancellor's winter economic statement include the new job support scheme, the extension of the very welcome reduction in VAT to 5% for hospitality and tourism, the deferral of VAT and other tax payments, and greater flexibility in the paying back of Government-backed loans.

Covid-19 Restrictions: Tourism and Hospitality

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) the Scottish Government and (b) Cabinet colleagues on the effect of additional covid-19 lockdown restrictions on the Scottish tourism and hospitality industries. [906981]

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) the Scottish Government and (b) Cabinet colleagues on the effect of additional covid-19 lockdown restrictions on the Scottish tourism and hospitality industries. [906986]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (David Duguid): Both public health and tourism policies are devolved to the Scottish Government. However, my offices and I are in regular discussions with both the UK Government and the Scottish Government to identify sectoral issues in Scotland due to lockdown restrictions and co-ordinate areas of UK-wide support to the sector.

Mary Glendon [V]: Scotland's tourism and hospitality industries have been hammered by the coronavirus restrictions and by the impact on international travel. What specific discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor on providing additional sector-specific support to these industries?

David Duguid: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State described earlier the ongoing discussions not just between the Scotland Office and the Scottish Government, but between the Scotland Office and other UK Departments, including the Treasury, on a wide range of issues, including the impact on the tourism sector. Tourism is one of Scotland's most important industries. This Office and I have spoken regularly with businesses and industry bodies in the past few months, and they have outlined their concerns and also their desire to reopen and to stay open as the best way to stimulate recovery.

Liz Twist: Scotland's drinks industry has been hit hard by the US tariff on Scotch whisky as a result of the US-EU trade dispute. What discussions has the Secretary of State or the Minister had with the International Trade Secretary on this, and will the Secretary of State use his new position on the Board of Trade to stand up for Scottish industry?

David Duguid: The very short answer to that last question is: yes, of course. In response to the earlier part of the hon. Lady's question, I can say from personal experience—having worked as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for International Trade for a while—that the Secretary of State for International Trade is fully committed to getting a deal and removing those tariffs. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland said earlier, the discussions have moved on to another phase in which bilateral discussions, outside of the EU negotiation team, will be taking place.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[907279] **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 October.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Sir David Amess [V]: Next month, a book that I have written, called “Ayes & Ears: a Survivor’s Guide to Westminster”, will be published. Part of it covers Brexit—and, yes, by inference, everyone will be in the book. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the last general election was not fought on how political parties might handle the coronavirus pandemic, but was categorically about ensuring that the result of the 2016 referendum is implemented in full? Can he confirm that he intends to see that happen?

The Prime Minister: I can indeed. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his new book. I assure him that not only has this country left the European Union, but on 1 January we will take back full control of our money, our borders and our laws.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): This is a crucial moment if we are to gain control of the virus, yet for eight days nearly 16,000 positive tests were missed by the Government. That means that about 48,000 contacts were not traced. As of yesterday, thousands had still not been reached. Does the Prime Minister accept that this very basic mistake has put lives at risk?

The Prime Minister: This is certainly a problem that we have fixed. The computer glitch and error to which the right hon. and learned Gentleman refers has been addressed. All the 16,000 people he refers to have, in fact, got their positive test results and should be self-isolating. As soon as we became aware of the missing data, we brought in 800 people to chase up those index cases, and we continue to chase their contacts. I think it will be for the reassurance of the House and the country that the missing data points do not, now that we look at them, change in any way our assessment of the epidemiology—the spread of the disease. That is why we continue with our package to suppress the virus not just nationally, but locally and regionally.

Keir Starmer: This is not just a technical issue; it is a human issue. The attempted reassurance by the Prime Minister just does not wash. In Greater Manchester, some of the missing cases date back to 18 September. That is two and a half weeks ago. There are three very serious consequences: first, it is now much harder to reach the contacts of the 16,000 people after so long; secondly, even if they are contacted successfully, for many the self-isolation period has already expired; and, thirdly, important decisions on local restrictions were made using the wrong data. Some £12 billion has been invested in this system, and yet a basic Excel error brings it down. No wonder it has been described as “intergalactic” incompetence. Why, at this crucial moment, did it take so long to catch this error and address it?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot have it both ways; he cannot call it a human error and a basic Excel error. Let me just remind the House and the right hon. and learned Gentleman of what I just said. The crucial thing is that, yes, of course there has been an error, but the data points—the cases—that we are looking at do not change the basic distribution

of the disease. It is very important for people to understand that. That is really what he was, I think, trying to drive at. Although the cases are considerably up across the country this week on last week, the seven-day statistics show that there are now 497 cases per 100,000 in Liverpool, 522 cases per 100,000 in Manchester and 422 in Newcastle. The key point there is that the local, regional approach combined with the national measures remains correct, I think, because two thirds of those admitted into hospital on Sunday were in the north-west, the north-east and Yorkshire. That is why, I think, that approach continues to be correct.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister says that it does not alter the basic distribution, yet thousands of people have been walking around when they should have been self-isolating. It patently has an effect on the basic distribution.

If this were an isolated example, I think the British people might understand, but there is a pattern here. On care homes, protective equipment, exams, testing: the Prime Minister ignores the warning signs, hurtles towards a car crash, then looks in the rear mirror and says, “What’s all that about?” It is quite literally government in hindsight. Today it is 100 days since the first local restrictions were introduced. Twenty local areas in England have been under restrictions for two months. Prime Minister, in 19 of those 20 areas, infection rates have gone up. In Rossendale and Hyndburn they have gone up tenfold. Yet all the Prime Minister has to say is, “It’s too early to say if restrictions are working.” But it is obvious that something has gone wrong here, so what is he going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, we are continuing to provide support, with £5 billion of support for the north-west and north-east for the lockdowns—the extra restrictions—that they are experiencing. We will continue to support all areas across the country that have to go into local measures. Two weeks ago, I set out that strategy. I said that we would go forward with the national measures such as intensifying the rule of six—making sure that we reinforced the rule of six. Two weeks ago, the right hon. and learned Gentleman supported it. In fact, I think he went on the Nick Ferrari show saying, “I support the rule of six—yes I do.” Yet last night the Labour party abstained on the rule of six. He asks what we are doing to enforce local measures; he cannot even be bothered to get his own side to support them himself.

Keir Starmer: For the Prime Minister’s benefit, let me take this slowly for him. We support measures to protect health. We want track and trace to work. But the Government are messing it up and it is our duty to point it out.

Let us get back to the questions—because these are not trick questions; I have the figures here, Prime Minister. In Bury, when restrictions were introduced, the infection rate was around 20 per 100,000; today it is 266. In Burnley, it was 21 per 100,000 when restrictions were introduced; now it is 434. In Bolton, it was 18 per 100,000; now it is 255. The Prime Minister really needs to understand that local communities are angry and frustrated. So will he level with the people of Bury, Burnley and Bolton and tell them: what does he actually think the problem is here?

The Prime Minister: The problem is, alas, that the disease continues to spread in the way that I described to the House earlier. The figures that the right hon. and learned Gentleman gives are no surprise, because they are fundamentally a repetition of what I have already told the House. What we are doing is a combination of national and local measures which one week he comes to this House and supports, and from which, the next week, mysteriously, he decides to whisk his support away. He cannot even be bothered to mobilise his own Benches to support something as fundamental as the rule of six, which he himself said only three weeks ago that he supported. He cannot continue to have it both ways. Does he support the rule of six—yes or no?

Keir Starmer: Yes. But if the Prime Minister cannot see and hear local communities when they say that the infection rate has gone up tenfold under restrictions, and he does not realise that is a problem, then that is part of the problem.

There is a further cause of anger—*[Interruption.]* Prime Minister, if you actually listen to the question, we might get on better—which is the lack of clarity about why particular restrictions have been introduced. For example, in the Prime Minister's own local authority of Hillingdon, today there are 62 cases per 100,000, yet no local restrictions, but in 20 local areas across England, restrictions were imposed when infection rates were much lower. In Kirklees, it was just 29 per 100,000. Local communities genuinely do not understand these differences. Can he please explain for them?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has heard from me and heard repeatedly from the Government why we are bringing in differentiated local restrictions. I have just given the figures for the north-east and the north-west. I wish I could pretend that everything is going to be rosy in the midlands or, indeed, in London, where alas we are also seeing infections rise, but that is why we need a concerted national effort. We need to follow the guidance. We need “Hands, face, space” and people to get a test if they have symptoms and to obey the rule of six. I think it quite extraordinary that the right hon. and learned Gentleman just said that he personally supports the rule of six while allowing his entire party to abstain.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister cannot explain why an area goes into restriction, he cannot explain what the different restrictions are, and he cannot explain how restrictions end. This is getting ridiculous. Next week, this House will vote on whether to approve the 10 pm rule. The Prime Minister knows that there are deeply held views across the country in different ways on this. One question is now screaming out: is there a scientific basis for the 10 pm rule? The public deserve to know and Parliament deserves to know. If there is a basis, why do the Government not do themselves a favour and publish it? If not, why do the Government not review the rule? Will the Prime Minister commit to publishing the scientific basis for the 10 pm rule before this House votes on it next Monday?

The Prime Minister: The basis on which we set out the curtailment of hospitality was the basis on which the right hon. and learned Gentleman accepted it two weeks ago, which is to reduce the spread of the virus.

That is our objective. That is why we introduced the rule of six, which again he supported only two weeks ago, yet last night the Opposition abstained and today they are withdrawing their support for other restrictions. What kind of signal does that send to the people of the country about the robustness of the Labour party and its willingness to enforce the restrictions? That is not new leadership; that is no leadership.

We are taking the tough decisions necessary, imposing restrictions—which we do not want to do—locally and nationally to fight the virus to keep young people and kids in education and to keep the bulk of our economy moving. At the same time, we are getting on with our agenda—our lifetime skills guarantee and our green industrial revolution—by which we will take this country forward and build back better.

[907280] **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): Two of the Government's central policies are levelling up and housing. Carlisle and Cumbria needs further infrastructure investment, but it does have the capacity for increased housing development, especially with the garden village to the south of Carlisle. The Government therefore have an opportunity to help with their levelling-up agenda and with reducing the strain on housing in the south of England. To achieve that, the Government could move parts of Departments out of London to the provinces, but not Manchester and Leeds. Would the Prime Minister therefore let me know when he proposes to move a Government Department to Carlisle?

The Prime Minister: I have spent at least one very happy night out in Carlisle, and it is a wonderful place. I will certainly look with interest at my hon. Friend's suggestion. We have an ambitious programme to disperse and to unite and level up across our country.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: This week is Challenge Poverty Week, and I would like to thank all the organisations across Scotland and the United Kingdom that are helping families through the most difficult of times. Their dedication and commitment should inspire every single one of us in the fight to end poverty. With mass unemployment looming, having the right social security measures in place to help families over the long term is vital. The Chancellor has so far refused to commit to making the £20 universal credit uplift permanent, which means that 16 million people face losing an income equivalent of £1,040 overnight. Will the Prime Minister now commit to making the £20 uplift to universal credit permanent?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's support for universal credit, which the Conservative party introduced. I am proud that we have been able to uprate it in the way that we have, and we will continue to support people across the country, with the biggest cash increase in the national living wage this year. The result of universal credit so far has been that there are 200,000 fewer people in absolute poverty now than there were in 2010. I know that he was not a keen supporter of universal credit when it was introduced, but I welcome his support today.

Ian Blackford: One of these days, the Prime Minister might consider answering the question—it was about making the £20 increase permanent. The Joseph Rowntree

Foundation has painted a clear picture for his Government: strip the £20 universal credit uplift away, and 700,000 more people, including 300,000 children, could move into poverty, and 500,000 more people could end up in severe poverty—more than 50% below the poverty line. The Resolution Foundation has called the £20 uplift a “living standards lifeline” for millions of families during the pandemic. Challenge Poverty Week is a moment for all of us to take unified action against poverty. The Prime Minister has an opportunity here and now. Will he do the right thing, will he answer the question, and will he make the £20 uplift permanent?

The Prime Minister: I do not want in any way to underestimate the importance of what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. It is vital that we tackle poverty in this country. That is why this Government are so proud of what we did with the national living wage. We are putting another £1.7 billion into universal credit by 2023-24. If that does not give him the answer he wants, he can ask again next week. We will continue to support people and families across this country, and we will continue to spend £95 billion a year in this country on working-age welfare. But the best thing we can do for people on universal credit is to get this virus down, get our economy moving again and get them back into well-paid, high-skilled jobs—and that is what we are going to do.

[907281] **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): The review announced by the Prime Minister of transport connections across the Union will be hugely welcome in Wales, where the public want a new M4 relief road, a cut in railway journey times in north Wales, and an upgrade to the A483/A5 in Clwyd South. Does he agree that this review demonstrates his Government’s commitment to building back better in a strong United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who represents a constituency that I once fought for—he represents it well, but I do not think I fought for it very well. I know the A483/A5 connection well, and Sir Peter will certainly look at that scheme and many others in his Union connectivity review.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Prime Minister is passionate about the Union, as am I, and I welcome the review of connectivity within the Union. Does he agree that, while it is good to consider connectivity across the Irish sea, it would be devastating to Northern Ireland to have barriers to trade in the Irish sea? In the remaining days of the negotiations with the European Union, may I urge him to hold firm and to commit to protecting Northern Ireland’s place within the internal market of the United Kingdom by ensuring full and unfettered access for businesses that trade in either direction and for the consumers who benefit from Northern Ireland’s being an integral part of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and I am sure his words will have been heard loud and clear by our friends in Brussels, but just in case they have not, of course we have the excellent United Kingdom Internal Market Bill to prevent such barriers from arising.

[907282] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is right to be talking about levelling up and building back better, but building back fairer. Can he outline what support is available for towns that have not received any towns or high street funding in recent tranches, such as Radcliffe and Prestwich in my constituency? Will he join me, as part of my campaign to support local shops, in congratulating the winner of my independent shop competition—The Only Way is Melts, by Tracy in Radcliffe?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can indeed confirm to my hon. Friend that, in addition to the particular support that he mentions, we are directing another £160 billion of support for business and local authorities and business improvement districts, and I am more than happy to congratulate The Only Way is Melts, by Tracy in Radcliffe.

[907284] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Across the UK, our universities are struggling to contain the coronavirus, with some 5,000 cases reported in recent weeks. Our communities deserve better and more local and immediate access to testing facilities, but in Leamington I am told that Deloitte will not deliver on its testing facility until the end of this month, some four weeks after 7,000 students will have arrived back in the town. My question is simple: were the Government not expecting students to return to university?

The Prime Minister: It is very important that students should return to university in the way that they have, and I want to thank the overwhelming majority of students for the way that they have complied with the guidance, complied with the regulations and are doing what they can to suppress it. Clearly, there are particular problems in some parts of the country, which we have discussed at length already. Will be pursuing the measures that we have outlined to bring them down in those areas, and I hope that the hon. Member will support them.

[907283] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): In his statement on 22 September, my right hon. Friend said that the Chancellor and the Culture Secretary were working urgently on a support package for sports clubs that rely on paying spectators. He also recognised the similar difficulties facing the conference and exhibition industry. I agree with his analysis, and that sector is really important in Harrogate and Knaresborough. Could he tell the House when that package will be coming forward, and will it include the conference and exhibition industry?

The Prime Minister: I totally agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of the conference and exhibition industry. I think it is worth about £90 billion to this country. It is of massive importance. It was a very difficult decision to take to pause conferences and exhibitions. We want to get them open as fast as possible. Of course, they have had a lot of support, as I indicated earlier—the £190 billion package is there to help businesses of all kinds—but the best way forward is to get the kind of testing systems that will enable not just conferences and businesses of that kind but all types, and even theatres, to reopen and get back to normality. That is what we are aiming for.

[907285] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): Yesterday, the Chancellor suggested that those who are musicians or work in the creative industries but cannot work because of covid restrictions, should “find new opportunities”. Can the Prime Minister tell the House—*[Interruption.]* Can the Prime Minister tell the House what jobs the hundreds of thousands of people, including hundreds in my constituency, who work in the fastest-growing part of our economy should be doing, because the answer from the Chancellor—“Go away, find a new job, you’re not our problem”—simply is not good enough for these thousands of people who are truly talented and world leading within this country?

The Prime Minister: That is simply not what the Chancellor said. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has already provided £1.7 billion of support for the creative culture industries and for sport. The hon. Member is right, by the way, to identify the massive economic value of those industries, and that is why we are supporting them through these tough times. That is why we are working to get the virus down and get our economy back to normal as fast as we possibly can, and I hope that he will support our strategy.

[907286] **Dame Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: Building on that, may I welcome the Prime Minister’s excellent Conservative party conference speech yesterday, which outlined his vision of our Government’s plans for a green economy that will create hundreds of thousands of jobs? Does he agree that the merits of his green economy proposal extend far beyond energy production, and also include the preservation of our green spaces? As the UK prepares to host COP26, will he show the international community the way, by committing the UK to championing greater protections for our chalk streams? Will he extend his vision to redesignate the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty as a national park, following Julian Glover’s recommendation in the Landscapes review?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, and we are committed to protecting areas such as the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty. I understand that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is considering each of the recommendations in Julian Glover’s review, and following the correct procedures. I hope my right hon. Friend will acknowledge—I hope she knows—that the Government are also leading the way globally in protecting biodiversity, habitats and species, and that is what we will be doing at the G7, and in the run-up to COP26 in Glasgow next year.

[907289] **Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Unemployment has already doubled to 8% in my constituency this year, and the end of furlough will lead to thousands more job losses in the next three weeks. The Merseyside local lockdown puts 58,000 jobs in what was a booming hospitality sector in the immediate firing line. Does the Prime Minister agree that tighter local lockdown restrictions, such as those imposed on Merseyside, should trigger automatic Government support for local business and support schemes, to prevent that economic carnage from worsening? Will he please commit today to a targeted support package for Merseyside, as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I share the hon. Lady’s feeling about the loss of jobs, and the potential loss of jobs, and it is wretched that we have to do this. We have already allocated £2.6 billion to the north-west, and Knowsley in particular has had £12 million, and Liverpool another £40 million. We will continue to provide support across the country, and to put our arms around jobs and livelihoods in the country, as we have done throughout this pandemic.

[907287] **Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s confirmation of the 40 new hospitals this decade, including the proposal for mid and north Hampshire, which will serve many of my constituents in East Hampshire. Does he agree that this is also a good opportunity to optimise healthcare provision across the wider area, making full use of our valued community hospitals, such as Alton Community Hospital?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. We are building a new hospital at Basingstoke and North Hampshire Hospital, and there will be a major refurbishment at Royal Hampshire County Hospital in Winchester. We will continue to support Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust as it develops its plans, including with local infrastructure such as Alton Community Hospital.

[907290] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Restrictions in the north-east around opening times and socialising with other households are limiting custom, reducing income, and making it uneconomical for many businesses, including those in my constituency, to stay open. What assurance can the Prime Minister give me and the local authority that he will provide the necessary finance to mitigate the effect on people’s income, and retain the 80,000 people who are employed in the hospitality and retail sectors? Will he meet local leaders to discuss their requests for such support?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is entirely right to raise the issue of support for hospitality. In areas that face tougher restrictions we will continue to do whatever we can to provide support. She will be familiar with the big package that we have already brought in. I think that the Opposition really need to decide whether they are in favour of the plan to reduce transmission to bear down on the virus or not. If they are, I am afraid that they must recognise that there are consequences of that plan.

[907288] **Paul Bristow** (Peterborough) (Con): The Prime Minister’s new lifetime skills guarantee is hugely welcome. Peterborough already has a new university planned, specialising in manufacturing, technology, science and engineering, thanks in part to the Government’s funding of a £14.6 million new research super-hub in our city centre, bringing highly paid jobs to our city centre. Does he agree that it is vital to include adult learners in our vision for further education and universities so that people in working cities such as Peterborough have the right skills to succeed?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, because it was indeed as part of our plan to fuel a green economic recovery that we put £14 million from the Getting Building fund into Peterborough to accelerate the delivery of a key new educational and research

facility. We are giving Peterborough another £1 million of accelerated payment for investment in capital projects to enable it to build back better.

[907291] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): The Government were right to increase universal credit by £20 a week to help families with the extra costs of the pandemic, but, at the moment, that increase is due to be removed next April. The Prime Minister has declined today to commit to making it permanent, but will he at least agree with me that it would be unthinkable to cut everyone's benefit before the pandemic is over?

The Prime Minister: Of course we keep all these things under constant review, but I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman joins the Opposition in support—and approval now—of what the Government have done with universal credit.

[907293] **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): Just 12% of our journalists and chief execs come from a working-class background, and just 6% of doctors and barristers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need a renewed focus on social mobility from all institutions so that we make much better use of all the country's talent?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly what this Government were elected to do in 2019. We were elected on a manifesto not just to build 40 more hospitals—now 48—and put 20,000 more police on our streets, but to unite our country and level up across our country, and unleash the potential of the whole United Kingdom. That is what we are going to do.

[907292] **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that it would be easy to build new homes “without destroying” our green spaces. Many constituents in my part of Coventry are concerned that the Government are relying yet again on dodgy figures to trample on our green spaces and build unaffordable, low-quality homes in their place. As Coventry is running out of brownfield sites, precisely where does he expect those new homes to be built?

The Prime Minister: There is abundant brownfield space across the whole UK, and I speak as someone who used to be the planning authority for London, and I know whereof I speak. The opportunity is there. In many cases, the restrictions are caused by cumbersome planning procedures, but they are also caused by the inability of young people to get the mortgages that they want to buy the homes that they want. That is why we are bringing forward fixed-rate mortgages for 95% of the value of a property to help young people on to the property ladder. We are going to turn generation rent into generation buy.

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

12.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

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

Points of Order

12.37 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday, I suggested that you and your office had denied me a speaking slot in the debate we were discussing. I had of course put in the request late, and owing to the new rules that do not allow on-the-day requests, it was not down to your office's discretion whether I could speak. I want to make sure that it is clear for the record that no slight on my part was meant towards you at all.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for that.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since the end of summer I, like many other Members of the House, have tabled a series of questions to the Health Secretary on issues that are important to my constituents. It is now way past the five sitting days for most of those questions and I am still waiting for a response. A question on 8 September was about when the Health Secretary had met families who had lost loved ones during the pandemic, and another on 15 September was about how private sector contracts are letting down people in Luton North who need covid tests. I also asked about data on the number of people who are trying to get tested in Luton North; for the Health Secretary to give evidence for the 10 pm pub curfew; about targets for this year's flu jabs; and about the track and trace app.

These questions were all asked in good faith and I know that my constituents are keen to know the answers to them. It is our job as Members of Parliament to hold the Government to account, but getting a straight answer out of the Health Secretary is almost as hard as getting a test at the moment. Will you therefore please advise, Mr Speaker, on how we are supposed to get answers from the Health Secretary to straightforward questions when he will not reply to letters, will not reply to our questions and, when he is in the Chamber, accuses Members of using divisive language when we just raise our concerns?

Mr Speaker: This comes on the back of what was said yesterday. I am getting very frustrated, and Members of Parliament are rightly getting frustrated, by the very late arrival of answers to questions—and in a lot of cases, Members are still waiting for them. It is totally unacceptable. We are the representatives of the electorate. We must get this message through to the Department. The hon. Lady's frustration is shared. That is the worst part: this is not an isolated case.

I would say, however, that there are other ways; the hon. Lady could write to the Procedure Committee to explain her frustration. In the end, this affects all Members, not those on one particular side. That is the big issue. The people we represent want the answers. I would suggest that the hon. Lady writes to the Procedure Committee, but in the end the responsibility lies with the Department of Health and Social Care. It is for the Secretary of State to ensure that his Department is more proactive in the answering of letters. I understand that he may have a lot of questions put to him, but in the end—bring the extra staff in—they must be answered. I will ensure that this issue is taken up again with the Leader of the House, who I know is as frustrated as the hon. Lady's good self and me.

Conveyancing Standards

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

12.40 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish minimum standards regarding searches and assessments of risk for solicitors and licensed conveyancers acting on behalf of purchasers of residential properties; and for connected purposes.

The main aim of this Bill is to help protect people who wish to buy a house—sometimes their first home—from being exposed to risks that currently are not sufficiently visible or understood at the point of purchase. The Bill does not propose radical changes to the conveyancing process; nor, indeed, does it propose changes to the development control system, although some may argue that that might be desirable to further de-risk the process for homebuyers.

I will set out two examples to illustrate the types of difficulties faced by homebuyers. Both are real cases of people who have been let down by a system that has not kept pace with an industry that has become increasingly cut-throat. The system does not offer enough consumer protections for people who are about to make possibly the single most important investment of their lives, while the transaction itself is mired in documents and legal complexities that are rarely fully understood.

My first example is of a developer who purchases land and applies for planning permission, which is granted subject to conditions. Those conditions are wide-ranging and set out requirements of the developer in order for them to receive final planning certification at the end of the development. One such condition may be that soil sampling is undertaken to establish whether any contamination is present; another may be that properties must not be occupied until planning conditions have been fully satisfied.

This particular developer set up a limited company for the sole purpose of the development and started marketing the site almost immediately. Some properties were sold off-plan; some were sold when the buildings were largely complete. When the final plot was sold, the developer immediately liquidated the company. That means the legal entity that sold the properties no longer existed.

It became apparent immediately that a significant number of planning conditions had not been met: no soil sampling, no preventing of owners from occupying, and no top coating of road services or pavements to bring them up to council-adoptable standards. Drainage was not connected properly, and the new homeowners had a huge list of unfinished works and complaints about poor standards of work.

At that point, the homeowners turned to the council for help, in the expectation that it would have the ability, as a local regulatory body, somehow to fix things. It transpired that any regulatory liabilities relating to the properties were transferred to the property owners at point of sale, and that if the council chose to enforce breaches of planning, it would have to pursue the new homeowners.

It is important to note that the current system places no requirements on local planning authorities to pursue developers for evidence of compliance with planning conditions. The expectation is that a developer will

[Marco Longhi]

want final planning certification, but that is all it is: an expectation. What if a developer does not care about obtaining the certification? Their objective is to build, sell and maximise profit. So here we are; we have just purchased a property in good faith following the advice of the conveyancing solicitor—who, by the way, was recommended by the developer—and the property does not have planning permission. Certification costs could be extremely significant, and we have no recourse to the developer because they no longer exist as a legal entity.

My second example is probably more widespread than my first, and I suspect that similar examples may be present in several MPs' casework folders. Imagine we are very keen to buy a property. At the point of purchase, our solicitor handling the conveyancing might highlight the fact that there is a contract for maintenance of green spaces on the estate—grass cutting, hedge trimming and so on—as well as the fact that those areas do not belong to any of the properties and the cost is about £100 per year. Do we still want to buy the property? Of course we do. That is not a lot of money in the grand scheme of things, and if it means securing the property of our dreams, of course we will pay it.

What is not discussed with sufficient clarity at the point of conveyance, if at all, is that the small print of the maintenance contract will state that contract owners can increase the price as and when they wish, and there is virtually no recourse within the contract for poor workmanship or lack of clarity. The fee of £100 per year may soon become £500 per year, and the grass cutting may be once a year instead of once a month. These areas remain unadopted by local councils—something that I find a little too convenient. How would you feel, Mr Speaker, if you paid an even higher

council tax for services you did not receive, compared with a neighbour around the corner who pays less and gets more?

Usually, when a service is not rendered, one may choose not to pay. That cannot happen here, because these contracts state that a charge will be placed against the property, so it cannot be sold without payment. Furthermore, homeowners cannot complain to anybody, because an unresponsive contractor is virtually unaccountable and has plenty of legal cover, while homeowners are usually bounced around from contractor to subcontractor to developer in a never-ending merry-go-round.

Those two scenarios are real. The same thing has happened in Dudley and to other people from the Black Country whom I have met. People find themselves financially exposed. The system is being gamed by unscrupulous developers and contractors, because it is not transparent enough to shine a light on the potential risks to people when they are buying a property. People might feel that the very fact that a solicitor is handling the conveyance means that they are sufficiently protected. They employ a solicitor not just to carry out due diligence for them, but to highlight any potential downsides. That is not happening with enough robustness, and that is why I am presenting the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Marco Longhi, Nicola Richards, Gareth Bacon, Sir John Hayes, Peter Gibson, Jamie Stone, Sir David Amess, Lee Anderson, Paul Howell, Ian Levy, Jim Shannon and Sally-Ann Hart present the Bill.

Marco Longhi accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 193).

Pension Schemes Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

12.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move, that the Bill be now read a Second time.

Pensions are a fundamental part of everyone's future. They offer security later in life and can provide much-needed investment to help to build the sustainable future we need. This Bill delivers on our manifesto commitments to legislate for a new style of pension scheme, establish pensions dashboards, and tackle those who try to plunder the pension pots of hard-working employees. It creates a new style of pension scheme that has the potential to increase future returns for millions of working people while being more sustainable for employees and employers alike. The Bill has consumer interests at its heart. It strengthens protections for savers by extending the Pensions Regulator's sanctions regime—prison for pension pot pinchers will, I hope, deter reckless bosses from running schemes into the ground.

The Bill transforms the way people get information about their retirement savings, bringing pensions into the digital age by allowing people to see all their pension information in one place, at the touch of a button. Importantly, it will ensure that individual savers can be told exactly how their pensions will be affected by the increases in the global temperature and what their scheme contributes to carbon emissions. Through the Bill, the UK will be among the very first countries in the world to put climate change reporting for pension funds into law. That is a crucial step towards meeting the Government's net zero ambition. It will ensure that pension funds play a leading role in the decarbonisation agenda.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): My constituents in Norfolk are passionate about climate change. They want to have safe and sustainable investments for the future. Can the Secretary of State explain how they will be able to invest sustainably and safely, and how the Bill will help them with that?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend represents one of the constituencies with the highest number of pensioners in the country, but for his future pensioners this is an important Bill. It will bring transparency for the first time about what is happening with individual investments. This Government are not in favour of trying to force divestment of different elements of fossil fuels and the like—I am conscious that he has Bacton in his constituency. But the Bill is about making sure that the trustees—effectively, the way in which pension funds will be used—are clear about how they can contribute to ensuring that we tackle climate change, and how their investments can play a part in making that happen.

This unprecedented period that we have been experiencing has shown more than ever the need for financial resilience, but also the need to focus on future resilience. Helping workers to achieve greater financial resilience for themselves for the long term is a crucial part of our economic recovery. Improving the financial resilience of the public is a personal priority for me, and I am proud that the Bill is designed to help pension

savers across the country. The Government have already taken action to ensure that there is support for pension contributions under automatic enrolment in the coronavirus job retention scheme. How important that policy is to us is demonstrated by the fact that we will be paying for pension contributions for kickstarters.

There are five parts to the Bill. Parts 1 and 2 set out the regulatory framework for new collective money purchase schemes, also known as collective defined contributions or CDCs. Interest in the CDC schemes is growing, as both members and employers look for options beyond the more traditional choices currently available to them to build long-term resilience. The schemes will provide employers with a new way of providing a pension where employers and employees can work together to deliver mutually beneficial outcomes.

The schemes will enable contributions to be pooled and invested, to give members a target benefit level. Investment risk is borne across the membership, rather than by individual members, delivering a good income in retirement without the cost of guarantees and without placing future liabilities on the employer. The Bill will ensure that the schemes are well run and we will require good member communications, so that members understand how their scheme works, including the risk-sharing features of CDC schemes, and understand that benefit levels may fluctuate.

Part 3 strengthens the powers of the Pensions Regulator. That fulfils our manifesto commitment to tackle those who think they can plunder the savings of hard-working employees. No more. The Bill introduces criminal sentences, so that the worst offenders could end up in jail for seven years, ensuring that those who play fast and loose with hard-working people's pensions face justice. These important measures introduce the power to issue civil penalties of up to £1 million, as well as creating three new criminal offences for individuals found to be acting wilfully or recklessly.

Some concern has been expressed in the other place that the scope of the powers is too wide and might deter people from becoming trustees. Let me reassure Members of this House and the other place that our objective is not to stop or interfere with routine business activity, or to deter people from becoming trustees. We have been clear that businesses must be allowed to make the right decisions to allow them to develop and grow. These new laws underline the importance of being trusted with the stewardship of members' retirement savings and ensure that people's hard-earned financial resilience is protected.

Our objective is to provide a sufficient deterrent to make individuals think twice before acting in a way that puts members' savings at risk. The key point is that the Bill makes it crystal clear that an offence is committed only if the person did not have a reasonable excuse for their behaviour or for engaging in that particular course of conduct. It will be for the regulator to prove that the act was not reasonable. The Pensions Regulator will publish specific guidance on these powers after consulting with the industry.

Part 4 delivers on our manifesto commitment to legislate for pensions dashboards. The world of work is changing, and people now have an average of 11 jobs in their lifetime. Pension savings built up during this time are often with different providers, and many people struggle to keep track of their pensions and find it difficult to make informed decisions about their retirement.

[Dr Coffey]

The provisions in the Bill will bring pensions into the digital age and help individuals to make informed decisions about their financial futures. Pensions dashboards will provide an online service, helping people to reconnect with their pension pots, enabling them to find lost pensions and allowing them to view all their pension information, including the state pension, in a single place.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I welcome the Bill, and part 4 in particular, including the bit that my right hon. Friend has just outlined about pension dashboards. It is such a minefield for our constituents to find all this information in one place, although people can do so very easily, for instance, via the HMRC dashboard in respect of tax. The Bill talks about compelling schemes to participate and to provide good-quality data in a timely manner. Could she just expand on that compulsion? What exactly does it mean in legal terms?

Dr Coffey: The Bill will require the pension schemes to provide all the data that they have available, so that it can be brought together to provide that information. I am conscious that this is further data, which may take a little time to come together, but this has been worked on for some time and we have made careful progress with the industry to get to this point. If my hon. Friend has any more detailed questions, my excellent Pensions Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), will be able to pursue this either in later interventions or in Committee.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We welcome this part of the Bill in particular. We support informing savers about their savings landscape, but one concern we have is that the amendment in the Lords that allows for the public dashboard to be bedded in for a year before commercial dashboards come in could be removed in Committee. Can the Secretary of State confirm now that she has no intention of watering that down? If that were to happen, it would be met with vigorous opposition from the Opposition.

Dr Coffey: Our aim is to empower consumers through dashboards, and the Government believe that they are best served through multiple dashboards. Of course we have listened carefully to the concerns expressed in the other House as well as in this place. We are still on Second Reading, and I think it fair to say that we will be considering the contributions carefully and that any matters that may need to be looked into further can be considered in Committee.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I welcome the Bill, particularly the part that my right hon. Friend is referring to at present. Sometimes, when people have multiple pensions with various pension schemes, they wish to put them into one pot, or two or three pots, rather than having to deal with so many. When that happens, some pension schemes seek to charge administrative costs when passing the funds on. Is there any mechanism to ensure that those administrative costs can be kept to a reasonable level, rather than being extortionate, which would ultimately impact on the pension pot for the individual?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to say that dashboards could encourage more people to consider consolidating their pension pots. There is guidance out there, and the Pensions Minister assures me that we are continuing to review the costs and charges that can happen in that regard. There is an element of administration cost that comes with such transfers, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we are on the side of the consumers who are saving to ensure that their money goes as far as possible for their future.

The Bill sets out the legislative framework for dashboards and makes provision to compel pension schemes to participate and provide good-quality data in a timely manner. The Pensions Regulator and the Financial Conduct Authority will be responsible for ensuring compliance by schemes. In the other place—this is perhaps covering a little of what has already been said—we introduced Government amendments to make it crystal clear that there will be a public dashboard, which will be overseen by the Money and Pensions Service. As I have said, we want to ensure that we increase people's engagement with their pensions, so it is important that the dashboards are accessible to as many people as possible. Some 52 million UK adults have pensions savings, involving over 40,000 schemes. That is why I believe that having multiple dashboards is the best option, ensuring people can easily access information to manage their financial affairs for today and tomorrow.

Part 5 covers a range of policies. Clause 123 and schedule 10 introduce new provisions with regard to scheme funding. Most sponsors and trustees work well together and use the flexibilities of the current scheme funding regime reasonably, but good practice is not universal. The scheme funding provisions seek to help trustees of defined-benefit schemes to improve the way they manage scheme funding and investment. They will also enable the pensions regulator to take action more efficiently to safeguard members' pensions and to mitigate risks to the Pension Protection Fund.

Climate risk is a key worry for many people in this country. The Government are resolute in how we want to help to tackle emissions to achieve our commitment to net zero by 2050. The Bill will make the pensions system greener and support the commitment to reach net zero by 2050. Clause 124 contains regulation-making powers to require scheme trustees and managers, for the purpose of managing climate-related risks, to take climate change goals, including the Government's net-zero target and the Paris agreement temperature goal, into account. The clause enables regulations to be made mandating pension schemes to adopt and report against the recommendations of the taskforce on climate-related financial disclosures. This will ensure that occupational pension schemes take into account climate change and the response to it in the Government's risk management and investment strategy, and report on how they have done so. Such measures will ensure that occupational pension schemes take climate change into account, and require that trustees disclose progress to their scheme members and the public.

Climate change is one of the defining challenges facing the planet for this and future generations, and the trillions invested in pension funds worldwide offer an enormous opportunity to build back better, greener and sustainably. I am extremely proud that we are at the

forefront of efforts to effect real and lasting change. These pension measures are among the first of their kind on the international stage.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the responsibility for pension scheme trustees goes further than just reporting having a strategy? Once they have invested, they need to engage and to monitor their investments to ensure they actually comply with their obligations to try to drive through that performance change.

Dr Coffey: I understand exactly the point my hon. Friend makes. My understanding is that the Financial Conduct Authority is changing its guidance or approach to make sure that asset managers are also getting on board. We are trying to ensure that asset managers, as well as trustees, are aware, so we have that collaborative arrangement to make sure we can make progress on this important use of pension funds.

One big concern people have relates to scams. Clause 125 further protects savers from falling victim to unscrupulous scammers when considering transferring their pension pots. The measures allow us to place conditions on a scheme member's right to transfer their pension savings to another pension scheme. This will protect members from pension scams by giving trustees of occupational pension schemes a level of confidence that transfers of pension savings are made to safe, not fraudulent, schemes. Regulations will prescribe the circumstances in which there is a high risk of a transfer to a fraudulent scheme, and could require scheme members to obtain information or guidance before transferring.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome this measure in the Bill, reflecting changes in the other place. As the Secretary of State said, the intention is to require, in certain circumstances, savers to take advice before they move their pension savings into what might be a scam. I wonder whether she agrees with me that we should go further and allow trustees to prevent a transfer where it looks as though the savings are going into a scam.

Dr Coffey: I know that the right hon. Gentleman and his Select Committee are looking at this matter carefully, and I appreciate that he has been in discussions with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who I believe wrote to the right hon. Gentleman yesterday. It is certainly an issue on which we want to continue to work to identify circumstances that could raise red flags, and legislate to enable trustees to act when they appear. The powers in the clause are broad enough to cover some of the scenarios about which the right hon. Gentleman is concerned.

Neil Gray: I welcome the intervention from the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). During the passage of the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018, the SNP tabled a number of relevant amendments that might well have covered some of these problems, which are a hangover from pension freedoms. Would the Secretary of State and the Minister be willing to look at some of those amendments again in Committee to make sure that some of those issues, particularly in respect of advice and guidance, are tied up?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has just told me he will share with the hon. Gentleman the letter that he sent to the Chair of the Select Committee. Generally, pensions legislation has broad support across the House, in recognition of the fact that these are long-term decisions, so of course the Government will look carefully at any amendments in Committee and any points made by the hon. Gentleman. We want to make sure that, going forward, we have confidence in the long-term objectives of the changes that the Bill will bring in.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, who is passionate about pensions, exceptionally assiduous and, in my humble opinion, the best Pensions Minister we have had in a very considerable period of time. I hope the House will agree that having safer, greener and better pension schemes is good for our constituents, as we encourage people to invest in themselves today to prepare for a comfortable retirement, and help to make them better informed about how their money is growing and being used for them and the planet. I commend the Bill to the House.

1.6 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to be called to speak in this Second Reading debate. Since I became the shadow Secretary of State earlier in the year, I have been carefully following the progress of the Bill in the other place, and I am pleased that it has finally reached this House.

First, I record my sincere admiration for and thanks to my colleagues in the other place—noticeably Baroness Sherlock, Baroness Drake and Baron MacKenzie—for their laudable work in carefully and thoughtfully amending the Bill.

In opening the debate for the Opposition, I shall outline our perspective on the Bill as it stands, as well as addressing the three areas—protecting people, protecting pension schemes and protecting the planet—in which Labour would like to see further amendments made as the Bill progresses. However, let me say clearly at the outset that my colleagues and I broadly welcome the Bill. We have been in dialogue with the Government for some time about its contents and the issues that it covers, and I am grateful to the Pensions Minister for his time this week on a number of matters. We will therefore not oppose the Bill today.

My message to the UK's pensions industry is that it should have confidence in the strong commitment that exists across the House of Commons to a pension system that is sustainable, sufficient and able to meet the challenges of an ageing population. Although we broadly support the measures in the Bill, we believe there is more to be done to create the robust system that we want. As the Bill progresses, we will seek to make those arguments in the usual way.

A new piece of pensions legislation is always an important step. Personally, I am fascinated by pensions, but I appreciate that not all people feel the same way. For many people, retirement feels like a distant concept. The understandable financial pressures that many families experience—especially at the moment—make longer-term considerations harder to contemplate. Even in better times, talk of defined contributions or lifetime allowances can cause some eyes to mist over. I feel strongly, though, that we will not be able to address the major public

[Jonathan Reynolds]

policy questions we face without getting people of all ages to make a genuine connection between their future prosperity and happiness and the pension plans that they are making today.

The connection I mention is essential because the outlook for today's young people is drastically different from that in years gone by, and that has become even more critical in the light of this year's events. We already know that the combination of student debt, higher house prices and—most of all—the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis and the austerity that came after it has meant that for the first time there is a generation of British people who might not be better off than their parents. That is why in last week's debate on the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill I made the point that the triple lock is not just about the level of the state pension for existing pensioners but about how we index the state pension so that it keeps its value for future generations who are not yet retired. We also have to make sure that we have a complementary system of occupational provision in which people have knowledge and control of their savings, with strong regulations to protect consumers' interests, and in which people can easily comprehend how the decisions they make will affect their retirement plans.

All that brings me to the contents of the Bill. First, I want people to know that their pension savings—their assets—will directly contribute to the future they want for themselves and their family. I am immensely proud of the work that my Labour colleagues did in the other place—much of it behind the scenes—to put climate commitments for pension funds into UK legislation for the first time ever. This is not just lip service, but genuine commitments, formalising the requirements of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures and enshrining a commitment towards the Paris agreement for trustees and managers of occupational pension schemes. That is fundamental to tackling the climate emergency, and it is a vital contributor to the health of pension funds. The long-term prospects of fossil fuel companies have implicit risks, and it is only right that those risks are taken into consideration as part of the financial responsibility that schemes have towards their members.

The UK should be leading the way on green finance, but we have been slipping behind internationally in recent years. I want to explore ways in which we can go even further to achieve that goal. The connection between people, really thinking about where their money is invested, is a key component of helping them to become more involved and more informed about their financial future overall.

The Bill also contains the blueprint for the pensions dashboard, one of the most long-awaited policy initiatives in history. We want to future-proof that dashboard, so that one day people can see in black and white an easily understandable measure that tells them how exposed to climate risk their retirement portfolio is. I know that the industry wants to make sure that we learn to walk before we start to run, and that the creation of the dashboard in itself is no small proposal, but I want us to be as ambitious as we can. Frankly, there is no time to waste when it comes to the climate emergency.

That takes me to my second point, on protecting people. For too long, there have been cases of unscrupulous people using the complexity of the pensions industry to

exploit those using it. The dashboard, in particular, has a vital role in making information transparent and easily accessible. That includes making sure that it has the capacity to clearly spell out to people what their fees are and who they are really paying, and for what. One of the very good amendments in the other place was intended to protect the dashboard from private transactions for a fixed period, and I am disappointed that the Government seem not inclined to keep that.

When consumers are presented with the new information that the dashboard will provide, we would prefer to have a moratorium on how products and new services are sold and marketed until people get used to having ready access to this information. In the wake of, for instance, volatile markets brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, it would be very easy for people to panic and make decisions that might not be in their long-term interests. We want to look at how we use the Money and Pensions Service to best mitigate this, especially when it comes to transfers.

Small pension pots, as has been mentioned, continue to be a major problem. How we can use the dashboard to easily consolidate those pots with minimum hassle and cost has to be on our minds. The dashboard will bring a sense of immediacy and transparency to that, but we need to make sure that people make their decisions when they are fully informed.

The other element of this, sadly, is pension scams. Regrettably, George Osborne's pension freedoms, exactly as was warned of, have been a watershed moment for fraudsters, who have taken advantage of such a significant change in the rules. As the shadow City Minister and now as the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, I have been made aware of some truly dreadful stories. I remember one especially bad case in which the victim not only lost their pension to the scam, but was then pursued by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs for many years for the tax payable on that money, because they had accessed it under the age of 55, even though they had been under the impression that they were moving it to a legitimate investment for now. That is the kind of scam that absolutely ruins lives, and the penalties and action taken against fraudsters should be severe.

We should also take pride in the fact that there have been several substantial successes in pensions policy in the last few years. Auto-enrolment is a prime example of that—a hugely successful policy begun by the last Labour Government. Thanks to auto-enrolment, by March 2019 more than 10 million people had been auto-enrolled in a pension scheme, according to figures from the Pensions Regulator. Of course we want people to be more engaged in their pensions, but default options that are easy to set up and straightforward to contribute to are essential.

That brings me to my final point, on protecting pension schemes. What that means is ensuring a strong infrastructure so that we have a well-protected and well-functioning system. First, we will urge the Government to retain the cross-party Bowles amendment inserted in the other place. We do not want the regulation to work in a way that unnecessarily closes defined-benefit schemes that would otherwise be open for new members, and that is what we are worried will happen if open and closed schemes have to meet the same investment and maturity

profiles. That is why we believe it is wrong to treat open and closed schemes in the same way, but that is another issue we intend to explore further in Committee.

Big challenges demand big answers, and that is why Labour supports the introduction of collective defined-contribution schemes as a potential way to get a better deal for workers than traditional DC schemes might offer. In doing so, we are mindful of the arguments from other countries about the need to ensure intergenerational fairness in those schemes, but we believe that those safeguards can be built in.

However, one area where we feel the Bill is silent is the creation of pension superfunds. These are very large funds of capital intended to consolidate several smaller DB schemes and run them as one large fund on a for-profit basis. Many are advertising substantial returns to potential investors. That is potentially an extremely significant development, and we do not believe it is appropriate for the Government to leave it in the hands of the Pensions Regulator to rule on this matter. The Government know the concerns that we have raised, and concerns have also been expressed by the Governor of the Bank of England and many people in the industry. I do not understand why these measures are not in the Bill, and the Opposition plan to push the Government again for more answers on this in Committee.

We believe that the measures in this Bill are important and worth while. We want well-managed, sufficient and sustainable pension provision that addresses long-term needs and is intergenerationally fair, and we want to begin the process of allowing savers to be much more engaged and in control of their assets. While the Bill does not give us everything we want, it makes solid steps towards that goal, and it is our belief that it deserves to have its Second Reading today.

1.16 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and, in particular, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), on their long-standing commitment to improving security for all our people in older age. My hon. Friend has shown over a lengthy period his commitment to securing older age for all in our country.

I would like to make four brief points, which I hope my hon. Friend will take into account as this excellent Bill continues its passage through both Houses. First, I would like to talk about the safety of pensions. There is no doubt that auto-enrolment has been a huge success for many, but Ministers will be aware that some people—particularly those on low pay—have been auto-enrolled into a pension scheme and found, when they tried to get information on their investment, that the company handling their pension is, in fact, a bogus firm.

I vividly recall a constituent coming to see me at my surgery. He was a delivery worker on fairly low pay. He was concerned about his auto-enrolled pension and wanted to know what was happening to his assets. He was trying to get an answer from the administrator for that firm and was simply told that the assets had decreased in value. When he tried to find out more, the firm would not engage with him. It was incredibly difficult for me, as someone who is quite familiar with the asset management sector, to get on to the ombudsman

on his behalf. It was very difficult to get answers out of anyone. I urge my hon. Friend to ensure that we have the ability to clamp down hard on scams of all sorts, including scams perpetrated by those who provide auto-enrolment schemes, and to enable people who may not be at all familiar with managing assets and their own investments to seek redress where necessary.

My second point is about the structure of pensions. I completely agree that the dashboard concept is a great idea. There is no doubt that it will transform people's ability to hang on to all their small pension pots from the various jobs they have had. Most people these days have several jobs during their career, not just one or two, and it can be a case of people looking in the back of a drawer and trying desperately to remember the name of the company where they worked for six months. That is why we end up in a situation where lots of people have lots of little pots that they never manage to lay their hands on. I ask my hon. Friend, as he considers the next steps for pensions, to consider properly the potential for creating a lifetime pot that follows the worker. Obviously, that would be a radically different approach from the pensions dashboard that enables people to keep track of all those pots, but, actually, when individuals try to consolidate a pension, quite often the transfer value of that pension is considerably less than the pay-out value if they hang on to it. That is often why one pension pot will try to hang on to a person as one of its members and stop them going somewhere else. In my view, it would be worth while to look at a pot that follows the individual that they then keep paying into wherever they work throughout their career.

In 2014, which seems light-years away now, I was City Minister and I was very proud to be working with George Osborne, who was Chancellor at the time, to introduce the pension freedoms. I heard what the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) said about that being an opportunity for scammers. I completely agree that some of the measures that have been put in place have really helped with that, and that, indeed, there have been some major problems. However, I do not agree that we should not have brought in those measures, because the ability of many people to then get a decent amount of money on retirement was quite life-changing for them. It enabled some to have a great holiday. It enabled others to help their children buy their first home, or to pay off their own mortgage to give them greater security as they went into a lower income in a later stage of their life.

At that time, back in 2014, we also upgraded the Pensions Advisory Service, so that people could get good advice on how best to manage their own pension assets. In my view, this has been a positive change, but there is still a very low level of understanding of pensions among members of the public, so for many, making decisions about what to do with their pension freedom or with any kind of investing is a really worrying time. That leaves them open to crooks and scammers. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister what conversations he has had with the Secretary of State for Education about adding an applied practical element to the maths GCSE that would educate young people on issues such as pensions, mortgages, car finance schemes, and, yes, student loans. What more can be done to enable people to familiarise themselves better at a younger age, so that it is not such a mystery to them as they reach the shockingly old age of people like me—

Mr Speaker: 40!

Andrea Leadsom: Exactly, Mr Speaker—at least. I was referring to people who are starting to have to think seriously about these issues.

My fourth and final point is about investing in decarbonisation. It was fantastic yesterday to hear the Prime Minister talking about our ambition to be world-leading in clean growth. That was, in fact, the No. 1 priority that I set out for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy when the Prime Minister first took office last year. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister are determined to help our pensions system contribute to the excellent action on decarbonisation that the Government are already taking. I totally agree with them that this multibillion-pound sector can be a real force for good, and investing in the green economy can play a part in helping us to level up across the UK.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is making some powerful arguments, and I commend her for that. She will probably have picked up, as I did the other day, that Exxon Mobil has been surpassed in terms of the value of its business by a Florida-based renewables company. When we consider that that was the origin of the Rockefeller Foundation wealth, it just goes to show that had we invested in some of those organisations earlier and provided encouragement, through tax or other fiscal incentives, for pensions to get into that sector, we would have done extremely well.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We should highlight the excellent work of some of the traditional high-carbon emitting companies of the past, which are really transforming themselves to become the renewables companies of the future. Some of the announcements made by BP, for example, have been incredibly welcome, especially those that show its determination to reduce its carbon footprint and to become one of the best and greenest companies of the future.

So I agree that by encouraging pension funds to invest in greener industries, we can help to improve our green economy and thereby level up across the UK and create hundreds of thousands of jobs. May I therefore ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister what conversations they have had with our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the Government's proposed reforms of corporate governance and audit? There is no doubt that audit reform could provide a much greater focus on what businesses are actually doing to improve their carbon footprint, and corporate governance changes could improve the incentives for company directors to prioritise carbon reduction and protecting the environment. With improved transparency and information about company performance, it will be considerably easier for pension fund managers to make investment decisions that will build security for us all in older age as well as protecting our planet, which is a top priority for so many people right across our economy.

Once again, I welcome this very important Bill, which I think is going to be quite transformative. I hope that my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend will take my

comments and suggestions in the light in which they are given, and try to improve and build on the excellent work that they have already done.

1.26 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who made some very interesting points which we would want to listen to, and which highlight why, on such an important issue, it is so important for Government to listen to Members across this House and work constructively on this very important piece of legislation.

The SNP broadly supports the Bill. There are key elements that we wish to see advanced, but also areas we hope to work on with other parties to help to improve. I am grateful to the Pensions Minister for his time over the past number of weeks, and in the previous Parliament, in keeping me up to date with the Bill. Similarly, I am pleased that the two main Opposition parties have been able to work together so constructively on these matters. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), in particular, for his approach, and look forward to maintaining that collaboration in Committee. I also echo the message to the pensions industry from the shadow Secretary of State. We engage regularly with the industry, as I am sure he does, on UK pension policy areas—and also, obviously, on looking towards pensions post Scottish independence. We are happy to see the Bill as it has arrived from the Lords advance into Committee, and we will not oppose its Second Reading, but I wish to lay down a few markers for the UK Government.

First, I want to set out our view on the key measures in the Bill. Parts 1 and 2 provide for the framework to operate and regulate collective defined-contribution schemes. There is great support for this from the Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union. Like the shadow Secretary of State, I am keen to have an assurance that while CDC schemes are worthwhile projects worth pursuing, they should not be a replacement for good DB schemes. We also support part 3, which provides greater powers for the Pensions Regulator that we hope would be a deterrent to any future BHS-type moment.

We also support part 4, as it provides the legislative framework for the pensions dashboard—the digital platform that will enable people to see all their pension savings in one place so that they can make better decisions and informed decisions about their retirement plans. Part 5 pulls together a number of other provisions that we support—specifically clauses 123 and 124—and other areas such as climate change reporting. It is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to address the climate emergency, so we welcome these measures.

We support the measures because we see them as helping important steps to encourage lifetime savings and provide greater clarity and protection for people dealing with their pensions. However, we do not want the UK Government to attempt to row back on improvements to the Bill that were made in the Lords, and particularly on providing the public dashboard, with a bedding-in period, before commercial dashboards arrive. Baroness Drake's amendment, at least, should stand. I hope the Minister will confirm, as the Secretary of State was unable to do so, that he has no intention of

removing it or watering it down in Committee. We do not oppose commercial dashboards. We understand that they will be coming and they have an important part to play. We just want the UK Government to invest properly in marketing and embedding the public dashboard as the first port of call for people to seek impartial information on their pensions. If commercial dashboards are allowed to take off at the same time as the MaPS dashboard, I fully expect the usage of the MaPS dashboard to be lower than it should be. It will be a huge missed opportunity to engage and inform people about their pensions in an impartial way. If the Government are serious about empowering and informing people about their pensions—I hope that they are—they will accept the Bill as it stands in this area.

We feel that compromise can be found to resolve any concern the Government may have about the wording of amendment 71, which was tabled by Baroness Bowles, to ensure that open schemes can be treated differently. I am willing to work with the Minister on clause 123, but urge him not to remove it altogether. That would have major implications for open schemes—a point on which my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) will elaborate in more detail later.

It is true that the Government enjoy a majority in this House, but they should not abuse that. I think that the Minister will today find unity on the Opposition Benches for protecting the amendments made in the Lords, some of which were supported by Conservative peers and former Pensions Ministers. I hope that he will be willing to work constructively, as he has been doing up to now, and as he went out of his way to do when we were first looking at the Bill in the previous Parliament, when the Government did not have the support of such a majority behind them. Matters such as those contained in the Bill should see consensual working. I hope that he will agree and listen to what he is hearing, not just from Opposition Members but from stakeholders across the industry, about protecting these amendments.

What the Bill sadly does not do is address a series of pensions injustices. The 1950s-born women are still waiting for justice, but we may have someone who is able to help. He said this:

“I have made several representations already on behalf of my own constituents who fall into this category. And I must say the answer I’ve got back from the Treasury is not yet satisfactory. But I will undertake—if I’m lucky enough to succeed in this campaign—to return to this issue with fresh vigour and new eyes and see what I can do to sort it out... But you know obviously the Treasury raise some stupefying sum that they say will be necessary to deal with it. I’m not convinced that’s necessarily true. Let’s see what we can do.”

The Member of Parliament who made that commitment last year is now the Prime Minister. Surely the Pensions Minister will be keen to work with his leader to lobby the Treasury to honour that promise. The least it could do would be to organise an impact assessment to better understand the detriment suffered by 1950s-born women and work on recompense from there.

Another area of injustice I would expect to be discussed in Committee is plumbers’ pensions schemes. My hon. Friends the Members for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Gordon have been working hard on this, to their credit, and I look forward to further discussions in Committee.

Another long-standing area of campaigning for the SNP has been on the creation of an independent pensions commission. I believe that there is sympathy for such an idea in the official Opposition, and the Minister may have considered this matter in the previous Parliament. We want to see a standing pensions commission that would ensure that injustices such as those suffered by the WASPI women are not allowed to happen again. We also feel that it would take the political sting out of difficult issues needing to be wrestled with. We accept that such a broad standing commission might be outwith the scope of the Bill—unless the Government were willing to propose it, of course—but we hope that it could be considered in the longer term.

We also want to see much greater speed applied to the roll-out of auto-enrolment to people on lower incomes and younger people. Although we wholeheartedly support automatic enrolment, far too many have been left behind and still cannot benefit from this important measure. Now, more than ever, we need the UK Government to be more ambitious. We have called for them to lower the age threshold for auto-enrolment to 18 so that young people can benefit from saving early for retirement, to remove the lower limit for the qualifying earnings band so that contributions are payable from the first £1 earned and, to expand contribution rates beyond the 8% statutory minimum. That would recognise the importance of starting a savings habit early, given the powerful impact that early career contributions can have on the size of retirement savings. Saving from the first £1 earned would be simpler and would help low-income workers to save more.

The Association of British Insurers notes that reducing the lower age limit to 18 and removing the lower earnings limit could save a further £2.5 billion. The UK Government’s failure to act on this at speed is disproportionately affecting women. Again, the ABI reports that the average pension pot for a woman of 65 is one fifth of a 65-year-old man’s and that women receive £29,000 less state pension than men over 20 years. That deficit is set to continue, all else being equal, with the gap closing by only 3% by 2060. Extending the coverage of auto-enrolment further by reducing the earnings threshold to the national insurance primary threshold would bring 480,000 people—mostly women—into pension saving, so further delays would be unacceptable. The UK Government should set a clear timetable for their plans for the expansion of auto-enrolment.

For people to get the most out of their savings, we need strengthened consumer protections and measures to boost confidence in the pension system. Pension freedom reforms were introduced in April 2015 by the Government to allow people to draw on their pension pots early, potentially resulting in future financial hardship for them. The introduction of pension freedoms muddled the waters further for individuals trying to understand their pensions. We voiced our opposition to the reforms at the time, highlighting that they could result in people transferring out of their pension to their detriment, and we have been shown to be correct.

It is clear that the UK Government have not put in place adequate safeguards for older people who are opting to free up funds to ensure that they will not end up in a desperate financial situation later. A pension pot should be looked at as deferred income, not a cash machine, and those with less money are more vulnerable to economic shocks in their personal finances, as well as

[Neil Gray]

potentially being more vulnerable to scammers who give misleading or false advice for a fee. Many people have since been given unsuitable financial advice to transfer their valuable DB pension pots into less suitable and less secure DC schemes, leading to growing compensation payments from the Financial Ombudsman Service and the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. The issue may represent a large mis-selling scandal, the full scale of which may only come to light in time, but as we fast approach an economic impact from coronavirus, I suspect that time might not be too far away.

Age UK notes that the introduction of the freedom and choice reforms in 2015 led to new opportunities for scammers, perhaps most notably people transferring out of their DB scheme, but also by people charging very high fees and selling unregulated investment opportunities to DC savers. We support measures in the Bill that will provide greater protection and reduce scams, but we hope to be able to tie up some more loose ends from pension freedoms when the Bill moves into Committee.

Given the challenges faced in so many areas, it is also disappointing that the Bill does not address pension taxation or having a more equitable spread of the benefits of the UK Government's investment in pensions tax relief. It also does not address the issues regarding superfunds, and we hope to be able to return to those areas later as well.

In conclusion, we support this Bill's Second Reading. As I have said, we will work with all parties to protect the Opposition amendments secured in the Lords, and we hope to be able to advance our own amendments, working with others, to make a decent Bill with necessary measures even better. Let us work together to make the most of this opportunity for current and future savers.

1.37 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate on this excellent Bill, and I think that I echo most of the remarks we have heard so far by saying that there is nothing in the Bill really to oppose. It leaves most of us looking for things we would like to add to the Bill, rather than being upset with anything that is already in it.

Much as the Opposition spokesman said, there are some key challenges for pensions, and I will address how the Bill tackles those challenges. The three challenges I generally look at are how we can increase people's engagement with what their pension means, how much they need and what they are likely to have in their retirement; how we can increase the number of people who get a decent pension in retirement, rather than just some small amount of money; and how we can protect what people have actually saved. The Bill makes progress on all three, but the key thing is engagement. If we can get engagement right, people will understand how important the issue is, what it means and what some of the risks, consequences and benefits are. Through that, we can probably get people saving more, and we can help stop them being a victim of a scam or making a bad choice when they get to retirement.

It is tempting to think, because we have 10 million more people saving for pensions through the great success of auto-enrolment, that we have fixed the

engagement problem, but the opposite is true. Auto-enrolment has not been such a success because people have engaged; they just have not chosen to opt out, and that was the whole basis for the inertia that was the reason for the adoption of auto-enrolment. We need to do more to engage people to make them understand exactly what all this means and what their retirement will look like if they carry on saving as they are.

The pensions dashboard is a key component. If we can get that right and people can go find out how much they have saved, find out what pension they would get from that, find out perhaps what ideally they would have saved by now and what their shortfall is, and then get some ideas for what action they should take over the rest of their working lives to close that, then we can genuinely improve the outcome people will have from their saving.

The challenge we have with the pensions dashboard is that we will get those improvements in behaviour and the outcomes we want only if people actually go on the dashboard on a regular basis and find the information they need. I would be more sceptical about how advantageous a stand-alone MaPS dashboard would be, because I have a horrible feeling that if we write to people and say, "Here's your log-on and here's your password," some people might log on the first day and think, "This is great—it's really useful," but would they remember it existed next year, the year after, when they get to their mid-life MOT time and when they get to their retirement? For a whole load of people, that envelope would never get opened, or would go in a drawer and basically just be gathering virtual dust.

We need to get that information to where people are managing their finances—whether their banking app or whatever else people are using. I am not too precious about whether there is a one-year gap before we open up that data, but I think that for this to work and lead to the advantages we seek, we need to take it further than just one dashboard that people might look at if they remember it exists and they can find their password and their username. That is not how this will really work.

I would not support two-way functionality. The dashboard has been about sucking out data, not a transactional dashboard. I would hate the idea that someone could go on the dashboard, click a button and do something to their pension after a few beers on Friday night. That would be a crazy thing to get into. The model we have of a dashboard that sucks out data when it is asked for it is the right one. However, we need to get people using it, not just have it gathering real or virtual dust.

The challenge we do really need to address on pensions is how we get people from saving a pretty small amount of money, which will not get them the quality of retirement that they think it will, to saving the amount that they need. That is where collective defined-contribution schemes can play a really important part, if they are used as an improvement to DC, not as a weakening of final salary schemes. I think that we would all encourage employers who do want to give their staff the best possible pension to think about whether they can move from a DC to a CDC to give their staff a far better outcome.

The Secretary of State called my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State the best Pensions Minister in living memory, and I think that, here, that is indeed true. Steve Webb may claim that prize, as perhaps the

longest-serving Pensions Minister in living history, but this Minister will not just bring on to the statute book a dream of defined ambition or a third way, but will actually see schemes in this space, and it will be a real achievement if we can get these schemes operating.

My only caution is that when we are selling the advantages, we should be clear that there is no magic. There is no employer guarantee here. The reason someone gets a much higher pension from this is that the people who, sadly, die earlier in their retirement will in effect be paying for those who have a longer life to have a higher pension. That has always been a feature of defined-benefit schemes and it is a feature of annuities, but we should not let people think that somehow this extra pension comes from nowhere. People should understand that they will not have their own pots to pass on to their family if they are one of the ones who, sadly, die young. At times, the marketing of these has been a little bit over-optimistic about what the benefits of the improved investing strategy or the reduced costs are, when most of the increased pension actually comes from the collective risk-sharing.

It is a pity that the Bill does not look at how we can expand the scope and rates of auto-enrolment. I understand why that has been done, and I know that we have set a mid-2020s timetable for further increases in the rate and changes to the age or the scope of earnings. However, the fact that we have seen opt-outs far lower than we thought does create the scope to bring forward some of those changes in trying to get people much higher than the 8% savings ratio and nearer to the 12% that we think they really need, or to at least the 12% that we think they really need.

My final remarks concern how we protect people and protect what they have saved in relation to scams. There are clearly welcome measures in the Bill, but we could possibly look at how we can go further to make sure that we are putting every tool out there that can possibly be there. We heard evidence at the Work and Pensions Committee this morning from pension scheme administrators, and there is the awful situation where they suspect that the transfer being asked for might be a scam, but they cannot be absolutely sure. They have a duty to make such a transfer, but can we find a way to allow them to delay the transfer for a little while so the member can have some more information and a bit of time to reflect and make absolutely sure that that is what they want to do before they go ahead? That sort of change in emphasis in relation to the powers would be really helpful in this situation.

We also need to go further in ensuring that, if people cannot afford advice, they at least take guidance from Pension Wise before they take fundamental decisions. Last time a pensions Bill came before the House—there is one every few years—amendments were tabled to try to make accessing pension guidance if not compulsory, as close to compulsory as we could get. It was suggested that before money was moved, there should be a release code from Pension Wise, to say that the person had taken guidance. The compromise at that point was to get the regulator to go away, do some work, and put measures in place to try to include that nearly mandatory use of guidance. Regrettably, however, the regulator has been incredibly slow, and three years have gone by without our seeing a great deal of action. I hope that

this Bill will be clear that that is what we expect the industry to do, and the regulator should put that in place and monitor it.

We want everyone who has saved for decades not to make a horrible mistake at the last minute, and to take that free guidance. Such guidance has huge support and receives overwhelmingly positive feedback, and there is no reason for someone not to take high-quality free guidance before risking thousands of pounds that they have saved. I accept that we cannot make that compulsory, but it should be as close to that as possible.

On pension consolidators, the idea of consolidation for weaker, smaller defined benefit schemes is attractive, and I welcome the market's moving in that direction and the regulator's approach so far. However, given that pensions Bills do not come before the House that often, I wonder whether we have missed an opportunity to put some of those rules on a statutory footing. Normally, I would not want the Government to include a clause that allows them to make secondary legislation, as that is not great for parliamentary scrutiny, but I wonder whether the power to introduce such rules could have been included in the Bill, lest the regulator starts to believe that regulation alone does not have the force or impact that we need. We would not want one of those consolidators to get any kind of market share if we are not sure that it is improving the situation for members, rather than making it worse.

Finally—I asked the Secretary of State about this—the pensions industry can be a huge force for good, and thanks to auto-enrolment it is investing billions of pounds every year. However, it should not invest passively, or just put money in, leave it there, and see what happens. When we have scandals, or corporate failures or disasters, we frequently see that large investors in some companies have not been playing an active role in ensuring the high standards that they should have expected. We must send out a loud and clear message that, where pension schemes and their asset managers are sizeable investors in some of the largest and most significant businesses in our country, we expect them to play an active role in the stewardship of those companies, and not just leave it to others. That is essential if the climate change measures in the Bill are to work. We should not just expect a report every couple of years.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I hesitate to interrupt my hon. Friend's flow, but there is an ongoing consultation on illiquids and consolidation. I endorse what he says about stewardship. He will no doubt be aware of the consultation that closes this week, which specifically encourages active stewardship regarding the management of large funds as he describes.

Nigel Mills: I am grateful to the Minister—perhaps he will submit my views to that consultation. This is about a behaviour change. It is not enough for us just to put rules in place; we need such behaviour to become the norm for large pension schemes that are investing huge amounts. That needs to be part of the behaviour; otherwise, we will have yet another report that gathers dust and that nobody really reads. Members and savers expect such measures. They want their money to be invested well—ethically, and in businesses that will improve the climate outcome. That would be good for pension schemes and their members, and companies need to take such measures seriously.

1.49 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): As has already been widely said, there is much to welcome in this Bill. Some important changes were made in the other place, and I pay tribute to the work that it did. I also appreciate the efforts that the Minister has made to work with my hon. Friends on the Front Bench, with me and the Work and Pensions Committee, and with others across the House to secure broad support for the measures in the Bill.

Pensions dashboards should be an important step forward in enabling savers to understand their pension position, allowing them more readily to make good decisions in planning for retirement. The Select Committee, under its former Chair, Frank Field, to whom I pay tribute, said in 2018:

“The case for a publicly-hosted pensions dashboard is clear cut”

because

“consumers want simple, impartial, and trustworthy information.”

In 2019, the Committee observed:

“A non-commercial pensions dashboard will be a welcome, if overdue, additional tool to provide transparency to individuals and help them plan how they use their pension funds.”

We have heard that it was agreed in the other place that the dashboard provided by the Money and Pensions Service should be up and running for a year, and the Secretary of State should report to Parliament on its operation, before other commercial dashboards are set up, and that commercial dashboards should not have facilities for engaging in financial transactions. Like others, I hope that those changes stay in place.

The former Committee reported in 2016 on defined-benefit pension schemes between reports that it published on the BHS and Carillion scandals, and its recommendations at that time are reflected in the new powers given to the Pensions Regulator in this Bill. The Committee recommended, for example, that the Government should consult on proposals to give trustees powers to demand timely information from sponsors, and I welcome the new offence created by the Bill of “knowingly or recklessly” providing false information to trustees.

The Committee also highlighted, in 2018, the attractions of collective defined-contribution pensions. I echo the observation of the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), whose contribution to the Select Committee I am grateful for, that the pooling of risk offers better pensions than standard defined-contribution saving and avoids the large potential liabilities that have made defined-benefit schemes less popular than they were. I welcome the legislative framework provided in the Bill, and I hope that this new model will be widely taken up.

However, I want to focus my remarks on the issue of pension scams, echoing a number of points that have already been made. As we have heard, the Select Committee has started an inquiry on pension scams, which the Secretary of State referred to. That is the first strand of three in an assessment of the pension freedoms five years on from their introduction by George Osborne.

Losing one’s pension savings to a scam is devastating. The Select Committee has heard of lives that have been ruined by scams—of people who have worked hard all their lives and were looking forward, as they were entitled to do, to a comfortable retirement, finding

suddenly that their savings have all been stolen; husbands not daring to tell their wives what has happened, or of the shame or dread of the future that they are suffering.

We do not know the scale of this issue. Many scams are never reported, partly because people are ashamed of what they have done and partly because they know that the chance of ever retrieving any of the money is slim. There are grave concerns about the effectiveness of Action Fraud in investigating and ensuring the pursuit of scams, given the low rate of success in retrieving scammed pensions.

The pension scams industry group, to which I pay tribute, estimates that scams could account for anything between 0.5% and 12% of all transfers out of employer pension schemes in the last five years. If we take the middle figure—say 5%—that would mean that over the last five years £10 billion of pension savings have been stolen. There are certainly well-informed reports of named individuals living in the lap of luxury in homes in exotic locations around the world on the proceeds of pensions out of which they have defrauded hard-working savers.

I am bound to say that these awful problems should have been foreseen when pension freedoms were introduced five years ago. Indeed, as I remember well, they were foreseen, but the coalition Government did not adequately prepare for them. I do not know why—they should have done, but they did not. Charles Randell, chair of the Financial Conduct Authority, said at the 2020 annual public meeting of the FCA that

“the manner in which the pension freedoms were introduced leaves a number of lessons to be learnt, including about the importance of coordinating changes in government policy with regulatory and industry preparedness and the speed with which major changes are introduced.”

He was absolutely right—those things were not done, and thousands of hard-working people have had their lives ruined as a result.

The pension scams industry group has thought long and hard about this, and the pensions industry has every incentive to worry about the reputational damage that it suffers as a result of the impact of scams. If people cannot trust what will happen with their money, they will not save. The industry group has identified red flags to assist in establishing whether the destination for a proposed transfer is likely to be a scam. It has suggested three main flags, any one of which, most people would agree, should mean that the transfer should not go ahead: first, if the receiving scheme is on the FCA warning list or some other internal list of schemes, entities or individuals of concern; secondly, if advice on the proposed transfer has been provided by firms or people who do not have appropriate regulatory permissions; and, thirdly, if the provider or self-invested personal pension operator is not registered with the FCA. The industry group has identified a number of other flags that may not in themselves show that the transfer ought not to go ahead, but do suggest that further checks need to be made before it does.

As I mentioned in my exchange with the Secretary of State, an amendment to the Bill was tabled in the other place to ensure that if a proposed transfer raised red flags it should not go ahead until the saver had taken financial advice. The problem graphically reported by the pension scams industry group is that only about a quarter of intended scam victims would be deterred from proceeding after receiving advice telling them not

to do so. The scammers win people's confidence—they become their friends, as we heard in the Select Committee this morning. The scammers tell people, "Yes, they will say that, but that is because they do not want you to move your money." People trust scammers until the moment they find their pension has gone.

I want to table a proposal enabling trustees to refuse to make the transfer altogether if one of the major red flags is raised. In my view—and I know that other Members support such an amendment—the statutory right to transfer conveyed in pension freedoms legislation should not apply in such cases. We heard this morning from scheme trustees not only that they had an obligation to transfer even if they knew perfectly well that the destination was a scam, but that if they did not do it quickly enough they would be fined for not getting a move on under the arrangements that are in place. It is hard to argue that the statutory right of transfer should apply, for example, if the destination is a firm that is listed on the FCA warning list. If the trustees of a scheme know that a particular transfer is going to a firm that is on the warning list, they should surely not have a legal obligation, as they do at the moment, and will still have under the Bill, to hand the money over to crooks if the saver has taken advice but still, despite that advice, wants to go ahead. If the receiving firm is a above board, it must show that to the FCA and get itself off the warning list.

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, with whom I have had, I think, three separate meetings over the summer specifically to address this point. Clearly we are all keen to ensure that clause 125 and the powers within it address the issues that he rightly raises and that are of concern to fellow members of the Committee.

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that I wrote to him yesterday and have given evidence in a more detailed document to the Work and Pensions Committee. With his permission, I will put both those documents in the Library of the House, so that all colleagues, including the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), have an opportunity to be aware of them. I am very happy to continue working with the right hon. Gentleman, and he will be well aware that the view of my Department is that the matters he raised can be addressed fundamentally by clause 125. The FCA has particular views on the red-flag list warning list point, but I am sure we can continue the dialogue.

Stephen Timms: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for those points and for the work that he has done, for the responsive way that he has looked at the issue over the past couple of months, and for the information that he has now provided. I will be very keen to hear from Pensions Scams Industry Group whether it feels that the proposal that the Minister has now tabled will meet the points that it has been raising. However, I am grateful for the progress that we have been making on this issue, and that will no doubt be further explored in Committee in the weeks ahead.

The determination by the pensions ombudsman in 2015 allowed trustees to decline a transfer request when there were concerns about a scam, but the *Hughes v. Royal London* court case in 2016 overturned that determination and established that the trustees do have an obligation to go ahead even when they know the receiving scheme

is a scam. That must be changed, and I am very encouraged by the Minister's point that he believes that it will be possible to bring forward regulations under the Bill as it stands to have that effect. It is important that that change is made.

Mr R complained to the pensions ombudsman about the decision of the London Pensions Fund Authority and Newham Council, which is my local authority, to allow him to transfer his pension to the Gresham pension scheme. That transfer went ahead and he has lost his entire pension, valued at £64,000. He has been awarded £1,000 in compensation since then. His view now is that the trustees should have refused to make that transfer but, under the 2016 *Hughes v. Royal London* decision, the trustees are legally obliged to go ahead with the transfer in a case of that kind. I think Mr R is right that the transfer that he requested should have been blocked by the trustees, and I very much hope that in future that will be possible. Very few people would today argue that the pension freedoms should be repealed, but pension savers are entitled to expect protection. The change that I have described is designed to provide it.

My final point has been touched on by the shadow Secretary of State. Clause 123 was amended in the other place. As the Minister knows, there is very strong support for the amended clause on the part of current defined-benefit schemes, such as the railways pension scheme and the BT scheme, that remain open. If that amendment were to be removed, those schemes fear that they would be treated unfairly by the regulator and in the same way as schemes in very different circumstances. Their future would be threatened as a result. It could be the final blow for private sector defined-benefit schemes. There is great nervousness about the Minister's intentions on that clause, as he well knows, and about the fact that if he removes the amendment, he may make those schemes unsustainable. I wonder if, in closing the debate, he might comment on his intentions on clause 123.

2.4 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee. This is an incredibly important debate because we know that our population is growing in age. By 2024, it is projected that 24% of our population will be over the age of 65, and in my constituency, 31% of our population is already over the age of 65. One of the key challenges that we face in this place is determining the best way to ensure that older people have safety, dignity and comfort in their retirement. They have paid their taxes, contributed to our economy and raised the next generation. But let us be clear: ultimately, the surest way of ensuring that people have safety and security in their retirement is through economic growth. No pension fund reform will be as effective if we do not have economic growth, because through economic growth, people earn more money and save more money. It is clear that our pension system simply has not progressed to meet the needs of a modern economy. That is why I warmly welcome the Bill for its clarity for pensioners and the protections that it brings.

I want to focus on the dashboard provision, which is one of the most interesting aspects of the Bill, and I have three points to make: first, on why I believe the

[Gareth Davies]

dashboards are needed; secondly, on concerns from the industry about the commercial provision; and thirdly, on concerns about the cost to pension plans.

First, in terms of why the dashboards are required, pension provider LV= estimates that a typical worker in Britain changes job every five years. As the Secretary of State said, a British person today can have as many as 11 jobs throughout their career, going from job to job and collecting pension plans along the way. It is hard to keep track of those pension pots, and people forget or lose them. The Pensions Policy Institute has outlined that around 1.6 million pension pots, worth a staggering £19.4 billion, are lost today. That works out at around £13,000 per lost pension plan. By 2050, it is estimated that there may be as many as 50 million lost pension pots.

These dashboards are incredibly important because, as the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) rightly pointed out, an additional 10 million people have been put into workplace pension plans in the last eight years alone. To ensure that all pension pots are included in the dashboards and to harness the very best of British FinTech, we need a commercial provision, and that brings me to my second point.

Secondly, while some in the industry have suggested that commercial dashboards open pensioners up to mis-selling, I put it to the House that this mistrust is unfounded. I looked at Denmark and Israel, which both have pension dashboards alongside commercial transactions, and not once has there been a case of mis-selling. We have one of the greatest financial regulators in the world in the Financial Conduct Authority, and I have tremendous faith in its ability to ensure that mis-selling does not occur.

Thirdly, I want to address the comments made about cost to pension plans by others in the industry. A dashboard is only as good as the data put into it. I would expect pension plans to already have their house in order and to have been practising data hygiene for many years. Anybody who has worked in a senior position in the investment industry, as I have, will know that data science is one of the fastest-growing parts of any business today, and not least pension or investment businesses. Those businesses should have been practising strong data hygiene for many years. I think we can all agree that the many benefits that are brought to millions of pensioners up and down our country, across these lands, will far outweigh any cost to pension plan providers.

I also want to highlight—it was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is no longer in his place—the provision to compel pension providers. I want to emphasise it, because I think it is under-appreciated just how important that is. In Denmark and Sweden, which had a voluntary provision to provide data, it took between 10 and 13 years for those dashboards to be fully operational and fully comprehensive; in Australia, which had similar provisions to this Bill, it took a fraction of the time. That is an under-appreciated point that deserves recognition.

Guy Opperman: Let me address that point. The Government were clearly waiting for the industry to volunteer the provision of the data to create a pension dashboard, but upon that not being done on a voluntary basis, it was inevitably the conclusion of both industry

and advisory bodies that we should proceed to compulsion. Hence, the Bill, following consultation, requires such data to be provided. I accept the international examples as totally correct, and that is why we are proceeding as we are.

Gareth Davies: I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying that and, again, I welcome the provision to compel pension providers. It allows the dashboards to be as effective as possible as quickly as possible.

Finally, let me address clause 124, requiring pension fund managers to include climate change risk. Again, I would expect pension fund managers already to be incorporating climate considerations in their investment process—climate change is clearly a risk for all pension pots. I am disappointed that we have to include it in the Bill, but I welcome it none the less and highlight how it emphasises, once again, this Government's commitment to green finance.

It would be remiss of me, however, to stand up in this Chamber without mentioning my long-standing call to the Government to issue a Government green gilt, which would help to raise literally billions of pounds to fund some of the announcements that have been made this week. That would follow Germany, Netherlands, France and many countries around the world in tackling UK pension fund assets, some of which—many of which—have already been funding other countries' bond issuances around the world. I would welcome any comments that the Minister has on that point.

In conclusion, this is an excellent Bill. I welcome the clarity that it brings to pensioners, as well as the powers for the regulator that will give a lot of comfort to many. It will clearly help bring our pension system into the modern world.

2.12 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Pensions are often the biggest pot of money that anyone will have. They hold the promise of future financial security and are hugely important to millions, but they are also complex, and more needs to be done to help people to understand this crucial topic. Increasing choice through pension freedoms has had a big downside, in particular for those moving out of defined-benefit pension schemes.

In 2017, the British Steel pension scheme was being reconfigured. Steelworkers were being circled by pension sharks to encourage pension transfers. One steelworker family from Blaenau Gwent were approached by a rogue financial adviser while they were away at their caravan on a family holiday, and he sweet-talked them into a bad deal. Such rogue advisers are often propped up by completely unregulated introducers, who are still not being properly investigated by the Financial Ombudsman.

Our Parliament's Work and Pensions Committee, in its report on this long and sorry tale, concluded that steelworkers were "shamelessly bamboozled" and that the industry's response has often been "too little, too late". It is a scandal that continues to have a devastating impact on steelworker families in my constituency and on thousands more across the country. The case study shows a slowness to respond by regulators. Predatory behaviour is all too common, and more action is needed to tackle it. Rates of genuine criminal enforcement against rogue advisers are low, and advice to steelworkers

remains confusing, so it is vital that the Bill brings forward the protections that should have been in place for steelworkers three years ago.

I welcome the Bill's commitment to strengthening the powers of the Pensions Regulator when it comes to enforcement and penalties; that is overdue. However, I think the Bill still leaves consumers vulnerable to being ripped off through a new market that could be created by the dashboards that have been mentioned. If the Government reject Labour's amendments in the other place, I urge them to provide some answers to the following key questions.

Has the Minister had conversations with the FCA and other agencies about putting in place proper measures for the regulation of any new dashboard market? The FCA, in particular, seems more concerned about what happens in the City of London than what happens in the kitchens of consumers across our country. What accountability measures will be put in place to ensure that regulators protect and prioritise consumers first? People who have issues with their pensions too often face an alphabet soup of different agencies and regulators. What steps will be taken to ensure that regulators' responsibilities are clearer to the consumer?

The Government say that this Bill will ensure that pension schemes are fit for the future. To make sure that that is the case, they must also reflect on the mistakes that have been made in the past. Protecting consumers must always be our top priority. The British Steel pension scandal may have been unique to the south Wales valleys and other steel towns across our country, but the issues that it represents can equally be found in our country's suburbs and cities. I hope that the Government will learn the lessons of the recent past and ensure that consumers and pensioners are protected for the future.

2.16 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The measures in the Bill could transform how we view and engage with pensions, and I welcome the huge progress that that represents. Pensions are technical and complicated, and decisions about saving for our future, and about what to do with all our savings, are incredibly important. Naturally, the Pensions Schemes Bill is incredibly detailed and technical, but its overarching aim is clear: it is about protecting and empowering consumers.

Today I will talk about the tension that arises between giving savers the power to make the best choices, and protecting them from those who seek to scam or exploit them. Across quite a lot of what we do in politics, and in many of the decisions that we make as a nation, there is a tension between supporting free choice in decision making and ensuring that there is a safety net and some degree of protection.

Changes to workplace pensions and the introduction of pension freedoms have meant that individuals now take more decisions about, and responsibility for, their pensions. Free choice and autonomy are dependent on several things, however, including access to the correct information and the ability to understand it; freedom from coercion, either implicit or explicit; and not being duped by scammers. The Bill rightly focuses on those areas.

On access to information, the introduction of a pensions dashboard will lead to real improvements in accessibility and consumer confidence in planning for retirement. For too long, finding out about and understanding

one's pension and savings has been excessively complicated, and information has been inaccessible. The measures in the Bill to require pension funds to provide data represent a huge step in addressing the issue. To achieve the maximum benefit, however, we must work to ensure that full state pension data is included, as well as a means of tracking all small pension pots that an individual may have accrued.

As many hon. Members have said, gone are the days when people had a job for life. Most of us will do many jobs throughout our careers, and I suspect that those in the House are very mindful of that. That leads to people having many small pension pots, adding further complexity and confusion to planning for retirement. The ability to track pension pots and bring all that data together will give individuals the information and the power to make the best decisions for themselves.

It is not sufficient for the information simply to be there; people have to want to access it, know that it is there, and be able to use and understand it. Not everyone will have the confidence or ability to review their pensions data. Arguably, those who are most engaged with their pensions are those who need the least support. We must therefore ensure that, alongside the pensions dashboard, communication to individuals is clear, and that support around it is available to help everyone to build confidence in their ability to manage their financial affairs. Probably for most people at the moment, thinking about their pensions in 20 or 30 years' time and delving into planning for the future is the last thing on their minds, but it is a crucial thing that all of us must do and do early on. It is a question of how we get that message across and ensure that when people think, "You know, I'm going to see where I am at and have a think about how much I'm saving," there is an easy route to getting that information, processing it and starting to make sound financial decisions.

Of course, when people go on that journey, out come the crooks. Sadly, when it comes to scamming, there are many crooks in the world. The Work and Pensions Committee heard harrowing evidence of the scale and impact pension scams can have on people's lives; in some cases people lost their life savings just as they were planning to retire, with no ability to get back into employment to recoup them—the worst possible situation. We know that in times of economic stress, such as the current pandemic, the rate of scams increases. I therefore especially welcome the additional powers for the regulator, the greater sanctions on employers or trustees who do not fulfil their obligations, and the measures in clause 125 to protect individuals from scams. The ability to introduce conditions on a member's right to transfer their pension means safeguards can be added to prevent money being sent to scam accounts, but the scammers will not go away and we must strive to do more.

There is clearly a difficult balance to be struck between enabling an individual to have freedom of choice and protecting those who may be vulnerable to exploitation. The Bill introduces many positive changes and safeguards. It will improve access to data and improve confidence. It also lays the foundation for a vast improvement in how we can engage with pensions and savings, but I remain concerned about those who are vulnerable to exploitation. I therefore urge Ministers to continue to explore ways to identify those who are most vulnerable to exploitation, to crack down on fake webpages, to pursue international crime gangs who are responsible for a lot of such offences, and to work closely with

[Dr Ben Spencer]

industries, charities and the social care sector to ensure that we can protect and support those who are most in need. People should be able to choose to do what they want with their pensions and plan for their future free of the threat of being a victim to a pension scam.

2.22 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to contribute to this very important debate, which I think has revealed quite a refreshing amount of consensus on both sides of the House. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). I agree with many of the points he made in relation to the measures in clause 125.

The Bill represents a welcome step towards ensuring the security and responsible use of UK pension schemes. I particularly welcome clause 124, which addresses the vital issue of climate change: the risk it represents to our long-term socioeconomic security, and the role that pension funds can play as key levers in the decarbonisation effort of our economy. Wales has a proud record on sustainability and climate change mitigation. A commitment to sustainable development is written into our de facto constitution and we were a world leader with our Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. I know the Minister is aware of the groundbreaking work undertaken at the Centre for Alternative Technology, which is located in the constituency of the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams). There is also groundbreaking work undertaken on my side of the Dyfi estuary. In particular, Aberystwyth University boasts the world-leading Centre for Glaciology, while IBERS—the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences—and Aberinnovation campus conduct crucial work on climate change mitigation.

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting on the record my knowledge of mid-Wales and support for so much of what is taking place there. I would be delighted to join him and visit the two institutions in his constituency and in that of his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), when we are allowed to make visits in future.

Ben Lake: That is a very kind offer from the Minister, and I will take him up on it.

Achieving net zero emissions will undoubtedly be a difficult and expensive challenge, yet, as the past few months have shown, the state, with its unrivalled ability to borrow and invest, can effect unprecedented change to our society and economy quite rapidly when there is a desire or need to do so. With around £3 trillion invested in UK pension schemes, pensions represent an equally transformative source of investment, and could support our decarbonisation efforts.

I welcome the requirements in the Bill for pension schemes to assess their exposure to climate change risk. Those requirements are necessary and well overdue. The Economist Intelligence Unit's estimate that climate change could eliminate up to 30% of the world's total manageable assets, along with the fact that the vast majority of UK pension schemes currently do not take climate change risk into account, offer sufficient justification for the introduction of the requirements.

Closer to home, in 2019 Welsh local authority pension funds still had more than £1 billion invested in fossil fuels. That means not only that the pension holders are exposed to future climate change risk, but that the funds are—indirectly at least—undermining collective efforts to decarbonise the economy. I therefore urge the UK Government to consider how they can better work with the Welsh Government to encourage the use of pension wealth to realise decarbonisation and productivity improvements across the four nations of the United Kingdom.

The opportunities are there. In recent years, vital projects such as the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon have gone unrealised, while the UK Government have proven themselves unwilling to finance key aspects of our carbon transition in Wales, including improvements to the Welsh railways. Simply put, we have an opportunity to make pensions work better for Wales, to achieve our climate targets and to meet our international commitments.

I welcome the Bill's increased powers for the pension regulator and the greater urgency for funds to consider climate change risk, but the Bill could go one step further. The finance sector has already taken welcome steps not only towards divestment, but in advancing the environmental, social, and corporate governance agenda. The UK Government could bolster those efforts by amending the Bill so that all default funds are required to reach net zero by 2050, at the latest. That would stimulate green investment, as well as industry development, including better reporting standards and stewardship, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) earlier.

Pension funds have a pivotal role to play in decarbonisation—from influencing companies' boardrooms to invest in a green transition, to protecting pension holders from the risk of climate change. For too long, their transformative potential as investors in that regard has been underutilised, so I welcome the Bill, and particularly clause 124, and hope that the Government can consider strengthening it further so that pension schemes play an even greater part in achieving our vital climate change targets.

2.27 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and to hear about all the fantastic work that my former university is doing in the green sector.

This is an important debate. We are talking about something that is often overlooked and under-discussed: the bedrock of people's futures. The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) summed it up well when he said that this is not about financiers in the City of London; it is about people in their kitchens. It is about people in Tredegar or Tipton—their futures and their livelihoods. It is about making sure that they have a sustainable future for their retirement, and the Bill is vital to ensuring that that can continue.

For people of my generation, in their 20s, pensions are not something we really think about, to be honest. As my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) summed up well, quite often the issue is information. As the data shows, many people now have numerous jobs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) pointed out, some people have up to 11 jobs in their

lifetime. It is about the slip in the drawer—the final notice that people get when they leave but then forget about it, and it goes to the back of their mind.

My first point, then, is about my support for pensions dashboards. It is vital that we can ensure that people make informed decisions about their futures. I support the pensions dashboard provisions in the Bill, because it is absolutely right that we ensure that, as people come to make decisions about their livelihoods and their future and how they are going to ensure it is sustainable, they have the information available. It has been interesting to hear, as a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, how that work has progressed. There is still more to do in this space, though, and that is recognised across the board. Nevertheless, I think we can all agree that it is vital that savers have the freedom to make choices in an informed way.

I want to turn to scams, which has been an overarching point today, particularly in relation to protecting the most vulnerable. I have some sympathy with the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee—perhaps I can call him my right honourable friend—when he talks about the red flag approach. We have heard evidence, summed up by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, of the disastrous effect that these scams have on ordinary working people and how people can lose their livelihoods as a result of someone who comes across as their friend and says to them, “Ignore the warning signs. Of course they are going to say that to you. Of course they are going to tell you not to do it, but it is a risk. Go on—do it.” I absolutely support, and we cannot stop, the freedom of savers to make that choice because I am fundamentally of the view that the person who knows best how to run their own life is the individual themselves, but ensuring that the safeguards are there is vital. I am heartened that the Minister is in a listening mood on this point and I hope that, as the Bill progresses, that listening mood continues. I am sure, from his comments today, that it absolutely will.

We have heard today some interesting evidence about what happens when the scams are finished. The right hon. Member for East Ham made a really good point about Mr R, who lost all that money and now has £1,000 compensation. When it comes to recovery funds and compensating people who have lost out, it is difficult. Ultimately, a lot of the time we are hearing that people are still left in absolutely dreadful positions, so I am heartened by the Minister’s approach. I look forward to hearing, as the Bill progresses and work continues, about the work that the Government will do more widely on this point, because that does not stop here with this Bill. We have all acknowledged that work to protect consumers from these scams and discussions with regulators will carry on as we continue.

I am supportive of and really heartened by the regulatory enforcement and the increased penalties, increased sentences and custodial sentences that are in place. That is absolutely right, because it is important that people cannot be seen to be allowed to get away with this, and they should not be. We need to support consumers who, at the end of the day, are relying on us getting this right.

I briefly want to touch on the point about climate change. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who is not in her place, made the point about ensuring that we encourage

funds to invest in new green technology. Green technology is going to be a vital part of what I call the “industrial flourishing”, particularly in an area such as mine in the Black Country. I am really fortunate to have in my area groups such as the midland housing group that has been pioneering fuel cell—battery cell—technology some 23 years before it has actually been used, and it is investment in technologies such as that that will power through the economic revival as we come out of this pandemic and crisis.

I have kept my comments relatively brief today, because we have had some fantastic, very well thought out contributions. Broadly, I am really happy with the cross-party support for the Bill. I definitely think that there are some probing discussions to be had as a result of the debate today, not least on scams and how we protect some of the most vulnerable consumers. In communities such as mine, particularly in areas such as Wednesbury, Tipton and Oldbury, we have some of the most vulnerable individuals who rely on some of these schemes. They are not wealthy people. They are not people who can ignore their pension pots. They are people ultimately who rely on their savings to get them through their later life, so we need to make sure that we protect my constituents in those areas, and I look forward to working with the Government particularly on that point.

2.34 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): This is the first time that I have seen the Pensions Minister since his sad loss. I just want to say that it is very good to see him back in the Chamber.

I start with clause 123. Like others, I think that schemes that remain open to new members should be treated differently from those that are closed. It is important that this is reflected in the legislation and in the Pensions Regulator’s codes of practice. Schemes that are open to new members have different needs and I hope the Minister will consider supporting the amendment that was tabled in the other place.

If these defined-benefit schemes are treated in the same way as closed schemes, they will simply become unaffordable. They do not have the same de-risk needs that the regulator is seeking to tackle for closed schemes. In fact, the White Paper itself acknowledged this, as it acknowledged that they would have reasonably longer-term objectives. One very good example—in fact, an almost perfect example—is the railway pension scheme, which is a shared cost arrangement, with a 60:40 split between employer and member. Huge hikes in contributions would simply make this scheme unaffordable for both employers and members and it is worth remembering that, however much we think that defined benefit schemes may be on the way out, they still account for over 20% of the UK pension sector, so it is important that we try to look after them.

There is another unintended consequence. There is a danger that, if we go down this route, we could end up with the Pensions Regulator virtually setting pension policy, rather than simply regulating it, because it would be the regulator’s actions that would determine how pension policy unfolds in the year ahead. I am not against the regulator, but everyone here will know that it is a body that has in the past come in for criticism. There is a danger here that, if it were to adopt too cautious an approach, partly through a desire to protect

[*Steve McCabe*]

its own interests, it might well end up acting against the interests of people who are investing in pension schemes. I do not think that the regulator is seeking to do that or that the Government are seeking to do that: it may be an unintended consequence of giving this power to the regulator to treat these schemes as if they are the same thing. It will end up directly influencing policy in relation to defined-benefit schemes in a way that I do not think anybody here really wants. My point is simple: we should do everything that we can to ensure that one of the consequences of the Bill is not to dismantle and effectively force the closure of perfectly viable existing open defined-benefit schemes. I hope the Minister will reflect on that.

I welcome part 4 of the Bill relating to the dashboard. I agree that the first dashboard should be a single non-commercial product, hopefully hosted by MaPS, but I also welcome a choice of platforms with the establishment of commercial dashboards, which need to be properly regulated. I am not so sure about the timescale—about whether there should be an absolute timescale before one is established and others can come along. It seems to me that that might be an issue about personal choice and demand to some extent. There does seem to be some evidence that particular age factors will influence who will use what type of dashboard. There may be other characteristics that would influence that. There is a possibility that a relatively small number of people might use a MaPS dashboard, which is a persuasive argument for at least encouraging some sort of choice and variety in the field. It is also important that the state pension is included in the dashboard. That, for me, is a given.

In terms of the green agenda, I welcome what the Bill offers, but there is a persuasive argument for saying that default pension funds should support Government net zero targets. There is about £3 trillion invested in UK pensions, and that could make a real difference in achieving low-carbon investment. The Economist Intelligence Unit estimates that climate change could wipe \$43 trillion off the global economy—about 30% of the world's manageable assets. So trustees pursuing net zero targets would inevitably be respecting their fiduciary duty to protect members' interests if they were to go down that road. It is not about a choice between being green and their members' interests: it is about recognising what the green challenge is, and how we could use those assets to get much closer to what the Government are seeking.

Gareth Davies: The hon. Gentleman is making some very good points that I would like to add to, as someone who has dealt with many of our country's pension funds. There is a disconnect between what the pensioners and the trustees believe: they would like to see much more investment in climate change initiatives and funds, but most of our pension funds are advised by a handful of consultants who are often a blockage to investment in, for example, ESG—environmental, social and governance—funds. Does he have any thoughts as to how we unblock the consultants aspect of this?

Steve McCabe: That is a good point. I think surveys have been undertaken that show that younger people from the 25-plus age group—there is an age divide in

this—are much more concerned about where their pension investments go. As with most other things, if you are putting the money in, you should have a voice in where it is directed. That seems perfectly reasonable.

Guy Opperman: Let me try to clarify the legitimate point raised by the hon. Gentleman and also the flipside in terms of the argument by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies). The Department for Work and Pensions has driven pension trustees forward to embrace ESG and the path of net zero, and asset managers have been lagging behind. I want to put on record the good work done by the FCA, which I accept has been criticised legitimately in the past. Only last week, Chris Woolard and his team specifically issued guidance that accelerates the asset managers to put them on a parallel path to the pension trustees so that we basically ensure that the original investor, and then the actual manager of the money, are singing from the same hymn sheet.

Steve McCabe: I am grateful to the Minister and acknowledge the points that he has made. I just think that there may be permission to go a bit further in this regard, and that is the point that I want to emphasise.

I support directed advice, particularly where there is any question of a scam. I welcome a power for trustees to intervene. I am happy to support the proposal from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). In my view, it might be better to give the Money and Pensions Service a role in offering limited advice rather than just the guidance so that we try to bridge the gap between guidance and advice. The fundamental difficulty seems to be that, unless people have a particularly big pot and can afford advice, they are denied it, and guidance is not sufficient to protect them or steer them in the right direction. There is an argument for something to bridge that gap, and it might be worth looking at a role for the Money and Pensions Service in doing that.

Finally, I want to go back to where I started and share my concerns that the Bill might be giving too much power to the Pensions Regulator. I was not entirely convinced by the Secretary of State's comments at the outset. There is a legitimate fear that clause 107 has the potential to criminalise a much wider group of people than can possibly be necessary or sensible. I ask the Minister to look at that again and see if we can be absolutely certain that the net has not been cast too wide.

2.45 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the Bill, which is a milestone in the country's journey to a safer, better and greener financial future, in which more people are saving for their old age. I echo the warm words spoken by the Secretary of State about the work of the Pensions Minister, who has a true passion for improving the future not only of his constituents in Hexham but of all our constituents.

This has been an incredibly well-informed debate and I hesitate to add anything, but I do want to bring in my perspective, as someone who used to work on the dark side as a pension fund manager, and to make the

obvious point that there are three main things that ensure that people have a good pension in old age. The first is starting as young as possible. I was interested to hear Members arguing about starting as early as 18. I certainly think that the Government should seriously consider such a provision, if people meet the earnings criterion. The second thing that makes people's pensions better over the long term is tax breaks and employer contributions. The earlier people can pay in the maximum before tax that they are allowed to and get the employer matching that amount, the better off they are going to be in retirement.

The third thing that makes people better off through their pension is lower charges. This subject has not yet come up during this debate, but it is incredibly important to put on the record. The charges in this incredibly competitive industry, in which the UK leads the world, can vary dramatically. I hope that the powers in the Bill will enable our constituents to see much more clearly on their pensions dashboard what they are being charged and for what. As someone who used to work in the industry on the receiving end of the charges, I know there is no doubt that the compounding effect can have a meaningful impact on the final outcome of people's pensions.

Will the Minister comment in his closing statement on the charges that the National Employment Savings Trust levies on our constituents? NEST is the body that was set up because, through auto-enrolment, there will be some very small and uneconomic pots that the industry will not want to take on. I recall from my time on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions that NEST itself charges really quite vicious amounts to people who are putting their money into a NEST scheme. I seem to recall that it was something like 1.8% up front and then an ongoing annual charge of 0.3%, which sounds low, but is not actually that competitive these days. Despite that, I understand that NEST has not been able to make enough money to repay the loan that the taxpayer gave to establish it. I would be interested in an update and in the Minister's thoughts on how we can ensure that people who are using NEST do not end up paying particularly onerous charges.

Let me turn to climate change risk. The Treasury Committee, on which I now serve, is currently doing an inquiry into green finance, and it is clear that the UK has a huge opportunity to make the most of our leadership—not only on climate generally, but also as a financial centre—and to be the go-to place for green finance, green investment and green bond insurance. I heartily endorse the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) for the UK to show the way not just by being the place where other countries come to issue green bonds, but by being the country that issues green bonds itself to invest in greening our economy.

I want to highlight something that we heard clearly in evidence this week. The former Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, has repeated that the cost of climate risk is not being priced into our stock market. There is quite a significant risk that investments in some large companies that form a large part of the index in this country—we should bear in mind how much investment goes into indexed funds—are held as assets that could end up being trapped in value.

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what she is saying, but as for what Mr Mark Carney has said, she will be aware that he is a member of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures. Under the Bill, the UK will be the first G7 country to bring such disclosures into statute. The advantage of that is that the very aspect that she has highlighted as a problem—FTSE 100 companies are not aware of what the risk is from climate change to the way in which they do business—will be tackled, as they will now be forced to disclose that on an ongoing basis to the wider market and individual consumers with pension investments. I believe that the issue raised by Carney, the Treasury Committee and others is addressed in the Bill and the consultation that accompanies it.

Harriett Baldwin: I welcome what the Minister says, and I did not want in any way to undermine the provision in the Bill and the incredible progress that it represents on our journey to a greener financial future. I welcome those steps wholeheartedly, but I wish to highlight that those risks, although disclosed, will be there. Many of our constituents, every month in their payroll, put investments into index-based funds in which those risks are inherent. It is incumbent on us all to recognise that that could be a big driver of UK returns, given that a significant portion of the index consists of carbon-based industries in the UK.

I make that point, and I make the point about charges, because the pensions dashboard will play a vital role in showing people what they are paying for those returns in an environment where interest rates are virtually zero, where the index has quite a lot of climate-affected assets, where charges can be as high as those from NEST, the state-backed provider, and where investment returns could be lower for a protracted period as we recover from the pandemic. It is worth flagging the fact that giving information on charges in particular and the way in which they are compounded over a lifetime will be a powerful part of the very many welcome changes that we can see in this excellent piece of legislation.

2.53 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) set out earlier, there is a great deal in the Bill that the SNP can welcome, including pensions dashboards, allowing trustees to take cognisance of the environmental impacts of the investments under their control, legislation to help avoid the unsuitable transfer of funds, and allowing the Pension Protection Fund to continue. Those are all good and welcome improvements to the regulatory and administrative landscape in which pensions operate.

When it comes to dealing with pensions—as Members have said, that is the most significant investment that many of us make—it is crucial that we are aware of unintended consequences. As a cautionary tale, I remind Members of what happened when the ability of funds to benefit from advance corporation tax was removed. While Treasury coffers have swelled as a consequence, that sounded the death knell for many excellent final salary pension schemes. Those on the Treasury Bench may not care terribly much for that comparison, but it is the sort of cautionary tale with which we would wish to approach this to make sure we are doing our level best

[Richard Thomson]

to avoid similar mistakes arising from past legislation and the present legislation, and it is on that note that I wish to focus my remarks.

The first issue I wish to concentrate on is one addressed by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) in relation to clause 123 and funding requirements for defined-benefit schemes. It is obvious why we would all wish to be assured that schemes are funded to meet the liabilities they have, but if we are to insist on being able to demonstrate that too rigidly, there is a very grave risk that the resulting investment policy that needs to be enacted will become so conservative that it focuses on meeting current liabilities at the expense of delivering future benefits for members within the scheme.

Obviously, that could mean a change in investment strategy away from equities to secure but potentially lower yielding investments, such as bonds, fixed interest investments, property infrastructure and the like, rather than balancing that mix with other types of investment, which might be expected to deliver higher returns over the longer term, and that danger is very real. Paragraph 210 of the consultation the Pensions Regulator is undertaking says:

“We consider that trustees’ focus should be to ensure the security of members’ accrued benefits rather than to ensure the provision of future benefits.”

An estimated 21% of defined-benefit scheme members in the UK belong to schemes that are still open to new members, and if the approach that seems to be favoured by the Pensions Regulator is followed for schemes that are open to new members, then as surely as night follows day, scheme investments will begin to ossify in favour of those preserved benefits, at the expense of the ability of these schemes to absorb new members, and that is something that will slowly be closed off to the detriment of those potential new members.

Clause 123 recognises the difference there needs to be in an investment strategy between schemes that are closed to new members and those that remain open. I do not believe that it is or should be the intention of guidance to close down such schemes to new members, but I think that is a danger this will have. Enshrining in legislation the ability of trustees to reflect the characteristics of the schemes that they manage in their investment strategies would help to avoid such an adverse and presumably unintended consequence. I encourage the Minister to ensure that such a clause or something that has similar effect is included in the final legislation.

The second point on which I wish to focus relates to something that is not addressed in the Bill at present. It relates to the treatment of multi-employer industry pension schemes, and I would like to cite the example of the Plumbing & Mechanical Services (UK) Industry Pension Scheme. I state for the record my interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary group for plumbers’ pensions. For Members who are not familiar with it, this is an industry-wide occupational scheme that provides defined benefits. It has over 35,000 members and has, over its life to date, had about 3,500 employers involved in it. The scheme opened in 1975, and it closed to future accrual of benefits from the end of June 2019, with about 350 employers participating in it at that point in

time. One of the issues here is the size of the scheme relative to the remaining employers, many of which are small businesses.

Employer debt legislation contains a number of statutory easements, which are available to many employers facing a section 75 debt under pension legislation—the Pensions Act 1995—when they close their businesses. However, those statutory easements do not cover all situations, such as where an employer has retired or has ceased trading, where the overall amount of the liability in relation to the scheme is small in comparison with the scheme’s size or where an employer has triggered a section 75 debt prior to the closure of a pension scheme to future accrual. In this particular instance, the trustee has been able to apply some existing easements allowed for in legislation, but there are a number of particularly sensitive cases where easements cannot be applied. As a result, individuals face personal bankruptcy, and companies that would otherwise be financially viable face being forced into insolvency.

I want to go into further detail about this case. The trustee currently has 72 employers to consider pursuing for payment where existing easements may not apply. Of those, 43 are incorporated and 29 are unincorporated. Of the 29 unincorporated employers, 20 have retired, and the existing statutory easements cannot apply where the employer has ceased trading. In these cases, there is no ongoing business, but because those employers were unincorporated, they have personal liability to the scheme, which means that their personal assets can be seized by the trustees and used to settle the employer’s debt to the scheme. The trustees advise that, under section 75, these 20 employers collectively have a liability to the scheme of £7 million. Even if each of those employers was made personally bankrupt, only a fraction of that £7 million is likely to be recovered.

I spoke this morning over the telephone to a member of a small local plumbing business in my constituency. He had written to me at the start of the year, and I will give the House a flavour of what he said, because his experience is sadly not untypical. He said:

“I am approaching retirement age, but retiral will trigger my section 75 debt as the law stands at the moment. My father started our employees on the... pension scheme almost forty years ago, long before it was mandatory to have a pension scheme. When I told him about this section 75 issue, my dad burst into tears and said ‘What have I done to you’. I said it was not his fault as he was only doing what he thought was a good thing for our employees by entering them into a pension scheme. Surely after almost 40 years paying into the scheme, all the payments that were due, it can’t result in me losing my house, my office building and my own personal money, which is by no means substantial, and being declared bankrupt.”

There are two methods that could be used to address that, and my party will table amendments on this in Committee. One is the introduction of a trustee discretion to allow trustees not to pursue a section 75 debt when it is below a de minimis threshold. The other is the alteration of deferred debt arrangements to permit employers in a scheme closed to future accrual to apply for a deferred debt arrangement, provided that they meet other statutory tests.

That is exactly the sort of thing that I mean by unintended consequences, because I cannot believe for one moment that anyone would have deliberately set up a scheme or put in place a law of that nature with these

sorts of outcome in mind. I hope that my party's amendments in Committee will be accepted and incorporated, because the Bill provides the best opportunity that many will have to get these issues resolved and ease that burden on their minds.

On the whole, this is a good Bill, and we find much in it to support. It gives opportunities to improve the pensions and retirement savings landscape, and I hope that the Government will remain open to further suggestions on how it might be improved as it progresses and heed the warnings, so that we can avoid these unintended consequences.

3.2 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), who made a lot of important points. It is also a pleasure and a novelty for me to speak without a time limit, but I will try not to test the House's patience too much.

This is a very important Bill that delivers on our manifesto commitments and has consumer welfare at its heart, and I am glad that it largely enjoys cross-party support. I welcome the speeches from around the Chamber. I particularly welcome the fact that colleagues from the 2019 intake are speaking in the debate, and I see that there are another three of them yet to speak. Either we are not as young as we look, or we have taken the advice to heart that it is never too early to start planning for retirement.

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on pension scams and someone who has a general interest in these matters, I am pleased to speak in favour of the important work that the Government have been undertaking. This important legislation will benefit members of the public and help people to plan for their future. It will have an important impact on people saving into pensions for their retirement, and will ensure that reckless bosses cannot gamble with people's savings. It will transform the way that people get information about their retirement savings, and it will empower the Pensions Regulator by making it tougher and making its guidance clearer.

We have come a long way on pensions in the last decade, and particularly on automatic enrolment, which most colleagues welcome, but in some ways, we are still in the 20th century. Some pension schemes still provide once-a-year statements. That might well reflect the view that pensions are a long-term investment, and we do not want people to panic as their value goes up and down week by week, but when those statements are frequently being sent to old addresses, it is a problem. People have an average of 11 jobs throughout their career, and with automatic enrolment, they are now likely to have nearly as many pension pots. We really need to bring this into the digital age. At present, these information failures make it harder for individuals to get a holistic view of the pensions they are building up, even if they have the help of a financial adviser. Control over our pension provision, which is often our largest financial asset, is hugely important, and the pensions dashboards will be a huge step forward for consumers.

Let me pick up something my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said. Making charges more visible to everybody would be a huge benefit, because sunlight is often the best disinfectant.

It will drive out schemes that are not competitive and push people into better-value schemes. Also, the recent reforms we have made mean that individuals can choose to bear more responsibility for risk and decision making, so it is right that they should have access to the information they need to make those informed choices. That will let them plan better for retirement and enable them to have good financial wellbeing as they get older.

I have heard the concerns from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and others about the dashboards, but I would say to them that I think regulation and legislation in all fields must go where the consumer is. A paragraph from the *Which?* report of February 2018 on dashboards states:

"It is clear that even if the government was to decide that there should only be a single government-run dashboard, other private sector dashboards would continue to develop outside of the regulated market. These may rely on screen-scraping or other potentially unsecure forms of transmitting customer data. They would even be able to screen-scrape data from the official government-run dashboard. If there were any problems with private sector dashboards then the consumer would have no easy method of obtaining redress, as they would remain outside regulation and outside the remit of the Financial Ombudsman Service".

I cannot really put it better than that. Private sector dashboards are inevitable. Indeed, there are commercial products out there already, looking at consolidation and so on. Drawing on my own experience in FinTech, I would say that these private sector solutions are likely to be more innovative and more responsive to consumer needs than the Government-driven solution.

Neil Gray: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I do not disagree. I understand that commercial dashboards are coming; that is not where the dispute is. What I and others across the House are looking for is for the Government to invest in and have a period to allow the Money and Pensions Service dashboard to bed in as the default position for consumers to go to, where they know they can get trusted impartial information about their pensions, and then to allow the commercial dashboards to go from there. That is the very reasonable position that the Lords took, and I think that we should agree to it in Committee. I ask the hon. Member to reflect on that.

Aaron Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I ask the Minister to comment on that in his summing up, but I reiterate that we have to go where the consumer is. I understand the point the hon. Gentleman is making. We need clear supervision and a robust regulatory framework, as provided for in the Bill, and we need a non-commercial service, but we have to be realistic: people are going to go to these services first, and they are already springing up. We cannot be constantly trying to catch up. In this regard, I note the earlier intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who is not in his place at the moment. These dashboards will encourage consolidation, and that may or may not be a good thing in specific cases, so we must continue to ensure that consumers have access to appropriate advice and that any administration fees are reasonable when consolidation takes place.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of members of the public being scammed out of their pensions. The FCA and the Pensions Regulator

[Aaron Bell]

report that in 2018, 180 people reported to Action Fraud that they had been victims, losing on average £82,000 each. A total of nearly £31 million has been reportedly lost to pension scammers since 2017, according to complaints filed with Action Fraud. I therefore welcome the measures in clause 125.

Let me personalise the scams issue for a moment. A couple of my Newcastle-under-Lyme constituents contacted me about their experience earlier this year. They have had to make very unwelcome changes to their retirement plans as a result. They, together with thousands of others, were convinced by commission-driven sales people to move their money into a scheme called Dolphin Trust, which is now called the German Property Group. The Minister might be aware of the scheme. It was set up to buy derelict listed German buildings in prime locations and redevelop them. In many cases, pension holders who invested were told, by unregulated salesmen who were paid up to 20% commission, that they would almost double their money if they left their savings in the scheme for five years. The scheme was often recommended by independent financial advisers, who advised their clients to invest via a self-invested personal pension.

As the House can imagine, the results were not as advertised. I thank the Treasury for its help with this case so far, but I would welcome further engagement with the Minister when that is possible. My understanding is that this specific case is currently with the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. That is the real human impact of retirement scams on people in my constituency, and, I am sure, in the constituencies of Members all around the House. I understand that the Government have already taken measures against so-called introducers, but I welcome the measures in clause 125 to strengthen consumer protection. As the Secretary of State put it in her opening speech, we need to have the option of

“prison for pension pot pinchers”.

I want briefly to touch on another couple of the elements of the Bill. I know that postmen and women, in particular, in Newcastle-under-Lyme will welcome the provisions enabling the introduction of collective defined contribution schemes. These have cross-party and industry support, and unions including the Communication Workers Union, as well as Master Trust and other pension providers, have expressed a desire to see more people benefiting from the advantages and risk-sharing that collective defined contribution schemes can bring. I think that that is broadly welcomed across the House. I will also mention the good work being done so that we use our pensions for the good of the planet, and the requirement that the Bill puts on trustees and managers, with a view to securing effective governance over the effects of climate change, and publishing information. That is not being prescriptive; it is about informing and empowering schemes and individuals to make decisions.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to the Minister for his passion for this subject and his willingness to engage with us. I also echo the remarks of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) about the Minister's personal tragedy earlier this year. The sympathy of the whole House is with him.

3.10 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): As a financial planner for many years, I can confirm that for a large majority of the UK population the topic of pensions is something to be avoided and put off to a later date. Looking at the sparseness of today's call sheet and at the Benches around me, I think that may be the case for many right hon. and hon. Members. Many UK pensions involve complicated borrowing and are hard to understand, and we cannot all be pension geeks like me and the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds).

In April 2006 we went through pension simplification—a misnomer if ever there was one. That was about the time that I was becoming involved in pensions, and if what came out of pension simplification is simple, I would have hated to work with what came before. This does not need to be complicated. Pensions are the simplest of things—they are an investment with a tax-efficient wrapper around them. People save for their retirement, with tax benefits as an incentive to do so. It is no more complicated than that.

Other industries have adapted and evolved to suit new technologies as they come up. The banking industry is a great example of that, and it has embraced new technological advances such as online banking. More than 76% of people in the UK now use online banking regularly, compared with just a third of people back in 2007. Just as the banking industry developed to meet the needs of modern society, it is now time for the pension sector to do the same and move into the 21st century, and the Bill seems to be the first step in doing just that.

A recent YouGov survey found that three in five workers have no idea how much they have saved in their pension, and more than a quarter of working-age people with a pension say that they never check what is in it. Given the United Kingdom's increasingly ageing population, it is more important than ever that individuals plan for the future and protect their savings, but currently, there are barriers to doing that.

As I have said in other debates in the House, my main reason for being involved with the Conservative and Unionist party is one of empowerment, and of enabling people to take control of their lives, make better decisions, and shape their own futures. Once again, I am proud to be a member of the party that empowers people to have the freedom and knowledge to make informed choices about their lives, and form the retirement that they want and deserve.

The Bill enables people to make better decisions about their pension by giving them access to their pension savings in one place. Like other hon. Members, I support the idea of the pensions dashboard, which will make it much easier for people to see information about their pensions online. With all their savings in one place, people will be more likely to keep track of them and engage with their pension pot, which will allow them to understand their pension savings and make better choices along the way.

I remain cautious, however, because a little information can be a bad thing, and I worry a little about individuals who would benefit from professional advice trying to take complex decisions on their own, rather than seeking a properly qualified financial planner. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell)

said, on average people have 11 jobs in their lifetime, and under the current auto-enrolment regime, they may have a different pension pot each time. It is therefore hard for them to monitor and keep up to date with their pension savings, to say nothing of the millions of people who have lost track of pensions from jobs they had decades ago.

The Minister and I have had many conversations about pension tracing, and I remain hopeful that because pensions have always been logged by a national insurance number, there is potential within the new dashboard system for a way to proactively inform individuals about pensions that they might have and not be aware of, without their needing to know the details of a job that might have been a significant time ago. According to the Association of British Insurers, 20% of adults admit to having lost a pension pot. The actual figure will be much higher, because some people will not even realise that it has happened. Research suggests that there is almost £20 billion in forgotten pensions; recovering that would be a massive boost for pensioners in these difficult times.

Mr L, for example, visited my office a couple of years ago wanting to access his £50,000 pension to clear the remaining balance of his mortgage and give him a little comfort. After a bit of investigation, we uncovered that he actually had £260,000, and we made a new plan not only to clear the mortgage but for him to retire seven years earlier than planned. That can be a transformative process to go through.

If we want to encourage people to engage with their pensions and their retirement plans, their pensions data needs to be readily available and we need to give them the right to choose how they engage with it, whether that is online, through an app on their phone, through the Money and Pensions Service or, indeed, via their own provider. The right to choose has already been extended to other areas of people's financial lives. With the creation of a pensions dashboard, that right will finally be extended to pensions, and people will have the freedom to make their own decisions about their future.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's plans for ensuring that data on multiple pensions cannot be viewed by competitor providers and that people's personal information remains protected from predatory sales practices. I have some sympathy with the points made by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and others who said that the MaPS platform should be primary, but I recognise that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme just mentioned, innovation often lies in the hands of private firms, normally to the benefit of the consumer.

Moving on from dashboards, the existing pension frameworks—defined-benefit and defined-contribution schemes—can create significant risk and cost for employers on one hand, and do not provide the most predictable retirement income for scheme members on the other. In addition to the dashboard, individuals in some circumstances will be provided with greater freedom of choice through the introduction of collective defined-contribution schemes, which are a better, more affordable and more reliable alternative for both scheme members and employers.

Under those schemes, savers in a company can pool their money collectively in a single fund that pays an annual pension income. By addressing the binary nature of UK pensions legislation, the Bill will give individuals

greater opportunities to invest in a variety of schemes that benefit them and their needs. As risk is shouldered collectively across the membership rather than by individual members, collective defined-contribution schemes will lead to greater stability and security. That is just another measure that shows that the Government are listening and working with the needs and views of both the industry and our constituents.

Let me touch briefly on charges and costs, which others have mentioned, and sound a note of caution that I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will heed. For many years, there has been a huge focus on costs and charges in pensions, and I worry that it is sometimes skewed the wrong way. I have seen a number of clients over the years who have transferred pension funds into options with much lower charging structures, only to see significantly lower growth. Something with a 1% charge that delivers a 5% return is a much better option than something that has a 0.2% charge but returns only 3%.

I am pleased that the Bill will strengthen the powers of the Pensions Regulator so that members of pension schemes have increased protection for their savings. That gives a fresh set of dentures to a regulator that previously may have lacked a little bite, and it is a welcome reform. Although the regulator performs an incredibly important role in protecting workplace pensions and building people's confidence in retirement saving, there has been a significant change in the industry since its creation in 2005, and it is time that it had some more authority, so I am glad that the Bill will update its role and powers so that it is fit to meet the needs of pensions in the 21st century.

The regulator will have greater powers to deter reckless behaviour, such as extended information-gathering powers, and new civil and criminal sanctions will be introduced. If we are to encourage people to save in their pensions for their future, it is right that they should feel confident that their savings will be protected by a robust regulatory structure. The measures in the Bill will build important trust in pension schemes and put consumer interests first.

Ultimately, the Bill showcases the heart of the Conservative and Unionist Government's values: empowerment, freedom and choice. It will give people the freedom to make informed decisions about their future, the ability to choose where to save their pension and the confidence to make the right decision about their future and retirement, knowing that it will be protected, and I am pleased to support it.

In closing, may I also take a moment to say on my behalf—and I am sure, on behalf of hon. and right hon. Members from all parts of the House—how pleased we all are to see my hon. Friend the Minister at the Dispatch Box after his recent tragic loss? I know the whole House was devastated to hear his news, and we hope that he and his partner are doing well. Others have paid tribute to his passion and assiduity in preparing the Bill, and I add my voice to their praise.

3.20 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is an honour to follow the self-confessed pension geek and guru that is my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts). I hope that when I come to draw my pension, it is revealed, as in the story of his constituent, that it is

[*Duncan Baker*]

actually five times greater than I ever expected it to be. I am sure it was all down to the wonderful advice that was given.

Rob Roberts: Past performance is no indication of future guaranteed performance. The small print says so quite clearly.

Duncan Baker: If I wrote a headline for this Bill, it would be something along the lines of, “If you want to save the planet, start a pension.” That would chime very well with my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who is encouraging young people to start a pension, as I am myself, but in a roundabout way, this Bill does just that. While the thought of pensions may give rise to a tendency for many to glaze over and think about things another day, this piece of legislation is a welcome move. That is proven by the wide base of support. As the Minister has been roundly thanked, I will applaud him and add my thanks, because this is a really great piece of legislation.

While I cannot profess to having the same level of knowledge as some Members in the Chamber today, I was in a former life a finance director, and I recall feeling some dread when auto-enrolment first arrived. I remember bemoaning the scheme, which at the time was more expensive to administer than the meaningful contributions that an employee would pay in when the rates were so low. How wrong those cynics were, including me, because its success speaks for itself. We now have more than 10 million workers in an auto-enrolment scheme in this country. People did not opt out when the contributions increased. Nearly 90% of eligible employees participate in a workplace pension now.

With an ageing population, the need to save for one's retirement is in anyone's view vitally necessary, much like many of the constituent parts of the Bill. Auto-enrolment has created inertia to save. It trusts people to think about their retirement, but the next stage is to bring back control—this is why the Bill is so good and important—so that people know what they have and where it is. As the old saying goes, “If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it”, and for that reason I wholeheartedly welcome the implementation of the pensions dashboard in the Bill.

It is a common fact—we have heard it many times today—that people lose control of their pension pots. People move jobs many times throughout their career. We have heard it is about 11 times on average, and there is some £20 billion in pension pots that people no longer necessarily know the location of. The dashboard is a progressive and necessary step in continually improving our pension system and empowering people to know what they have and where it is, not to mention beneficial for pension companies and contributors given that we are always told how small pots are not the most beneficial or economically efficient. What is more, the Bill gives clarity, transparency and support to help make people make informed decisions.

I welcome clause 125. We have heard time and again of the dreadful and immoral scams to which people have sadly fallen victim. For many, pension savings are their largest financial asset. If someone falls victim to a scam, their loss can be just shy of £100,000. Adequate

restrictions to protect consumers with a layer of due diligence and a red flag are a sensible brake, which will help to avoid such repercussions.

I welcome the introduction of collective defined-contribution schemes. CDCs create a collective pot from which everyone who owns and shares the fund can benefit, and we are already hearing welcoming noises about that. The Bill provides legislation and the regulatory framework for new collective money purchase schemes and, as such, it helps to widen the desire for alternative collective arrangements.

But back to saving the planet. Clause 124 represents a hugely significant step, and it is in tune with the speech that the Prime Minister gave yesterday. Climate change continues, quite rightly, to take centre stage in so much of our legislative agenda. This is the first pensions Bill ever to mention climate change. Pension trustees must now consider climate change as financially material to members' investments. Under the regulations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures, schemes must consider the response to climate change as both a risk and an opportunity in their governance risk management strategy, and they must publish that information.

When we think of the billions upon billions invested in pension funds, we can see that allowing pension schemes and the market to embrace the green agenda will enable people to put their own savings into helping us to achieve net zero. Perhaps for the first time ever—even if we never quite thought we would say this—saving for our retirement can now be seen as saving the planet as well.

3.26 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I will not be speaking for as long as I did yesterday in the Adjournment debate. I will just say a few words about the Minister, who is a great neighbour. He is the sort of neighbour that an MP would want to have next door, and he is always incredibly helpful and friendly. I echo the words of some of my hon. Friends about the tragedy that he and his wife, who are both personal friends of mine, have suffered. I wish them all the very best for the future. I add my name to the tributes that the Secretary of State paid to him in his role as Pensions Minister. He has been superb in government for many years. Whether he will continue in that role or be elevated—I hope he will be—who knows? He has certainly been great in his job.

I pay tribute to some of my hon. Friends from the 2019 intake who have made contributions. My hon. Friends the Members for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) and for Delyn (Rob Roberts) have a huge amount of personal experience in this area, and it is great to see that expertise being brought to the Floor of the House.

For many people, the two major contributions that Parliament and the Conservative Government have made to their lives will probably be the long-term positives of the last 10 years of auto-enrolment and the raising of the threshold at which people start to pay income tax. Those are probably the two largest financial measures of which they will feel the effects over a long period of their lives. The Bill builds on a lot of that great work.

The CDC scheme in part 1 is a welcome measure. I am glad that it has union support, and I know that Royal Mail workers in my constituency are looking forward to benefiting from it. On strengthening the powers of the regulator, from my conversations during the last few months with Members on both sides of the House about pensions issues that have affected their constituents over many years, it is clear that any such strengthening will be welcomed. I am glad to see that in part 3. On part 5, we can all welcome the extra choice and empowerment delivered to our constituents by the introduction of the green initiatives that other hon. Members have mentioned. I know that part 4 and the dashboard have been the subject of much debate today. I have had 11 jobs in the past five years, never mind a lifetime, so I very much welcome the proposal. However, I hope that the voters of Durham North West will change the habit of a lifetime and keep me in place for many years to come.

An aspect of auto-enrolment is that people go into it when they are aged 22 or earning over £10,000 a year. Many of my constituents start work at 18 and it would be good to see their circumstances considered, not necessarily by this Bill but in future, so that young people contribute as soon as they enter work. I started work at 16 and can only imagine the extra pension pot that I would have—maybe even as large as the one that my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn mentioned—if I had contributed from an even earlier age. When people start contributing early, those contributions have the greatest cumulative effect. I hope that, when the Government think of people in constituencies like mine who go straight into work at the age of 18, they will consider introducing measures that make saving from the earliest possible point even easier.

The Bill is forward thinking and builds on a lot of the good work done by Members in all parts of the House over the past few years. It strengthens protections for people and provides clarity, particularly in the proposal for a dashboard. As someone with many pension pots that I have now managed to amalgamate, I quite understand that this is an important step in the right direction for those who change jobs frequently or who are in different sorts of temporary work. I welcome the Bill.

3.31 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): First, I express my thanks to Members of the other place for introducing the Bill and for their work in bringing it to its current form. Clearly, much expertise and scrutiny have been brought to bear.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge that life expectancy is increasing and that that is good news. It also brings challenges and that is a good problem to have. Older people may now need a pension income that will last for 20, 30 or even 40 years and we should welcome that. As I said in the debate last week on the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill, the triple-lock guarantee for pensions has never been more important. It is clear that many working-age people, and especially younger people, are not saving, and are simply unable to save enough, for their retirement. Final salary pension schemes, such as defined-benefit schemes, are increasingly closing to new entrants. This will mean that the state pension will become an increasingly important source of retirement income in the future. That makes this Bill and its

consideration of how best to manage workplace pension schemes even more vital. As a result of the work in the other place, there is much to welcome.

I have had a number of jobs over my time in employment. I cannot beat 11 in five years but, at the last count, I am currently a member of four different pension schemes—both private and public sector and both defined-benefit and defined-contribution schemes. It is clear that, as work changes and more people move from employer to employer, such circumstances are more likely, and I welcome the Bill's acknowledgment of this increasing reality for many.

I will restrict my remarks to a small number of areas. Other Members have outlined the details of parts 1 and 2 and the proposal to introduce collective defined-contribution schemes and collective money purchase schemes to allow savers to take advantage of market highs and avoid the lows. It makes sense to offer a more balanced alternative to having all the risk lying with either the sponsoring employer, as in defined-benefit schemes, or with the employee, as in defined-contribution schemes. The cross-party employer and employee support outlined in the Government's consultation reflects that and, having outlined the importance of ensuring inter-generational fairness last week, I highlight the Lords amendment to clause 27, which would provide that, whenever the pensions regulator issued a notice requiring a scheme to submit a supervisory return, it must include a requirement that the trustees assess the extent to which the scheme is operating in a manner that is fair to all its members. I seek a response from the Minister on that amendment and on the steps that the Government are taking to ensure that such fairness is there from the outset of any CDC scheme.

On part 4, like many, I welcome the creation of dashboards that will allow people not only to see their current pension provisions all in one place, but even to find pensions they potentially did not know that they had. That is currently estimated to be one in five people. The burden of responsibility for risk-taking lies increasingly with the individual. They have more flexibility, but they need to have as much information as possible made available to them so they can make the best possible decisions and be protected from the scams that many Members have mentioned.

The recommendation for dashboards dates back to 2016, and I am disappointed that it has taken until now for us to see concrete measures. Further details on timescales for dashboards would be appreciated. In addition, I am interested in hearing from the Minister about the DWP proposals to allow a pension to follow an individual from job to job. Given the increasing responsibility of individuals, that is one way to ensure that people understand their entitlements, save accordingly and, potentially, reduce their dependence on the state pension in future.

On part 5, I want to highlight, like many, clause 123 and the amendment accepted in the other place relating to the treatment of open and closed defined-benefit schemes. I understand that the Pensions Regulator is concerned that the failure and subsequent cost to fund DB schemes is becoming a risk, but a great many DB schemes are still open. For them, being forced to de-risk would mean that they would not be able to continue to afford paying out as high a pension to their members.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

In other words, DB schemes would be forced to make less risky investments, such as on Government bonds, which means that they would create less of a return on their investments, but would still be required to pay out the same amount. Given that Government bonds and other low-risk investments will have very low rates for the longer term, as a result of covid, the risks to such DB open schemes' viability becomes even more stark.

Yesterday, like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), I met executives of the railways pension scheme. They explained that closed schemes have a fixed end point in sight. They need readily available assets to pay pensions, and they invest in lower risk assets by default. Open-to-new-member schemes are more balanced, with new members replacing older leavers. Such schemes' needs and objectives are fundamentally different, and they do not need to sell assets. Primary legislation is needed to recognise the different characteristics, and I hope that the Minister will indicate whether that will be supported in Committee.

Finally, the Liberal Democrats welcome clause 124—it is a welcome step—and the Secretary of State's comments on asset managers earlier. Beyond covid, the climate emergency remains the biggest future challenge to the UK. As I said at the outset, there is much to welcome in the Bill, but I echo the comments of the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), that it does not address previous pension injustices, including the persistence of a gender pension gap and the situation experienced by previous members of the plumbers' pension scheme; like the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), I am a member of the APPG, and have affected constituents. I hope that those situations will be looked at further in Committee.

3.37 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Those who built Britain deserve nothing less than security and dignity in retirement. Pensions is not an easy policy area. It requires, on the one hand, careful long-term planning and management of the public finances and, on the other, the role that we play in this House in laying down the statutory framework for pensions. That is why, in government, Labour sought to establish consensus.

We introduced the Pensions Commission, which charted a new direction for United Kingdom pensions policy. Chaired by Adair Turner, it gained widespread agreement to reforms that, even at the time of the establishment of the commission, had been regarded as unthinkable. The lasting legacy of that was auto-enrolment, transforming the lives of millions, with 10 million more people now saving into a workplace pension.

I now turn to the Bill, with that spirit of constructive engagement in mind, and with a number of questions arising out of today's debate. I begin by thanking the Pensions Minister for his outstanding work in carrying forward so much of the Bill. He is highly regarded across the House, as we heard from the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and others.

In an unprecedented period, I am grateful to the Minister for the fact that, because of his persistence and engagement with us, because of the effective cross-party working there has been and because of the determination of those who have supported important measures in

the Bill, it has finally made it to this stage. I add just one other point: it is greatly to the credit of the hon. Gentleman that, in the most difficult of circumstances, he has forged forward. I simply say that, on this side of the House, we stand in solidarity with him and his wife.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and the Secretary of State have said, the Bill, as first introduced in the House of Lords, focused on three key areas: first, CDC schemes; secondly, the role of the Pensions Regulator; and thirdly, the pensions dashboard. Part 5 also included provisions on DB scheme funding and transfer rights. Now the Bill contains one further key area, and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) was right when he said that it is the first time that such a measure has appeared in pensions legislation. From the outset, it was our strong view that the Bill offered an opportunity to make progress on the role of pension schemes in combating climate change. Originally, there was not a single reference to climate change or to environmental concerns in the Bill. Now, there is a set of provisions in clause 124, headed "Climate change risk", which require those managing pension funds to take climate targets into account in their overall governance and to disclose climate change risks and opportunities.

I pay tribute to the hard work of our colleagues in the House of Lords and those who supported them on a cross-party basis for putting climate commitments for pension funds into UK legislation for the first time ever. That is a tremendous achievement of which those who successfully argued for such provisions, including Baroness Sherlock, Lord McKenzie and Baroness Drake, should be proud. I thank not only those in the Lords for their level of support, but the range of organisations outwith Parliament, including ShareAction, the TUC, and commercial companies such as Aviva, for some of the necessary measures that we now see in the Bill.

I have one further point on climate change. In exchanges on the Floor of the House earlier this year, the Pensions Minister agreed that, at the appropriate stage, we should hold a climate change pensions summit. I hope that today he will reaffirm that commitment, not least because of this excellent debate and the excellent contributions from the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and others who said that, during this great historic challenge of climate change, we are seeing not only the immense potential of investment by pension funds, but the extent to which that will greatly benefit pension schemes. Such a summit would be very welcome indeed.

On CDC schemes, I welcome the work that has been done by the Communication Workers Union and its deputy general secretary, Terry Pullinger, and by those in Royal Mail to bring us to this point. I am talking about a groundbreaking pension scheme forging a new and exciting pathway to a better pension for around 130,000 Royal Mail employees. This represents a truly revolutionary milestone for the UK pensions landscape. We support the provisions in the Bill that finally set up a framework for that to happen. If one looks internationally, at the experience of the Dutch, for example, we are talking about pension outcomes that are over and above—that are 20% and 30% better than—the traditional falling back on DC savings pots for those who are members of the scheme. It is important to be clear that

we will always defend good defined-benefit schemes and the provisions in this Bill must not undermine existing schemes. I would welcome the Minister's committing himself to that.

Turning to the role of the Pensions Regulator, we support the strengthening of the existing sanctions regime by the introduction of new criminal offences and higher penalties for wrongdoing. The pensions landscape has been troubled in recent years by scandals, including those involving BHS and Carillion, to name just a few. Beyond the newspaper headlines, the mismanagement of pension funds was catastrophic for the scheme members involved. It is right that those who intentionally or knowingly mishandle pension schemes, or endanger workers' pensions, should face severe penalties. That is why we wholeheartedly support the relevant provisions in the Bill, which I have termed the "Philip Green" clauses.

Crucially, we need to go further and to ensure that, on this issue of scams, decisive action must be taken at the next stage. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) rightly said that more needs to be done. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) told a harrowing story about the terrible consequences of workers who fall victim to pension scams. I always remember the terrible story, from when the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018 went through the House, of the Port Talbot shift worker who burst into tears when he met the Pensions Advisory Service, because he had been seduced into transferring out of his good historic scheme into a far inferior scheme. He was in tears because he had seen all those he supervised on his shift follow his example and all lose out as a consequence.

There are sharks out there, and pensioners and future pensioners need to be protected against them, which is why I welcome the strong commitment to debate in the next stages. Crucially, we hope we will arrive at a framework such that if an innocent individual is being seduced into making the wrong decision, alarm bells ring and it does not go ahead—the red flags have been described in this debate.

The pensions dashboard is an innovation that we support. There were some interesting contributions in what was an excellent debate—for example, from the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford on the nature of pensions in modern Britain. The dashboard is truly a step in the right direction. We have always supported the concept of allowing people to access information about their pension savings more easily. We also support the idea—mentioned in contributions by the hon. Members for Amber Valley, for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell)—that individual citizens should be able to access information, including through the dashboard, on costs and charges.

Where we appear to differ from the Government is in our strong view that the dashboard should be run firmly in the interests of the public. It should be publicly owned, free at the point of use and available to all. We have agreed to disagree on that—the path down which the Government are going is that there will be a public dashboard and commercial dashboards—but Labour secured amendments in the other place to guarantee a one-year head start for a publicly owned dashboard before commercial rivals are allowed to enter the market,

and to prevent commercial transactions on dashboards without primary legislation. Given the scams and scandals that have blighted the pensions world, the dashboard should not become another tool by which savers can be targeted by commercial initiatives that may harm their savings. I am concerned by soundings from the Government suggesting they will go back on these positive amendments to the Bill, so I ask the Minister: will a public dashboard be first? What is the Government's intention on ever allowing transactions on the dashboard at any point?

Let me turn to other areas of concern. There were powerful contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak and the hon. Members for Gordon (Richard Thomson) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on the issue of open and closed schemes. As the Minister is aware, there are grave concerns about the impact of the Bill's provisions on open DB schemes. Prior to my becoming a Member of Parliament, in my former role in the old Transport and General Workers Union and then Unite, I worked hard to defend good DB schemes, such as the local government pension scheme.

As I said earlier, I do not for one moment accept the premise that somehow DB schemes are history or are not worth protecting. DB schemes currently have 10.5 million members, with £1.5 trillion under management. Those assets can be invested in sustainable and long-term ways, such as in infrastructure projects and initiatives—including those with a positive approach to climate change—as well as generating the best possible return for the scheme members. They remain a crucial part of the pensions landscape, so it is a legitimate concern that the Bill does not adequately recognise the difference between DB schemes that are open to new members and those that are closed. The former includes many public sector schemes. By overlooking that distinction, the Bill risks imposing overly conservative—with a small c—measures on open DB schemes that may ultimately threaten their sustainability.

With that in mind, we supported in the other place clause 123, which is aimed at addressing the issue and protecting the 1.1 million ordinary members of schemes that are currently open to new members and the further 7.6 million people who are members of schemes still open to future accrual. The Minister has expressed some concerns over the wording of clause 123 but does not necessarily seem to agree with its intent. Is he willing to confirm that he is open to working with us, across party lines, on appropriate amendments for discussion in Committee?

The Bill is welcome—of that there is no doubt—but there are issues it does not address. The continuing cause of grievance, absolutely understandably so, on the part of the Allied Steel and Wire steelworkers is a desperate one. Many worked for decades, paying 100% of their pensions only to find, many years later, that they may only receive half of what they are entitled to. That is despite the fact that their campaigning led to legal changes that protected the retirement funds of many other members of wound up schemes. They have been fighting for their full pensions for almost 20 years. Tragically, some have died before getting the retirement income that should have been theirs to begin with. The problem is a complex one; the injustice is clear. Is the Minister prepared to meet them to discuss potential solutions?

[Jack Dromey]

There is also the cause, which we have raised frequently in this House, of the WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. It is unacceptable that the '50s women continue to be victims of the injustice they have suffered. I warmly welcome the Prime Minister recognising that injustice. I hope that in the next stages the Department is prepared to engage with the women concerned on potential solutions, including exploring targeting help for those worst affected.

Let me end on a similar note to my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde. We want a pension system that is cost-effective and fair, and which guarantees working people dignity and security in retirement. From the excellent contributions made from across the House, I will single out auto-enrolment as an example of the importance of going further. I think it was the hon. Member for Amber Valley who spoke about that. The way I have often put it is that 8% cannot be the summit of our ambitions. Auto-enrolment is a huge and welcome step in the right direction, but we need to go further and faster if we are to fulfil the objective of security and dignity in retirement.

In Committee, the Opposition will push for measures we want to explore: widening auto-enrolment, better protection against pension scams because of the urgency of a growing scandal, and ensuring that the dashboard is run in the public interest. We hope the Government will continue, as they have done thus far, to work with us and other Opposition parties to achieve wider and longer-term policies that will protect people's pensions.

I will end on the point I started with: there is a sacred duty on all of us here always to champion the cause of security and dignity in retirement. The people of Britain deserve nothing less.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): This is an important Bill for millions of everyday people: those who have already retired and those who are saving for retirement. The Bill makes pensions safer, better and greener. I thank colleagues from across the House for their support of the Bill. I am nervous when there is consensus in praise of a Bill. It is a bit like when the chairman of a football club indicates that they have confidence in the manager, and we all know how that goes in the normal course of events.

First, I would like to address some of the issues that are not in the Bill. State pensions are not a part of the Bill. The scope of the Bill makes provision for occupational pension schemes only. The points on the state pension are duly noted, but they are not within the scope of the Bill. On automatic enrolment, it is entirely true that the automatic enrolment review sets out our ambition to remove, in the mid-2020s, the lower earnings limit and the lower age threshold. That will happen, but in due course. On superfunds, I welcome the support in broad terms—I accept it is in broad terms—from the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), and the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). I accept that this is an ongoing process. There is an interim regime, which has been brought forward by the Pensions Regulator. It is something we hope to take

forward, but I accept that the Government do need to address it in due course. On pensions taxation, many points have been raised. I am sure the Chancellor is listening avidly and will address the matter in due course.

The importance of the Bill has been shown by the many different and thoughtful contributions from hon. Members. The House welcomed the fact that certain Members have been willing to identify themselves as pension geeks, not least the shadow Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts). I thank all colleagues from the 2019 intake who have contributed so brilliantly, including my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), who explicitly made the case for green gilts. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), who is my new neighbour. All I can say about him as a neighbour is that he is an awful lot better than the previous occupant of his seat, and I welcome him to it.

This Bill matters, and, as was put best by the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), it matters most to the mums and dads in Tredegar. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) said that we need to look at the impact of this legislation, whether it is on the people of Tredegar or Tipton. I will be resolute in ensuring—to the best of our abilities within the confines of the Bill—that scams are stopped. It is crucial that we drive forward real change through clause 125 and the regulations that follow. As I said, I have written to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and given detailed evidence to the Committee. I am quite sure that we can continue the dialogue to flesh out what that will mean in the regulatory process. I am keen that the Bill is utilised to the best of our ability and that it sets out a road map to ensure that people are not scammed through their pensions. We will stop those callous crooks and ensure that transfers are carried out appropriately.

Nick Smith: It is great to hear the Minister speak up for the good people of Tredegar, my home town. I accept that dashboards and transparency should help in understanding schemes' performance, fees and important matters that affect pensioners across the country, but, as the Secretary of State said in her introduction, we have 40 million-plus pensioners and there are 40,000 different schemes. Will the Minister please tell us more about how he is going to ensure that dashboards are sufficiently regulated so that there are no future problems with this initiative?

Guy Opperman: I will come to dashboards in more detail. I am happy to discuss this with the hon. Gentleman individually. The long and short of it is that we are keen that there is a detailed authorisation regime and that there are suitable restraints in place to ensure that the system is not open to abuse. This is different from the type of dashboard envisaged by some, which is a repository of all data. We are definitely not going down that route. With the data team, we are designing the dashboard to ensure that it is data accessed by the individual, not a pot that all parties can take data from. It is a detailed conversation and one that I would be delighted to take up with the hon. Gentleman, but I assure him that our objective is to ensure that there are no problems of the kind he raised.

Let me turn to green technology and climate change. I look forward to my visit to mid-Wales and to working with the Welsh Government. I agree with the point made that if one wants to change the world, investing in a pension is unquestionably the right way forward. I endorse the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for West Bromwich West and for Grantham and Stamford, and I am certain that the Treasury is listening to the idea of green gilts as an alternative vehicle for pension funds to invest in on an ongoing basis.

There is no doubt that, by including climate-related Financial disclosures in the Bill, we are continuing a narrative: this Government are driving forward work against climate change more than any other Government in the world. We are the first Government in the G7 to legislate for net zero. We are leading the way on environmental, social and corporate governance throughout the European Union, as is acknowledged by all our partners in the EU. We are the first Government to legislate to bring CFDs into law in this country. Without a shadow of a doubt, this builds on the work that we have done, and on the promises and assurances made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in his speech to the Conservative party conference yesterday.

I turn to CDCs, for which there is welcome support across the House. Royal Mail, and all the postmen and women who support all our constituencies up and down the country, are keen to see this measure. I have worked extensively with the Communication Workers Union, Royal Mail and the various organisations that have supported this policy. I do not want to be too Blairite in a spirit of cross-party unity, but there is no doubt that CDCs are the third way in pensions, and a way forward that provides an alternative to the current regime.

With the dashboards, we are trying to bring pensions into the 21st century. We are building on the work that has been done in other markets, whether energy, banking or savings, all of which have similar things with open banking, savings apps and the ability to change an energy provider. I can assure the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak that the state pension will be part of the dashboard. On the formulation of the dashboard and what it looks like, many people want to talk about the end product. I merely want to get the product up and running, but the end product will, quite clearly, have something about costs and charges, which addresses the point that the hon. Gentleman raised, as did my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). I can assure her that charges are under review on an ongoing basis. The dashboard will also, we hope, do much to provide simpler statements, simplifying something that has been very technical for very long time.

We heard about the issue of small pots and the difficulties in understanding those on an ongoing basis. It may have escaped the House's attention, but the Department has an ongoing small pots review that is working cross-industry to try to assess exactly what the particular problems are. That will include, I assure the House, a consideration of "pot follows member". Clearly, all that would require future regulation, but we are definitely looking at it as a Department.

We believe very strongly in the importance of a Government-backed, impartial dashboard, and we have committed to having the MaPS dashboard available from the start. We strongly believe, though, that multiple

dashboards will help a consumer base with differing priorities. In launching a product, do we expect the customer to find it, or do we launch the product where the customer is? There are different customers who have different expectations and needs, and some already have a relationship with a provider. A variety of dashboards can help to evolve the project.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister for giving way. I want to say at the outset how pleased I am to see him in his place. He should rest assured that the thoughts of my family are very much with his. Likewise, I take a moment to ask the House to remember that my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) would have been here, were it not for her health issues, as the SNP pensions spokesperson.

I think it is clear that Members on both sides of the House, even those on the Government Benches, are not far apart on the issue of the dashboard. Between now and the Committee stage, would the Minister be willing to discuss his intentions with me and with Labour Front Benchers and the Liberal Democrats to see what compromise could be sought in all our interests going forward? This is a really important issue for us. I know the Minister to be someone who seeks consensus where possible, and I hope he would like to do so again in this case.

Guy Opperman: I have already engaged in extensive discussions, but I would be delighted to continue to do so both in and out of Committee. I think it is very clear that the Secretary of State and I have gone to great efforts to try to take the House with us in that dialogue and debate, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that will continue.

Let me move on to address the powers of the Pensions Regulator. I think it is right for me to put on record that TPR has done a good job during Covid, and, as an organisation, it is definitely improving. I accept that there have been criticisms, but it has unquestionably progressed under the supervision of its current chairman. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn that these regulatory powers provide a fresh set of dentures for TPR to ensure that its bite is a little more substantial than its previous bark. That is a fair point well made. This builds on work that has already been done.

Several colleagues have raised the issue of open DB pension schemes. The Government continue to engage with the schemes and the Pensions Regulator, and we want to understand the concerns. I met stakeholders last Friday, and I have discussed this with Opposition Members. The measures in the Bill are designed to deliver clearer funding standards while upholding the flexibility of the scheme funding regime. There is an ongoing consultation, issued by the regulator, which looks at a potential bespoke regime. I have already discussed with the individual schemes whether the consultation is the right way forward, but I am happy to continue that dialogue, as I am on other issues.

I thank many colleagues for their kind words and support for my wife and me following the death of our twin boys. It is genuinely appreciated. This House is a special place when we are presented with adversity. It brings us together, and I think it humanises us that, while we disagree politically, we share the same problems.

[Guy Opperman]

I echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts, and wish the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) well.

We are pushing ahead with an innovative and ambitious pensions agenda that is reforming retirement. It delivers on commitments made in a manifesto backed by the people of this country in December 2019. It makes our constituents' pensions safer, better and greener—safer by cracking down on scams and unscrupulous bosses, better by utilising new technology to develop and create a dashboard, and greener by ensuring that we get to net zero through ethical and sustainable pension investment. I look forward to further discussion, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

PENSION SCHEMES BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Pension Schemes Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 5 November 2020.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

PENSION SCHEMES BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Pension Schemes Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:

- (1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided; and

- (2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

4.6 pm

Sitting suspended.

Public Health

4.9 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I beg to move,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (North of England and North East and North West of England etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1074), dated 1 October 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 2 October, be approved.

These regulations came into force on Saturday 3 October. They were based on the latest epidemiological data and local insights. The data showed rapidly rising rates of covid-19 infections in Merseyside, Halton, Warrington, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough, indicating an urgent need for further steps to control the outbreak. The regulations also introduced an easing of restrictions for Bolton, based on the stabilisation compared with the rapid growth in case numbers a few weeks previously.

These regulations represent targeted measures designed to reduce transmission in areas where incidence rates are high. We do not want to, and will not, impose regulations where they are clearly unnecessary, but where we do, while public health is our priority, we are balancing the need to impose measures to tackle the transmission of the virus with protecting our economy and education.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is also important to look at the number of hospitalisations in an area, which is why, at the moment, Redcar and Cleveland are staying out of local lockdown restrictions?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. In making these decisions, we look at multiple factors. We look at the incidence rate per 100,000, for instance. We look at the positivity rate—the percentage of tests that are positive—and we keep a close eye on hospital admissions. All those factors are important. The good thing about the data from our testing systems is that they give more leading indicators of things that may follow on. All of those are an important part of the information that goes into the decisions that are made.

Incidence rates across Merseyside, Halton and Warrington over the seven-day period 17 to 23 September 2020 range from 163.3 per 100,000 people in St Helens to 257.7 per 100,000 people in Liverpool. Test positivity was high too, ranging from 10.5% in the Wirral to 15.7% in Liverpool in the same period. With those levels of infection, including growing infection rates in people aged 60 and over, for whom we know the risks of complications are greater, action was clearly necessary. By contrast, in Bolton, which until the regulations were introduced was under greater restrictions and interventions than nearby areas, infection rates have stabilised, although they are still high, at 241.8 per 100,000 people, with a test positivity rate of 12.3%.

Many areas across the north of England have been subject to extra restrictions, in some cases, for weeks. I know that that is really hard for people, day in, day out, and for many businesses. The regulations do not introduce any new measures, but they amend existing legislation.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Briefly, the Minister touched on the point that the regulations amend previous regulations that have been in force for some time. Something which, I suspect, Opposition Members will raise is the incidence rate, based on

testing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) said, there are other measures on hospitalisations and other things. Can the Minister set out some of the evidence that demonstrates that the measures that have been introduced in the Liverpool area are likely to have some prospect of working, because that will be important in reassuring our constituents that the Government have got a grip on the situation?

Helen Whately: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I will come on to the impact and detail of the rationale for the interventions.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that as the virus is coming roaring back, particularly in areas such as my constituency, now is the wrong time to be getting rid of the furlough, and that if we are going to have extra restrictions, we also really need much greater extra support so that we can compensate and look after business owners and individuals who have to self-isolate or close?

Helen Whately: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the impact of restrictions on people's livelihoods as well as their lives. However, she is asking me to stray beyond my brief as a Health Minister to talk about the financial support, although she will be aware that the furlough has supported huge numbers of people during the period of lockdown and since, and the Chancellor has introduced further measures to support people in the months ahead.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Helen Whately: I will make a little more progress and then I will take further interventions.

I will now run through each set of regulations that was amended. The first was the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (North of England) Regulations 2020—SI 2020/1057—which changed the geographic areas covered by the north of England regulations. Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, Warrington and the Wirral were removed. These local authority areas were then added to the north-east and north-west regulations—SI 2020/1010. Two new areas were also added to the same protected area, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough. For each of these, this was the first time that local restrictions had been implemented. People living in these areas are prohibited from mixing with people from different households in each other's homes and gardens, and in any indoor public venue.

Next, these regulations added Bolton to the geographic area covered by the north of England regulations, rejoining the other local authorities that make up Greater Manchester. This amendment meant that the takeaway-only restriction affecting hospitality was removed, so businesses in Bolton have once again been able to serve food and alcohol with table service. Due to Bolton being added to the north of England regulations, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Bolton) Regulations 2020—SI 2020/974—were revoked.

The final are regulations amended by these regulations is the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Obligations of Undertakings) (England) Regulations

[*Helen Whately*]

2020—SI 2020/1008—which were incorrectly amended before. This amendment ensures that the right exemptions apply to the requirement on pub, café, restaurant or bar managers in the protected area of the north-east and north-west regions to take all reasonable measures to stop groups of six in areas where only national restrictions apply, or, members of the same household in the north-east and north-west protected area, singing on the premises.

To come to the decisions behind these regulations in more detail, given the urgency of the situation and the rapidly increasing numbers of people testing positive for covid in Merseyside, Halton, Warrington, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough, we consulted local leaders last week on the potential next steps. Similarly, we consulted local leaders in Bolton.

Jacob Young: I thank my hon. Friend for her Department's approach to the Teesside restrictions—for not including Teesside as one whole, homogenous bloc, as some people wanted, but viewing the individual parts, such as Middlesbrough, Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland, as separate entities.

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. We are trying to get the balance right between wanting to target restrictions and not impose them on areas where they might not be needed, and being mindful that if every area has its own local variant specifically, it does get more and more confusing, so there is a clear balance to strike in targeting but also trying to keep things simple.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Helen Whately: Let me just come to Bolton. I was saying that we had consulted local leaders in Bolton and we used the emergency procedure to make the present set of regulations as soon as we could. Recognising the concern about the time that it can take for Parliament to debate these statutory instruments and given the pace of the pandemic, I hope that hon. Members acknowledge that we are debating today measures that came into force just this Saturday.

As I mentioned, for the implementation of these measures, existing legislation was amended rather than bringing in new Acts. We reviewed the impact of existing regulations and considered where they needed to be more robust or could be eased. We took into account the existing measures in place elsewhere and assessments of the impact that those measures were having. The complexity of local restrictions has been highlighted recently, so the decision was made to impose regulations already in place rather than to develop new ones.

There is extremely serious concern about the outbreak in the north of England, the north-east and the north-west, both at the point the decisions were made to introduce further restrictions, and ongoing. Engagement with local public health teams and local leaders has been extensive. I would like to thank the local council leaders, local authorities more broadly and the local resilience forums, as well as Public Health England, the Joint Biosecurity Centre, and the local and regional directors of public

health for all their engagement and all the work they are doing. All the local councils involved have engaged sensibly at chief executive and other levels, and I know they have also been doing a huge amount locally—for instance, working to increase compliance, supporting increased access to testing, working with care homes and supporting the most vulnerable. We will only succeed in suppressing this virus by working together at every level.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I thank the Minister for setting this out so clearly and concisely, because this is really difficult. The International Trade Secretary said on the radio this morning that we need to suppress this virus until the vaccine comes. The problem I have—today we are discussing these areas, but we could be discussing any area, including my area, next—is that, if the vaccine comes, when the vaccine comes, we then have all sorts of challenges around roll-out, efficacy and the long-term stay of that vaccine. Is the Government's view that we need to suppress this virus until the vaccine comes and then science is going to ride to our rescue, or is there a bigger plan, a next plan, to think about how we live with this virus for the long term, which the Prime Minister and the Chancellor keep referring to?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend invites me to stray somewhat from the subject of this SI and the updates to the regulations, but clearly from what he said, he is well aware of all the work that is going on for us to have a vaccine. He is also well aware that the priority at the moment is that we absolutely have to suppress this virus because the alternative does not bear thinking about.

Jake Berry: On the subject of this SI, what does the Minister think the impact was of the eat out to help out scheme in places such as Bolton? When it was introduced, the rate per 100,000 was more than 10 times that of central London. Does she believe it has had an impact, and if so, what?

Helen Whately: Again, my hon. Friend is asking me to stray beyond the scope of the SI, but what I will say is that, in the decisions that are made about interventions and policies more generally, clearly we are always looking at what is going on and what the transmission rate is. Something we saw during the period when there was eat out to help out was that that was a period when, in general, we had lower rates of infection. It gave great support to the hospitality sector, which had been clearly having a really difficult time. We are now very much seeing a second wave, particularly in much of the north of England, and therefore it is absolutely appropriate that there are, in general, greater restrictions. We absolutely must suppress this virus and one place where we know that infection goes on is through hospitality, where there is social contact.

I will return to the job in hand, Madam Deputy Speaker. Guidance has been updated for people living in protected areas to make it clear what they can and cannot do under the restrictions. Again, I know local authorities are working hard on communications, as these measures only work if people know about them, understand them and comply. These regulations, as with the other local regulations we have debated already, demonstrate that we will take action where we need to. In mirroring the restrictions that have been used in other parts of the

country, we are drawing on and learning from experience. We will, of course, use continued experience of these measures to inform and help us develop our responses to ongoing local outbreaks.

I reiterate to the House that, for significant national measures with effect in the whole of England or UK-wide, we will consult Parliament and, wherever possible, we will hold votes before such regulations come into force, though of course responding to the virus means that the Government must act with speed when required, and we cannot hold up urgent regulations that are needed to control the virus and save lives. I am sure that no Member of this House would want to limit the Government's ability to take emergency action in the national interest, as we did in March, but we will continue to involve the House in scrutinising our decisions in the way my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out last week. This will be through regular statements and debates, and providing opportunities for Members to question the Government's scientific advisers more regularly. I am grateful to all Members for their continued engagement in this challenging process.

Mr Harper: Will the Minister give way?

Helen Whately: I am just wrapping up, and I have taken many interventions. I am very sorry, but I am not going to take a further intervention at this point, as there are Members waiting to speak.

I particularly thank people in the protected area in the north of England, who are restricting social contact and forgoing many of the things that make life worth living. In so doing, they are playing their part in suppressing the virus and protecting those whose lives are at risk.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Colleagues will be aware that this is an extremely short debate. To have any chance of getting everyone in—the Minister can come back at the end to respond to points that have been made—I will impose a three-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

4.25 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): In recent weeks, Ministers and Opposition Front Benchers have met upstairs in Committee to discuss such covid-related statutory instruments. It is welcome that we are debating this in the main Chamber because it means that local Members of Parliament can scrutinise them also. With that in mind, I do not intend to speak for long and I will probably limit the interventions I take—one thing I know is not to disappoint a roomful of colleagues who want to talk about their community.

I will start with the good news. I have been critical throughout the pandemic about the time that it has taken between a statutory instrument's being brought into effect, and its being debated. In one case there was a lag of nine and a half weeks. It makes a nonsense of parliamentary scrutiny if we rubber-stamp measures months after they have come into effect. We must have a timely say, so that the British public can have confidence, and as the Minister said, this statutory instrument is just four days old—that is the good news.

The bad news is that SI 2020/1074 amends SI 2020/1010, which came into force on 18 September, although it is not to be debated until Monday. We are discussing amendments to secondary legislation, even though we are

yet to discuss that secondary legislation. I am keen to hear from the Minister why things have happened in that order. Is it possible that the other SI is more controversial and is to be hidden upstairs and discussed after the fact? We have followed events over the past hour or so on the controversial SI on the curfew. That seems to have been pulled from upstairs entirely because it is coming downstairs. What on earth is going on? I hope the Minister can tell us so that we do not have to find out through anonymous briefings yet again. This is a reflection of somewhat chaotic, rather than competent, leadership.

I suspect that the Government are doing this to head off division in their own ranks, once again putting the interests of the Conservative party ahead of the interests of the country. I say gently to would-be rebels—I say this at every opportunity—that if they do not like the delegated powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020, they should wait to see the ones in the Brexit-related legislation. For example, as drafted, the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill will hand to the same Secretary of State virtually unfettered powers over our entire medicines regime in this country. I hope that when the time comes, Members will be as keen and proactive to ensure that those powers are used in an appropriate way as they have been with these secondary powers.

The Opposition do not oppose the substance of SI 2020/1074. We know that as infection rates increase, so will restrictions. In this case, Liverpool city region, Warrington, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough are being added to those areas where mixing indoors is barred, which is an inevitable part of rising infection rates. We in Nottingham are awaiting that same call this week.

Ben Bradley: The hon. Gentleman mentioned Nottingham, and as a fellow Nottinghamshire MP I am interested in his views. A few minutes ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) mentioned the granular and localised nature of those lockdown areas and being able to pick the areas where this is most effective. My constituents in Mansfield, with one seventh of the rate of transmission in Nottinghamshire, are faced with lockdown measures linked to that outbreak. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important in those areas to consider local data, and not to impose additional restrictions on people where that might not be appropriate?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that intervention and I share that view. I have seen the hon. Gentleman's tweet this afternoon in which he is very clear about that. Like me, he will have followed local Nottinghamshire data closely, and there should be close consultation with hon. Members, and with leaders such as the Mayor of Mansfield and the leader of Nottinghamshire County Council. A one-size-fits-all approach is not the best route scientifically, and it will also breed local discontent and mean that people might be less inclined to follow it. So I support the hon. Gentleman in that venture.

Although rising restrictions are an inevitable part of rising infection rates, there is nothing inevitable about the loss of control of this virus. The Government promised us a world-class test and trace system, but rather than building on tried and tested local options in local government, they pursued a big national private contract. It was a triumph for dogma at a time when we need evidence-based leadership, and of course it has been a debacle.

[Alex Norris]

The Government had a chance to fix this at a time when infection rates were relatively low, but they failed to do so. They have now lost control of the virus entirely, and our people will lose freedoms as a result. Yesterday, I saw a Minister blame the British people for rising infection rates. I thought that was extraordinary. Our constituents have made incredible sacrifices over the last several months; they do not deserve to have the Government thumb their nose at them for it.

Frankly, the Government can deflect as much as they want, but it will not wash. I would like to hear from the Minister today what they are doing to get this right and when it is going to happen. No more being sent hundreds of miles for tests, no more delayed results, no more lost spreadsheets. Drop the ludicrous defence of the indefensible. Let us stop pretending it is all okay when it is obviously not.

I have debated a number of these statutory instruments, and it is striking that every one of them has related to the north or the midlands. Rather than levelling up, we risk entrenching the north-south divide in this country. It is no longer reasonable to say, either, that these are going to be short, sharp interventions.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions that many of these lockdowns have been in the north of England and the midlands. Does he agree that the figures for Chorley, Wyre, Lancaster, Oadby and Wigston, Wolverhampton, and West Lancashire, where there is lockdown, hardly vary from those in areas where there is no lockdown that have Conservative MPs, such as Barrow, Darlington, Craven and Newark? It reeks of political bias rather than objective decision making.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that intervention, and I am about to make a related point. There seems to be no direction for when an area might exit restrictions or, indeed, what it might need to do in order to do so. The Minister started by saying that the Government are following the best epidemiological guidance, but it is unclear, as my hon. Friend mentions, why some areas are in lockdown despite having lower infection rates than others that are not. Again, that breeds cynicism and frustration.

It is also true that these restrictions ought to be accompanied by greater economic support, as well as much clearer communication. Perhaps the Minister could be a trailblazer and do what the Prime Minister was unable to do by saying what a local community needs to do to exit lockdown and, in the meantime, what precisely is likely to be done to support it.

In conclusion, we do not oppose these restrictions, but we strongly oppose the incompetence that has led us here. British people have missed births, weddings and funerals to fight this virus. Now, more people will not even be able to go and see their parents or their grandchildren, because the Government have not got a grip. No wonder their patience is running so thin.

4.32 pm

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): On 23 March, it was absolutely correct that our nation entered lockdown as one nation, but I believe the fact

that we are discussing these local restrictions today shows that we should have left lockdown in a sequential way, guided by regional data.

In Blackburn with Darwen, one of the boroughs I represent, when the pubs opened in July our local infection rate was 81 per 100,000, while London's was 3.2. I think the Government have fallen into the fatal trap of making national decisions based on a London-centric view with London data. I hope that the Minister will go away and reflect on that, and take the opportunity to take a new approach.

The people I speak to across Rossendale and Darwen are confused. There are variable restrictions that come in and come out. They want a simple system. That is why I believe that, rather than the regulations we are discussing, we should have a national system covering England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with the consent of the devolved Administrations—one that is clear and proportionate but, most of all, simple and easy for people to follow. That national system should come in and out on the basis of local data and local decision making, not on the basis of national decisions or national data. For businesses in east Lancashire and the wider north-west, it is vital that, whatever system we have, it is backed by strong Treasury support to ensure that areas in the north of England that are subject to enhanced restrictions can survive economically at the end of this lockdown.

The final point I will make is in relation to liberties and freedoms. As a nation, the liberties and freedoms we take for granted have not been given to us by a benevolent Government. They have been hard fought for and hard won. In fact, on many occasions they have had to be torn from the hands of the powerful. Day by day, we see those liberties and freedoms being given back to the Government in the name of covid. I am afraid that that has to stop, because once we give these up, they will not come back to us; the Government will not return them.

Businesses such as Perspex and Bark Engineering in my constituency, which worked through lockdown, showed us the best of society. The worst of society is the Government enjoying these new powers a little bit too much, with police officers fining people for being in their front gardens and a bizarre ban on people sunbathing on their own in public open spaces; I cannot see what harm that was doing. When the Minister responds to the debate, can she tell us what the plan is for returning to the people of the north of England the liberties that these restrictions take away? We want to remove the manacles of state control from our hands and our feet, but we can do that only when we have beaten this virus. The Minister must say what measure will see that happen.

4.35 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I could use my time to discuss specific local issues, the need for better support for local businesses and jobs and how the Government have failed to produce the necessary data and evidence to support the measures they have imposed, such as the 10 pm curfew, closing pubs and restaurants, and banning families from meeting one another. But I want to focus on the biggest hurdle to this country and the northern region being able to address the covid-19 crisis more effectively, and that is the Prime Minister and the lack

of a coherent strategy to help us get back to any semblance of normality any time soon, whether or not we find a vaccine that works—something that the Government seem to pin a lot of their hopes on.

This Prime Minister has overpromised and underdelivered consistently. In July, he was talking about a more significant return to normality in November. We are just a matter of weeks away from November, and we are already hearing rumours of a full lockdown. My constituents have been clear that they hear confused messages. They are bewildered, and they are not listening to what the Government say any more. They have heard, “Eat out. Don’t eat out. Meet your family. Don’t meet your family. Travel. Don’t travel. Work from home. Don’t work from home,” and there have also been the debacles over primary schools reopening and the process for awarding exam results. The Prime Minister and his Government have demonstrated an incredible amount of incompetence. He could not even explain the rules in the north-east when asked. I do not need to spend long on the utter shambles of test and trace, because that has been well covered.

The Prime Minister has lost control. The Conservative party could make a big difference in the fight against coronavirus by ridding us of this Prime Minister and putting someone in place who is competent, who is up to the challenge of leading our country at a time of national crisis, who and will appoint people to the Cabinet who can do a proper job. The Prime Minister is fond of using wartime analogies. I believe we need a covid war Cabinet that is cross-party, at the very least with my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition in it. Constituents are telling me that they want politicians to work together to find a way forward and do the right thing, with proper parliamentary scrutiny. They are growing tired of the constant change and confusion. More of my constituents are telling me that they want to get on with their lives using their own common sense.

I have little time to list the other things that need to be done. We need the Government to articulate and communicate effectively what they see as the big trade-offs we face as a nation in terms of health, welfare, the economy and jobs, as well as how they will address the consequences of delays in treatment for non-covid patients for the early detection of conditions such as cancer and the impact on mental health of the lockdown restrictions. They need to show evidence to back up measures they put in place, to begin to regain people’s trust. They particularly need to demonstrate that what is happening in our hospitals is not a normal consequence of winter pressures. Test and trace must be put right quickly. We need much more local control and the resources to go with it.

We know that only some people spread the virus. What is being done to better target those who have a high viral load? The Prime Minister’s speech yesterday was high on rhetoric, but contained little to give confidence to this Parliament and the country that he has a strategy for a way out of this crisis without wrecking the economy and curtailing some of our civil liberties.

4.39 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The extension to the regulations in the north-east that this statutory instrument brings in will come some three weeks after the regulations were introduced in Sunderland, the city

I represent. The objective is clearly to bring down the number of cases and stop the spread of the virus. The reality is that cases in Sunderland have increased by 321% since the regulations were brought in three weeks ago. They have not stopped, gone down or levelled off; they have gone up massively. The seven local authorities—the LA7—had two asks of the Government when they asked for regulations to be introduced. One was to allow informal child care, which I am grateful that the Secretary of State conceded several days later. The other was that people should be allowed to go into family members’ or friends’ gardens to see people, but that was rejected.

The reality is that people in the area I represent in Sunderland are seeing their family members; they are breaking the rules and they are going into others’ houses. Everyone knows that the virus spreads when people are in small rooms together. These regulations, and the regulations in Sunderland, are actually making the virus spread worse, not improving it, because the Government have not listened to local people or to the requests of cross-party leaders on the needs of the north-east. The Government’s regulations only work if they take people with them, and they are not taking people with them. The police are not an army. They cannot possibly stop what is going on. I have huge sympathy for people going in to see their relatives, for all sorts of reasons. I do not condone their breaking the law, but I understand it.

The other thing the local authorities asked for was financial support, to allow them to support businesses, jobs and other things in the community. They asked for some £20.5 million of support for businesses, but that has not been addressed. It has not even been responded to in the Government’s response. I urge the Minister to respond to these requests, because in my constituency in the north-east, since these local lockdown measures have come in, a third of the hospitality industry has closed down and many others have cut the number of days they are open. Furlough is coming to an end in three weeks, and there are discussions about mass redundancies going on in a region that already has significantly higher unemployment than many other parts of the country. The Government need to get a grip on this. They need to act to get control of the virus and support the economy and the people of this country.

4.42 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I welcome this opportunity to speak, because while Cheshire East remains one of the few regions in the north-west not in lockdown, it is now on the watch list, and concern among my residents about what might happen is growing. Some have criticised the Government, but it is fair to describe the choice currently facing the Government as either acting to stop the spread of the virus or letting it rip. Whether it doubles every seven days, every 14 days or every 21 days, we know that it will speed up, that it will eventually speed up rapidly and that it will then grow exponentially. We must remember that the lower the R rate and the incidence when the Government act, the more likely those actions are to be successful and the less severe they will need to be.

I do not underestimate the impacts of the measures on mental and physical health, or on livelihoods. They are very significant, but I think we need to take some

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

comfort from the fact that the chief medical officer frequently, if not always, references this when he is talking about the impact of the virus. I think the Government understand this, and they are weighing the impacts against the cost of the virus spreading. So far, it is thought to have affected 6% of the population, and our estimates are that that has led to the death of approximately 40,000 people. There is some scepticism about that figure, so let us halve it. That would be a generous response to the scepticism. If the rest of the 94% of the population were to get the virus, we are talking about something like 300,000 deaths in the next 12 months. But let us be even more sceptical and halve the number of people who are going to get it. Again, we are looking at something like 150,000 people who would pass away. That does not take into account the enormous strain that would be put on the health service as people became unwell and were admitted to hospital.

I do not think that the hospitality sector would not survive that kind of daily reporting of the health impact of a communicable virus. And can we really ask the 2.5 million people aged over 80 to stay at home? Those people are, on the whole, still living full, active lives, and we also need to consider the 10 million people in their 60s and 70s who would also need to stay at home. The more we let everybody else act in a normal way, the greater the restrictions on those people would be. If the virus was spreading rapidly through the younger population, we would be telling those older people that they effectively could not have anything to do with anyone else because they would be at such a high risk of catching the disease. I do not think that that is realistic, so until we have an alternative, whether it be a vaccine or mass testing, it is quite right that the Government act as they have been doing.

However, the Government need to work harder on explaining and justifying the steps they are taking, both locally and nationally. Where is the detailed explanation of why they have not excluded children from the rule of six? Where is the detailed explanation around the 10 pm lockdown?

This statutory instrument obviously relates to local lockdown measures, but if we do not have the confidence and the faith of the public in the national measures, we have very little chance of getting them to listen to us on the local measures, and it is Members in this place who will be out there explaining and justifying the measures and the approaches that the Government have taken. If we cannot explain them, do not understand them and do not have that detailed information, what chance do we have of successfully doing that for the public? I ask the Minister to get the Government to work harder on bringing this House with them on these measures, which I ultimately think are justified.

4.45 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): This House and the other place gave the Government enormous powers in March when the country was faced with the pandemic and a crisis. I believe the Government have abused those powers. They have taken arbitrary decisions and they have taken politically biased and prejudiced decisions. Most of all, as the Leader of the

Opposition said at Prime Minister's Question Time, they have shown "intergalactic incompetence" in what they have done—just sheer incompetence.

It turns out that the Government's incompetence means that the massively overcentralised cure they have provided with the lockdowns is turning out to be worse than the disease itself. They have made more than 200 announcements, according to *The Daily Telegraph*. How many people can follow that number of announcements? People just ignore them, as colleagues have said. The Government have made 18 U-turns. It is not surprising that people have not followed those things.

Let me give the House an example of the incompetence as it has affected Salford. Of the 15,841 test cases that went missing, 200 were in Salford, and the results for a third of those took more than a week to arrive. The incubation period of the disease is gone in that time. Some of those people who had been tested and were waiting for results that did not come were in care homes. Some of them were over 90, the most vulnerable group possible.

The Government need to get rid of the centralisation and do what has been the history of public health in this country, which is to move decisions down to the local level, where people can work on a granular level. We can have sensible local test and trace systems that immediately get things into the system and allow local people to take action.

I said that the cure is worse than the disease. On 8 April, the Government were given a paper that showed that more than 200,000 people were likely to die because of the health service being switched off. At present, hospital beds are empty and people cannot get tested for cancer and other diseases very easily. We need to get the health service working, and one way to do so is to ensure that the test and trace system works effectively so that people can be treated immediately. I hope that the Minister will take this back to the Secretary of State and the Government and decentralise their policies immediately.

4.48 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): First, I thank the Minister for the fact we are having this debate on the Floor of the House today, which fulfils the spirit of what the Secretary of State promised last week. May I just take her back, at the beginning of my remarks, to my intervention and my attempted second intervention? I asked whether she could set out some data about the effectiveness of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (North East of England) Regulations 2020, which have been in place for some time. She said in response to my intervention that she would do so later in her speech. It may have been my failing, but I did not hear her do so. I hope that she will do so when she responds at the end of the debate, because when we bring regulations in, I want to see that they are effective.

Certainly there are mechanisms in the regulations for that review to take place. For example, the Secretary of State has to review the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (North of England) Regulations 2020 every two weeks to see whether they are still necessary. Presumably, that encompasses looking not just at testing data, but at hospitalisations and the whole range of data. Can the

Minister confirm either that that information has been published for us all to see, or that it will be published, so that we can make a proper assessment of the regulations' effectiveness?

In the closing minute or so of my remarks, I want to say one thing. I do not agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) that there are only two options: the so-called "let it rip" option and the lockdown option. I think there is a third option. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), and with what my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said in his excellent speech in the debate last week. I do not think there is going to be a vaccine quickly, and if there is one, I do not think it will be completely effective. I am afraid that we will have to live with this virus for some time.

I use the word "live" deliberately, because we need restrictions that enable people to live meaningful lives. That includes being able to do the valuable things that hon. Members have talked about, such as seeing friends and family—the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) touched on that—and acting in a way that enables the economy to be sustainable.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that people need some joy in their lives and something to look forward to, and that only by following such a path will we get that back?

Mr Harper: I agree with my hon. Friend, and the Government need to recognise that we are in this for the long term. We need a set of restrictions that are sustainable, that we can stick with over the long term, that people feel are deliverable and that enable the economy to flourish. I was encouraged yesterday by the urgent question that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury took for the Government, because it sounded to me as though the Treasury was starting to think about this approach of living with the virus and putting in place economic measures. That is very helpful.

Jake Berry: For someone who lives in Rossendale and Darwen on the border between Bolton and Lancashire, the rules have a labyrinthine complexity. They change on a weekly basis and people cannot follow them. Surely, living with this virus must mean having simple, easy-to-follow rules that do not change on a weekly basis, and that can be turned on or off based on local data. Does my right hon. Friend accept that that is the right approach?

Mr Harper: Yes, I do. We can see from the footnote to the regulations that we are debating that the two sets of regulations that they refer to have been amended 18 times. I have to confess that I find them difficult to follow. A resident of any of the areas in question cannot just go to the Government website and pop their postcode in—*[Interruption.]* The House is going to be asked to take a view on these regulations today, and I have taken the trouble to look at them and research them so that I can take a properly considered view on them. I am also concerned that the Government should make the right decisions based on evidence. We hear stories to the effect that these restrictions may be put in place in other parts of the country, and it is important that we get it right. Let me conclude my remarks, and I will sit down.

The Government need to think about living with this virus for a considerable period and having a sustainable set of restrictions. I do not think that there is just one choices. As I said to the Minister yesterday, I do not think it is helpful if every time somebody asks a question or sets out an alternative, they are accused of wanting to let the virus rip and let thousands of people die. I think that point was well made, because she did not refer to it again in her closing remarks. However, on a webinar with the CBI this morning, I heard the Secretary of State again set out that choice, which I think is a false choice.

I do think that there is a "third way", to quote the phrase that has been used today. I think there is a more sustainable one, which would be better for the country and more successful. If the Government were to adopt that approach, I think the whole House and the whole country could get behind the plan. We could unite to live with this virus in a way that people would find meaningful and sustainable. I hope that the Government will reflect on that and bring forward such a plan at the earliest opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I urge colleagues to be considerate of each other. Not everybody is going to get in on this debate, and if people have spoken once, it is quite important to remember that interventions are going to prevent others from speaking. I therefore urge people not to take interventions.

4.54 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Government, when introducing regulations such as this, should avoid overcomplication. Rules and regulations like this, which entire populations are expected to follow in their everyday lives, should be simple, explicable, understandable and transparent in the sense that they are evidence-based, especially when they lead to curbs on individual liberties and, as a consequence of breaking them, large fines.

The measures take 10 pages to set out, and contain a number of confusions: between a national restriction and a local one, and in areas of local restrictions that can be confusing; or differences between what is law and guidance—what we must do, or be fined, as opposed to what we are advised to do, for our own good. It is not at all clear what people are supposed to do, even if they read these 10 pages of detailed regulations.

Most of all, regulations need to be effective in bringing down infection rates. At present, it seems difficult to argue that the local lockdown rules have been effective. In 19 of the 20 areas where they have been introduced, infection rates have soared. On Merseyside, we have only had the rules for a week, but infection rates are soaring.

The local lockdown has the potential to cause great economic damage, and yet the regulations do not at present contain any provision for compensating those businesses that are now fighting for survival as a consequence of the effect of the measures on their ability to remain viable. That in turn threatens the livelihoods of thousands of people. In Garston and Halewood, unemployment has already doubled this year to 8%, or about 5,000 people, but worse is to come, because I have 15,000 furloughed jobs in my constituency and furlough ends in three weeks.

[Maria Eagle]

Some industries are not able to operate normally, or in some cases at all—entertainment, events, aviation and others. Now, areas such as hospitality are threatened with severe consequences by the economic impact of local lockdown measures. As for the approximately 77,000 self-employed workers in the Liverpool city region, many cannot work at all, and qualify for no support whatever from the Government support schemes; they are simply excluded. There are almost 58,000 jobs in hospitality and the visitor economy in the Liverpool city region. Until coronavirus, it had been booming, with 10 consecutive years of growth. Now, 6,300 businesses and many thousands of jobs are at immediate risk. The Government have not offered any additional economic support under the regulations—just £7 million, across nine local authorities, for outbreak control.

Furlough ends in three weeks. These measures will still be in place, if not more stringent ones, if we believe some of the briefings this evening, and given the infection rates. The Government must implement a local business and job support scheme for areas where local lockdowns are implemented to prevent the jobs carnage we are about to see. I hope that the Minister will agree with me.

4.57 pm

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): I must admit that when I was elected, back in December, I did not anticipate standing here among the green Benches to talk about its being an offence for two households to meet, but the impact of the pandemic is such that that is precisely what we are here to discuss. That is where we find ourselves.

In the early stages of the pandemic, when little was known about the virus, it was right that all steps were taken to stop the spread. Since then, we know that it has not spread evenly around the country, and we have seen a rapid rise of cases across the north-east. The Government are exactly right to take a localised approach, rather than subjecting those in low-covid areas to overly restrictive national measures, but, on that note, since north-east restrictions were announced, I have had emails from constituents in Middleton-in-Teesdale, Bowes and Hamsterley, confused and angry about why they must be put through more serious restrictions, despite cases in their immediate local vicinity remaining low.

If localised measures are to become the norm, will it be possible to have data analysed on a more localised level, allowing areas with minimal cases, where local residents are working hard to follow the guidance, to enjoy more freedom? After all, we are the party of freedom. Also, if we are to have restrictions on businesses to reduce the spread of the virus, I believe that we must have greater protections for the sectors that are hit hardest by the inability to socialise.

One of my constituents is John Harper-Wilkes, who runs Lartington Hall, an incredible wedding venue just outside Barnard Castle. Couples who had booked to get married at Lartington Hall this year are choosing to postpone their weddings until next year, rather than getting married in front of socially distanced crowds of 15. John has done nothing to make customers postpone their bookings but, through no fault of his own, he has lost almost all his custom. He has now had to make all his staff redundant. The impact of such job

losses cannot be overstated, and the long-term mental health impact of unemployment or lost incomes can be devastating.

Another constituent, publican Christian Burns, has done everything that the Government have asked him to do to make his venues covid-secure and ensure that customers are safe to return to his pub. Last weekend, he told me, rather than his usual Saturday take of £5,000 to £6,000, he took only £128 all day, not even enough to cover his entire staffing bill. Given the 10 o'clock curfew and with households being unable to meet, I am really concerned that these restrictions may, without additional financial support, have the overall impact of closing pubs, and not just for lockdown but for good. We must make sure that our pubs, the social hubs of our communities, remain viable for the long term for the mental health of all those people who rely on them for social contact.

We have to balance reducing transmission of the virus with allowing business to carry on as usual. To stem the rising number of cases, I will support the statutory instrument today, but may I please urge my right hon. Friends in the Government to look closely at how we can provide new tangible support for our hospitality and events sector? That is for people like Christian, John, Cheryl Jeffrey and Chris Robinson. We cannot let them down.

5 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): These decisions were taken on false data owing to the Excel error. The situation in Knowsley and St Helens was worse than first thought. The infection rate is almost four times higher than that in Greater Manchester when restrictions were introduced there. I fear that, once again, the Government have acted too late.

There are bigger consequences of this mistake. For the past week, thousands of people across the country should have been told to self-isolate. Instead, they have been unwittingly spreading the virus. That has put lives at risk and could lead to many more families losing their loved ones. From our £12 billion world-beating test and trace system the public deserve better. Even before this error, 35% of contacts had not been traced in Knowsley. The Government have had months to fix this. Infection rates are back to the levels we saw in April but, with the serial incompetence that we have seen, I am afraid this is hardly a surprise. Local authorities and health officials have proved far more effective at contact tracing than private companies. If the Government had trusted them and invested in them in the first place, we would not be in the situation we are in now.

Like many colleagues, I have received emails asking me to oppose the restrictions. For me, health will always take priority over the economy. I understand that we need a strong economy to fund our national health service but the best way to repair the economy is to get the virus under control. The UK has had the highest number of covid-19-related deaths in Europe followed by the worst economic crisis. That is in stark contrast to Germany where many fewer deaths have led to a much better-performing economy. This is no coincidence.

There is no trade-off between the economy and health. To improve the economy, the Government must get the virus under control. To get the virus under control, the Government must have a working contact-tracing programme.

This announcement came with the promise of £7 million pounds for the councils affected, working out at less than £800,000 for each authority. For the size of the task in hand that is simply not good enough. These are the councils that were originally promised that they would be reimbursed with “whatever it takes” to keep communities safe. Hardly is the word the bond.

We are not yet out of this crisis. We may not even be halfway through. The reality is that even our top scientific and medical experts do not know how bad this could get. With this in mind, I urge the Government to share the scientific and medical evidence with local communities so that they may understand on what basis a decision has been made, and always to err on the side of caution to protect lives. It is better to be safe than sorry.

5.3 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): This is of course one nation. No area of our country should be left behind or forgotten by any Member of Parliament. I am therefore pleased to be able to speak in this debate.

I have a number of detailed questions to ask the Minister. First, on these regulations, is there any granular data that can give clarity on why the rise is so great in these areas compared to the different picture that we have in the south-west of England? That type of granular data should be available from local public health teams, who were able to tell us, after the Leicester outbreaks, that the transmission was coming from takeaway shops and households rather than from clothes factories, as everyone wrongly assumed. Is knowing this granular detail not absolutely key to focusing restrictions on what is likely to be effective rather than on blanket harsh lockdowns that may achieve little at enormous cost?

To what extent is the spread of the disease related to large university halls of residence? What evidence is there that either lockdowns or track and trace are making a substantial difference to bringing down infection levels, or is that just testing a model? What measures have been taken to minimise agency staff moving between care homes? Can we confirm that there is no seeding of covid from hospitals into care homes again by the discharging of test-positive patients? Finally, on nosocomial infections, it appears that infections within hospitals are starting to rise. Is that being monitored and addressed?

With that, I will end my contribution, because I want other Members to be able to represent their areas.

5.5 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): If the hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) was correct in his earlier intervention on the Minister and low hospital admissions are the key to avoiding local lockdowns, then most certainly Hartlepool should not have gone into lockdown last Saturday. His brass-neck intervention on the Minister does not help the people of Teesside one iota; it just adds to the confusion.

The challenges that this crisis have created for my constituency are unprecedented. I want to place on record my gratitude to the local council and its staff, NHS and care workers, and all key workers for doing extraordinary work in these very difficult times.

The newly imposed measures, with less than a week gone, are already having a negative impact on local businesses. Pubs and restaurants, already damaged by the 10 o'clock closing rule, are being knocked out by the body blow of restrictions on meeting anyone outside the household bubble in public spaces.

The rules lack clarity and are causing tremendous confusion. The lack of a clear strategy to get us out of lockdown is worrying. I have to say that my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), and I were disgusted by the lack of advance notification from the Government of their intentions. I hope that Members are treated better in future. More important, the fact that my council was notified via a press release is unacceptable.

Jobs are at risk, our local economy is floundering and public health is suffering. Our council asked for safeguarding measures; the Government gave it lockdown. Our council needs £4.5 million to get us through this crisis; it got a share of £7 million, split between nine local authorities. Frankly, that is nothing short of a disgrace.

5.7 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), who made some terrific points. In the short time that I have, I would just like to make some specific points and ask the Minister a few questions, if I may. And if I may, I just say to the Minister, with all due respect, that we are all in the same business. No one in the House wants to do anything other than stop the spread of the virus, save lives, and support jobs and businesses. Those are not mutually exclusive objectives, and I am sure we can do all those things.

I want to share a comment with the Minister and ask her a particular question. I spoke yesterday with a senior source from within Durham constabulary, who raised with me a specific concern: advice had been given that additional resources promised for policing the local lockdown restrictions were dependent on taking robust enforcement action and pursuing prosecutions. He felt that that was too prescriptive, and likely to sour existing good community and local business relations. He, like me, feels that the local authority and police are working well and collaboratively in County Durham, and that to be effective we need policing by consent. Additional police funding should not be dependent on demonstrating more prosecutions. I hope the Minister agrees with me and, will respond if that is not correct.

Let me make the Minister aware of the consequences for jobs. The pub and hospitality trade in my constituency, as in many others, is withering under Government restrictions. I am still unconvinced of the evidence for the nonsensical 10 pm very strict hospitality curfew, which throws large groups of people on to the street all at the same time, who then crowd on to public transport all at the same time. I do not believe that that protects public health, and it does not protect businesses. Performance venues of all types are closing their doors, the community is losing amenities, and people are out of work at the start of what may well be a very bleak winter.

Further down the supply chain, local breweries are losing orders. The Chancellor seems to be conducting a vendetta against the smaller British brewers: he has excluded them from support for the hospitality industry.

[Grahame Morris]

They may struggle in the covid crisis through the winter, but the Chancellor seems determined to run them out of business with his proposals on small brewers relief. Will the Minister please look into that?

Relying on local restrictions and lockdowns moves the pressure to support businesses affected from national to local government. Minister, specific industries need specialist support—please, hear our plea.

5.10 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I agree with quite a lot of what the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) has just said, and also what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) said.

We all understand that localised restrictions are better than national ones, especially when there are particular spikes in local areas, but there are variations within our communities as well. Weardale in my constituency has far fewer cases than much of the rest of my constituency, so it would be great to see some really localised data and some really localised regulations. I understand that the Government have to respond to local authorities and have worked with them, and they have listened to Members when we have raised some issues. I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for responding to the childcare issue that we raised recently.

More broadly, people in my constituency are concerned about three overarching things. First, they want clarity on the schemes—how areas are put into them and how they get out. People really want to know the path forward, because currently that is really worrying people, and particularly local businesses in the hospitality sector.

Secondly, on the 10 pm curfew, my local pubs, clubs and restaurants really benefited from the eat out to help out scheme, but they are now really worried about what we are going to do going forward. We need to understand why the 10 pm curfew is in place—people need to hear what the Government are saying and the evidence behind it.

Thirdly, on test and trace, we have seen a huge increase in testing in the UK, but recently there has been a problem with speed of response, which has led to more concern locally. We really need some answers from the Government on how we are moving forward on that.

I shall conclude quickly, because lots of other Members want to speak. The Government really need to explain and justify the things that are being put forward, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) said. Only by doing so will we maintain the consent of the people to the measures being imposed. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland that, with our local businesses facing real local impacts after being locked down once, and now facing restrictions again, they really need the Government to come forward with a clear message and some clear support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I want to bring the Minister in at the end for at least five minutes. We can get everybody in if people think about each other. If people take, say, two and a half minutes, we can get everybody in. I am sure Margaret Greenwood will lead the way.

5.12 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those people who have been working so hard during the pandemic to keep us safe. We are all very aware of the many sacrifices that people have had to make, not being able to visit loved ones or be with family members.

Last week's announcement of additional measures for Wirral and the rest of the Liverpool city region was in response to the sharp increase in infection we have seen in Wirral in recent weeks. It is a matter of very real concern, so we all have an important part to play in tackling it. It is also important, though, that the Government recognise that the regulations will have a profound impact on local jobs and the economy. In Wirral West, 500 people work in pubs and bars, 400 work in licensed restaurants and many thousands more across the region work in the sector.

The Government must recognise that the regulations have serious implications for local authorities and city region combined authorities. Last week, the Secretary of State announced £7 million of funding to local authorities in the areas under new measures, which he said was

"to support them with their vital work."—[*Official Report*, 1 October 2020; Vol. 681, c. 499.]

However, it appears that that money is to be shared across nine local authorities—something he did not make clear at the time. That money is to be used only for outbreak management; it is not to support any businesses that might be affected.

Public health regulations are important, and I am pleased to say that there is a high level of compliance in Wirral—people really do want to do the right thing—but the Government must match that by playing their part: they must provide financial support for the local economy and keep people in their jobs. The Government must also make sure that we have a test and trace system that is up to the job. If the regulations are to be successful locally, that is essential. Shockingly, we have been waiting for such a system for more than six months now. I have written to the Secretary of State three times in recent months—most recently in September—asking him to fully utilise the expertise and knowledge of local authorities' public health departments as a means of fixing track and trace. We need a track and trace system that uses the expertise based in our local health teams in local authorities, and one that is sensitive to the needs of communities. Instead, what we see from this Government is sheer incompetence.

The report this weekend that 16,000 positive covid-19 tests went missing because the Excel spreadsheet that was being used was 13 years out of date is evidence of yet further catastrophic mismanagement by this Government in what is a massive crisis. IT consultants across the country will have looked on in dismay and disbelief as it emerged that the data was being kept on an Excel spreadsheet at all, let alone one that was 13 years old. How do the Government expect infection rates to come down if vital data is lost and local public health teams are not provided with the information that they need to advise people to isolate? How do the Government expect to be able to assess the effectiveness of these regulations without a high-quality, reliable test and trace system? These are matters of great urgency. I

ask the Minister to respond to that urgency today, and set out what she will do to ensure that Wirral and the Liverpool city region get the support that they need.

5.16 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I rise to speak today for the residents of Warrington North who have been under lockdown for 16 days now, with additional restrictions having been imposed a week ago. My constituents are now banned from going for a drink or a meal indoors with someone they do not live with, or from visiting a public venue together at the risk of fines that double from £100 upwards. Food and drink can be served only at tables, and the 10 pm curfew applies to pubs and restaurants. Local businesses tell me that that has caused their bookings to drop from 60% to 90% in a single week. As they are not being told to close, they are not eligible for further support grants.

There is a £1,500 grant available to businesses in places with local lockdown restrictions, but only in Blackburn and Darwen, Pendle and Oldham, not Warrington. These decisions will cost businesses and jobs, and, equally, the £7 million split between nine local authorities will not allow our council to help those desperate for support.

My constituents are eager to be responsible and safe, but what they resent are confused instructions, incompetence, inconsistent treatment and unnecessary economic harm. We have heard of more incompetence in the past few days, with 16,000 cases having been lost from the system because of inept use of Excel spreadsheets. One hundred and fifty seven of these cases are in Warrington, which means that hundreds of people have been neither tracked nor traced in my community.

What are the benefits of these restrictions, confused, incompetent and inconsistent though they may be? Well, they have not stopped the spread of covid cases, but what they have achieved is massive damage to our local businesses and profoundly negative impacts on the mental health of our residents, who are cut off from friends and family in almost all circumstances.

The Government seem to be clamouring to impose even more restrictions on our community and on the neighbouring Liverpool city region without even giving us the evidence for the restrictions so far, any exit strategy for us to work towards, or any hope that there may be an end in sight. We cannot go on like this. The public want to do the right thing, but need to have confidence that the Government are putting them in a position to do this. We are being let down.

5.18 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I rise to speak very briefly, not only as the Member of Parliament for Weaver Vale, but as the son of a publican. I remember the days when kicking-out time was around 11 o'clock—quite a few Members in this Chamber will remember that. Before licensing laws were liberalised, there were some consequences of that kicking-out time. There was antisocial behaviour when leaving times were not staggered. I am not saying that that necessarily happened in my father's pub, but it certainly happened in other pubs that I am familiar with in the community.

I look in horror at the 10 pm curfew in my community and in communities up and down the land. Despite constant questions and pleas for the evidence for it from

Members right across this Chamber and from all parties, we are not getting sufficient answers. However, what we are seeing is people congregating at the new kicking-out time of 10 pm, crowding on to public transport, and holding impromptu parties in city centres and town centres, which means that, effectively, they are becoming superspreaders.

Interestingly, I represent a constituency that has Cheshire West and Chester on one side and Halton and Runcorn on the other. One side has additional lockdown restrictions; the other does not. I have seen an astronomical rise in the number of covid infections on the Halton side and not such a large rise on the Cheshire West and Chester side. Pubs right across the piece, the events industry and the hospitality sector are on their knees at the moment—absolutely on their knees and desperate—and now we have the local lockdown restrictions as well. They need a support package; they need help. The decision on the 10 pm curfew needs to be reviewed and revisited.

I ask three things of the Minister, repeating similar things that Members have said across the House today. On the test, trace and isolate system, we should give it to the local authorities: devolve that responsibility to local authorities, and fund them properly. It is working at that level; let us do something that works. On communication, which has been raised right across the House, let us get it right. Let us be proactive at the national level and make sure we communicate with local authorities. Let us also have the courtesy of communication with parliamentarians: that has been absolutely disgraceful so far. The final ask is for a sectoral support package for the hospitality industry and beyond. Let us be smart about using public money if we are to fight this virus together.

5.21 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): We all want to fight to get the virus down and save lives, but to do so we must have coherent and transparent rules from the Government that are simple and that everyone can understand, and that certainly do not run to 10 pages. We must have an effective test and trace system. We have to understand—I hope that the Minister will take this back to the Government—that we cannot get the virus down by lockdowns on the cheap. It makes no sense to withdraw the support that kept everybody going earlier in the year while the pandemic is coming back and still raging in our communities.

We need the Government to look very quickly at the support they can give to the areas that they decide need extra restrictions. On the Wirral, we have 31,000 jobs still furloughed. Furlough comes to an end in three weeks' time, just as the extra lockdown restrictions that this SI introduces are closing down and making unviable a lot more of our local jobs and businesses. In order for us to support the Government and join the battle to get the virus down, they must increase support for individuals who need to self-isolate when test and trace is fixed. They must support businesses that are forced to close or operate at much lower profit levels, or unprofitably, through no fault of their own, because of the restrictions that the Government have imposed. They must give extra support to local authorities and statutory services that have to maintain the ongoing capacity to act. On the Wirral, we have over 15,000 people who had to shield during the initial phases of the pandemic. In the

[Ms Angela Eagle]

past four months, the Wirral food bank has seen a 51% increase in the support that it gives to 65,000 people—71 tonnes of food. The Government must support us to do the right thing if we are to get the virus down.

5.23 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I am pleased that we now have the opportunity to debate these regulations, but it is extremely disappointing that we have not had the opportunity to debate on the Floor of this House, since they were introduced, the original regulations that put Bradford under local restrictions.

Bradford has now been under local restrictions since July, and during that time my constituents have faced considerable restrictions on their freedoms, unable to meet relatives at home, in their gardens, in pubs or in restaurants, and restricted from visiting care homes. Many face real risks to their jobs and livelihoods. Despite these restrictions, the infection rate across Bradford South has continued to rise, from 35.8 to 187.5 per 100,000. Something is not working, and the Government must set out why they think this is and what they are planning to do next.

Since the local restrictions were introduced, I have had severe concerns about the way in which the Government have handled them. Throughout this period, decisions have repeatedly been announced on days when the House is not sitting, which means that we are unable to question Ministers about them on behalf of our constituents. They have often been announced late in the day through Twitter or by press release, which has added to a sense of outrage and confusion as people seek to understand increasingly complex rules. Moreover, the Government have repeatedly failed to make public the data and criteria that are driving these decisions. This lack of accountability on the part of the Government cuts to the heart of our democracy, and has added to the feeling that decisions on imposing or lifting local restrictions are being taken inconsistently or for reasons other than scientific evidence.

Bradford South was at 35.8 cases per 100,000 when it was put into local restrictions, yet areas that now have much higher numbers of cases have not been subject to such restrictions. The Government need to explain why. We need clarity and consistency in decision-making processes. My constituents have been living with these local restrictions for months now. The least they deserve from the Government is honesty and transparency about whether the local restrictions are working, and a clear plan to review the Government's strategy if they are not.

5.26 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Two thirds of the north's population are now living under some form of local restrictions. Batley and Spen was one of the first. The announcement on Twitter the night before restrictions came into effect caused confusion and distress. My constituents deserve better. The restrictions have certainly hit businesses including coach companies, wedding companies and beauty salons—to name but a few. They have all been hit hard, and although we are resilient in Yorkshire, as the weeks roll by it is obvious that these businesses will need the financial support that I have asked for many times in this House.

I am pleased that the Government have agreed to a £500 grant, but the communication has been another disaster. Is it open to those on low pay or just to those on benefits? Is it open to those who are self-isolating? What about those with no access to public funds? This is obviously a fast-moving situation, but the new restrictions—such as the 10 pm curfew—seem to be implemented so arbitrarily that they are potentially counterproductive. As elected representatives for our constituencies, we need swift and transparent answers. A generic reply is not good enough.

We know that there is a hard winter ahead, which is why we need a locally controlled test and trace system, with councils able to draw on money when it is needed. Our hospitals are under pressure. I thank Kirklees Primary Care Trust and the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which are stretched to the limits. We want to do the right thing by our communities, but we want to support common-sense restrictions. It must be a joint endeavour. Local council leaders and mayors must be part of making decisions that affect their communities. Our high streets are also struggling.

Without any clarity around the parameters for coming out of restrictions, and with no sense of an exit plan, we will all suffer: families who cannot see loved ones; those who are shielding, terrified to go back out into the world; and those who have lost their businesses or jobs, and are locked in a cycle of loneliness and poor mental health. For those people, who need hope or light at the end of the tunnel, we need a clear strategy to exit the restrictions, and start the job of recovery and renewal of our economy.

5.28 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): In the time available to me, it is hard to convey just how frustrating and frightening the current situation is. We are living through an international health crisis, but it is now translating into local crises too, especially in the north of England. Cases in Newcastle remain at an alarming level of 240 per 100,000 people.

It is frustrating that there is a clear contradiction in the Government's approach that makes the task of controlling the rise much more challenging. While the Health Secretary focuses on suppressing the virus through local lockdowns, the Chancellor's blanket approach of winding down financial support measures across the country makes it much more difficult for people to protect themselves and others from the virus, undermining the very purpose of these lockdowns. We already know that the mortality rates from coronavirus in the most deprived parts of England are more than twice as high as those in the least deprived areas. Pre-crisis economic and social conditions have left certain parts of the country particularly vulnerable to covid-19, which has in turn brought on local lockdowns, just as the Government are withdrawing financial support. It is not a sustainable approach for the months ahead.

Let us look at the hospitality sector as just one example. The reality of local lockdowns and restrictions on households mixing means that countless jobs in pubs, cafés and restaurants will become unviable—to use the Chancellor's words—when the furlough scheme comes to an end this month. The Chancellor says that the replacement for the job retention scheme—the job

support scheme—will support jobs that are viable in the long term. Clearly, the pandemic will impact on future working and consumption patterns, but are we really to believe—this is the implied logic—that Geordies will be less interested in going out for food and drink than people in other parts of the country in the long term? As we are seeing a high degree of local variation in covid cases and in the public health response, we need properly funded, localised economic responses too. If we fail to provide sufficient support in the areas most vulnerable to covid-19 we risk exacerbating further the country's stark economic inequalities.

I have a few questions. When are we going to see the financial support for which LA7 leaders in the north-east have asked? Only one in eight workers is eligible for the new self-isolation payment. How are others going to be able to afford to self-isolate without it? The Government knew, when the virus first hit this year, that their public health strategy had to be backed up with an economic support package. The money was there to ensure that people could afford to do what it took to get the virus under control, to stay home wherever possible, and isolate where necessary. That support needs to be given again. We are not all in this together, but we will be if the Government do not step up soon.

5.31 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In the brief time available, I would like to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and make several points. This is tough, and it is difficult for many residents to understand the different shades of restrictions and so on. We should not underestimate the effect on those people who cannot see as many people as they used to see, even in the recent past. It is particularly hard on people with relatives in care homes, who are finding it really difficult not to see members of their family.

The seven local authorities in the north of the north-east, if I can put it that way, took a proactive approach to try to counteract the spread, prevent further infection and keep the rate down, but there were asks when they came to the Government with that, as well as proposed restrictions to help us manage and come out of further measures in as healthy an economic state as possible. The first ask was to have a test and trace system locally, run by local authorities. There was a call for a localised track and trace service because our public health teams, our local NHS and our councils know our area and are best placed to follow through on that action, so it is really important that we follow that. Secondly, those local authorities asked for support for the businesses most affected. As we have heard, hospitality, retail, leisure, pubs and restaurants have all been affected by the 10 pm curfew and, as other hon. Members have said, by the fear of going out. We need extra measures and funding effectively to manage the situation locally and to make sure that we can come out with viable jobs in place.

On Tuesday, I asked the Secretary of State about local test and trace. In his reply, he said that the Government had given £10 million for local track and trace services, but our councils do not appear to have heard about that. Can the Minister confirm that that £10 million has been made available? It is particularly important in the light of the fiasco of the unreported test results last week that we have a really effective test and trace service, so can the Minister confirm that £10 million is there?

5.34 pm

Helen Whately: I thank colleagues for the contributions that have been made today, which I have listened to very carefully. There have been some extremely heartfelt speeches on all sides of the House that clearly reflect the enormously difficult time we face right now in this country for all our constituencies and all our constituents. They are facing restrictions and things that affect their day-to-day life—their livelihoods, the businesses they may run or work in, or, for instance, visiting relatives in care homes; we want to do everything we can to make sure that can be done safely.

But this does all reflect the fact that we are truly facing a global pandemic and, as I said yesterday—for those who were in the Chamber for the debate yesterday—the greatest crisis or the greatest challenge that our country has faced since the second world war. That means that, however we want things to be, at the moment there is no way they will be as we want them to be. I am sure hon. Members on all sides of the House recognise that everybody, whatever role they are in, is doing their very best to make things the least bad that they possibly can be.

The reality is that we are fighting a truly invisible, deadly enemy that is spreading through our communities—and as we know, sadly, killing as it goes—and we must suppress it, but do so with this incredibly difficult balance. Colleagues have talked about the impact on businesses and the local economy in their constituencies. We must do this while doing our utmost to protect the economy and, of course, keep kids in school and support those in university and other forms of education. As has been said, if the pandemic spreads faster and further, that in its own right also has impacts on the economy—not just the restrictions, but the impact of the pandemic itself and more people getting covid.

As the Government have responded over the weeks that have passed, we have been constantly learning, listening, adapting—learning from those overseas, as well as from the data that we have built up ourselves—and working closely with those in local areas, because the only way we will win against this virus is, indeed, by working together, fighting together and defeating it together.

I now come to some of the comments from colleagues. One question that came up several times is: why are we seeing different action in different areas? What I will say is that numerous factors are looked at—the incidence rate, the positivity rate, hospitalisations, intensive care units and, of course, views. Those absolutely have been taken into account in the regulations that we are debating today. As for the impact—in fact, one colleague asked: are they still necessary?—some areas have come out of some restrictions and seen easements. We do know that it takes time for there to be an impact, but we need to continue to take the steps that are necessary because, as we know, the real exit from this is for us to see rates come down.

We are clearly working flat out for a vaccine, and we are continuing to build up the capacity of our test and trace system. I want to pick up one particular concern that there might have been some problem in that there was not the right data because of the technical problem last week. What I will say is that actually the data on which these decisions were made, or the data that did not feed through, was too recent to affect these decisions, but it will feed into future decisions—very much so. What I will say, and ask colleagues to remember, is that

[Helen Whately]

we have built up the capacity of our testing system from testing 2,000 people a day to being able to test well over 200,000 people a day, which is not to be sniffed at, and are working up to 500,000 a day by the end this month.

Members have asked about local test and trace. Absolutely, the systems work together. The national system does work with local tracers and is working with local teams, although what I will say to those who want their local public health to be running the whole thing is that I am hearing from local public health teams that they are really maxed out with a huge number of responsibilities at the moment. We should continue to work together, because the local and national complement each other.

There are no easy answers. Some colleagues have said that they want restrictions that are easier to live with. Restrictions on our social contact will be hard to live with. I would like to say a huge thank you to all our constituents across the country who are playing their part in following these restrictions, as we must do ourselves. I commend these regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (North of England and North East and North West of England etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1074), dated 1 October 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 2 October, be approved.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CONSUMER PROTECTION)

That the draft Consumer Protection (Enforcement) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 14 September, be approved.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Adjacent Waters Boundaries (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 7 September, be approved.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Financial support for the self-employed during COVID-19

5.41 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I rise on behalf of my self-employed constituents who rightly feel let down by the lack of support from the UK Government. Some, such as the newly self-employed, those paid by dividends, those on an annual salary and freelancers in the creative industries, have had no support whatsoever. This is untenable, and solutions for the excluded need to be found. The Chancellor's recent winter economic plan does not address these injustices at all. With regard to continuing support for those self-employed people who can access the scheme, only providing support for up to 20% of their profits is clearly inadequate. With this petition, I call on the Government to rethink and amend their policy.

The petition states:

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

Declares that the economic consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic has had a particularly harsh impact on those individuals who are self-employed or run small businesses; expresses concern that the Chancellor's recent Winter Economic Plan means the Self Employment Income Support Scheme is to be wound down; and further expresses concern over the many gaps already existing in the previous scheme, which was inadequate for millions of people who considered themselves excluded from Government support.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward additional measures to support those self-employed and freelance workers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002608]

Policing in South-West London

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

5.42 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this important issue on the Floor of the House. I want to start by paying tribute to our fantastic police officers in the south west command unit, who continue to provide exceptional service to local residents and who have gone above and beyond to keep our communities safe during lockdown. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Commander Sally Benatar for her years of service and wish her well in the future. I welcome Lis Chapple, the new lead of the south west command unit, and look forward to a productive working relationship with her.

Within the four boroughs that make up the south west command unit of the Metropolitan police, we have three of the four safest boroughs in London, including Richmond and Kingston, which I represent. The relative safety of our streets is, of course, something that local residents value highly, and is part of what makes south-west London such an attractive and popular place to live, work and study. Those three relatively safe suburban boroughs, however, share the command unit with Wandsworth, with all the complexities and additional demands on policing that an inner-city borough represents. The resources of the south west command unit are therefore frequently skewed towards one borough, with implications for the remainder.

I want to state clearly that I support the Met's goals in targeting violence reduction and that I absolutely want to see it putting all the resources needed towards saving young lives. The recent, tragic case of Archie Beston in my constituency has highlighted how quickly and unpredictably violence can occur, the devastating impact it has on those who are left behind, and the importance of a rapid police response. My heart goes out to Archie's family and friends, and I pray that the sentencing of the perpetrators later this month will help them to feel that justice has been done.

I remain concerned that, with scarce resources being targeted towards the most serious crimes, we lack sufficient officers to provide the kind of everyday policing that is so necessary to keeping our streets safe. I have written to the Mayor to share my concerns, and he has responded with information about the various measures that he has taken to increase police resources across the capital. He was unable to reassure me that we might see a future boost to police numbers in Richmond and Kingston because of the impact of the coronavirus on local authority budgets. That is not, of course, a problem confined to the capital, but in London, a shortfall in funding will mean that our police budget has to be cut. The Mayor's estimate is that, unless the deficit can be addressed, our policing budget will be cut by £109.3 million over the next two years. This means even scarcer resources being targeted, by necessity, at the most serious crimes, leaving comparatively safer boroughs, such as those in the south-west, with even fewer resources for everyday policing.

In addition to the impact on funding, it is important to consider what impact the coronavirus has had on demand for policing. It will not have escaped the Minister's notice that footfall in central London has dropped

dramatically since March, and has not yet recovered, and the considerable resources that were once dedicated to policing the shops and leisure outlets of central London are not required in the same numbers that they once were. By contrast, footfall in suburban areas such as south-west London has increased considerably. During lockdown, in common with many other areas across London and the country as a whole, south-west London saw a big increase in antisocial behaviour.

On Richmond Green and the Barnes riverside, and in Canbury Gardens in Kingston, crowds gathered to play loud music and get drunk, and—most distressingly to local residents—private gardens were used when no public toilets were available. Large crowds attracted drug dealers and drug use, and those were only the most noticeable changes. Local police report an increase in cases of domestic violence, and incidents involving mental health issues. Crime, antisocial behaviour and other incidents requiring a police presence have shifted from our city centres to our suburbs. A policing demand profile that prioritises city centres may not be an appropriate template in future, and I urge the Home Office to work with the Metropolitan police and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime to review how resources are allocated.

I wish to speak about how the absence of a physical police presence affects communities. Although we are far from unique in having this issue, the rise in antisocial behaviour that we experienced in Richmond and Kingston over the summer has made residents extremely anxious about their safety. Public drunkenness is extremely intimidating for everybody, but especially for lone females and the elderly. It is frightening to imagine that there is nobody to protect someone confronted by an unpredictable and aggressive individual. The same is true of drug dealing and drug taking. It takes only one incident to make people feel afraid of walking in their own streets and neighbourhoods, and that can have an incredibly repressive effect on people's lives.

For young people, the threat of being mugged in our boroughs is real. I applaud some of the community initiatives that have sprung up to help young people protect themselves and their belongings, especially the excellent Mothers Against Muggings initiative in my constituency. Young people should not be made to feel they are responsible if they become victims of a crime, and neither should they have to curb their educational, sporting or social activities because of a fear of going out. A police presence, or at least the knowledge that the police are nearby, can go a long way towards helping people go about their lives with confidence. We can also deter people from crimes committing. That is not just better for those who avoid becoming victims of crime, with all the mental and physical anguish that results from that; it is good for those who are deterred from committing an act that may burden them with a criminal record.

These are anxious times everywhere, and it is not surprising that people are more concerned than usual about their safety, or that police should have had more demands on their time than before the pandemic. However, the feeling that the community is not being well served by the police has, in parts of my constituency, reached a point at which some residents are canvassing support for a privately funded police force to patrol specific areas. I wish to state publicly and clearly that I am completely opposed to any such initiative. Everybody

[Sarah Olney]

has the right to safety and justice, regardless of their background or income, and it should not be reserved specifically for those who can pay for it. I am deeply concerned about the implications of the interests of customers of a private police force being enforced against those who have not paid for it. Will the Minister join me in opposing such initiatives, and reinforce the Government's commitment to provide sufficient resources to maintain the safety of our streets?

If people do not live in fear of going out into their communities, they are more likely to engage with people from different backgrounds, to provide support to their neighbours, to shop in local shops, and to contribute to a safer, friendlier neighbourhood that is the best possible deterrent to crime and antisocial behaviour. Will the Government make a commitment to neighbourhood policing as the best way of building strong communities that prevent crime and support all their residents? Will they review policing demand profiles in response to the pandemic, and—above all—will they ensure that policing authorities across the country, and especially in London and the four boroughs of the south-west, have the resources they need to police effectively everywhere?

5.49 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for initiating this important debate and for allowing me to make a speech so that I did not have to intervene on her constantly, and I thank the Minister, too, for allowing me time. Let me add my thanks to the local police, who are fantastic and try their best, and send my best wishes to Sally Benatar and welcome Lis Chapple.

The point that I want to emphasise, which has already been made, is the desperate need for a stronger visible police presence locally, which for me includes Twickenham, Teddington, Whitton, St Margarets and the Hamptons. As my hon. Friend mentioned, lockdown, combined with the good weather, has attracted an awful lot of crime and antisocial behaviour over recent months, particularly in our green spaces. For me, that includes Twickenham Green, Murray Park, Heathfield Recreation Ground and Udney Hall Gardens. That crime and antisocial behaviour ranges from urinating and defecating outside people's houses to intimidation, drug use, criminal damage of vehicles, opportunistic theft and assault. The common theme I hear from residents is that the police were called and either did not show up or were too slow to show up.

Between 2016 and 2019, we saw police numbers across London decimated. We have lost 299 police community support officers across London and almost 1,500 special constables. We desperately need a more visible police presence and a return to community policing. Although the local police have made great efforts to engage with the local community, the council and me, I am dismayed to hear from them that the problem with trying to step up patrols locally is that our already short-staffed local police are called away regularly to shut down illegal raves and deal with protests and other issues in other parts of London because police resources are so stretched. Although I am sure the Minister will echo the point, which has already been made, that we are a low-crime borough in Richmond, if the policing presence continues

to be eroded in this way, criminals and others who wish to get up to no good will simply take advantage of the situation, as they already are.

One Twickenham town centre resident said: "I'm beginning to not feel safe at all here now. I have gone most of the 58 years of my life relatively unscathed, only to be directly affected by four crimes committed in just four months." We heard that residents in Richmond have taken matters into their own hands by hiring private security. I hear chatter on local community forums that people in my constituency are looking into that too. My concern is the same as my hon. Friend's: that those living on the poorest estates in my constituency, where crime and antisocial behaviour are higher, are the ones least able to afford that, quite apart from the fact that I disagree with the whole concept and I think it is dangerous and wrong. I hope that the Minister will condemn it.

The Conservative Government pledged at the last election to put 20,000 more police officers on our streets. We have seen a fraction of those funded so far, so I hope the Minister will address when he expects to fund those additional police officers for the Met and provide a long-term settlement so that it can plan for the future. I would also welcome his assurances on how we can ensure that Twickenham, in particular, gets the policing and the protection that its residents need and deserve.

5.53 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on securing this important debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for her contribution.

I have to say that I am surprised that in more than 12 months as Minister for Crime and Policing, this is the first Adjournment debate that I have done on crime. There have been lots of other debates about process-type issues, or issues of concern to Members, but not about crime, which is a frustration I find myself expressing about much of the policing family. There is lots of talk about process, computers and human beings, and all that is very important, but in the end the product, which is fighting crime, has to be our primary concern.

I am therefore pleased that the hon. Member for Richmond Park has raised this issue from her part of the world. Although it is a very safe part of London and, indeed, a very safe part of the country, that does not mean that we should not pay attention to the concerns of her residents. She should be assured that wherever and however a crime occurs in this country, it is a personal offence to me that it has, and I will be stretching every sinew in the time that I am allowed in this job to do something about it.

I start by offering my congratulations and thanks, along with the hon. Lady's, to Chief Superintendent Benatar, who is moving on to pastures new. Presumably she is no relation to the pop star of the same surname from my youth, Pat Benatar, whom the hon. Lady may well know; it is an unusual name that sticks in the memory. I also welcome Lis Chapple, who is coming along hopefully to do as fine a job. We should recognise that south-west London in particular has been rocked by a tragedy in the policing family—a terrible, heinous

crime that occurred a couple of weeks ago with the death of a police sergeant in Croydon. That is deeply, deeply regrettable and is something that we all mourn.

Moving on to the broad issues, the speech that I was given to read out today, as Ministers are wont to do in Adjournment debates, is not entirely appropriate to what was raised by the hon. Lady, notwithstanding the steers that were given to us. I am going to do what I think is known technically in the trade as winging it.

Broadly, I think the hon. Lady raised four issues. On funding, I am sure she will understand that we stand apart slightly from the police funding in London. The best we can do is provide significant and generous funding to the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime through the police funding settlement, and that is exactly what we did last year. The overall police funding package went up by about £1 billion to £15.2 billion, and a very significant proportion of that went to London. Much of that was to fund an uplift in police officers, as part of the 20,000 extra police officers we will be recruiting over the next three years. The Met allocation is 1,369, which is a lot. I know that recruitment has gone extremely well in the Metropolitan police, and numbers are up 4-point-something per cent. year on year. I am pleased to say that over 92% of those police officers are dedicated to frontline duties, which is a very high proportion.

The hon. Lady rightly pressed me, and there will be more to come. That number is just the Met's share of the first 6,000, and there are another 14,000 to recruit. I am hopeful we will be announcing the allocation of those soon. It has obviously got wrapped up in the discussions with Treasury colleagues in the spending review, but our commitment to recruiting those 20,000 is rock solid. Indeed, it is a bigger job than 20,000, because we actually have to recruit about 45,000 to backfill those who are retiring during that period to make sure we reach an extra 20,000. That will give us an extremely high number of police officers, not least in the capital.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of covid being a distraction for the police and said it had been a huge burden for them, and indeed it has. The police have frankly done a brilliant job of dealing with a fast-moving and very complex backdrop to their job. They have had to embrace a new role over the past few months that they have never performed before. They have done it with alacrity, and happily.

The resilience of the police has been incredible. In many parts of the country, absence in police forces has dropped below pre-covid levels. It is almost as if police officers across the country wanted to step forward and do their bit at this time of national crisis in a way that they perhaps have not done in the past. Many a detective has squeezed into their uniform and got out on the frontline to do their bit for the national effort to fight crime.

There have also been other impacts. Some of the demonstrations that we have seen, especially in central London, have had an impact on the police, particularly in terms of the extractions that the hon. Lady mentioned, not least because many of those disputes take place out of normal hours—at weekends or whatever—and require overtime, which means that rest days or holidays are missed that have to be caught up. There becomes a backlog of time not spent policing that is absorbed by that public order duty. We also find that has an impact on the workforce, because, frankly, they become tired. If

an officer is busy out fighting crime and then they are called to a demonstration in central London to do their public order duty, it often means they miss that downtime with their friends, their family, or whatever it might be. They become tired and weary, and that has to be rectified, too.

Sarah Olney: The Minister makes the point about demonstrations this summer, and obviously I am aware that there have been quite a few. I just wonder whether there have been significantly more than there normally are in any given year. Should the resourcing plan perhaps take account of that, inasmuch as if people are being called to these additional duties, the resourcing plan should have enough in it to reflect, as he says, the rest days that they then need to catch up on?

Kit Malthouse: I do not think that there have been appreciably more demonstrations. In fact, we may well have seen years in the past when there were bigger demonstrations. However, a lot of the demonstrations this year took place against the backdrop of covid and, as they say in policing, had “potential” and therefore required that a greater potential resource might be appropriate. If the police have intelligence or a sense that a public order situation might get a little out of hand, frisky, or even turn violent, there will often be police officers held in reserve elsewhere, away from the action, to be called up, should they be required. They may well be wearing more body armour or protective equipment just in case things, as they say, kick off. We have seen that once or twice this summer, sadly.

To be honest, that is part of the regret about some of these demonstrations, well-meaning though they may have been, such as the Extinction Rebellion demonstrations that cause so much difficulty. They do absorb police resource—I do not think people realise how much—and very many of those officers are drawn from neighbourhood policing and neighbourhood teams. They are trained to public order standards so that they can be extracted—or abstracted, if you like—and that does cause problems in neighbourhoods, not just on the day, but in the catch-up, because it absorbs rest days, holidays, training days and other days that are naturally part of a police officer's cycle of existence. There is an element of tail—of absorption—that causes a problem. However, the Metropolitan police—we have been in constant touch with the force, on an almost daily basis—has done a fantastic job from top to bottom over the last few months. It has been really fantastic and I pay tribute to it for the work that it has done.

The other area that the hon. Lady mentioned is antisocial behaviour. While she is hearing from her residents that they have a particular experience that is causing them concern over antisocial behaviour, we have seen a fall in antisocial behaviour across the country over the last few years. During the covid lockdown, the Office for National Statistics could not do its standard crime survey, so it was doing telephone surveys throughout it on crime. The ONS's results show that about 20% of the people whom it called during the lockdown witnessed antisocial behaviour during the three months of lockdown, but, at the same time, 21% said that they saw a reduction in antisocial behaviour during that period, so nationally, the figure is broadly flat. Nevertheless, I understand that in a low-crime area, such as Richmond or Twickenham,

[Kit Malthouse]

the impact of antisocial behaviour is amplified because people are used to existing with a much quieter background in that leafy part of London. Antisocial behaviour does have that impact.

While the police should and could play their part, I ask that both the hon. Member for Richmond Park and the hon. Member for Twickenham make sure that their local authority is making full use of the tools that were given to communities and local authorities in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. There is a suite of tools there, such as civil injunctions, criminal behaviour orders, public space protection orders, community protection notices, dispersal powers and closure powers, all of which could be used. Some of the antisocial behaviour to which the hon. Member for Richmond Park referred is related to licensed premises and the consumption of alcohol, and making sure that local authorities have both their licensing policy and enforcement in good shape is critical to success.

Sarah Olney: Perhaps it would be helpful to clarify that some of what I described in my speech as antisocial behaviour has been referred to by the police, I believe, as unlicensed musical events or in that sort of category. It is my understanding that there has been a big increase in that across London during the summer, particularly as there have been no licensed musical events such as Glastonbury or other festivals, and nightclubs have all been closed. A lot of that activity has moved to open spaces. That is the experience that we have been having in Richmond and in Twickenham.

Kit Malthouse: Yes, the hon. Lady is right. We have seen a surge in unlicensed music events across the whole country as two things happened. First, young people have a natural desire to be sociable, but for them, the rock concert/festival schedule was abandoned. However, at the same time, in one or two instances, there is perhaps initial evidence to show that those involved in the drugs industry are co-ordinating these events as a natural place in which they can sell drugs. Dealing with that was behind the regulations that the Government introduced to impose £10,000 fixed penalty notices on those who organise such gatherings. As she will know, a number of those penalty notices have been handed out. With unlicensed music events, the police have powers to confiscate equipment, and they very often do so. Sadly, however, despite the fact that such equipment costs several thousand pounds, they are under a duty to return it in time. I did wonder whether we could either take our time returning it or find some other use for it, to act as a suitable disincentive to organising such events, but the £10,000 fixed penalty notice was apparently more powerful.

Since then, there has been a reduction in unlicensed music events. Some of that has related to—let us say—assertive action by the police, and the change in the regulatory environment. It has also, frankly, related to the weather. As the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), who is sitting in the Whip's place, will know—he has been, in the past, a special constable of some note—the police often refer to their greatest friend and ally in fighting crime as PC Rain. The weather will, we hope, have a depressive effect on such events over the autumn.

Alongside all the powers, however, the hon. Lady is quite right to say that there is an urgent desire in London, in particular, and in the whole country for a greater sense of police presence. People want much more assurance that public space is governed and controlled. That desire is a large part of what lies behind our pledge to recruit 20,000 more police officers.

Munira Wilson: I want to pick up on the point about councils being equipped with tools to tackle antisocial behaviour. Will the Minister clarify whether local councils have also been given the funding to do so? We know that local government has suffered cuts year on year. In Richmond, where there has been a lot of trouble in green spaces, the council has tried to step up its own park patrols where possible, but it has been hampered by a lack of finance, which has been hit by covid.

Kit Malthouse: I recognise the issue that the hon. Lady raises, but although as a former cabinet member for finance in a London borough for five years, I understand the funding pressures on councils, much of their financial fate lies in their own hands. During my time in local government in the capital, we saw, let us say, variable performance from a financial point of view. There were those who managed their finances well, and those who did it not so well.

I have not looked recently at the balance sheet of Richmond Council, and I would be happy to have that discussion if the hon. Lady wishes. Nevertheless, it is not terribly expensive to put in place, for example, a public spaces protection order. Such an order could be used somewhere like a park, where antisocial behaviour is taking place. The order can insist either that certain activities do not take place or, indeed, that certain things should take place, and the breaching of it is an offence. If Richmond Council wanted to focus on that, I am sure that it could. The council has, obviously, changed hands politically a number of times, but in my day it was never known for being on the back foot, under either Conservative or Liberal Democrat control, when it came to protecting its residents. I hope and believe that it will step forward this time as well.

Both hon. Members raised the issue of privately funded police forces. I am a Conservative, and I believe in freedom of association. I would therefore not want to restrict the ability of private individuals to gather together to protect themselves in a particular way. We see that happening in other parts of our world. For example, the Jewish community in this country has its own protection organisation called the Community Security Trust, which mounts guards and protection outside synagogues every Saturday because they are a particular community who feel that they might be targeted when they are on their way to worship their God. That is legal, allowable and perfectly reputable, as far as I am concerned.

Sarah Olney: Does the Minister not accept that there is a difference between arranging a private security firm to protect private property and arranging a privately funded police force to patrol a public area?

Kit Malthouse: Actually, the Community Security Trust is not a security organisation. It is a voluntary organisation and, as I understand it, members of the community volunteer to be part of the CST to protect

their own community. It does require some funding, but it is nevertheless very organised and they train very well. It is a remarkable organisation. In fact, it has worked with other faith groups and talked to them about their own safety, because sadly, many faith groups are often the target of extremists.

Of course, we have private security firms who cater to businesses and others at events and concerts—like those rock concerts that have not happened this summer—and who do that kind of work, so I am hesitant to condemn it. However, the situation that the hon. Lady is talking about, which we have seen elsewhere in the capital, not

least in St John's Wood over the past 10 or 12 years, is undesirable. It would be great to be in a position where people did not feel a compulsion to do those things because the police presence was such that they felt a sense of governed space and security, and my hope and ambition is that, over the next three years, that is exactly where we will get to.

Question put and agreed to.

6.11 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 October 2020

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

China: Labour Programme in Tibet

9.30 am

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Welcome to Westminster Hall. If hon. Members will bear with me, I have to read the pre-flight briefing. I remind Members that there have been some changes to normal practice to support the new call list system and to ensure that social distancing can be respected. Members should sanitise their microphones before they use them and respect the one-way system around the room. Members should speak only from the horseshoe. Members can speak only if they are on the call lists. This applies even if debates are undersubscribed. Members cannot join the debate if they are not on the call list.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reports of China's rapid expansion of the labour programme in Tibet co-published by the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. Having wiped my microphone, I feel like I am ready to go. Today's debate is about the recent report on China's rapid expansion of mass labour programmes in Tibet. This paper was co-published by a leading human rights adviser and scholar, Adrian Zenz, with a group that I am a member of called IPAC—the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China—and there are others in the room who are also part of that group. It includes both left and right parliamentarians in 17 countries who are concerned about the behaviour of China across a range of issues. As I say, Adrian Zenz is a scholar in this area, and he has previously published a paper with IPAC on the forced sterilisation of Uyghur women, and I will touch on that issue shortly.

Adrian Zenz has uncovered this material through existing Government papers. That is the interesting thing: none of this is secret. In a sense, it is quite open, and these Government papers spell out exactly what has been going on. The findings are shocking, although it is important to note that, with all the other debates about China, which I will touch on in my conclusion, Tibet has, funnily enough, been rather forgotten. It has been an issue for a while, and then it has disappeared, and nobody seems to talk about it. What this paper has done is reminded us that, over a longer period than for anything else, the Chinese authorities have been bearing down on the human rights of the indigenous population in Tibet.

The findings of the report are particularly interesting, because they show that there has been mandatory—I use this term advisedly—vocational training, which basically means driving out the sense of identity of the people in Tibet. Alongside these programmes, there are forcible labour transfer schemes. Those are slightly gentle words, but what they mean is that people are being taken from one place and put into camps, a bit like—well, a lot

like—the Uyghurs we uncovered, who are forced to do hard labour in all sorts of areas and without proper pay or support.

Over half a million labourers were collected together into these camps in the first seven months of 2020. Local government officials are required by the Government to meet quotas for what they term recruitment to the scheme—it is nothing like any concept of recruitment that we might understand. It basically means that they have to get people in certain categories into those camps as quickly as they can. This process is overseen by strict military management, which includes enforced indoctrination and intrusive surveillance of participants. Labourers may also be forcibly transferred from their homes to work all over China. In other words, this is not just about camps in Tibet; people are being moved around to fulfil requirements elsewhere. Of course, this process has close similarities with the training and labour transfer in the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region, which I will touch on.

The Government's attempts to dilute Tibetan identity are really critical. That is being done through forced cultural assimilation, and the same pattern is going on in a number of areas. Interestingly, the Government documents state that these programmes aim to reform Tibetan cultural “backwardness”. That is an interesting concept and a relative concept, and of course its relativity is defined by those in power, which is to say the Communist party of China. That aim is achieved by the Government enforcing the learning of Mandarin and weakening, however they can, the religious influence that exists among those who claim to be indigenously Tibetan.

This is not an isolated incident. We have seen this pattern of eradication—or attempted eradication—of ethnicity across China. We know from the parallel report that was published a little earlier on the Uyghurs that at least 1 million Uyghurs are in mass arbitrary detention in Xinjiang. There are almost 400 prison camps in the region, with more still under development. It is disgraceful, but we understand that western fashion brands use supply chains where forced labour is prevalent. I am sure that will apply in due course, if not already, in Tibet. The Government-sponsored forced sterilisation and birth suppression in the Uyghur populations, which we believe do exist, would meet the genocide criteria—we have yet to get the UN to even look at that, but it is the key. Civil servants are also placed in Uyghur homes to monitor behaviour, and children whose parents are detained are being taken from their families and placed in state facilities.

But it is not just the Tibetans and the Uyghurs; it is now also the Christians. Party members who profess a faith are now subject to disciplinary procedures, with the arrest and detention of Christian leaders such as Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Church, who was detained in December 2018 and sentenced to nine years in prison for

“incitement to subvert state power”.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): These acts of repression never happen all at once. It is never a single thing that happens immediately. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern about reports that we are now hearing from southern Mongolia about

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

the start of the same process of cultural and linguistic oppression of the local population? If we do not call it out, we will probably see the same thing happen there.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is a pleasure to give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who came early to this issue. He has been calling it out for some time, and I congratulate him on that. I agree with him. We have to look at the starting point. People took their eyes off Tibet, but we can see now what is happening. People did not want to talk about the Uyghurs, but we have advanced. Repression is happening everywhere.

My point about the Christians is that it has been going on for a long time. There are threats, for example, to withhold state support from low-income Christian families who do not give up their religious belief, and there is a similar experience among Catholic churches. It is not only about churches that the Government do not consider to be registered; it is also even churches that they might consider to be registered.

The Falun Gong has experienced the most appalling behaviour. The 610 Office is the security agency charged with solely persecuting the Falun Gong. If detainees do not renounce Falun Gong beliefs, they are subject to re-education through labour. There are reports of beatings, solitary confinement, 24-hour monitoring, rack torture, tiger bench torture, water torture, stress position torture, forced feeding for those on hunger strike and forced injections of unknown drugs, and now, most shockingly of all, there are confirmed stories of organ harvesting from those who have been incarcerated.

Liu Guifu, a Falun Gong practitioner from Beijing, was twice sent to RTL camps—retraining camps—in Beijing. She reports being deprived of sleep, not allowed to use a bathroom or drink water. She was forced to consume faeces and toilet water, and was given unidentifiable drugs to make her lose consciousness. I urge the Government to call that out.

I also urge the Government to do a series of things so that the UK becomes a lead advocate in all of this. First, we need to look at mandatory sanctions with regard to global human rights abuses: sanctions such as travel bans or asset freezes. The officials responsible should have Magnitsky arrangements applied to them for the use of forced compulsory labour in Tibet and in other areas, too. The Government should also open a way for similar judgments to be issued on cases regarding abuses against Xinjiang's Uyghurs and other minorities in China that I have touched on.

I urge the Government to support amendment 68 to the Trade Bill in the Lords to nullify trade arrangements past and future if the High Court makes a preliminary determination that a proposed trade partner has perpetrated genocide. I can tell the Government now that, should such a new clause come to the Commons, I will absolutely support it. I also urge the Government to consider that, to meet GDP targets, China's economy needs to grow by some 7.5% a year. Under the cover of that, China is being given the capacity to behave in the way it does by western companies and Governments, which are turning a blind eye.

It is worth reminding ourselves that, beyond even the human rights abuses, China is now in breach of World Trade Organisation rules endlessly across the piece. It incentivises companies through illegal discounts, tax

breaks and subsidies. Even Volkswagen reported that it had to buy a quota of components from local Chinese suppliers or pay more than double the standard import tax on such parts, which violates the WTO rules that everybody else is meant to obey. China favours exporting finished products, which means that it basically forces companies to manufacture and produce.

The supply chain risk profiles are all in the report, and they are there for us as well. The supply chains in Tibet, Xinjiang and other regions are linked to forced labour, and the Government have to make it clear to British business that it is unacceptable to be in the slightest bit involved with those chains. I also ask the Government to demand reciprocal access to Tibet and other regions, such as Xinjiang, in order to allow for independent international investigation into the reports of forced labour, and to call for a UN special rapporteur on Tibet.

The peculiarity of the situation is that if China were any other country in the world, every Government would call it out. They would demand change. Imagine if it were a country in Europe, Africa or anywhere else—there would immediately be demands and debates in the UN. That does not happen. Far too much of what we think and do about China is now influenced massively by the concern about getting goods, manufacturers, investment and so on organised.

China is involved in occupying the South China sea. The UN has said that China has no right to it at all, yet it is demanding and controlling whole areas. It has been involved in border disputes—aggressive behaviour—recently with India, in which Indian soldiers have been killed.

Then there is the situation in Hong Kong. How much more can we say about Hong Kong? China is abusing what is going on and has dismissed an international agreement with regards to the legalities, leading to the incarceration of many peaceful protestors and their shipment to China for prosecution, where they will certainly not get a fair trial. By the way, I asked the Government what they think of British judges being employed still on the bench in Hong Kong. Surely it is time that we said, "Enough!" They can no longer give cover to what is going on in Hong Kong. It has to stop, for goodness' sake.

There is one other action that the Government can take. The winter Olympics are planned to be in China. Many of us believe that, if it were any other country, there would now be calls for the Olympics to be moved. I simply say to the Government that they will have to take a stance on this issue pretty soon.

Overall, we are dealing now with a country that appears to have bullied and threatened its way through all of this. It is imposing the most dreadful and terrible things on many of its people, it is abusing human rights, and many people now believe that it might even be guilty of a form of genocide. I simply say to my Government that it is time for them to stand up. It is time for this Government to lead, and it is time for this Government to act.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 11 o'clock. I am obliged to start calling the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 10.27 am. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and

10 minutes for the Minister, and Sir Iain Duncan Smith will have three minutes at the end to wind up the debate. Five very distinguished Back Benchers are seeking to contribute, and we have 42 minutes of Back-Bench time before the Front Benchers come in.

9.45 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall today. I echo what has been said about human rights abuses in Tibet and in the People's Republic of China in general. It is shocking that in the 21st century we are still having to speak out against the barbaric acts of a totalitarian regime. The basic rights enshrined in documents such as the universal declaration of human rights and the international covenant on civil and political rights are the foundation stone on which human life can be lived in dignity. We have a duty to stand up for those rights on behalf of not only persecuted people inside China but all people, not least because the Chinese Communist party is seeking to expand its influence around the world.

I would like to speak more specifically about the recent report by Adrian Zenz on militarised vocational training in Tibet and to place that in the context of the CCP's long-term strategy in Tibet. First, it is important to note that the report refers mainly to what is happening in the so-called Tibet autonomous region, which is only one part of Tibet. The vast areas of eastern Tibet are contained within the provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. We must be careful not to overlook the Tibetan people in those regions.

About 6 million Tibetans live under Chinese rule. Although exact numbers are hard to ascertain, it has been estimated that, until recently, there have been roughly 2 million Tibetans whose lifestyle can be described as nomadic or pastoralist. They graze their herds on the high pastures, as their ancestors did for generations. Their way of life is fine-tuned to the harsh climate. The CCP has long sought to undermine that traditional lifestyle. The fundamental reason for that is that the pastoralist way of life perpetuates the distinctive Tibetan identity and culture. Together with the Tibetan language and Tibetan Buddhism, it is one of the pillars on which that distinctive identity and culture rest. The CCP has for decades seen the Tibetan's distinctive identity and free spirit as a threat to its authoritarian rule. Just as the CCP wishes to cripple the Tibetan language through Mandarin education, as we have heard, and to cripple Tibetan Buddhism through the demolition of monasteries such as Larung Gar, so it is trying to undermine the pastoralist lifestyle.

That is the context for this report. The CCP's pretext for its action is framed in terms of economic development. The pastoralist lifestyle is characterised as backward, and pastoralists are treated as surplus labourers who are lazy. Using a combination of superficial incentives and punitive force, the CCP has long been driving pastoralists off their ancestral lands and into towns, where they are expected to engage in the Chinese economy. The forced vocational training courses described in the report are nominally to give them skills that they can use in the towns. It must be affirmed, however, that that is a pretext. Considerable evidence amassed by Tibetans suggests that the lifestyle of pastoralists who are driven into towns is deeply degrading.

Once in the towns, the Tibetan people are much more easily controlled within the horrifying systems of surveillance, such as the grid management and double-linked household system described in the report. To reaffirm the key point, the CCP's framing of its policies in Tibet in terms of economic development is spurious. The issue here is deliberate cultural destruction. In that sense, there are many similarities between the CCP strategy in Tibet and the horrific cultural genocide taking place in Xinjiang. I stress, however, how important it is to take the situations in Tibet and in Xinjiang on their own separate terms. We must be careful not to blur the important difference between the two cases, as that would only help to let the CCP off the hook for its specific abuses against Tibet.

Therefore, I call on the Government to bring Magnitsky sanctions against those members of the CCP involved in perpetuating human rights abuses in Tibet, as we have heard. I also call on them to adopt the private Member's Bill from the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on reciprocal access to Tibet, which would make it harder for the CCP to continue to hide its abuses in Tibet from journalists, diplomats and independent travellers.

Finally—this is important and has not been mentioned yet—I call on the Government to publish their formal strategy for when the current Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, dies. It is very likely that the CCP will try to use that moment to further undermine the Tibetan identity by appointing its own stooge Dalai Lama. We should be ready to stand in defence of the Tibetan people if and when that moment comes.

9.50 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing this debate today. He started by saying that Tibet is something of a forgotten issue. Over 20 years, as a member of the all-party parliamentary group for Tibet, and as chair and co-chair for the last five years, I have been in this Chamber—a very lonely Chamber—raising the cause of Tibet, so it is good to see many more hon. Members from across the House here in support.

Last year, we marked 60 years since the invasion of Tibet. Since then, more than a million Tibetans have lost their lives at the hands of the Chinese. The regime has brought about the suppression of basic human rights, such as religion, cultural identity, free movement and assembly, as well as subjection to arbitrary arrest, detention, disappearances, torture and racial discrimination. It is also imposing an environmental catastrophe on the world with the degradation of the Tibetan plateau, which is responsible for the water sources that feed or refresh almost 40% of the world's population. That must not be a forgotten or hidden disaster any more.

China is now widely recognised as a serial abuser of human rights and cultural identity. It has been doing it in Tibet for years, but now because of what is going on in Xinjiang province with the Uyghurs, with the suppression of the Mongolian minorities that we have seen more recently, and, of course, in Hong Kong, this human rights abuse is at last getting the attention that it so rightly deserves.

[Tim Loughton]

I am proud to be a member of IPAC, to which my right hon. Friend alluded, and very much welcome this report. A few days ago, when we marked the international global action day on China, I issued a statement on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on Tibet, which I want to put on the record. I said:

“On the day that the Chinese Communist Party celebrates the National Day of the People’s Republic of China with a characteristic display of military might and global arrogance, we join the great majority of the free world in remembering the victims of Chinese oppression past and present. For over 60 years now, the peace-loving people of Tibet have seen their liberty, their culture and their heritage systematically suppressed and over one million have lost their lives upholding everyday freedoms that we take for granted in the free world. They continue to be persecuted within Tibet and increasingly amongst the widespread communities forced to live outside their homeland.

In the last few years, the suppression of minorities within Chinese borders has taken an even more sinister turn, as we see the latest assault on the liberties of the Uyghur people forced into concentration camps and subject to appalling sterilisation programmes that constitute genocide under UN definitions. In Hong Kong, which has for long been a beacon of freedom and creativity, China has thought nothing of reneging on international agreements to bring that population to heel and we stand shoulder to shoulder with the brave citizens who continue to take a stand against the world’s most oppressive superpower”.

I hope that all hon. Members concur with that.

The report contains the most extraordinary revelations. The labour transfer policy mandates that pastoralists and farmers are to be subjected to centralised, military-style vocational training which aims to reform backward thinking and includes training in work, discipline, law and the Chinese language. I gather that the Chinese authorities ordered Tibetan nomads to wipe out Tibetan goats. The Chinese authorities deemed that the goats were detrimental to the environment, which is rather ironic given the environmental carnage that the Chinese Communist party is waging in that region. Last year, all the goats in western Tibet, especially in the Tingri region, were wiped out. Tibetan nomads and farmers are now being turned into menial labourers and are concerned by the sudden change of their traditional nomadic or farming lives. This is the equivalent of the Westminster Government telling Welsh farmers to kill all their Welsh lambs and retrain as Ikea shop assistants, for example. It is extraordinary. Why can we not call this out for what it is? It is absolutely appalling.

In the last two years, more than 10,000 monks and nuns have forcefully been evicted from hundreds of destroyed monasteries and placed into internment camps for political re-education as part of the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism. Retired Tibetans are not allowed to go on pilgrimages to holy shrines. Tibetan children are not allowed to participate in religious activities during vacations. Possession of a photograph of the Dalai Lama is an imprisonable offence. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law)—who, alas, cannot be here today—and I went to Dharamshala and again had the honour of meeting his holiness the Dalai Lama. A more peace-loving group of people could not be found on this planet. The torture and the horrendous suppression that they have been through is quite extraordinary, yet they retain their dignity in the face of such adversity. They have seen their holy sites Disney-fied for Chinese tourists.

A new law passed by the Tibetan People’s Congress in January this year, “Regulations on the Establishment of a Model Area for Ethnic Unity and Progress in the Tibetan Autonomous Region”—I use “autonomous” loosely—is all part of the Sinicization programme, despite Tibet’s constitution supposedly guaranteeing the autonomy and cultural identity of those minorities within the Chinese border. The Tibetan language has been replaced by Mandarin in schools and is banned from being taught in monasteries, and Tibetans certainly have reduced job prospects if they continue to use it. Tibetans have to register and seek permission to travel across the Tibetan autonomous region. In contrast, Han Chinese do not need permits to travel anywhere they like in China or the whole Tibetan autonomous region. There is mass surveillance of the population. We have debated in Parliament what Huawei is up to; it is part of that surveillance, certainly in Xinjiang province and in the monitoring of mobile phones used by Tibetans.

On the minoritisation of Tibetans, we have seen a mass inflow into Tibet of Han Chinese and of Chinese companies that employ only Chinese-speaking migrants; they reluctantly employ Tibetans where they have to, because in the higher parts, only native Tibetans can withstand the altitude. There is no freedom of assembly. Escape routes through Nepal for Tibetans who cannot tolerate the oppression anymore have now been cut off because the communist Government in Nepal have done a deal with the Chinese. There is persecution of the Tibetan diaspora around the world, who live in fear of the long reach of the tentacles of the Chinese Communist party.

China denied what has been going on in Xinjiang province until satellite photographs of the concentration camps caught them out in the end. What should we do? I am pleased that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) mentioned my Tibet (Reciprocal Access) Bill, which I reintroduced again in this Session. It is based on legislation passed in Congress unanimously, with cross-party support, which has been put into effect. It was backed by Marco Rubio from the Republicans and Jim McGovern from the Democrats, and as a result neither is allowed to go to China—a badge of honour, frankly. The Bill calls for reciprocal sanctions against officials who do not allow representatives of the British Government or others to visit Tibet to see the human rights abuses going on at first hand. We need this law to send out a strong signal from this country that Governments cannot abuse their own people in secret, because we will call it out. Human rights abuses of this magnitude, wherever they happen, must be called out. China has no divine right to immunity.

We need a UN special investigation into genocide and the use of slave labour. We remember the Tesco Christmas card incident last year, when somebody found a message from a slave labourer being used to produce Christmas cards in part of China. We must resist Huawei. We must resist the influence in UK boardrooms, with highly paid British directors taking the Chinese shilling.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Does my hon. Friend not agree that right now there must be a very public statement by the Government saying to those who take money from China and then promptly defend it that that has to cease?

Tim Loughton: I completely agree, and perhaps we will get it at the end of the debate. We must also call out the Confucius institutes, which wield sinister influence in our universities and increasingly in our school classrooms. They give money supposedly to teach Mandarin, but there is another, subtler agenda going on. As my right hon. Friend said, the Magnitsky legislation is absolutely made for such abuses. We must bring that forward.

Last year, I was at the Riga conference of international parliamentarians with the hon. Member for Dundee West, where we issued the Riga declaration—we all signed up to it—which asked China

“to give unimpeded access to Tibet to foreign journalists, scholars and researchers, diplomats and other foreign citizens, including those of Tibetan origin.”

It called on China to

“cease its policies and practices that harm the natural environment of the Tibetan Plateau and to resume the dialogue with envoys of His Holiness the Dalai Lama without preconditions.”

Let me end by quoting the Global Alliance for Tibet and Persecuted Minorities, which produced some of the information in the report. It said:

“The silence of the world community has emboldened the Chinese aggression and onslaught against Tibetans and Uighurs, who are being stripped of their human rights. Although much damage has already been done, it is high time that the international community should wake up and recognise the threat posed by the Chinese Communist party to peoples living under its rule and to those countries which are under the influence of China due to their monetary benefits and the huge debts which they offer. The crimes against the Uighurs and Tibetans should be recognised as genocide according to the International Genocide Convention.”

Hear, hear to that. It is time we vociferously called out the oppressive regime that is the Chinese Communist party.

10.1 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing the report to the House’s attention. A constituent of mine will be particularly grateful that he mentioned the plight of the Falun Gong and concerns about forced organ harvesting, as she has been waging a long campaign to bring that to public attention.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on all the work that he has done as co-chair of the all-party group for Tibet and his latest legislative move. A couple of years ago, as a vice-chair of the all-party group for Tibet, I had the pleasure of travelling to Dharamsala with him and the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), where we met the Tibetan Parliament in exile. Everything he said about the peace-loving, respectful nature of the people we met is absolutely true. We have welcomed Tibetan exiles to Parliament on a number of occasions, from the hugely impressive Lobsang Sangay, the Sikyong—the political leader—of the Government in exile to Buddhist monks. I echo what he said about the humanity of the people and their desire for a peaceful solution to the situation in Tibet, as well as the grave injustice they have suffered over the years.

In Bristol, we have an active local group of people from the Tibetan diaspora, some of whom recently embarked on a walk from Bristol to London to raise awareness of their cause. I was there to see them off at the start of their walk by the plinth where the statue of Edward Colston was recently pulled down by Black

Lives Matter campaigners. Obviously that statue marked another great injustice, so it was by fitting that they set off from that site. I know that those local campaigners are grateful that this matter is being discussed in the House today.

The report is worrying, and especially so when put in the context of China’s wider human rights abuses. The coercive training regimes in Tibet are not on the industrial scale of those in Xinjiang, and is not yet any evidence of extra-judicial internment, but it does bear worrying hallmarks of the treatment of the Uyghur Muslims. The training of surplus labourers to “remove backwards thinking” and to teach Chinese language, work and ethics is the latest chapter in a long-running campaign to dilute Tibetan identity and assimilate Tibet in the Chinese provinces. Some 500,000 Tibetans have been recruited to the programme, which is disturbing when we consider that the population numbers only 3 million. Of the half a million people put into the re-education camps, 10,000 are monks and nuns, as has been mentioned. Conditions in those camps are so harsh that, according to recent reports, one nun was driven to suicide.

Outside the camps, the efforts to sinicize Tibetan Buddhism continue. China has recently demolished two historic Buddhist academic institutions, Larung Gar and Yachen Gar. Tibetans are being detained for sharing photos of the Dalai Lama, sharing books written in Tibetan, and even speaking to relatives about the importance of the Tibetan language. That is a clear, orchestrated attempt to remove Tibetan culture from Tibet.

What is happening in Tibet is reminiscent not only of Xinjiang but of Hong Kong, albeit for different reasons. The 17-point agreement lays out a framework for Tibet not dissimilar to Hong Kong’s one country, two systems rule; but as in Hong Kong, that agreement is being eroded over time.

I want to speak briefly about the brave Tibetans who have spoken up against China’s environmental crimes in the region, and who have faced imprisonment and fines. I was particularly distressed to hear what the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said about goats being destroyed. It is obviously wrong, when there are human rights abuses on such a massive scale, to be upset by what is happening to goats, but I think it is symptomatic of the wilful destruction of the Tibetan people’s way of life in the plateau.

The Tibetan plateau is not only a vital geopolitical region; it is home to the world’s largest ice storage outside the north and south poles, yet a quarter of its ice has been lost since 1970. Even if we limit global warming to 1.5°C, up to two thirds of the region’s remaining glaciers will disappear by the end of the century. At the moment the Paris climate accords bind us to 2°C rather than 1.5°C, but we are not even on track for that. Currently, it is very possible that the earth will be 4°C hotter by the end of the century. When we think that the temperature difference between the present day and the last ice age was only 6°C, that puts into context how massive an environmental catastrophe it would be.

It is not just a question of global warming. The Mekong, Yangtze, Ganges and Indus rivers all have their source in Tibet, and 1.6 billion people are supported by the rivers. The melting of the third pole will have a catastrophic effect on those people, and there will be

[Kerry McCarthy]

global ramifications. Banks will burst and livelihoods will be destroyed; there will be an unprecedented refugee crisis, but there will also be an effect on geopolitical relations in the regions. Indo-Chinese relations could turn ugly. We need to question the environmental record of the CCP in Tibet, just as we do its human rights record.

A couple of years ago, I was involved in a campaign with Free Tibet. Liverpool football club had entered into a sponsorship deal with Tibet Water Resources, a company that extracted and bottled water from Tibetan glaciers. I think the football club did not have the slightest idea that there was anything wrong. Those involved probably thought it sounded like an incredibly environmentally sound, pure type of project. We drew to their attention the fact that they were facilitating, condoning and in some way complicit in what China was doing in exploiting the natural resources of the region. I am glad to say that after a year that sponsorship deal was dropped.

On the question of the trading relationship with China, it is obviously an incredibly important business partner of ours, but there needs to be a point where we put principles before our own economic interest. From 2011 to 2015 I was in the shadow Foreign Office team for Labour. As well as covering the part of the world that we are talking about, I had the shadow human rights brief. In September 2013, William Hague and Vince Cable launched with great fanfare the business and human rights action plan. We were the first country to present that sort of national action plan to implement the UN guiding principles developed by the former special representative to the UN Secretary-General, John Ruggie. Warm words were spoken—I think that William Hague used a phrase about two beating hearts of UK foreign policy: the business side and the human rights side—but only a couple of months later, in December 2013, David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, led the largest ever trade delegation to China. I asked questions about to what extent this business and human rights action plan in any way influenced that trade mission, and the answer became very clear. I remember a Minister from the Lords coming along to a meeting of the all-party parliamentary China group and saying it was not his job to think about human rights; he was a Trade Minister, and his job was to do the trade side of things.

The same was true for a number of other countries, as well. Nick Clegg went to Colombia, and I asked whether human rights were discussed there; in fact, I ended up making an official complaint because his answers were so hopeless. David Cameron went to Saudi Arabia, and it is quite amusing to look at the answers I got back when I asked if human rights were discussed. I was told, “We discussed a wide range of issues,” so I asked again, and was told that “Nothing was off the table.” There were endless permutations of those sorts of phrases, and it became clear to me that this business and human rights action plan was not worth the paper it was written on. That was very sad, because I think the intention was there to develop a more ethical foreign policy.

To conclude, we cannot allow countries such as China to act in this manner with impunity. The Government need to seriously consider Magnitsky sanctions on officials

with ties to the situation in Tibet, as well as to human rights abuses elsewhere in China. We should not pick and choose which human rights abuses we condemn and which by our silence we condone; instead, we should stand up unequivocally for human rights throughout the world.

10.11 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on having secured this debate. I fully support his powerful speech, and thank him for all the work he has done to raise the issue of human rights in China.

I believe that the Government are now actually listening; they are listening more than they did three or four years ago, when the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, which I chair, published its report “The Darkest Moment: The Crackdown on Human Rights in China, 2013-16”, which can still be found on our website—www.conservativehumanrights.com. We made 22 recommendations in it, some of which have been echoed here today. It is a tragedy that it is four years on, yet we are still asking the same questions.

That report included a whole section on Tibet. We reported on the limited civil and political rights of people in Tibet—that was a quote, and the reason is partly because the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), to whom I also pay tribute for his work on this issue, talked about how there is progression of abuse. As the report said,

“the main causes of the Tibetan people’s grievances are China’s policies of political repression, cultural assimilation, economic marginalisation, social discrimination and environmental destruction in Tibet.”

We also detailed reports and testimonies about the treatment of political prisoners, including beatings by police and other security services during interrogation sessions, mock executions, electric shock treatment, the accused being locked in cells that were pitch black or so small they could not move, torture using iron chairs, and other egregious breaches of human rights, restricting freedom. What we did not report on then, but which we hear about today, is the forced abduction of hundreds—potentially thousands—of Tibetan people and their effective imprisonment elsewhere.

I ask the Minister to look at this report, which we are actively updating now, and at its recommendations. In the time I have left, I also want to suggest four ways in which the UK could effectively respond to these deeply concerning human rights issues in Tibet. The first is global human rights sanctions: I support calls for the Government to consider using the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020 to target officials responsible for the use of forced or compulsory labour in Tibet. Names have been given to us; forced or compulsory labour is specified in those regulations as a violation, and under the regulations those sanctioned could face travel bans or asset freezes. We recall that when announcing those measures, the Foreign Secretary commented that the sanctions would be

“the latest next step forward in the long struggle against impunity for the worst human rights violations.”—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 663-4.]

Will the Government now show that they intend to fulfil the express purpose of those sanctions, and hold to account the perpetrators of the human rights abuses we have heard about today?

Sanctioning officials responsible for human rights abuses in Tibet would send out a clear signal that the UK will stand up for human rights globally, wherever such abuses occur. I hope it would also open the way for similar judgments to be issued on cases regarding abuses against other minorities in China. We have heard about the Falun Gong, the Christians and others today. They were referred to in this report, several years ago.

I am deeply concerned to hear about the similarities between the report we have heard about today and the situation we see in Xinjiang with the Uyghurs. The international community must step up, and the UK must take a global lead and take action to stop Tibetans facing the same fate as the Uyghurs. It might already be too late. Will we follow the lead of the US in sanctioning officials?

Secondly, with regard to modern day slavery in supply chains, will the Government work to ensure due diligence and risk assessments are completed by UK businesses and public bodies with supply chains in Tibet, Xinjiang and other regions in China affected by forced labour? To do so would be in line with the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which requires large organisations to report on efforts to ensure that slavery and human trafficking is not taking place in its supply chains or any part of the business.

A study conducted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute found that many household brands, such as Apple, BMW, Huawei, Nike, Samsung, Sony and Volkswagen, could be implicated in the use of forced Uyghur labour in the Xinjiang region. There are similar concerns about the fashion industry, with potentially almost a fifth of the world's cotton supplies originating from Xinjiang. I urge the Government to work with businesses to ensure that supply chains originating from Tibet are not similarly tainted with forced labour. To enforce this, the Government should use their new powers to issue civil penalties for non-compliance with the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which would require large organisations to report on steps they are taking to remove forced labour from supply chains and to demonstrate reasonable practices in their supply chains.

Thirdly, there is the issue of reciprocal access to Tibet. We called for that in our 2016 report and we have heard calls for it today. The Government must now surely ask for reciprocal and unrestricted access so that we can ensure an independent international investigation into reports of forced labour and other human rights abuses in Tibet. The Chinese Government have systematically obstructed travel to the Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas by foreign diplomats, officials and journalists. Reciprocal access would ensure that abuses in Tibet do not escape the world's attention.

Before I close, I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. I support his Bill. He made a most powerful speech, and I thank him for the information that he brought to the Chamber today. Will the Minister look at a further report, which I did not bring today, that our Human Rights Commission has done on the Confucius Institutes, which my hon. Friend also mentioned? It goes into detail about the grave concerns about what is happening through their existence within our UK universities.

Finally, can the Minister update us on the UN's position regarding the installation of a special rapporteur to investigate forced labour in China? Will he commit to

raising this issue at the UN and call on the Secretary General of the UN to install a special rapporteur to investigate forced labour in Tibet? That will provide unbiased and thorough scrutiny of allegations of human rights abuses in Tibet. We need to ensure that the Government do not just listen and speak, but act.

10.19 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this debate. I declare an interest, in that I am also a member of IPAC. I, too, think that IPAC is to be commended for the production of the report that is tagged in the title of the debate.

To pick up on the theme first touched on by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), it is heartening to see the attention that issues such as the oppression of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang province and the situation in Hong Kong are now getting. However, it has not always been thus, and we should acknowledge that there has been a significant attitude change in Governments across the developed world towards China.

By and large I welcome that and I think it a positive change, but I sound a note of caution: when we criticise the regime in Beijing, the Chinese Communist party, we do that because what it does is worthy of criticism. It is not about isolating or demonising China. China has the potential to be a force for good as a massive and growing economy, but when we see that strength in the Chinese economy being used as a malign force in different parts of the world—the way in which China has used its economic influence in Africa, in particular, is worthy of greater consideration—we have not just the right, but the duty to call it out.

It is the case, candidly, as the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) touched on, that Governments of all stripes in recent years have been slow to the party on this. I remember the years when visits to this country under the Blair Government saw protesters shielded away from the site to avoid the risk of offending the delegations, and in 2013, Alex Salmond should have met the Dalai Lama when he came to Edinburgh. However, on all those occasions it is fair to say that the risk of upsetting China, getting on the wrong side of it and then being somehow economically disadvantaged, meant that we made the wrong call and took the wrong turns.

I am delighted to see a different approach from this Government and others throughout the western world. It was for that reason that I made the point about southern or, as we often call it, inner Mongolia, because what we are seeing there has disturbing echoes of what we have seen in other semi-autonomous regions in China. It starts with the linguistic and cultural oppression, but it never finishes there, and when we see it starting, that is the point at which we should be calling it out. I know today's debate is not about southern Mongolia—perhaps we can keep that for other occasions—but I would draw the House and the Minister's attention to some of the recent work being done by bodies such as Human Rights Watch and the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Centre and the reports that they published towards the end of August.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

The IPAC report that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green referenced reveals that Tibet now has a significant compulsory vocational training programme and forced labour transfer scheme—straight out of the Xinjiang playbook, we could say. More than 500,000 people have been enlisted by the programme in the first seven months of 2020 alone; 49,900 of them were directly transferred to other parts of the province, while 3,109, according to the report, were transferred out of Tibet. It is easy to talk about the figures, horrific as they are, but it is worth pausing for a second to reflect on what they actually mean.

The figures mean, essentially, that the people of Tibet are seen as tools of the state and are deprived of the right and the opportunity to have any say in how and where they work. They have no freedom to choose how they live their own lives. It is a wilful disregard of human rights and human dignity, and that is why we have a duty to call it out. The report says that the forced labour programme is overseen by “strict military-style management”, which limits the liberty of Tibetans in an attempt to remove their so-called “backwardness”.

There is absolutely no place for such an approach in any working or social environment. We see this obsession with conformity and uniformity time and again in the way in which the Government in Beijing approach their people. There is no place for that in a modern state. The treatment of Tibet is part of the much wider programme that we have seen by the Chinese in other parts of the country.

I have a number of points for the Minister. To pick up on a point made by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), there is a need to get observers and a human rights taskforce, badged under the United Nations, into Xinjiang province and other areas of concern. There is a need to meaningfully use Magnitsky-type sanctions and to look at whether the supply chains of companies selling and operating in this country have been using forced labour and whether British businesses and public bodies should take that into consideration. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 means that we have legal obligations as well as a moral imperative.

This comes down to the most fundamental human rights imaginable. We should never forget that human rights are universal. If they do not matter in Tibet and Xinjiang, frankly they do not actually matter here either.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. I call Patrick Grady for the SNP.

10.26 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to be back in Westminster Hall. I join others in congratulating the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing the debate and on his incredibly comprehensive opening contribution, which has been followed by equally powerful contributions from Members representing a wide range of parties and the wide range of views within some of those parties. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, we are identifying a

new and increasing consensus about the importance of speaking out about the actions of the Chinese state and, particularly in this debate, its treatment of the Tibetan peoples and other minorities.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is right that my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) would have been here in other circumstances. He has been a passionate campaigner with his colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting Tibet over the years. He has been on visits, and has met some visitors, as I have had the privilege of meeting, including the Sikyong and others, who have come to address the all-party group.

The report that the debate has highlighted and the efforts of Dr Adrian Zenz have given a new level of coverage to, and awareness of, the tragedies that are unfolding. It is important also to recognise the role of journalists who have picked up on the report, in particular Reuters, which, in the face of the restrictions on journalists that Members have spoken about, has produced a comprehensive piece of coverage and analysis, and attempted to seek a response from the Chinese authorities.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is right: for many people, the oppression of Tibet and the exile of the Dalai Lama is a kind of static fact of life. However, the report has brought home the chilling reality of all the different horrors—enforced military-style training and education, environmental degradation and what the report calls a coercive lifestyle change for the Tibetan people from nomadism and farming to wage labour, which is the strongest, most clear and targeted attack on traditional Tibetan livelihoods that we have seen since the cultural revolution. As others have said, it is essentially a form of cultural genocide, or indeed worse.

We know that the Chinese regime denies that and says that everything is voluntary and nothing is forced, but that does not match the reality that has been reported and the experience elsewhere. As we have heard, the United Nations estimates that at least a million people in Xinjiang, mostly from the ethnic Uyghur population, are subjected to similar treatment—detained in camps, subjected to ideological education and forced sterilisation, as the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, and other horrors—despite Chinese claims that the participants in such camps have “graduated”. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute identified at least 14 detention centres being built this year alone—14 out of 380 that it has identified across the country using its satellite technology and other methods. Speaking up and speaking out has to be an important first step, and global leaders must recognise and respond to the report and other similar analysis.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland was right to say that the global attitude towards China is changing. Throughout Members’ contributions to this debate, we have heard the options that are open to Governments, including the UK Government, be it travel bans for identified officials, Magnitsky sanctions, the implementation and monitoring of the Ruggie principles and the business and human rights action plans that the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke of, or questioning the role of specific companies. We have had a lot of debate in the House recently about the role of Huawei and how it is allowed to operate here in the United Kingdom. Most importantly, journalists,

academics and international observers should have a right of independent access for monitoring in Tibet and the other regions.

The UK Government have to support all those calls. This is an important moment for the UK. If it wants to emerge now as a new, global Britain, it has to demonstrate that it will have the courage to rise to the challenges. That is why questions around participation in the winter Olympics in 2022 have to be part of that consideration. They have to be part of our use of soft power, how we make our views on these issues felt around the world and how we engage.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most perilous moments will be when the Dalai Lama dies? It will create an interregnum, and the Chinese Communist party will use that moment to undermine the Buddhist tradition and spiritual leadership. We have to be aware of that.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and indeed His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that he will think about whether or not he wants to be reincarnated. The Chinese Government will have to take that into account. If we are going to talk about religious minorities, a growing number of adherents to the Catholic faith are also concerned about the Vatican's relationship with China. We must bear that in mind as well.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland spoke about the Scottish Government's previous relationship with China in the context of how other Governments' relationships have changed. When the current First Minister visited China, she made a point of speaking out on human rights, equality and women's rights. She made the point that economic growth and equality have to go hand in hand, because there cannot be successful, sustainable economic growth without respect for equality and human rights. That has to be remembered.

In all of this, we have to think about our individual responsibilities as well. The hon. Member for Bristol East and others spoke about bottled water and supply chains. We all have to think about consumer goods that appear to be too good to be true in terms of price and quality. As the hon. Member for Congleton said, whose hands have made that cheap clothing, cheap electronics or cheap hand sanitiser? Who made our cheap facemasks that have suddenly become ubiquitous? The wipes that we have in the room were made in Turkey—I made a point of checking before I spoke—but it is clear that many of our facemasks were made in China.

The hon. Member for Bristol East spoke of one of her constituents. My constituent Yu Yu Williamson died, sadly, during the summer. She moved to the UK from China as a young woman. When she came here, she was able to have access to free media and understand the truth of the regime that she had been brought up in. From that point, she never stopped campaigning for the rights and freedoms of her people, particularly the rights of the Tibetans to self-determination and religious freedom across the country. She also campaigned on concerns about organ harvesting and the oppression of Falun Gong practitioners. She was an ardent lobbyist. It is possible that Members present met here if they were ever outside in Parliament Square, because she was a regular presence at the Falun Gong protests that took place outside. Her campaigning meant that she was

never able to return safely to the country of her birth. I pay tribute to her and send my deepest sympathies and condolences to her family and many friends in Scotland and around the world. I commend the beautiful obituary that appeared in *The Herald*—perhaps I will send it round to the Members who have taken part in the debate.

We owe it to people such as Yu Yu, countless other campaigners around the world, and the millions who are suffering under oppression in China to continue to challenge and question the actions of the Chinese regime. I hope that the Minister will rise to that challenge today.

10.35 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who gave a powerful speech listing the issues with the behaviour of the Chinese Communist party, whether in Hong Kong, the Himalayas or the South China sea. That set the stage for what has been an excellent debate.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who gave a powerful critique of the human rights action plan. She demonstrated that our values are not for sale and that, when it comes to the constant debate on whether to prioritise trade or human rights, there should be no debate at all, because the priority is to stand up for our values and for human rights. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly put it, if human rights do not matter in Tibet, in Xinjiang or in other parts of the world, they end up not mattering here either. This is a universal issue that affects all of us. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) made that point very clearly with regard to the ethnic and cultural survival of ways of life and diversity across China.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has done so much work on the issue of Tibet and has been a leading voice on it for so long. He set out some very tangible and clear recommendations for what we need to do to address these issues. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) did likewise. Indeed, there were so many other contributions today that unfortunately I do not have enough time to go through them all in detail.

I will say a few words about where my party sits on this issue. It is absolutely clear that we are profoundly concerned by the human rights abuses in Xinjiang against the Uyghur Muslims. We have called repeatedly on the Government to take action and we are deeply troubled to hear that similar abuses of human rights are taking place in Tibet.

The research sets out some very disturbing statistics, including the half a million labourers over the first seven months of 2020. There is strict, military-style management and enforced indoctrination and intrusive surveillance of participants. It is clear that the programme's aim is to reform Tibetans' so-called cultural backwardness, through teaching Mandarin, and by weakening the way of life and the religious practices of the Tibetan people.

Before I appeal to the Minister with some specific recommendations, I will say a few words on the wider context of the policies and activities of the Chinese Government. It is becoming increasingly clear that our

[Stephen Kinnock]

interaction as a United Kingdom, and the interaction and engagement of the United Kingdom Government—indeed, of successive Governments since 2010—has been characterised, I am afraid to say, by naivety and complacency, both domestically and abroad. Of course, in 2015 David Cameron and George Osborne announced the so-called golden era of Sino-British relations, based on the premise that we would open our markets to China and that the Chinese Government would reciprocate while gradually aligning with the international rules-based order and opening up to trade with the rest of the world. That approach viewed the UK's relationship with China purely through an economic lens, turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in exchange for the naive and narrow promise of future economic benefit.

The reality is that the benefits of trade have remained largely unbalanced, a process actively encouraged by the Chinese state, which has facilitated the replication of intellectual property and the dumping of heavily subsidised products on European markets, leaving UK firms open to hostile takeovers and driving the UK to a trade deficit with China of around £20 billion a year. Further still, the UK now has 229 supply chains dependent on China, 59 of which relate to our critical national infrastructure.

Moreover, we are increasingly isolated on the global stage. Over the past decade, I am afraid we have gained a global reputation for being alliance breakers, when one of the great strengths of our country has traditionally been our role as alliance makers. The UK's relative isolation has made it easier for President Xi to press ahead with the imposition of national security legislation in Hong Kong, which has been met with international condemnation; the persecution of the Uyghur and Tibetan minorities; and destabilising actions in the South China Sea, which are a violation of international law. To summarise, our supply chain dependence on China clearly constrains our ability to stand up for our national interest and national security, while this Government's approach to international relations has hindered our ability to convene and lead an alliance of democracies, to stand up for our values and interests.

The golden era strategy was an unmitigated failure. Britain alone—an agenda that the current Government appear to be pursuing—is not a strategy at all. It is a recipe for disaster. China respects strength, unity and consistency, but we are in a position where we are starting to look weak, divided and inconsistent, and that has to change. We need a fundamental reset in Sino-British relations and, indeed, in relations between China and the rest of the world.

It is against that backdrop that we debate Tibet today. Our central message to the Government is that expressions of outrage are not sufficient. Tangible action is required and we recommend three initial responses. First, the scope of legislation that underpins the so-called Magnitsky sanctions must be broadened. The senior Chinese Communist party and Hong Kong Executive officials, who are clearly responsible for breaches of human rights in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, must be added to the list. The rapidity of the Government's recent decision to add senior Belarusian officials to the

Magnitsky list was very welcome. Why, then, are they dragging their feet when it comes to Chinese Government officials?

Secondly, we urge the UK Government to revise their risk advisory for British companies that source goods and services from areas that may involve Tibetan forced labour. The vast majority of British companies want to do the right thing. They want to behave ethically, and the Government must act to support them in doing so.

Thirdly, we support calls for the UK Government to push for the appointment of a UN special rapporteur for the full and transparent investigation of forced labour and ethnic persecution in Xinjiang and Tibet. The issue of genocide has been raised, but in order for that to be classified as genocide, very clear and compelling proof and evidence are required. The way to get that is through international action to get that special rapporteur; otherwise, we cannot move forward with the debate on genocide.

I trust that the Minister has taken note of the strong views expressed by right hon. and hon. Members from across the House. I look forward to his response to the specific points and recommendations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Could the Minister please conclude his remarks no later than 10.57 am?

10.43 am

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is a great pleasure to be back in this Chamber. I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for initiating this very important debate. I am also grateful to others for their contributions and strong views, including the hon. Member for Bath (Vera Hobhouse), my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

Promoting and protecting human rights are incredibly important to this Government, no matter where those violations and abuses occur. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, on 22 September the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China published a report alleging that the Chinese Government had expanded a large-scale mandatory vocational training programme in Tibet. The reported nature of this programme is deeply concerning to the UK Government and we take these allegations extremely seriously.

As we have heard, the report alleges coercive vocational training and the transfer of labour. It describes a large-scale campaign to retrain and transfer some rural labourers within Tibet and elsewhere in China. Those allegations bear similarities with the reported system of forced labour in Xinjiang, including the military-style vocational training; a focus, as we have heard today, on Chinese language training; and local middlemen receiving financial incentives to transfer labour throughout Tibet and beyond.

It is worth noting, however, as brought up by the hon. Member for Bristol East, that we do not have clear evidence that the very worst abuses taking place in

Xinjiang are being replicated as yet in Tibet. There is no evidence of mass extrajudicial internment or of workers being kept in closed and securitised environments, like in Xinjiang. But of course we are working very closely with the report's author. We are scrutinising the report, which has been out for two weeks. We are also working with other experts on Tibet and our international partners, so that we can get a clear and thorough understanding of the situation.

As is evident from our track record, we pay very close attention to the human rights situation not only in Tibet but right across China. We have called on the Chinese authorities to lift the severe and unjustified restriction on access for foreigners to Tibet. That has been raised by virtually every right hon. and hon. Member in the Chamber. Our officials at the British embassy in Beijing were last able to visit Lhasa in July 2019. We are consistent in our calls that that access needs to change.

We have consistently urged China to respect all the fundamental rights, in line with its own constitution and the international frameworks to which China is a party. The right to freedom of religion or belief applies to the people of Tibet just as it does to the people of Chingford and Woodford Green and elsewhere in the UK.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama was mentioned by Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. The UK views the Dalai Lama very much as a respected spiritual leader, and as such he has visited the UK on a number of occasions. We continue to do all we can to encourage freedoms for religious and cultural expression in Tibet and across China.

I think that the hon. Member for Bath made the point about the succession. The appointment of a new Dalai Lama is clearly a religious matter, and one for the relevant religious authorities to decide, in line with freedom of religion or belief. It is worth pointing out that we have also raised the case of the Panchen Lama with the Chinese authorities. We have demanded confirmation of his welfare and that he enjoys freedom of movement.

This Government have therefore shown time and again that when allegations are substantiated, we will speak out and act to hold China to account. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State, supported by his ministerial team, has repeatedly set out our grave concerns about the human rights violations perpetrated against the people of Hong Kong and against Uyghur Muslims and other minorities in Xinjiang. I have done so myself in many parliamentary debates, the most recent being last month. We have raised those concerns directly with the Foreign Secretary's counterpart, Wang Yi, on a number of occasions.

We have also played a leading role within the international community to hold China to account, with two unprecedented joint statements at the UN in the past year. Twenty-eight countries joined the UK-led statement at the Human Rights Council in June, and right hon. and hon. Members will have seen that yesterday 39 countries joined a statement at the UN General Assembly in New York expressing our deep concern at the situation in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet. I believe that that growing coalition reflects UK diplomatic leadership. I

have an awful lot of respect for the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Aberavon, but I rather disagree that we have been ineffective in that regard. We have shown diplomatic leadership, as those statements in the UN demonstrate. The personal involvement of the Foreign Secretary is testament to that situation.

At the UN Human Rights Council, we used China's most recent universal periodic human rights review to challenge its record publicly and encourage improved compliance with all its international human rights commitments. Last month, we dedicated our entire national statement at the council to the human rights violations taking place in China. That is only the second time that the UK has dedicated a national statement to a single country, with the first being in 2018 on Russia, following the poisonings in Salisbury. As the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have made clear, we want a positive relationship with China. China is a leading member of the international community with which we want to have a strong and constructive relationship in many areas.

I turn to points raised by right hon. and hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green raised sanctions, as did virtually every other Member. We are carefully considering further designations under our newly introduced sanctions regime. It is essential that sanctions are developed accurately and with the correct evidence. My right hon. Friend will know that it is not appropriate to speculate on who may be designated, but it is absolutely right to say that we are constantly reviewing this within the FCDO.

Members have mentioned supply chains, responsibility and amendment 68 to the Trade Bill. It is crucial that all businesses conduct the appropriate due diligence to ensure that their supply chains are free of forced labour. All Members referenced how there should be reciprocal access, and that is absolutely the Government's position in terms of unfettered access to these regions. I will come shortly to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green also referenced judges in Hong Kong. An independent judiciary is a cornerstone of Hong Kong's economic success and way of life. Sadly, the new national security law provides Hong Kong's Chief Executive, rather than the Chief Justice, with the power to appoint judges. That risks undermining the independence of Hong Kong's judiciary. We will monitor that closely, including the implications for the role of UK judges in the Hong Kong justice system.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned the Olympics, which he has also mentioned publicly. As the Foreign Secretary said yesterday, we are focused on working closely with our international partners to hold the Chinese authorities to account. We need to build the evidence base on which future action should be taken. While we have no current plans to boycott the Olympics—that is a matter for the sporting authorities—we have been clear throughout that we will not look the other way when faced with egregious human rights abuses in Xinjiang or violations of the freedoms of the Hong Kong people.

The hon. Member for Bath mentioned the Tibet (Reciprocal Access) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. I thank

[Nigel Adams]

my hon. Friend for his work on the APPG for Tibet and all he has done to bring Parliament's attention to what is happening in Tibet. We are very much aware of his Bill, which has its Second Reading in March 2021. We will continue to call, at the UN and directly with the Chinese authorities, for unfettered access to the region, and obviously we will work with my hon. Friend and closely monitor his private Member's Bill.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland raised the issue of Inner Mongolia, which he and I have discussed separately. We will continue to monitor that situation and engage on that. He also referred to unfettered access to those regions, which we will continue to call for; all the Opposition spokesmen also made that point clearly. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned, as have others, the call for a UN special rapporteur. We have repeatedly called in the UN for China to allow unfettered access to observers, including the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It is vital that that should include access to Tibet. She also mentioned the work of Confucius institutes. It is simple: any attempt to interfere with academic freedom or freedom of speech will not be tolerated. If any universities or research institutions experience attempts to undermine free debate, we encourage them to come forward and speak to the Government.

I have a few seconds left before I hand back to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. We will always act to uphold our values, our interests and our national security. We are crystal clear with China when we disagree with its approach. We urge the Chinese Government to respect all fundamental rights across the People's Republic of China, including in Tibet. We are examining the latest reports of coercive training and transfer of labour in Tibet, and we take them seriously.

I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing this issue to the attention of the House today. We are working to establish a full picture of the situation. We have repeatedly held China to account for its human rights violations, and we will continue to do so. We will continue to stand up for our values and act as a force for good in the world.

10.57 am

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his comments at the end of this really powerful debate, featuring many right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House. It is clear from the debate that there is now a growing strength and unity of feeling across all parts of the House of Commons that the policy—as referenced by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock)—initiated by the then Chancellor and Prime Minister of a Government in whom I served, which was referred to in turn as “Project Kowtow”, can no longer exist. We now need to bear down on Chinese abuse.

The point of the debate was to highlight the latest abuse in Tibet, but more than that, across the board, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to take the following points forward. We must make sure that Magnitsky sanctions are applied to those mentioned in the reports, as well reports on Xinjiang and the Uyghurs and all those other areas as well, particularly Hong Kong. It is time now to call them out and put those sanctions in place; we have spent too long thinking about it.

We need to condemn those companies involved with and linked to modern-day slavery and abuse in China. The Government should call out those companies. The way to act here is to agree to amendment 68 to the Trade Bill in the House of Lords, which would immediately stop that activity. I ask my hon. Friend to tell those in the Government that it is time to take a position on the Olympics, no matter what.

I hope that the calling out of those abuses in Tibet for a long time by many of my right hon. and hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Minister, will let the Government know that we can no longer just say that we want a good and constructive relationship with China. We want an honest relationship with China—one in which, when something is wrong, we say it is wrong. In this case, if genocide and abuses of human rights are taking place, we now, as a Government and as a people, must call them out and take action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered reports of China's rapid expansion of the labour programme in Tibet co-published by the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.

Rule of Law

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. Would it be okay if I stayed here while my colleague makes his introductory speech?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Yes, that is fine.

11.1 am

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the rule of law in the UK.

Although I may not be a lawyer, as a professional I understand the need for the highest standards of professional conduct and, like every parent, I cherish my responsibility to instil in my children a deep understanding of right and wrong. How that develops is vital to their future and how they make their way in the world. When our children are little, we guide their understanding through the language of good choices and poor choices, working with their teachers and others to celebrate their successes and to use natural and restorative justice techniques to support their understanding of the impact and consequences of the choices they make.

As our children move into adolescence, we necessarily begin a process of refining that understanding, which manifests in a natural pushing against the boundaries of childhood and a process of reflection, leading to the development of their internal moral and ethical codes, which they then carry into adulthood.

Like any parent, I want the very best future for my children, so I take great care to act in a way that supports and guides the development of the values of honesty, integrity, respect and compassion, underpinned by a strong sense of self and a high degree of self-awareness. It is not always easy, but I always strive to demonstrate that I am a human, that I am fallible and that I am able to take ownership of any error in judgment, to apologise for any harm I may have caused, however inadvertently, and to embody the principles of restorative justice by making amends in a sincere and transparent way.

My hope is that, by my actions, my children will understand the value of truth, contrition and atonement. However, that is increasingly difficult when the actions of those in power suggest that such values and principles only exist for others—that their word is always negotiable and never their bond or guarantee. What does that say about the character of those who lead us?

We have a Prime Minister whose past includes well-documented and repeated incidents of racist language. Despite having been given ample opportunities to apologise, he has steadfastly refused to do so. In the absence of any sense of responsibility or of the value of truth there can be no apology, no contrition and no atonement. While the Government may wish those matters away, they still stand as a measure of the man and of all those who stand in his defence.

However, the PM is not alone in that regard. At the height of the global pandemic, in which the UK has one of the highest mortality rates in the world, this Government's Health Secretary regularly obfuscates when pressed on matters of importance. And what of the UK Government's man in Scotland, the right hon. Member

for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack)? He is stuck on his repeat with his claims of a “power surge”, so lacking in substance that he cannot produce any evidence to support its existence. I could question his motives, but I do not need to. Speaking at the Conservative party conference yesterday, he said about the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill that “they”—the SNP—

“don't like the bill, which makes me like it even more.”

If that is what passes in the Conservative party for an appropriate motivation to enact legislation—legislation that will have a demonstrably damaging effect on people's livelihoods, jobs and businesses and Scotland's democracy—that is shameful.

The right hon. Gentleman's words reveal the dangerous and ideological grip that this Government are in, not just in observing the law but in writing it. If that type of casual comment is anything to go by, it is little wonder that the Prime Minister and his Back Benchers get such pleasure from their contentious behaviour towards Scotland, where the wildly exaggerated promises of Brexit are readily discarded but a casual comment made during Scotland's 2014 referendum is held as inviolable. The Prime Minister should consider that the tissue of lies that was the vow used to secure that vote and its immediate betrayal will never be forgotten in Scotland. Those promises of devo-max ring hollow like never before as this Government impose their will on a Scotland that did not vote for them.

Prior to 2016, the Sewel convention performed a useful function, ensuring that the devolved legislatures engaged with the UK's legislation to address problems early on. It engendered a culture of mutual respect and was based on trust, compromise, and transparent and open dialogue, but Brexit has exposed the vulnerability of devolved power in the face of a Conservative UK parliamentary majority.

Despite a clear majority remain vote in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the unilateral enactment of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 without the consent of the Welsh or Northern Irish Assemblies or the Scottish Parliament was described by Aileen McHarg, professor of public law at Durham University, as threatening the Sewel convention “almost to destruction”. She went on to say that while it was possible to depart from the Sewel convention, UK ministers had failed to give constitutional grounds for doing so, and that

“To make an exception to a rule, what is required is an explanation of why its underlying rationale either does not apply, or is overridden by some competing principle.”

Perhaps that is a point that the Minister could clarify today. Professor McHarg further cautioned that such a

“radical re-reading of the Sewel Convention...would seriously undermine the protection it offers for devolved autonomy.”

So much for a power surge.

Professor McHarg is not alone. In January, the Institute for Government stated that the Sewel convention had been broken by Brexit, and that reform is now urgent. Although both the Scottish and Welsh Governments put forward substantive proposals for such reform, such as making the convention legally enforceable or adding a stage to consider the views of the devolved Administrations, this Government were reluctant to engage. The United Kingdom Internal Market Bill makes it abundantly clear that their idea of reform has been to

[Neale Hanvey]

do the complete opposite. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) recently opined,

“The Sewel convention is about as much use for defending devolution as a chocolate teapot”.

The Bill also shows a flagrant disregard for the Sewel convention, one of the key planks of the UK’s unwritten constitution. Clause 46 attempts to strip away powers from Scottish Ministers in clearly defined devolved areas of power. As Baroness Helena Kennedy QC said of the Bill last week,

“It goes against the Sewel convention. It goes against our traditional constitutional workings and conventions. This is a really shocking business, and we shouldn’t take it lying down”.

Indeed, the very mechanism that exists to protect devolution is toothless in the face of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill and its facility to drive a coach and horses through the devolution settlement.

However, the further betrayal of the promises made to Scotland in 2014 is not the only impact of the Bill. It has also alerted the international community of something Scotland has known for a considerable time: that the word of the UK Government means nothing. Legislating to break international law in the midst of efforts to forge trade agreements with the EU and other nations across the globe—agreements that the UK Government presumably hope will be binding on both sides—is a very peculiar way to demonstrate the necessity of good faith.

On 24 September this year, the Attorney General asserted in this House that, as a matter of domestic law, it was proper for Parliament to pass legislation that might breach

“international law or treaty obligations.”

Fortunately, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West was on hand to raise the following question:

“The Attorney General has justified her support for the Bill by reference to the domestic legal principle of parliamentary supremacy and the judgment of the UK Supreme Court in *Miller*. But in that case, the UK Supreme Court also said, at paragraph 55, that ‘treaties between sovereign states’, such as the withdrawal agreement, ‘have effect in international law and are not governed by the domestic law of any state.’ The Supreme Court was quite clear that such treaties ‘are binding on the United Kingdom in international law’.”

She then asked:

“Why did the Attorney General omit reference to that part of the Supreme Court’s judgment? Did she not learn the rule against selective citation when she was at law school?”—[*Official Report*, 24 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 1125-1126.]

However, it quickly became evident that not only had the Attorney General missed the point of law by confusing *Miller 1* with the *Miller 2* and *Cherry* cases—she must have been taking lessons from her boss by trading playground taunts as a substitute for substance and mounting an undignified attack on my hon. and learned Friend and the Scottish Government.

Following the point of order and an impromptu celebration from my hon. and learned Friend given her great victory for the rule of law made in Scotland, the misunderstanding was clarified, as one esteemed commentator opined that it was a case of

“Mixed Millers from the attorney general.”

However, there was no further response from the Attorney General. Perhaps we can hear one today.

It is worth noting that the Attorney General also raised the matter of the Scottish Government’s named person scheme when they were found to be in breach of international law, but there is little by way of equivalence. The Supreme Court ruled that although the named persons proposal was unquestionably legitimate and benign, some of the provisions breached the rights to privacy and family life under the European convention on human rights. Unlike the UK Government, the Scottish Government accepted the ruling without question and introduced a Bill to address the concerns of the court. That response to a court ruling stands in stark contrast to the UK Government, who have pressed on with their legislation regardless, despite a flood of criticism from some of the most senior legal voices in the country.

The SNP Scottish Government did not complain about “activist” or “leftie” lawyers or suggest that judges should have their wings clipped; they welcomed the role of the courts in holding the Executive to account, and see it as a crucial part of a healthy democracy. I gently suggest that the UK Government could learn a lot from Holyrood’s approach. In pursuing a clear breach of international law, UK Government Ministers are now also in breach of the ministerial code.

As confirmed in the Court of Appeal in 2018, the ministerial code still mandates compliance with international law. Furthermore, the Attorney General’s justification that treaty obligations become binding only to the extent that they are enshrined in domestic legislation is nonsense: they become enforceable before domestic courts only if incorporated by legislation. The Government’s reliance on internal law to justify their position does not in any way affect the fact that the Bill places the UK in breach of its international treaty obligations. It was therefore of little surprise to read the reaction of the *Financial Times* legal correspondent, who described the Attorney General’s legal opinion as

“first-term, first-year undergraduate tosh”.

I should not need to say this, but fulfilling obligations under international treaties is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of any state that claims to be a responsible member of the international community. International law governs the making, interpretation and termination of international treaties. Most importantly, the Vienna convention on the law of treaties 1969, which the UK signed in 1970 and ratified in 1971, provides in article 26 that

“Every treaty in force is binding upon the parties to it and must be performed by them in good faith.”

That article reflects a very long-standing principle of international law: “*pacta sunt servanda*”—agreements must be kept. That is a basic principle of customary international law, and as such, is also part of English common law. It is key to the very existence of a rules-based international order.

In recent years, we have seen the UK call on the Iranian, Chinese and Russian Governments to respect their commitments under international law. It is difficult to see how the UK will be able to conduct such conversations with any credibility in future. To that end, one can only conclude that the consequences for the UK’s international standing and reputation have been deeply damaging.

According to the Foreign Secretary, however, he has met no one who thinks that the UK is not a defender of the international rule of law in the wake of that controversial legislation. That statement lacks any credibility. I will give a flavour from some people the Foreign Secretary may meet. The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), asked

“how can the Government reassure future international partners that the UK can be trusted to abide by the legal obligations in the agreements it signs?”—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2020; Vol. 679, c. 499.]

Former Prime Minister Sir John Major has said:

“Our signature on any treaty or agreement has been sacrosanct... If we lose our reputation for honouring the promises we make, we will have lost something beyond price that may never be regained.”

The right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) said:

“Seeking to renegotiate the Northern Ireland protocol will be regarded worldwide as an act of bad faith.”

Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, said:

“The UK must respect the Northern Ireland protocol as signed with the EU to ensure the free flow of goods across the border. If the UK violates that international treaty and Brexit undermines the Good Friday accord, there will be absolutely no chance of a US-UK trade agreement passing the Congress.”

Finally, Amal Clooney, the former UK special envoy on media freedom, said:

“very sadly, it has now become untenable for me, as special envoy, to urge other states to respect and enforce international obligations while the UK declares that it does not intend to do so itself.”

I could seriously go on and on. In a recent Foreign Affairs Committee sitting, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) raised the Sino-British joint declaration, which the Foreign Secretary has accused China of breaking by forcing controversial national security legislation on Hong Kong. In response, the Foreign Secretary said:

“What I think you’re trying to neatly do is draw some moral equivalence or substantial equivalence between the two and I think it’s crazy, I think it’s absolute nonsense.”

He also insisted that

“we haven’t broken international law”

yet, instead saying that the legislation is necessary because of

“frankly some of the aggressive behaviour”

from Brussels.

That got me thinking. Should Scotland also take a similar tack, and introduce the legislation that we feel is necessary because, frankly, of some of the aggressive behaviour from this UK Government? Or is this more a case of “do as I say and not as I do”? Of course, it is not just the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill that undermines the devolution settlement and the Union; the planned independent review of administrative law, which is no small matter, is set to target the crucial judicial review process following the successful use of that mechanism to prevent the unlawful prorogation of Parliament, and that inquiry poses a danger to the Union.

It is important to reiterate widely held concerns about contracts recently awarded by this Government. Data analysed by *The Guardian* shows that in response to covid, state bodies have awarded at least 177 contracts worth £1.1 billion to commercial firms. Of those contracts, 115—

with a total value of more than £1 billion—were awarded under the fast-track rules, bypassing competitive tenders. Of course, that is nothing new from the UK Government. Last year, when the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) handed a £13.8 million ferry contract to Seaborne Freight, with no tender process, despite the fact that the company owned no ships, that led to Eurotunnel suing the Government, who paid out £33 million in settlement just before the case was to go to court. In the meantime, Seaborne Freight has gone into liquidation, owing £2 million.

Today, I am focusing on the party of government, because they are in Government, but I make no exception for others, regardless of their political stripes, who abuse the power that they are trusted to carry as a means to nefarious or personal ends. The party of law and order appear to have become the party of lawlessness and disorder. I ask the Minister to ask the Attorney General the question on the lips of parents up and down these islands: how can we teach our children right from wrong when those in power are seen to abuse it, when those who make the law break the law and when the protectors of the people throw their best interests to the wind in pursuit of self-interest? By their failure to observe the rule of law, the Government diminish us all.

11.20 am

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure, as ever, to be the Minister here at Westminster Hall. I thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) for raising this issue and I congratulate him on securing the debate.

On the rule of law, the freedoms and protections that we all enjoy are crucial. That is an important constitutional principle. It demands equality before the law. It demands access to independent and impartial justice, a Government subject to the law, and law that is clear, unambiguous and concise. The duty of the Law Officers of the Crown is, at least in part, to ensure that the Government act lawfully at all times—that is, that Ministers of the Crown and civil servants act in accordance with the law.

As the hon. Gentleman has made clear, his reason for requesting the debate today was not so much for a general discussion on the rule of law—important though that is—but about the very specific provisions of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill. I will say a few words about the Bill and the rule of law. The Bill that the Government tabled is clear, and the Government have been clear throughout that they are acting in full accordance with UK law and the UK’s constitutional norms, which have been an example and an exemplar around the world for centuries. The Bill is currently being considered in the other place, having comfortably passed Third Reading in the House of Commons by 340 votes to 256.

Before I move on to legal aspects of the Bill, I note that there will be no change to the powers that the devolved Administrations already have as a result of it. The vast majority of powers with devolved competences returning from Brussels, as they will do from 1 January, will go straight to Holyrood or Stormont or Cardiff Bay. Those include, for example, agricultural measures, air quality—very important—and energy efficiency of buildings, and also elements of employment law. All those areas will go from Brussels straight to the devolved

[*The Solicitor General*]

competences. That will mean that the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, which are already among the most powerful devolved Administrations anywhere in the world, will have even more powers. The hon. Gentleman should be delighted by that.

Returning to the rule of law, this House has extensively debated what are now clauses 44, 45 and 47 of the Bill and the interaction of those clauses with the UK's international law obligations. The Government have explained why the inclusion of those clauses are the actions of a responsible Government to provide a safety net. As I speak, our UK representatives are working in the Joint Committee to try to resolve these difficulties, but, as a responsible Government and a Government for the whole Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we must prepare. We have a duty to prepare for all eventualities. We cannot allow the peace process, or the UK's internal market, to inadvertently be compromised by unintended consequences either of the Northern Ireland protocol in the withdrawal agreement, or anything else. We need an insurance policy. We need a safety net to make sure that our Union—this precious Union—is not broken apart by these agreements.

Protecting the Union is the highest priority. To provide that safety net, the Government considered it appropriate to ask Parliament to provide a means of addressing these issues if the genuine and earnest attempt by the UK's negotiating team to resolve these conflicts does not succeed. Providing that safety net reflects the difficult and highly exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves, because we cannot guarantee the result of Joint Committee negotiations. It is, therefore, the only way of ensuring the effectiveness of other more fundamental provisions of the Northern Ireland protocol. These provisions guarantee Northern Ireland's constitutional status within this kingdom under the Belfast Agreement, and guarantee that Northern Ireland would be part of the United Kingdom's customs territory. Left to its own devices, and without the Joint Committee to iron out the creases, these inconsistencies would only get worse over time. It may be that the Joint Committee is able to resolve matters, but we must set up these legislative safety nets just in case.

It goes without saying that this does not change the key principle that continues to guide the UK's approach to international relations and international law. We remain a state that accepts that we are obliged to discharge our treaty obligations in good faith. Our word is our bond. Other sovereign states who deal with us know that. They know it very well, they respect it, and they act accordingly, as in the case of Japan, which recently concluded a free trade agreement with us. There is also an understanding around the world—the Foreign Secretary alluded to it—

Neale Hanvey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

The Solicitor General: I will just finish my sentence. There is an understanding that decoupling from the European Union is a unique—indeed, unprecedented—situation with the added complexity of the peace process and Northern Ireland, and the unstable political landscape that prevailed before the last election. In the difficult and highly exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves we must, therefore, consider the fundamental principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

I have not been given an awful lot of time, but I must just say that the principle of parliamentary sovereignty means that it is entirely constitutional for Parliament to enact legislation even if provisions within that legislation, once commenced, would affect the UK's treaty obligations. I will just make this point: section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 reiterated, in terms, that parliamentary supremacy “subsists” notwithstanding the provisions of the withdrawal agreement with express reference to direct effect, the very thing that may potentially be disapplied here. In other words, Parliament had already prepared for that eventuality. It is there in black and white in section 38.

In the United Kingdom, treaty obligations only become binding in domestic law to the extent that they are enshrined in domestic legislation. Whether to enact or repeal legislation, and the content of that legislation, is for this Parliament and for this Parliament alone. It is a dualist approach. It is not uncommon, and it is not rare. In fact, it is shared by Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Parliamentary scrutiny of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill so far has served to reinforce Parliament's central role in the UK's constitution.

In the last minute that I have, I wanted to reiterate this point: other states known for upholding the rule of law have passed domestic legislation that ran contrary to their treaty obligations. For example, in 2018 the Canadian Government introduced domestic legislation to legalise cannabis. That was in breach of specific provisions of the existing treaty obligations under three United Nations narcotics conventions. The Canadian Government acknowledged the breach, but they stated that their approach was still consistent with the overarching goal of those conventions. Debates such as this are an important opportunity to explain how the Government are upholding the rule of law while making provision for the internal market in the UK and retaining the ability to act decisively in the interest of the whole United Kingdom following our departure from the European Union earlier this year, so I thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath for raising the issue today.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6))

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Online Harms

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered online harms.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am delighted to have secured this debate this afternoon. I know that lots of colleagues are keen to participate, and many of them have much greater expertise in this policy area than I do. I have never been more overwhelmed on securing a debate by offers of briefings, information, research and support from organisations that are dedicated to trying to make a difference in this area. Given the strength of feeling and the depth of the evidence base, it is remarkable that we have not made more progress.

I was approached by the Petitions Committee who asked if four online petitions could be considered as part of this debate. Those petitions are entitled: “Make online abuse a specific criminal offence and create a register of offenders,” “Make online homophobia a specific criminal offence,” “Hold online trolls accountable for their online abuse via their IP address” and “Ban anonymous accounts on social media”. The petitions have collectively been signed by more than half a million people and I am pleased to say that there were 773 signatories from my Halifax constituency.

I had intended to include a list and thank all those who sent briefings, but there were so many, it would take me about 12 hours to read out that list. I would therefore just like to mention the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo’s, the Antisemitism Policy Trust, John Carr OBE, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and my good and honourable Friend the Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore), who has a vast knowledge and expertise in this area, not least in his capacity as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social media. I will reference others throughout my speech. I thank them all for the information and support in shaping the focus of my efforts.

During lockdown, we have seen how the internet has facilitated digital connection and social media has provided a lifeline to the outside world for so many. None of us in this room is ignorant of the good that social media can do; however, as lawmakers, we are all collectively responsible for the utter failure to regulate it and for the societal damage that that is causing.

The online harms White Paper published last year confirms that nearly nine in 10 UK adults and 99% of 12 to 15-year-olds are online. The NSPCC estimates that in the first three months of 2020, online sex crimes recorded against children surpassed 100 a day—that is roughly one every 14 minutes. Barnardo’s also contacted me about some of the harrowing online experiences it has been supporting children through as part of its new “See, Hear, Respond” campaign over the course of the lockdown—the sorts of experiences that would significantly damage adults, let alone children.

As MPs, we all know what it is like to be in the public eye and to be on the receiving end of online abuse, but I started to ramp up my work in this area when I was approached by a brilliant woman, Nicky Chance-Thompson,

who is the chief exec of the magnificent Piece Hall in my constituency, which everyone should come and visit when they have the opportunity. She is a deputy lieutenant and the Yorkshire Choice Awards Business Woman of the Year 2019. She is also on Northern Power Women’s power list.

When Caroline Flack tragically died in February this year, Nicky bravely approached me and others to share her own experiences of women in the public eye and to call on all of us to get a grip of online abuse before any further lives are lost. Nicky published an article with the *Yorkshire Evening Post* describing how she was a victim and survivor of online abuse, which rides high on social media. She said:

“Cowards hiding behind fake profiles can say anything they like about anyone, and there appears to be no consequences for them nor recourse for the victims...Misogyny is unpalatably frequent. Many women in high profile or public positions cop it simply for doing their jobs or being successful.”

She urged everyone involved to speak up and take action because “silence is killing people.”

Nicky’s article was published by the *Yorkshire Evening Post* as part of their “Call It Out” campaign, which has been spearheaded by editor, Laura Collins. It proved to be the catalyst for a broader initiative between Nicky, myself, editors of the *Yorkshire Post* and *Yorkshire Evening Post*, James Mitchinson and Laura Collins, Stop Funding Hate, the Conscious Advertising Network and the Journalism Trust Initiative, led by Reporters Without Borders. We came together to agree a constructive way forward to make progress on cleaning up the internet. We interrogated the online harms White Paper; its joint ministerial statement bears the names of two former Cabinet Members who both left Government over a year ago, which hardly screams urgency, but it does state:

“While some companies have taken steps to improve safety on their platforms, progress has been too slow and inconsistent overall.”

I am afraid that, in itself, is a reflection of the Government’s inaction.

We talk a great deal about public health right now, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) said in a discussion I had with her about her Petitions Committee investigation into online abuse, we will look back on this period in history with disbelief and shame that we did nothing in the face of what can only be described as a public health ticking time bomb. She compared unregulated online abuse and hate to smoking, and that analogy is entirely right.

Until a landmark study in the 1950s, whether a person chose to smoke was nothing to do with Government, and even when the body of research provided evidence for the link between tobacco use and lung cancer and other chronic diseases, Governments were slow to involve themselves in efforts to stop people smoking, or to get them to smoke less or not to start in the first place. If we think about where we are now on smoking, although smoking cessation budgets have been slashed in recent years, we proactively fund stop smoking services, have school education programmes and heavily regulate what is available to purchase and how it is advertised.

We do that because we recognised that smoking was having a detrimental impact on physical health. We invested, not only because it was the right thing to do, but

[Holly Lynch]

because it was more cost-effective to intervene than to allow so many people to become so unwell as a consequence. Compare that with online abuse and hate and the impact we know it is having on the wellbeing and mental health of society, particularly young people.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. She mentioned the importance of regulation, and as she was speaking I was reflecting on the regulation that is in place to govern the BBC and broadcast media, because it was felt that, if communication was going straight into the living room of every home in this country, it needed to have a firm regulatory footing. Does she not think that a similar approach to this sector could have prevented some of the harms that she is talking about today?

Holly Lynch: The right hon. Lady makes an important point. I am about to come on to some of the different ways that we need to extend the regulation that is already there. She makes the point that that information was going straight into homes; information online is coming straight into somebody's hand in front of their face, so why do we not extend the same types of regulation to it? I will come on to that in more detail, but I thank her for that point.

As I said, 99% of 12 to 15-year-olds are online, and seven in 10 young people have experienced cyber-bullying, with nearly 40% of young people saying they experienced cyber-bullying on a high-frequency basis, according to the Royal Society for Public Health's "#StatusofMind" report. Those of us in this Chamber know better than anyone the impact that social media is having on public discourse and on the ability to have safe spaces for the exchange of different opinions, which are vital in any democracy.

One of the reasons the *Yorkshire Evening Post* was so motivated to launch the Call It Out campaign was realising the impact of the barrage of online abuse directed predominantly, but not exclusively, towards their its female journalists. Editor Laura Collins, who I commend for her leadership on this issue, told me this week that the sentiment of one comment on Facebook responding to an article about the local restrictions in Leeds was not uncommon: it said, "Whoever is publishing these articles needs executing by firing squad". The newspaper reported it to Facebook on 28 September and nine days later is yet to receive a response.

Our "Clean Up The Internet" initiative, somewhat underwhelmed by the White Paper, feared that the Government did not have the will to truly transform the way the internet is used, so we considered what else would need to happen. Online social media platforms have said far too often that they just provide the platform and can only do so much to oversee the content shared on it, but that holds no water at all where paid ads are concerned. It is a glaring omission from the White Paper that it does not consider misinformation and disinformation, which can be not only shared widely for free, but promoted through online advertising.

As we have heard, advertising in print or on broadcast platforms is regulated through Ofcom and the Advertising Standards Authority, and it must be pre-approved by a number of relevant bodies. There are clear rules, powers and consequences. The internet, however, to quote the

NSPCC campaign, is the "wild west". We must therefore extend that regulation to online advertising as a matter of urgency.

The urgency is twofold. The spread of misinformation and disinformation relating to the pandemic, whether it is conspiracy theories about its origins or even its existence, fake cures or promoting the sale of personal protective equipment by bogus companies, when we are trying to combat a virus, can have fatal consequences. So-called clickbait advertising and the monetisation of items dressed up as news, with the most outrageous and sensational teasers inevitably receiving the most clicks and generating the most income, means that credible news from real journalists with integrity to both their conduct and their content, like those at the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, is being driven out of that space. The online business model does not work for those who play by the rules, because there simply are not any.

Let us move on to what else would make a difference. I hope that the Minister will be able to answer a number of questions today about the progress of legislation and regulation. We have had the initial response to the White Paper, but when can we expect to see the Bill published? If we consider that the process began when the Green Paper was published in October 2017 and that the Government have suggested it may be 2023 before new legislation comes into effect, that will be six years, which is an incredibly long time in the life of a child—almost an entire generation.

Opportunities to strengthen protections for children online have been continually missed. During lockdown, large numbers of children have been harmed by entirely avoidable online experiences. If the Government had acted sooner, those consequences may not have been as severe or widespread.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and thank her for her tribute to me. I pay tribute to her for the work she does in her constituency and across Yorkshire on this issue.

In terms of protection of children, one of the most concerning things I have seen during the pandemic is about the Internet Watch Foundation, which is Government-funded and reports to the police and central Government about the number of URLs focusing on paedophilia and child exploitation images. Takedown has reduced by some 80% since the pandemic started. I have raised that with Ministers in the Cabinet Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Does she agree that the Government need to take that far more seriously and put funding in place to ensure such things can be taken down and that children are protected from the most extreme online harms?

Holly Lynch: My hon. Friend, who has vast experience in this area, references some of the most extreme and harrowing online experiences, which our children are now becoming exposed to on a regular basis. We absolutely must re-resource this area to get a grip of it and prevent children from becoming victims, which happens every day that we do not tighten up the rules and regulations surrounding the use of the internet.

I also ask the Minister whether legislation will include—it should—regulation of, or rather the removal of, misinformation and disinformation online. Will it seek

to regulate much more of what is harmful and hateful but is not necessarily criminal from a public health perspective, if nothing else? Will the proposed duty of care be properly underpinned by a statutory framework? Just how significant will the consequences be for those who do not adhere to it?

The Government announced the suspension of the implementation of an age-verification regime for commercial pornography sites on 16 October 2019, despite the fact that it only needed a commencement date. It is not at all clear why that was or when it will be reintroduced. I hope that the Minister can enlighten us about when the regime will come into effect.

The Local Government Association has raised important concerns. Local authorities have statutory safeguarding responsibilities on issues such as child exploitation, as we have just heard, suicide prevention and tackling addiction, all of which become incredibly difficult when a child or young person—or an adult, for that matter—goes online. It had to produce the “Councillors’ guide to handling intimidation”, which recognises the growing need among councillors for support related to predominantly online intimidation. That is another damning indication of just how bad things have become.

I have worked with these groups on this issue and have been overwhelmed with suggestions for what more could be done. First, no one should be able to set up an entirely anonymous profile on social media platforms. The rise in bots and people hiding behind anonymous profiles who push hate and abuse should simply no longer be allowed. People would not necessarily have to put all their information in the public domain, but they would need to provide accurate information in order to be able to set up an account or a profile. The approach is explicitly called for in two of the public petitions attached to the debate, demonstrating that there is public support for such an approach. That would allow us to hold both the platform and the individuals responsible to account for any breaches in conduct.

Imagine if being held to account for posting something that is predetermined to be abusive through the online harms Bill, such as hateful antisemitic content, meant that an appropriate agency—be it Ofcom, the police or the enforcement arm of a new regulator—could effectively issue on-the-spot fines to the perpetrator. If we can identify the perpetrator, we can also work with police to determine whether a hate crime has occurred and bring charges wherever possible. The increased resources that are necessary for such an approach would be covered by the revenue generated by those fines. That type of approach would be transformative. Can the Minister respond to that point—not necessarily to me, but to all those who have signed the petitions before us, which ask for that kind of thinking?

Fearing that the Government lack the will to adopt the radical approach that is required, the working group that I spoke about will look to get more and more advertisers on board that are prepared to pull their advertising from social media platforms if the sorts of transformations that we are calling for are not forthcoming. I put everyone on notice that that work is well under way.

On securing the debate, I was approached by colleagues from all parties, and I am pleased that so many are able to take part. Given just how broad this topic is, I have not said anything about extremist and radical content

online, gang violence, cyber-bullying, self-harm, explicit and extreme content, sexual content, grooming, gaming and gambling, and the promotion of eating disorders. I am sure others will say more about such things, but I fear the Government will say that there is so much to regulate that they are struggling to see the way forward. There is so much there that it is a dereliction of duty every day that we fail to regulate this space and keep damaging content from our young people and adults alike.

We know that this is an international issue, and Plan International has just released the results of its largest ever global survey on online violence after speaking to 14,000 girls aged 15 to 25 across 22 countries. The data reveal that nearly 60% have been harassed or abused online, and that one in five girls have left a social media platform or significantly reduced their use of it after being harassed. This plea goes to the social media companies as well: if they want to have users in the future who can enjoy what they provide, they must create a safe space. Currently, they simply do not. It is an international issue, but we are the mother of Parliaments, are we not?

The Government seem so overwhelmed by the prospect of doing everything that they are not doing anything. I urge the Minister to start that process. Take those first steps, because each one will make some difference in bringing about the change that we have a moral obligation to deliver.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I remind Members that the convention still applies: if you wish to speak, you should be present at the beginning. There are quite a large number of people on the call list, so please restrict your comments to about four minutes; otherwise, I will have to impose a time limit. I will call Members as on the call list, starting with Andrew Percy.

2.48 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), a fellow Yorkshire MP, for securing the debate and for the content of her speech.

I will primarily focus on antisemitism online, particularly in my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on antisemitism. Before I do that, I want to raise the issue of financial scams, which many of us have been lobbied on. I had a very sad case of a constituent who was recently affected by such a scam. They are truly shocking and harmful scams that take place online. I hope that as the Government move forward in this space and introduce legislation, they will have scams in mind too.

We all know the history of the rise of antisemitism in recent years, both on the far left and on the far right in this country, and across Europe and the wider world. It is sad that antisemitism has continued to grow and to find space online during this period of coronavirus. We have seen a fall in the number of physical incidents, probably because of the lockdown, but sadly we have seen all too much of a continuation online. Between the start of this year and June the Community Security Trust recorded 344 online incidents. There would have been many more were it not for the narrow reporting parameters. We could easily be up into the millions if

[Andrew Percy]

we could measure antisemitism under the broadest scope. Those examples are as shocking as what we all know. There are many Members present who are members of the all-party parliamentary group on antisemitism and who have taken a stand on the issue.

During the period in question there has been Zoombombing of Jewish events with vile racist antisemitic commentary. Sadly, there have been covid conspiracy theories growing online. It is disappointing, first, that there is an anti-mask movement—sadly that is across the world; but often that moves closely to antisemitism. A constituent recently contacted me about that, with some barking mad idea about masks and how terrible they are, to which I replied, “Next thing you will be telling me it is all the fault of the Rothschilds,” to which—no word of a lie—I received a response saying “Actually, the Rothschilds knew this was going to happen.” That is how this stuff spreads. It is a simple step from one to the other.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making some crucial points. Does he share my disgust, and is he appalled, that YouTube at the start of this debate is providing links to a notorious antisemitic radio station called Radio Aryan and, indeed, a whole channel dedicated to antisemitic material? I will not read the name out. The content is there right now, as we are having this debate. YouTube has not removed it.

Andrew Percy: It is absolutely shocking. It should not take legislation to deal with it; it is obvious that the content should not be there. We need the Government to legislate, as I shall come on to in a moment, but it takes no brain surgeon to figure this stuff out. Sadly, too many platforms do not do enough.

Then of course there was the shocking Wiley incident, when he was tweeting on average every 87 seconds, which is incredible. There were 600 tweets, on a conservative estimate, which were seen online by more than 47 million people, of vile antisemitic abuse. Let us just consider some examples of it. He tweeted:

“If you work for a company owned by 2 Jewish men and you challenge the Jewish community in anyway of course you will get fired.”

Another one was:

“Infact there are 2 sets of people who nobody has really wanted to challenge #Jewish & #KKK but being in business for 20 years you start to undestand why.”

Then—something completely disgusting:

“Jewish people you think you are too important I am sick of you”

and

“Jewish people you make me sick and I will not budge”.

It took days. As I said, it took, at a conservative estimate, 600 tweets before anything was done about it. Instagram videos were posted. When one platform closed it down it ended up elsewhere. That is despite all the terms and conditions in place.

Enforcement is, sadly, all too invisible, as the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has highlighted, with regard to Radio Aryan. I was pleased that Wiley was stripped of his honour, but he should never have been able to get into the position of

being able to spout that bile for so long. The best we have been able to do is strip him of an honour. It is completely and utterly unacceptable.

There is a similar problem with other platforms. I want to talk briefly about BitChute. It is an alternative platform, but we see the same old tropes there. Videos get millions of views there. It is a nastier version of YouTube—let us be honest—with videos in the name of the proscribed group National Action, a channel, for example, with the name “Good Night Jewish Parasite”, livestreaming of terrorist content, racist videos about Black Lives Matter protesters and much more; but it is a UK-based platform with UK directors, and while action is taken against individual videos there is, sadly, not enough recourse. Given the time limits, I shall quickly ask two questions and make two comments on legislation and where we are heading.

The online harms White Paper suggested a number of codes of practice, and that seems to have been rowed away from somewhat in recent weeks and months, so that there will be reliance, instead, on the terms and conditions. I do not think that that is enough. I hope that the Minister will confirm that enforceable codes of action will flow. I hope that also if she has some time she will perhaps meet me, and the Antisemitism Policy Trust and other partners, to discuss the matter in more detail.

Will the Minister consider introducing senior management liability for social media companies? The German model for fines is often talked about, but it has not worked. The maximum fine so far issued in Germany is, I think, two million dollars or pounds, which is nothing for Facebook. It can afford to build that into its programme.

There is plenty more I could have said—I am conscious of the time—but I hope the Minister will commit to meet with us and respond to those two points.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I remind Members that unless we keep to four minutes, we will not get everybody in.

2.55 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Edward; the pressure is on. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), as I have already said. I remember a debate on online harms some four years ago, when I first entered the House, when only three Members were in this room. Clearly our numbers are restricted today, but it is great to see a full Westminster Hall, as more and more Members come to realise the huge problems that the online platforms create.

Being aware of the time, I want to stick to two areas where I think the platforms are failing. First, I have raised anti-vax issues right across the summer, and as the pandemic started. In the last year an additional 7.8 million people have visited anti-vax Facebook pages or followed the Twitter, Instagram or YouTube accounts of organisations that are trying to make a quick buck out of people’s fears by selling false vaccines and treatments, asking them not to consult a doctor if they have any symptoms—“Don’t get tests because you can cure these things with different types of herbal tea”.

Across all the platforms—none is particularly worse than the others in my view, because they all have a responsibility—the argument that comes back is: “It’s a

point of view: a position they could take, if you could form an argument, about this possibly being the way forward on covid.” Sadly, I have heard Members of this House suggest that covid is no worse than flu, despite all clinical professionals saying that is not the case. This gets picked up on anti-vax platforms, which quote Members saying, “You don’t have to wear a mask, you don’t have to get a vaccine and you don’t have to worry about it, because it’s no worse than flu”. Even if the Member has not said that, they twist their words into that position. How the platforms manage that is a huge concern.

I welcomed Facebook’s intervention yesterday to take down President Trump’s comments about covid. It is nice to see an intervention at that level, confirming that he indeed spouts fake news. It is about time Facebook did a lot more of that to address what is happening in this pandemic.

My second point is about the protection of children and young people. I have a huge concern about cyber-bullying and the targeting of young people, and specifically the growing number of young people being coerced, via gaming or the platforms or livestreaming, into committing sexual acts of harm against themselves, and that then is moving into the dark web. The Internet Watch Foundation says that Europe is the grooming capital of the world—it is mainly in the Netherlands, but it is on the increase in this country. I have already mentioned the concern of the IWF and the Met about the need for the Government to put more resources into getting these URLs taken down. There is a real fear among the tech community that young people are being taught how to abuse themselves by people who are grooming them. I know the Minister cares about this—we have spoken about it before. It needs to be rectified.

My two asks, in the half a minute left to me, are that we introduce the Bill as quickly as possible and that it is robust and clear, and takes on the platforms. I agree with the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) that it cannot be about the platforms setting their own regulations and then Ofcom deciding what should or should not be controlled and fines being issued. There should be culpability.

My final ask to the Minister is to create a social media levy fund that allows research into this issue. Make the platforms pay for the fact that they are not willing to do half of this work themselves, for the sake of young people, politicians, people in public life and people in the street who believe the fake news or the anti-vax information, because they are fearful of something. If they do not take responsibility, they should be fined for the dishonour of not dealing with these problems.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Well done—four and a half minutes.

2.59 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The 2015 Conservative manifesto made a commitment that

“we will stop children’s exposure to harmful sexualised content online, by requiring age verification for access to all sites containing pornographic material”.

That is crucial, because of what the Children’s Commissioner says about the damaging impact of such sites on young people’s views of sex or relationships and “belief that women are sex objects.”

In 2016 the Government therefore rightly introduced proposals for age verification, or AV, and some of us here spent many hours scrutinising, amending and ultimately passing part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017. Commercial providers would have to implement age verification systems requiring users to provide proof of age—that they were over 18—or the provider sites would be blocked. That is critical when only a small proportion of those sites are UK-based; the top 50 are all based outside the UK.

Concerningly, however, in 2019 the Government suddenly announced that they were not going to implement part 3 of the 2017 Act, which was then the subject of an angry urgent question. At the same time, though, Ministers gave reassurances that they regarded protecting children from pornography as “a critically urgent issue” and that their purpose was not to abandon plans to introduce AV on commercial pornography sites but to introduce AV instead through the online harms Bill, which would address all online harms in the same piece of legislation.

The indications were that that Bill would be ready for pre-legislative scrutiny in early 2020. I am more than saddened that that was not the case. The Government produced an online harms White Paper and a consultation in April 2019. The consultation closed in June 2019; the Government’s full response to it is still awaited, with no draft Bill yet in sight.

We have heard that the draft Bill might now be published in mid-2021, meaning that, subject to pre-legislative scrutiny, it could be 2023 before it is on the statute book, six years after this House passed part 3 of the 2017 Act—six years during which increasing numbers of children, some as young as five, have had unfettered access to online pornography.

Parents, children’s charities and many colleagues here in Parliament are deeply concerned. This week, Savanta ComRes polling has been published showing that the public are not happy. In mid-September, 2,100 adults were polled across the UK, 63% of whom said that the Government should implement part 3 of the 2017 Act now and additional protections against other online harms through the online harms Bill, when that legislation has been passed. Only 21% thought the Government should delay introducing statutory AV on pornographic sites until all the other mechanisms for addressing online harms are ready. If we discount the “don’t knows”, 74% said the Government should implement part 3 of 2017 Act now.

Finally, I suspect that the provisions that the Government may introduce could be even weaker than those in part 3 of the 2017 Act, having received replies to written parliamentary questions indicating that the proposed duty of care will apply not to all commercial pornographic sites but only to those that do not enable user-generated functionalities, because they usually require payment, which acts as a deterrent to children accessing them.

The Government should neither delay nor water down their manifesto commitment. I call on them to implement part 3 of the 2017 Act immediately and to introduce additional online safety protection through the online harms Bill urgently. We can never make the internet safe, but we can make it safer.

3.3 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

I thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for bringing this extremely important issue to Westminster Hall for debate. She spoke very eloquently and comprehensively on these issues, highlighting the lack of consequences under current legislation and the absolutely devastating impact of online abuse.

In the time that I have, I will speak briefly about a couple of different issues. The first is mental health. In this generation, one in five individuals online are children, so there will be an absolute tidal wave of mental health issues linked to online abuse. Indeed, that is already happening: I see it with my own children and their peers, and I see it across my constituency and, indeed, the UK. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on mentoring, which provides the secretariat for the Diana Award, I recently spoke to the ambassadors on its youth board and heard that online bullying is one of the most fundamental issues that children have to cope with every single day of their lives. When I was young, bullying used to happen at school, but a child could come home from school and there was a gap, and they could receive support from elsewhere. Nowadays, it is constant. Now children are linking with their peers all the time—the majority of that is online, as well as occasionally in person, now that they are back at school.

The mental health impact must be addressed, and the legislation is crucial to that. It is a starting point, but we also need to support the youth ambassadors in schools who want to do anti-bullying work, be mentors to peers and ensure that they progress that good work to build resilience in their generation against this abuse. We look to the Minister to ensure that the legislation is robust and provides support in schools. I echo the words and sentiments of the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), who spoke about the importance of tackling antisemitism, particularly online. The Community Security Trust is recording the data and found 185 online instances in 2015 and 697 cases in 2019. That is a massive increase of 277%. That is another issue that really has to be tackled.

Finally, will the Minister look closely not only at the individuals who are online anonymously, but at those who impersonate others? I had that myself at the last election. As soon as I gave up the “MP” in my handle, someone online took that handle and started to tweet as though they were me. I am raising this not from my own perspective particularly—although it could have been extremely damaging—but because, as everyone here knows, constituents contact us online to tell them about their personal issues as a first port of call. Will the Minister consider meeting me to discuss that important issue further?

3.7 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for securing this important debate on an issue that I am passionate about, being motivated by my own experience of online abuse. A constituent has spoken to me about their experience and their concerns. I speak also as a mother who has concerns about what the online world will look like when my son starts accessing the internet.

Covid-19 has magnified the benefits of the internet. Our social media platforms have been so important in getting the safety message out, as well as being important

for remote learning and home schooling. More than ever, we talk to our family online. Those are just some examples of how the internet can be a tremendous power for good. However the internet also remains one of the most dangerous and potentially destructive interventions of the last century. It is a place where online bullying and harassment occurs daily, where child abuse is endemic, and where damaging information can be shared, suicide and self-harm promoted, and terrorism encouraged and espoused.

In recent months, these abhorrent sides of the internet have certainly got a tighter grip. If what happens every second on the internet happened on the streets, we would not let our children anywhere near it and we would expect the full force of the law to be applied to it. Yet Government and law enforcement have allowed the intangible, remote worldwide web to self-regulate, and have also allowed an attitude of self-regulation for well over a decade. It is my belief that this must end.

I wholeheartedly endorse the six tests outlined by the NSPCC last week on what must be delivered by the legislation, including liability, empowering a regulator, effective sanctions, and recognising and dealing with the gravity of issues such as abuse, self-harm and suicide. Can anyone give me a good reason why we cannot take these steps?

I wish today to highlight a number of concerns. The first is about age verification, which is an absolute must in the forthcoming legislation. The Government U-turn of 16 October 2019 on age verification has never been accompanied by an explanation that made sense. Given that age verification providers were in place and ready to provide robust, high-specification, secure, anonymised verification, the alleged technology issues explanation does not stack up. In addition, why would the Government hold back on something that could be delivered now, as opposed to trying to marry it with other online harms that will be picked up in the current legislation? The Minister at that time told us that provision in the Conservative manifesto for statutory age verification on commercial pornography sites was “a critically important issue”. If it is critically important, it needs tackling immediately. I also ask the Government to prove us wrong on the perception that they are intent on watering down the protections for children in this regard.

On anonymity, we need to tackle these faceless trolls. We need to strip away the ability to have several accounts, all of which are used to abuse individuals. We are all accustomed to confirming our identity, be it for employment or going through the airport. Why not online?

Finally, let us look at what else we can do to increase awareness and educate children, parents and society at large. I had the privilege last week of meeting a young lady from my constituency, Mrs Deborah Webster, who has carried out significant research into the impact of legal but harmful content on our young people. Her findings are staggering—so much so that she now goes into schools to carry out a digital resilience programme. I think we all need some digital resilience in today's society, but it needs to be underpinned by education and the curriculum. This is a huge opportunity for the Government to make a difference in almost every home in the country. It ought not to be missed.

3.11 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly

Lynch) on securing the debate. I also thank the NSPCC, CARE, UK Safer Internet Centre, Girlguiding and Refuge for their excellent briefings. As the hon. Lady pointed out, this is an enormously complex issue. A number of petitions touching on areas of online harm have attracted around half a million signatories in total, as she said. That shows the Minister not only the strength of feeling but the importance of the Government's providing a comprehensive response to this.

Let us be honest: when this sector wants to act, it does. It acted back in 2010 on online child abuse images, by putting in place protocols around splash pages, and it has acted on some issues around electoral fraud and fake news. However, the problem is that the industry does not consistently react, because it does not feel that it needs to. That has to change.

The Government have shown a clear intent to act in this area, through the 2017 Green Paper, the White Paper and the promise of legislation. The core concept that the Government want to put forward—as we understand it, anyway—is a duty of care: to make companies take responsibility for the safety of their users and to tackle the harm caused by their content, their activities and their services. Those are basic things that one would think were already in place, but they are not. They are to be applauded as a starting point, but again let us be clear that it is only a starting point, because setting up a regulator and regulatory frameworks do not provide a route of redress for victims. Lawyers know that a duty of care will not enable people to pursue a complaint to the regulator about an individual problem; it will just give the regulator an opportunity to fine companies or hit them over the head with a big stick.

People can bring a claim through ordinary legal proceedings, but that is limited by the existing legal framework, which we know is inadequate. The Law Commission is belatedly looking at a number of these areas, but it feels like the horse has already bolted. We might have to wait months or even years for its recommendations to come through, be reviewed and then be put forward in further legislation. It would be wholly unacceptable for the Government to bring forward a Bill with only measures to regulate, not legislation that actually has teeth.

We also need to deal with the inadequacies of the legislation, and I suggest that the Government should focus on at least three areas. When it comes to image-based abuse, the law is a mess. We have layer upon layer of legislation that does not give the police the necessary tools to protect victims. The second area is age verification, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has already gone through. That is a promise we have not yet delivered on, and this Bill has to deliver on it. The third area is the importance of putting in place legislation that protects victims of intimidation during elections, which again the Government have promised to look at.

In conclusion, the coronavirus lockdown has served to create a perfect storm for online abuse. The Government have to act, and act quickly. Regulation alone is not enough; we need legislative reform as well.

3.15 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Edward, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for

Halifax (Holly Lynch) on securing this important and timely debate. I also thank House officials for ensuring that Westminster Hall is open once again, so that we can have these debates. Before I begin my remarks, I will note my declarations of interest: my chairmanship of the parliamentary internet, communications and technology forum all-party parliamentary group, and of the APPG on technology and national security; my chairmanship of Labour Digital and the Institute of Artificial Intelligence; and my previous professional work on these issues as a technology lawyer, as noted in the Register of Members' Financial Interest.

The online harms Bill will be a big and important piece of legislation, covering a range of difficult issues, from defining content that is harmful but not illegal and how we protect children, through to ensuring an effective regulatory framework that delivers a meaningful duty of care. Given the time, I will not rehearse the many important arguments for getting this right; I will keep my remarks short, both to give the Minister enough time to give substantive and full answers and so that other colleagues have a chance to contribute. The Secretary of State confirmed to the House in early September that the full response to the White Paper would be published this year—that is, 2020—and that legislation would be introduced early next year, which is 2021. On that basis, I have three sets of questions.

First, can the Minister confirm whether the publication of the full response to the White Paper is currently allocated to her Department's forward grid, and if so, when it is pencilled in for publication? My understanding is that it will be published between now and December. Could she also tell us whether the Department has secured a legislative slot with the Leader of the House for First Reading, and if so, give us a rough idea of when that might be? Does the Department envisage a period of prelegislative scrutiny before Second Reading? If it does, what role will the House of Lords play in that?

Secondly, can the Minister reassure us that the initial scope of the duty of care and the enforcement powers being made available to the regulator have not been watered down, and that she agrees with me that, while it is difficult to define what is harmful but not illegal, Parliament is the body best placed to do so, not private companies? Will she also reassure us that the passage of this Bill will not be linked to negotiations with the United States on the UK-US trade deal, given that we know that the United States has placed liability loopholes for platforms in trade deals with other countries?

Finally, will the Minister confirm that the answer I received from the Security Minister on the Floor of the House—that the online harms Bill will include provisions for enhancing sovereign defensive and offensive digital capabilities—is correct? If so, will she tell us whether the progression of the Bill is linked to the ongoing integrated review?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Textbook timekeeping.

3.18 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on securing today's debate. These issues are absolutely crucial; I have spoken about them many

[Stephen Doughty]

times in this place, particularly during my time on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and have exposed gross failures by social media companies on a number of occasions. Of course, this goes well beyond the usual suspects. We have heard today about a range of sites, including gaming sites, BitChute, Gab, Discord and others that are less well known than the YouTube, Facebooks, Instagrams and Twitters of this world. Even Tripadvisor, I have been told, was being used to share links to extremist content, which I am sure many of us find absolutely shocking.

I am also informed very much by my experiences in my Cardiff South and Penarth constituency over the last eight years. I have seen online videos glamorising drugs gangs and violence not removed due to claims of freedom of expression. These were videos that showed young people dripping in blood disposing of evidence after stabbing somebody—a simulated event, but one that was clearly glorifying utterly unacceptable and disgusting behaviour. I have seen jihadi organisations recruiting and spreading their messages of terror, including proscribed organisations, and other obvious ones such as Radio Aryan given the freedom to operate and spread their message of hate by YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others, not taken off. I have seen online attacks on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and attacks on the LGBT+ community. I have had my own experience of such online attacks, including threats about real-world events, and having to deal with those through the police.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore) spoke about fake news, whether that is anti-vax, about 5G or about foreign powers spreading disinformation in our country. I am told that the Russian state, for example, seeded 32 separate narratives about the poisoning of the Skripals and its shameful activities with chemical weapons on our own soil, in order to spread disinformation.

We have heard about the huge damage to mental health, as well as issues such as cyber-stalking and the activities of paedophiles, but I want to draw the House's attention to two specific issues today regarding the extreme right wing. The first is an organisation called the British Hand. Children as young as 12 are being drawn into extreme far-right groups, often by peers of a similar age, through the ease of anonymous social media accounts on bespoke sites such as Discord and Telegram, but also through Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. One particular cell, exposed by Hope Not Hate, is the British Hand group, allegedly led by a 15-year-old in Derby who recruits through Instagram and Telegram to encourage acts of violence, particularly against migrants. The group has been sharing videos of the Christchurch shooting and pro-National Action material, which is readily available on its Instagram page and through private group chats, instigating members to commit acts of violence, to join organisations such as, I am sorry to say, Sir Edward, the Army and the Army cadets, and to participate in the study of homemade weapons. That group must be dealt with and I hope the Minister will have something to say about them.

Secondly, there is the Order of Nine Angles. Alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), I have repeatedly called for the group to be banned. On 12 September, Mohamed-Aslim Zafis was

sitting outside his mosque in Toronto when he was stabbed to death. The Canadian Anti-Hate Network has uncovered the alleged perpetrator, William Von Neutegem, is linked to the far right and particularly the Nazi satanist group the Order of Nine Angles. The group spread their message on YouTube using videos with references to neo-Nazism and the occult, and with chanting, a nine-pointed star and the monolith of a homemade altar associated with Order of Nine Angles ceremonies. This comes after serious events in the United States as well. They need to be banned. Hope Not Hate has been doing excellent work on this and I declare my interest as a supporter of theirs in Parliament.

This problem has got to be dealt with. We cannot see any more delay from the Government, either in banning these organisations or bringing forward online harms legislation. We cannot wait until 2023; this was needed years ago. It is needed in all of the areas that Members have spoken about today, but I would particularly like to see a focus on these extreme right organisations that have been given such a free rein.

3.22 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): May I say how wonderful it is to be back in Westminster Hall after so long? I thank all the House staff who have made that possible and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for securing this important debate.

Many Members have spoken about the abuse and grooming that happens online. I completely agree that that needs to be targeted and legislated for. Some may have assumed that I would be talking about gambling today, but I am not. I want to focus on a specific area that is a cause of untold damage and should be included in the scope of any legislation about online harms.

Online sellers are creating a significant problem by not protecting consumers who are purchasing electrical goods from their sites. We know from experience that such goods may be substandard, counterfeit, recalled or non-compatible with use in this country. There is a severe lack of transparency that is putting many lives at significant risk.

Electricity causes more than 14,000 house fires annually, almost half of all accidental house fires. Each year, thousands are injured due to electrical incidents. In a survey carried out by Electrical Safety First, a staggering 93% of customers said that they would expect online sellers to protect them from purchasing counterfeit or substandard products, yet even when buying from well-known global platforms far too often that is not the case. Millions of people are falling victim with potentially tragic consequences.

This year has unsurprisingly seen a record rise in online sales, meaning a record number of unsuspecting customers purchased potentially unsafe goods. When the hair, beauty and wellbeing sector was forced to close salons and spas for longer than other businesses, many people will have gone online to purchase equipment to cut the family's hair or bought items that would enable them to do their own beauty treatments at home. In fact, research suggests that as many as 21 million consumers did this. With stocks running out fast, many people were just grateful to buy whatever they could get hold of, probably without even considering whether the product would be safe or not.

With covid restrictions set to continue, the increase in online shopping could have devastating consequences. Sales of electrical goods online are likely to be even higher this Christmas, so we have to do everything in our power to limit the harm and protect innocent consumers.

Since I first became an MP in 2015, I have campaigned for the need for the safer sale of electrical goods through online marketplaces. As a nation, our shopping habits were already moving online, but the coronavirus and subsequent lockdowns have escalated that trend at a far greater pace than we could ever have imagined. That is why I urge the Government to include the sale of unsafe electrical products in the expected online harms legislation.

Tighter controls are needed on the platforms selling those products, to ensure that people are purchasing items confident in the knowledge that their goods meet safety standards. Online sellers must take responsibility for their own checks and procedures to guarantee that the goods they are selling are genuine, safe and not subject to manufacturer's recall.

Online harms legislation is vital to protect people from a wide range of potential dangers. Almost 90% of adults use the internet, and none of us can deny how potentially dangerous so many aspects of the digital world are. We cannot ignore the fact that our legislation needs to catch up. Terrorist activity, online bullying, gambling, child safety and the safety of vulnerable adults are all areas in desperate need of legislation, but so is the hidden harm of the potential purchasing of life-threatening electrical goods. When the Government bring in this new legislation, it is essential that the sale of unsafe electrical goods is included within the remit. Potentially fatal products are an online harm and it is our responsibility to ensure those sales are legislated against.

3.27 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for securing this important and, I hope, influential debate.

Online harms are one of the biggest worries and harms faced by parents across my constituency and across the country. As a parent, I am very worried about what is happening in the safety of my own home, which I cannot control. Speaking to other parents, I know that is a shared concern. In our own homes, children can have free and unfettered access to pornography and to people inciting young people to violent hate and extremist views. Women can be threatened to share intimate images, which can cause long-lasting damage. Our online world must be a safe and positive place for us all to explore, including our children, but at present it is not. Providers are not taking action. Parents just cannot keep up. Self-regulation is definitely not cutting it and online harm in our society is spiralling out of control.

The 2015 Conservative manifesto pledged that

"we will stop children's exposure to harmful sexualised content online, by requiring age verification for access to all sites containing pornographic material."

Well, it is time to come good on that commitment. If the Government had acted sooner, large numbers of children would not have been harmed by avoidable

online experiences during lockdown. The consequences of ongoing inaction are severe and widespread. Our children can never unsee images they have stumbled across in all innocence in their own home. There are more children online for more time with more anxiety, yet there is less regulation, less action taken by providers and more sex offenders online.

I want to highlight three key issues. The first is pornography. According to the NSPCC, in the first three months of this year, more than 100 sex crimes against children were recorded every day. Lockdown led to a spike in online child abuse, meaning that that is much higher. The second issue is youth violence. The Mayor of London and deputy mayor for policing and crime have been vocal about the role of the internet in spreading violent messages and the incitement to commit serious youth violence. That is around us every day. The third issue is threats around sharing intimate images. One in 14 adults and one in seven young women have experienced threats about sharing intimate images. As a mother of two daughters, I am really concerned about that, and I know that parents across the country share that concern.

Although the sharing of intimate images was made a crime in 2015, threatening to share them can be just as damaging, but it is not illegal in England and Wales, although it is in Scotland. The threats are used to control, damage and affect mental health, and one in 10 survivors said that the threats had made them feel suicidal. There is also a substantial body of evidence suggesting that exposure to pornography is harmful to children and young people and can have a damaging impact on young people's views of sex or relationships, leading to a belief that women are sex objects. There are links between sexually coercive behaviour and higher rates of sexual harassment and forced sex. We simply cannot let this situation go unregulated any longer, so I have some questions for the Minister.

When will the First Reading of the online harms Bill be? Is there urgency to tackle online harms? Will the Minister commit to introducing legislation to outlaw threats to share intimate images as part of the Domestic Abuse Bill? Can she introduce a statutory instrument to redesignate the regulator as the British Board of Film Classification? That could be done very quickly and would enable age verification of pornographic websites. Will the online harms Bill contain strong and robust action, with a framework of comprehensive regulations and an adaptable new regulator that can adapt to the issues that will come up in future that we do not even know about yet?

It is time for tough action. We have really strict limits against hate speech and pornography in other areas of life, but just where most children are most of the time is where the Government are failing in their duty of care.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): We now come to the summing-up speeches. I call Gavin Newlands.

3.31 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. We have had an absolutely excellent debate, as evidenced by the number of Members who have attended. The debate opened with a thoughtful and powerful contribution from the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), and I

[Gavin Newlands]

congratulate her on securing it. She spoke alarmingly of the 100 online sex crimes against children each day—or more than 100 now—of the endemic misogyny online, and of the serious danger of doing nothing, comparing the long-term effects of doing nothing to smoking.

The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) spoke of the ridiculous anti-mask and anti-vaxxer narrative and how it has gained traction online. He shared some of the vile antisemitic comments that often get posted online, often unchallenged on some platforms. The hon. Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore) went into a lot more detail on the anti-vax brigade, who are too often emboldened by too many in the public eye, including Members in this place. I am sure he is delighted that Trump's dangerous posts are being taken down. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) expressed her disappointment, which I share, in the delay thus far in Government action, and she spoke of the survey that found that 63% of adults wanted the Government to implement part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 immediately.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke of the tidal wave of mental health problems that we can all see in our constituencies and perhaps even in our own families, and the prevalence of online bullying. I think we all agree with what the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) said: if every incident that happened online happened in the street, we would not let our children out the door. She spoke of the importance of age verification being part of any Government action.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) spoke of providers and platforms and the absolute necessity for them to show a duty of care to their customers. She also spoke about the inadequacies of the existing legal framework. I look forward to the Minister's answers to the three sets of on-point questions from the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) spoke of foreign powers spreading disinformation and the dangers of the extreme right wing online, which is definitely a sentiment I agree with.

The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) surprised us all by not talking about gambling. She spoke about the fraudulent sale of dangerous, substandard and counterfeit goods. Lastly, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) said that the internet should be a positive place for our children, but that online harm is spiralling out of control. We have had quite contrasting contributions to the debate, but certainly there was a consensus within that that the Government must take action now. As has just been said, the internet should be an enormous and progressive force for good, whether for our economic development or for connecting with family and friends across the world, but all too often our experience can be a negative one, be that through the daily undermining of civil discourse, identity theft or being bullied or abused.

The internet has become an integral, indispensable and in many ways pervasive part of daily life, with nearly 90% of UK adults online. For 12 to 15-year-olds that figure is 99%, and I can definitely state that my 14-year-old is not one of the 1% in this case. One thing I think we all agree on is that the sheer pace of the

development of the internet and our use of it, particularly over the past few months, has been difficult for Parliaments, Governments and therefore laws to keep pace with. These reforms are absolutely vital; they were already overdue and they have been subject to repeated delay. The pandemic has only added to the urgent need for their completion, as the world has moved online to an even greater extent.

The last formal update on the White Paper came in a report in February, but during the past six months, the NSPCC has reported an increased risk to children online during lockdown, while cases of covid-19-related fraud and scams have become prevalent. We know of fraudsters routinely targeting victims through sponsored Google and Facebook links and harvesting personal details from fake call centres.

There is a long-standing problem with serious organised criminals impersonating investment products; the Investment Association has reported that in the three months following the start of lockdown, reports of cloning scam activity spiked. Pandemic misinformation and online conspiracy theories have real consequences in the real world too, from increased numbers of people saying they will refuse a vaccine to the burning down of 5G masts.

That all increases the urgency for reform, but, as has been mentioned during the debate, the recent report from the House of Lords Democracy and Digital Technologies Committee said that the Bill might not come into effect until 2024, as the Government drag their feet on a draft Bill. In her response to the debate, may I seek an assurance from the Minister that that is not the case and that it will come in sooner than that?

The longer these delays continue, the more difficult it becomes for the Government to deny that they are due to the influence of extensive lobbying by large tech companies, coupled with a fear of potential damage to US-UK trade talks. Again, I seek an assurance in the Minister's contribution that any trade talks with the US will have no influence on the Government's approach or their timetable for taking action. The UK's reputation as a secure financial centre is also at stake; with Brexit already leading firms to look to relocate, it is even more vital for the Government to avoid giving them another reason to do so.

It goes without saying, but I will say it anyway, that the Scottish Government firmly believe that online abuse is unacceptable and that everybody deserves to be treated fairly, regardless of age, disability, gender, gender identity, race, religion, belief or sexual orientation. The Scottish Government have funded respectme, Scotland's fantastic anti-bullying service, which acts as a source of information for young people in Scotland. The organisation has created and made available publications to raise awareness of the issue of cyber-bullying. It has highlighted that online bullying is still bullying, and it implores us not to get caught up on the medium of abuse. We absolutely must tackle online abuse as robustly and reactively as offline abuse. There should be greater steps taken to inform the public of their right to report online abuse to the police, and training given to police forces on how to handle such cases.

A number of our own MPs, as has been mentioned, have experienced online abuse. Although politicians have chosen to be in public life, and with that comes an acceptance of public criticism, there is a crystal-clear

difference between criticism—even harsh criticism—and abuse. I stand with all hon. Members who have suffered abuse, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow during the last election. I will also make the point that, while men are harassed online, when women are the target, online harassment quickly descends into sexualised hate or threats. Online gender-based violence is a clear example of the deeply rooted gender inequalities that still sadly exist in our society.

We have also heard that children are deeply vulnerable to online abuse. We must do more to keep them safe. The Scottish Government have a national action plan on internet safety for children and young people. The plan emphasises the role that wider society, including the online sector, must play in enhancing internet safety for children and young people. The Scottish Government continue to work to ensure that professionals and communities have the appropriate skills and knowledge to provide support to children and young people.

As in England and Wales, there are a number of offences in Scots law that can cover online bullying and harassment. The Scottish Government are looking to add further protections in this area by publishing a hate crime Bill, which will consolidate, modernise and extend existing hate crime legislation, ensuring that it is fit for 21st-century Scotland. The Scottish Government have engaged extensively with more than 50 organisations, including Police Scotland, the Crown Office and others that work in the criminal justice system. The Bill does not prevent people from expressing controversial, challenging or offensive views, nor does it seek to stifle criticism or rigorous debate in any way, but it will target individuals whose behaviour is threatening or abusive and is intended to stir up hatred. The Scottish Government will continue to consult and listen to all views as the Bill progresses, to ensure that the correct balance is struck.

It is crystal clear from today's debate that there is a consensus for action on this vital issue. We just need the Government to get on with it. The longer they wait, the more lives are ruined by online crime and abuse.

3.40 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on securing the debate and other Members on their contributions, which have been thoughtful, well-informed and passionate on this critical subject.

I also declare an interest: as a chartered engineer, I spent 20 years building out the networks that have become the internet. Over that time, but most particularly in the 10 years since I entered Parliament, our lives have been increasingly lived online, with 80% of UK adults using the internet daily or almost every day. Social platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter are woven into the fabric of our lives. Together with a vast array of online apps for everything from video conferencing to healthy eating, they are a critical enabler of an active life as citizen, consumer and economic contributor.

The covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift online. At the height of the lockdown, UK adults were spending on average over four hours a day online. For those not digitally excluded, it brought huge benefits, keeping us

in touch virtually as physical touch became antisocial. However, as we have heard, particularly for my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the internet is at times an increasingly dark, challenging and inhospitable place. No matter how vulnerable or how well informed people are, they have little control over content, which is curated by tech platforms, allowing the spread of disinformation, sexual exploitation, fake news, extremism, hatred and other harmful content.

The importance and timeliness of today's debate can be seen in the number of hon. Members in the Chamber, in yesterday's United States Congress tech antitrust report and in today's report from UBS, which reveals the eye-watering levels of wealth in the tech sector. Yet, as we have heard, the UK Government have done nothing. Regulation has not kept pace with technology, crime or consumers, leaving growing numbers of people increasingly exposed to significant online harms. It did not have to be this way.

In 2002, the then Labour Government saw the growth of new communications technologies and undertook a comprehensive, forward-looking review of the issues they raised. The result was the Communications Act 2003 and a new regulator, Ofcom, with the power to ensure that these issues were resolved in the public interest. That regulatory framework was given a 10-year lifespan—I know that because I was head of technology at Ofcom at the time.

In 2012, the Conservative-led Government saw the growth of our online lives, social media and big data, and did—nothing. The 2012 review of online harms may be the most important review we never had. As we have heard, the Government cannot even respond to their own belated and limited online harms consultation in a timely manner, leaving it to big tech to continue to control our online lives.

I consider myself a tech evangelist. I believe that tech is an engine of progress like no other. I believe it can improve the lives of my constituents and enable a more equal, more productive and more sustainable skills-based economy through a fourth industrial green revolution. However, people need to be protected online and empowered to take control of their online lives. The Government need to be on the side of the people, not tech lobbyists.

Hon. Members have set out many of the critical issues, so I will focus my remaining remarks on four areas: children, finance, disinformation and regulation. As emphasised particularly by the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), the Government are failing in their duty to safeguard children. Worsened by increasing social isolation due to the pandemic, online abuse is being normalised for a whole generation. The previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), called the pandemic the “perfect storm” for child abuse. The UK Safer Internet Centre found 8.8 million attempts to access child sexual abuse in one month alone. How will the Government address that, and what will they do to support schools? The centre found that schools desperately

[*Chi Onwurah*]

need help and support in levelling up online safety. Will the Government replace the UK Safer Internet Centre's EU funding, so that it can continue to do its good work as we leave the European Union?

On financing, the platform giants' business model is driven by algorithms that serve up more and more extreme content, which drives extreme behaviours such as radicalisation and self-harm. The model depends on eyeballs and is financed through advertising. Google and Facebook control the online advertising market, which facilitates so much online harm. What plan do the Government have to address the failings of that model or to give the Competition and Markets Authority and the advertising regulators the powers to do so? It is despicable that, nearly three years after her death, the family of Molly Russell have had only limited access to her data and have been denied access to the algorithms and all the content that helped facilitate her suicide. Will the Minister ensure that that changes?

The tech giants' model also means that Google and Facebook have control of the online high street, directing the traffic on it, even as Amazon unfairly outcompetes the high street in our real-world towns. How will the Government address economic online harms and enable competition?

Our ability to build back from covid will depend on the successful deployment of a vaccine. As we have heard from the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), however, misinformation on vaccines—as well as on 5G, the holocaust and just about everything—is freely available and promoted on social media. The Government's counter-disinformation officer has a full-time dedicated staff of zero. When will they take disinformation seriously, and what will they do about it?

We are a constructive Opposition. It might appear that I have been liberal in my criticism of the Government, but that is born from my experience, the experience of hon. Members present and, most importantly, the experience of constituents up and down the country. Far too many people's lives are detrimentally affected by what they experience online. As a constructive Opposition, we have proposals as well as criticisms. The Government have been too slow to act, and tech giants have thought themselves unaccountable for too long. However, they can be made accountable. Self-regulation has failed, but robust, reasonable, rational, forward-looking and principles-based regulation can succeed. It is shocking that, in all this time, the Government have not established what those principles should be. Is anonymity a right, or is it a privilege? Is identity a right? How do we decide when legal online content becomes harmful?

Labour has made it clear that we need a digital bill of rights and a legal duty of care to give more powers and protections. We need a statutory regulator for online platforms to crack down on the harm, the hate and the fake. However, we have also launched the Our Digital Future consultation to build consensus on the underlying principles by which our online lives should be guided—it is still taking submissions, if hon. Members would like to contribute. We are also committed to eradicating the digital divide—indeed, the many new digital divides—as a result of which marginalised people have become increasingly excluded from the online world.

Many bodies have contacted me and asked me to raise their concerns about issues from dangerous goods online to data adequacy, small business competition to fake reviews, age verification to facial recognition, and antisemitism to intellectual property. I cannot do them all justice. The Government must outline a clear plan to address the multitude of online harms. It cannot be limited to the platforms simply policing their terms and conditions. Enforcement and redress are required, and I repeat the questions posed by my hon. Friends the Members for Halifax and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), although I despair of answers. The Government must get a grip if our lives are to flourish online without fear or favour.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage):

It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for tabling this incredibly important topic for debate. This is my first opportunity since taking this role in February to speak publicly about online harms, and I am grateful for the chance to do so. I am also grateful to all Members who have taken part in the debate and raised some incredibly important topics.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) summed up an important challenge at the beginning: it should not take Government legislation to sort this out, but, unfortunately, it does, now more than ever. That was brought home to me over the summer, when I talked to the father of Molly Russell, a young lady whose story started with online bullying and then led on to her seeking information online as to how to take her own life, which she did. That was a conversation that I never want to have with another parent again. It was utterly chilling. That is why my dedication to making sure the legislation is fit for purpose is stronger than ever.

The hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) challenged me to ensure that the legislation is robust, clear and soon, and I take that challenge. I have had a number of other challenges from across the room, and given that I have only a few moments to respond, I will get through as many as I can. Anyone I do not get to, I will write to.

As hon. Members know, the Government published the online harms White Paper last year, setting out how to make legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. User safety is very much at the heart of our approach. The intention to establish a new duty of care for companies towards their users will ensure they have appropriate systems and processes in place to deal with the harmful content on their services and to keep their users safe.

Our approach will require companies to have clear and accessible mechanisms for users to report harmful content and to challenge it—take it down, in fact—where necessary. Companies will be expected to enforce their terms and conditions transparently and consistently. The duty of care will be overseen by a regulator, which will have oversight of these mechanisms and strong enforcement powers to deal with non-compliance.

The White Paper spoke about some of these powers, but we have also consulted on further powers to carry out things such as business disruption activities, blocking internet service providers and personal sanctions for senior managers. Further information will be published in the full Government response.

Since publishing the public consultation, we published the interim Government response earlier in the year, which shares the findings from the consultation and indicated the direction of travel. We intend to publish the full Government response within the next few weeks and to have the legislation ready early next year.

A range of other issues have been raised today, and I will get through as many as I can. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and many other hon. Members suggested that there might be some watering down of the legislation compared with the White Paper. In fact, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) thought that it might be part of some of our trade negotiations. That is not the case. There will be no watering down—in fact, the opposite.

The protection of children is at the heart of our approach to tackling online harms, and a number of hon. Members have raised that. There is huge recognition that the online world can be particularly damaging for children. We understand that. It is their mental health and their very well-being that are at stake. Our online harms proposals will assume a higher level of protection for children than for the typical adult user. We will expect companies to have a range of tools to protect them, including measures such as age assurance and age verification technologies to protect them from accessing inappropriate content.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about the Digital Economy Act 2017. This will go further than the focus of the Digital Economy Act. One criticism of that Act was that its scope did not cover social media companies. One of the worst places where a considerable quantity of pornographic material is available to children is on social media. Our new approach will therefore include social media companies and all sites on which there is user-generated content, including major pornography sites.

It is important that we no longer see age verification for pornography in isolation, but as part of this wider package to protect children across a range of sites and harmful materials. This technology is new and emerging, and it is important that we take every opportunity to get at the front end of it. That is why we are collaborating with the Home Office, GCHQ and a wide range of stakeholders on research into the verification of children online, and considering the technical challenges of knowing who online is a child. We ran a successful technical trial to test the use of age-assurance technologies at scale. The initial findings have been promising, and I look forward to developing that work shortly.

In recent years, there has been a massive rise in online abuse, harassment and intimidation, with a large majority of that on social media. I am clear that any abuse targeted towards anybody is unacceptable, but we heard from many Members that certain users are disproportionately targeted. For example, we know that issues such as revenge porn are rising. The UK Safer Internet Centre recently cited the fact that, this year, the revenge porn helpline has already dealt with 22% more cases than in the whole of 2019. That is not acceptable.

We are clear that what is illegal offline should be illegal online, including a number of things raised today, such as incitement to violence and the selling of faulty and potentially hazardous goods. We need to make sure that social media companies take as much responsibility as they can, but we also need to make sure that law

enforcement agencies are equipped to take action where they need to. In some cases, the law is not fit for purpose to deal with the challenges of the online world, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). That is why we instructed the Law Commission to review existing legislation on abusive and harmful communications. It is also undertaking additional reviews, including on the taking, making and sharing of intimate images, which is obviously incredibly upsetting for victims. Given the nature of lawmaking, a patchwork of offences has been developed over time to address this issue. The Law Commission is now considering the best way to address these harms and whether there are any gaps in legislation. We are working alongside it to consider the right legislative vehicle to take this issue forward.

Finally, we have seen some horrific examples involving disinformation and misinformation over the covid period, including the burning down of 5G masts because of some horrific conspiracy theories. We stood up the cross-Whitehall counter-disinformation cell earlier in the year and, to give reassurance to those who asked for it, we have been working since the beginning of the summer with colleagues across Government and with social media companies on how to respond to anti-vax campaigns, so that is very much in hand.

As well as calling for action from companies, it is key that users are empowered with the knowledge and skills to keep themselves safe, which is why our online media literacy strategy will come out in partnership with the White Paper. With that, I will end, to leave time for the hon. Member for Halifax to conclude the debate.

3.58 pm

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to all hon. Members who have taken part in this important debate, and not least to the Labour shadow spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), for her important contribution. She again made use of her expertise in the powerful position she took.

I am also grateful to the Minister for her response. She gave what I felt was quite a personal commitment to get a grip of this. However, while we asked a lot of specific questions, we heard phrases like “range of tools”, “terms and conditions”, “misinformation and disinformation” and “is in hand”. It was not necessarily the absolute clarity we were asking for. Will social media companies have heard that response and realised that the transformation that we ask for is on its way? I am not sure they will, so I politely put it to the Minister that we very much hope that her personal contribution and the commitments she made are forthcoming, and that where she is afforded more time in the future, she will be able to share more with us.

I will end with a personal plea, echoing the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart). As a mother of a two-year-old boy, the clock is ticking, and I need assurances that, by the time he is old enough to use the internet, we will have got a grip of this. Others shared experiences of their children using it here and now, and they are witnessing the impact that it has on them. We also have responsibilities beyond that, as Members of Parliament and lawmakers.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Covid-19: Financial Implications for Schools

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

4.2 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the financial implications of covid-19 for schools.

I am grateful to Mr Speaker for giving me the opportunity to raise an issue of considerable importance to my constituents and, I suspect, constituents across England. Schools in Harrow and across the country are facing a very tough financial year because of their extra covid costs. I say gently to the Minister that Ministers are not yet doing enough to help.

Harrow is blessed with a very strong state sector, with generally excellent primary and secondary schools, as well as a strong sixth-form college and good further education provision. The schools work together extremely well and the quality of Harrow's schools remains a central attractive part of the borough's offer to families with children.

I pay particular tribute to Harrow's headteachers. They are a remarkable group of very talented leaders and generally have very strong staff teams in their schools. Since the beginning of this term, students from 12 schools have had to self-isolate, but in general the return to school has gone relatively well.

I am a former pupil of two Harrow schools and am now a parent of a child at one, and I have many friends whose children are either at or have been at Harrow schools. What happens in the borough's schools and their funding is a lively concern in the many conversations that I have as a constituency MP. Talking to headteachers and others involved in the financial governance of our schools, I am concerned, first, about the funding difficulties that covid is causing our schools; secondly, about the limited financial support the Government have so far offered; and, thirdly, about the difficult financial backdrop faced by schools, even before coronavirus became an issue. I am also concerned about the increased difficulties that covid is causing those children with special needs; the mental health challenges facing our young people, which are being exacerbated as a result of covid; and what the feared increase in child poverty will mean for schools and their finances.

One of the many excellent high schools in my constituency expects to incur, over 12 months, approximately £175,000 in extra costs due to covid. Extra cleaning, extra teaching cover, longer hours needed for support staff, additional essential supplies, such as personal protective equipment and sanitiser, and significant digital investment—for example, in laptops to ensure that students can study at home in the event of closure, partial closure, self-isolation and so on—are just some examples of things that have created extra costs. Also, the school has suffered a significant loss in income in relation to a lot of community clubs—for example, football clubs—to language schools and to simply the use of buildings for event hire. That is lost income that the school would have invested in education for its pupils. To be fair, that high school has received some funding from the Department

to cover cleaning costs, and funding equivalent to two teachers from the catch-up fund, which will, according to the headteacher, help just with years 10 and 11.

One large primary school, which is fairly typical of the borough, has incurred more than £60,000 in extra costs just over the last—summer—term. Again, the school has faced significant costs for additional staffing to cover lessons where teachers or teaching assistants have been shielding, and for site staff and office staff overtime to prepare for the reopening of the school. School lunchtimes are costing more because of the need for disposable cutlery and packaging, and, given the staggered lunchtime arrangements required, there are, again, extra staffing costs.

Two primary schools have seen the need for significant extra IT investment. Similarly, they have had extra cleaning costs and they have seen significant losses of income, as their premises cannot be hired out. Some schools in Harrow and, indeed, across the country are also trying to maintain wraparound care—even as external providers can no longer do so—in order to help parents who otherwise would struggle to keep working.

The spending review announcement will not leave Harrow schools much better off. The so-called funding increases are largely just recycling the pay and pension awards, which used to be funded separately. I understand specifically that pay and pension increases from last month are not funded, costing the average high school in the borough between £150,000 and £200,000, and the average primary school more than £50,000. Changes to the school funding formula for deprivation have hit Harrow schools very hard, because for some reason we are now classified as a less deprived area. The consequent loss of funding meant that Harrow schools did not get anywhere near the 4% funding increase announced nationally for 2020-21. It is difficult, therefore, to see how the funding settlement for Harrow schools—welcome as any increase always is—goes anywhere near addressing the real-terms cuts in school spending over the last 10 years.

On the national picture, as I alluded to, I recognise that the Department for Education has provided some additional funding for schools facing, in Ministers' words, "exceptional costs". However, there are limits on the amount of costs that will be recompensed, and no consideration is given to the loss of often crucial lettings income.

The National Foundation for Educational Research set out in September the scale of the educational and financial challenges facing schools, based on interviews with almost 3,000 school leaders and teachers across more than 2,200 primary and secondary schools in England. The NFER pointed out that nearly all teachers estimate that their pupils are behind in their curriculum learning, with the average estimate being that they are three months behind. Teachers in the most deprived schools were more than three times more likely to report that their pupils were four months or more behind in their curriculum learning than teachers in the least deprived areas. Indeed, more than half of all teachers thought that the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had widened.

The report notes the difficulties in teaching remotely, with more than one quarter of pupils having limited or no access to IT at home—a particular challenge for schools serving the most deprived areas. Across the

piece, almost 50% of teachers thought that their pupils needed intensive catch-up help, with the figure being even higher in the most deprived schools and in areas serving the highest proportion of pupils from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, such as schools in my constituency. The report notes the need for additional IT equipment. Senior leaders have been particularly aware of the need for improved IT, with the limitations of school IT systems hindering their ability to communicate with pupils, parents and, indeed, staff.

The NFER went on to suggest that some primary schools could need up to an estimated £280,000 a year and that an average secondary school could need up to an estimated £720,600 in order to operate in line with the Government's requirements. I should underline that these estimates are based on talking to senior leaders who were concerned about their ability to provide a full and comprehensive service to their pupils from the beginning of last month.

The NFER acknowledges the funding that the Government have provided for cleaning costs, the catch-up funding and the IT funding, but it says, in its traditionally understated way:

"Nevertheless...there is still likely to be a need for additional funding beyond the current government offer."

The Institute for Fiscal Studies annual report on school funding, which was also published just last month, is also striking. The IFS is arguably the most independent and respected group of analysts in the UK, and it reported that larger funding costs for schools in poor areas have left them badly placed to deal with all the challenges that covid-19 has thrown up. The IFS notes the obvious widening of educational inequalities over lockdown and highlights the particularly tough challenges faced by schools serving more deprived pupils over the next few years, with planned increases in teachers' starting salaries—welcome as they are in their own right—likely to weigh even more heavily on their budgets because they are more likely to have to employ new teachers.

The IFS describes the post-lockdown funding support for schools as "modest", and goes on specifically to say:

"Faster falls in spending per pupil over the last decade, slower increases under the National Funding Formula...widening of educational inequalities...all provide a case for greater targeting of funding to more deprived schools."

The IFS also notes:

"School spending per pupil in England fell by 9% in real terms between 2009-10 and 2019-20",

describing it as

"the largest cut in over 40 years",

compared with the

"increase in spending per pupil of over 60%"

during the period of the last Labour Government.

The IFS goes on to acknowledge the 2019 spending review announcement for day-to-day spending on schools in England through to 2022-23. It notes that, using school-specific inflation, the expected growth in spending per pupil between 2019-20 and 2022-23 would leave spending per pupil about 3% in real terms below its 2009-10 level, which will still be the biggest squeeze on school resources since the 1970s.

The IFS further notes the lower increases in formula allocations for schools in poorer areas, which

"run counter to the objective"—

that is, the objective of the Government, apparently—

"of using school funding to 'level up' poorer regions."

Echoing the NFER report, the IFS says that this could "pose additional challenges for deprived schools seeking to help pupils catch up after the closure of schools during the pandemic."

The IFS goes into some detail on the different aspects of the Government support, in particular describing the national tutoring programme as offering a level of support that is "low" when compared with the scale of likely lost learning.

The Minister will also know that there is particular concern about children with special needs, with almost one fifth of them, according to Government figures, off school due to the problems that schools face in managing infection control, timetables and transport difficulties. There is a particular problem, which the media have covered, in providing access to education for children with a tracheostomy, or who require what is called oral suctioning to clear their airways. Public Health England rules state that schools must ensure that they are suctioned in separate ventilated and sanitised rooms by staff wearing full protective gear. Many schools are simply unable to comply with those rules. It would be helpful to hear from the Minister—if not today, then soon—what specific steps his Department has taken to address that issue.

There are broader issues about funding for children with special needs. The Children's Commissioner has noted specifically that the problem of access to mainstream schooling for children with special educational needs was showing up long before lockdown. None of the disruption of this year has helped to change that picture.

Many local authorities, struggling with years of austerity cuts, are still often finding it difficult to provide appropriate placements, and children with special needs are missing out in many cases on their education, putting their parents under enormous pressure to pick up the pieces. Research commissioned by the Local Government Association acknowledges the extra funding that the Government have provided for special educational needs in this comprehensive spending review period, but it estimates that councils still face a high-needs shortfall of at least £889 million. It would be good to hear from the Minister whether there will be further sustained investment in special educational needs provision by Ministers over the course of the next spending review.

Similarly, it would be helpful to hear what further support Ministers are providing for investment in mental health services to which schools can have access. Various charities have highlighted the increased feelings of isolation and loneliness during lockdown for many young people. Again, the Children's Commissioner has articulated the greater threats of domestic abuse, online grooming and other threats that children faced during lockdown, few of which would have been picked up by teachers during that period, and for which children now require support.

The final thing I want to mention in terms of the financial implications that covid has for schools is child poverty. Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research suggests that covid threatens to push up to another 200,000 more children into poverty by the end of the year. That is on top of the 4.2 million children trapped in poverty already. As unions such as the National Education Union have highlighted, child poverty is already putting pressure on school budgets, with schools funding extra breakfast and holiday clubs, providing and washing children's clothing, and supplying children with essential equipment that they need to learn.

[Gareth Thomas]

I acknowledge the Government's investment in digital equipment and the expansion of free school meals to cover school holidays at Easter and over the summer period but, given the expected rise in unemployment and the associated rise in child poverty that I fear is inevitable, it would be helpful if Ministers would confirm whether similar free school meal provision can be made this half term, and in the holidays at Christmas and next year, particularly while the covid pandemic is still having an impact.

What further investment will Ministers make to tackle the digital poverty that is likely to hold young people back if they still do not have access to laptops, tablets or other such equipment? Will Ministers consider providing free household internet access to children and young people in households on universal credit?

I am grateful for helpful briefings from the National Association of Head Teachers, NASUWT, the Local Government Association, the National Education Union and, of course, schools in my constituency, and my local authority. Schools face a difficult financial challenge in the coming months, and none more than those in my borough. Ministers need to extend funding to cover covid costs and to recognise that sustained investment is needed in areas of deprivation and special needs. Further investment will be required in mental health services, and rising child poverty will have a further significant impact on schools and their finances.

4.19 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I will be brief, as I want to hear from the Minister. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this important debate. I thank him for giving me a couple of minutes for sharing, reiterating and adding to his experience of school funding, especially from my constituency in Putney and from across Wandsworth. I pay tribute to the heads, the staff management and the chairs of governors of schools who are managing budgets during this difficult time. I would like to outline four areas of concern that I have noted for local schools.

The first area of concern is mental health. That is one of those areas that is additionally funded, and is an area that can potentially be cut by school governors at the moment, when a school is stripped to the bone. The second area of concern is that of additional costs—more staff, more cleaning costs, and more PPE. There is also inconsistency in terms of income. Many schools have previously had some or a lot of income from hiring out their premises, but are getting no reimbursement or acknowledgment of that difference in budget as a result of losing that income. A third area of concern is youth services. There have been huge cuts in youth services: in London alone, over 100 youth services have been cut in the last five years. That has an impact on education. There is no area to do homework, informal education goes and family support goes. That has all been an additional concern after covid.

The fourth and final concern is special educational needs, as has been outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West. Only last Saturday, two parents came to my surgery. They were at their wits' end. They were not getting the diagnosis support. When they had an education,

health and care plan they were not getting any response to that plan. That is detrimental not only to the education of those children and young people, but to the schools that are having to put in additional resources to try and cope with and support those young people. I would like to highlight those areas of concern, and obviously the catch-up fund. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the catch-up fund—when it will be reviewed and whether there will be flexibility to provide additional funding for that catch-up as we know and understand the needs of our young people over the next year. Thank you.

4.21 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, for the first time as far as I am concerned. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing the debate. Education does lie at the heart of our national mission as we recover from the coronavirus pandemic. Helping children to catch up on the time that they lost as we took action to stem the spread of coronavirus is critical, not only for this generation of schoolchildren but for the economic and social health of the nation. It is thanks to the outstanding efforts of our teachers and staff that pupils are continuing to receive the education and opportunities they deserve in the face of this pandemic.

The Government have been clear that pupils in all year groups, and from all types of school, should return to school full time from the beginning of the autumn term. Figures show that, as at 1 October, 99.8% of schools were open and 92% were open to all their pupils. Over 7 million children and young people are back in school, representing 90% of pupils across the country. I am delighted to hear from the hon. Member for Harrow West that the return to school in Harrow has gone relatively well too. We continue to do everything in our power to ensure that every child can be back in their classroom safely, as that is the best place for them to be for their education, development and wellbeing. The Department has published detailed guidance to support schools to implement protective measures that are endorsed by Public Health England and fully informed by evidence from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. Schools will have access to testing, PPE and advice from their local health protection team where needed.

The Government are supporting schools during the coronavirus outbreak and we are delivering the biggest funding boost in a decade, which is giving every school more money for every child. We are increasing core schools funding by £2.6 billion this year, and £4.8 billion and £7.1 billion by 2021-22 and 2022-23 respectively, compared with 2019-20, including additional funding specifically for children with special educational needs and disabilities. On top of that, we are providing £1.5 billion per year to fund additional pension costs for teachers, contrary to what the hon. Member for Harrow West said in his opening remarks. Overall, that will bring the schools budget to £52.2 billion a year by 2022-23. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said—in a report other parts of which were quoted by the hon. Member for Harrow West—that investment will broadly restore schools funding to previous levels in real terms per pupil by 2023.

On special needs funding, high needs funding has increased by nearly 25% over these two years—a rise of £780 million this year and £730 million next year—bringing total high-needs funding to £8 billion. We understand the pressures that schools and local authorities are facing with high-needs and special needs costs, which is why we have introduced such large increases, particularly large increases in the special needs budget. The hon. Member for Harrow West asked about the spending review. That is happening as we speak, so I cannot say what will be in it, but this is a priority for this Government, as we have seen from these two years of spending.

We need to acknowledge that every child and young person in the country has experienced unprecedented disruption to their education as a result of coronavirus, and those from the most vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds will be among those hardest-hit. We are hugely concerned about that as a Government, as are the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). That is why, on top of that £2.6 billion increase in this year's schools budget, the Government are providing a package of additional support worth £1 billion to ensure that schools can help children make up for lost teaching time, recognising the additional work that schools will need to do to help students catch up. Of that package, £650 million is being provided in the form of a universal catch-up premium for schools. The grant recognises that every young person has lost time in education as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. That £650 million—£80 for every child in a mainstream school and £240 per pupil in a special school—will be delivered in three tranches across this academic year.

It is likely that disadvantaged and vulnerable children will have been hit hardest by this outbreak. That is why we have also launched the national tutoring programme, to provide additional targeted support for those children and young people who need the most support to catch up—one-to-one and small group tuition. We have also been providing additional funding to schools on top of existing budgets, in order to cover unavoidable costs incurred between March and July due to the covid-19 outbreak that could not be met from those schools' budgets. Schools were eligible to claim for increased premises costs associated with keeping schools open over the Easter and summer half-term holidays, support for free school meals for eligible children who were not in school and where schools were not using the national voucher scheme, and additional cleaning costs incurred due to confirmed or suspected covid-19 cases, over and

above the cost of existing cleaning. Schools have already received initial payments of £58 million in respect of their claims against those expenses, and those payments have been made to schools that claimed only against their standard expenditure categories. Some schools have made claims outside their standard categories, and we are assessing those claims. If we decide that they are eligible, they will be paid later in the autumn term.

The Government are committed to the continuation of high-quality education for all pupils, and to the ambition—shared by schools—of ensuring that everyone can catch up and reach their full potential. We have therefore invested over £100 million to support remote education, and have already delivered over 220,000 laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children who would not otherwise have access, supporting those children to stay online and connected with their teachers during the summer term. Those laptops and tablets remain the property of the schools and local authorities, so that they can continue to be used to support education, and we are now supplementing that support by making available 250,000 additional laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children in years 3 to 11 in the event that face-to-face schooling is disrupted as a result of covid-19 outbreaks or local restrictions that mean that children become reliant on remote education.

The Department have also made £4.8 million available to Oak National Academy to provide video lessons, for reception up to year 11, for the last summer term and for this coming academic year. That will provide a resource to support teachers throughout this academic year, helping them to transition education from the classroom to online in the event of local restrictions. So we are working to support all children to return and start to reverse the enormous costs of missed education. This will be an important move back towards normal life for many children and families. We are extremely grateful for the exceptional efforts that teachers, headteachers and other school staff have been making to support their pupils during this very challenging period, and we know that we have the professional knowledge and expertise in our education system to ensure that pupils and students recover and get back on track. To help them do so, we are providing schools with the resources they need to get children back into the classroom safely and protect a generation of pupils from the disruption caused to their education by this pandemic.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Flooding: Staffordshire

4.30 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Before we begin, I briefly remind Members that there are some changes to normal practice in order to support the new call list system, and to ensure that social distancing can be respected. Members should sanitise their microphones before they use them and respect the one-way system around the room—that means you come down this side and out that way. Members should only speak from the horseshoe and they can speak only if they are on the call list. That applies even if debates are undersubscribed. Members cannot join the debate if they are not on the call list. In the case of heavily oversubscribed debates, Members are not expected to wait for the wind-ups, but that is not the position we are in today.

4.31 pm

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered flooding in Staffordshire.

Storm Alex this weekend has been an all too timely reminder of the havoc that flooding can wreak. In January 2020, we saw some of the very worst flooding in Staffordshire for a century. The River Sow in Stafford burst its banks. Throughout my constituency, from Bishop's Wood to Ranton, from Lapley to Hopton, my constituents have yet again suffered from flooding.

I am grateful to a number of Staffordshire colleagues for coming today to provide support on this important topic. I am sure they will provide numerous illustrations of how their constituents have also been impacted by flooding in Staffordshire.

Staffordshire has done more than its fair share of house building over the last few years. Increased development in Stafford is important, given its strategic location in the UK, but with that come consequences for residents. It is vital that our local infrastructure is able to cope. Increased surface run-off means that, over the last 20 years, homes that were never affected before have suffered from flooding, once-dry sports grounds are now regularly unusable due to being waterlogged, and local businesses are often left counting the cost due to floodwaters preventing them from opening, or destroying their goods. Something needs to be done to tackle these issues. I fear that if we do not act now, the situation regarding flooding in Staffordshire will only get worse.

The major problem in Staffordshire is who to call when your house starts to flood. We all know who to call when a crime is being committed, when someone falls ill or if there is a fire, but there appears to be no answer for flooding. There is literally no one available to answer that call. I have repeatedly had constituents calling me and my constituency office, often at midnight, as water has been pouring into their homes and there is no one to help. It is simply not good enough. I am urging the Government today to create an emergency three-digit flood phone number—for example, 555—that everyone in our country knows to call if they are experiencing a flood emergency.

We already have the technology available. It could work like the 101 number that puts people through to their local police force. In this instance, it would put my constituents in touch with someone in Staffordshire who is able to help them with their flooding situation.

The emergency flood phone number should run 24/7, because flooding is an emergency. When water is pouring through your letterbox in the middle of the night, the place where you live, your livelihood and even your life could be at risk.

That brings me to another question that, frankly, the Government need to answer. It appears to be a very simple question: who is the lead authority responsible for flooding? Many agencies are involved with handling flooding, but when I speak to them, none seems keen to take overall responsibility. That is not good enough for residents.

Let me give an example from my constituency. Tixall Road was flooded for nearly a month and no agency sorted it out. The main roads from Great Haywood and Little Haywood were blocked due to floodwater; residents told me they had to go on a detour of many miles and it cost local businesses, such as the Canalside Farm shop whose customers come from far and wide, a huge amount of money.

What was I told when I tried to find help for my constituents? The agency responsible for the road said it could not deal with it because it “wasn't their water,” as the water had come from a field. That is just one of numerous examples of the complete lack of joined-up thinking in relation to flooding, and I am sure the House will hear more examples from my colleagues in their speeches this afternoon.

Of course, I called all the different agencies that are meant to help with flooding but no one was willing to move the water on Tixall Road, and all gave me a different reason why it was not their problem. But it was a problem; the weeks went on and the villagers still could not get on with their lives. They were still cut off by floodwater, farmers' crops were being destroyed in the fields and local businesses were suffering. The only official response was that the police came along and closed the road. I agree that that was necessary in the short term, but shutting the road did not solve the fundamental problem that it was still flooded and no one could use it. In the end, the residents had to remove the water at their own expense. In my view, that should not have happened and they have been badly let down.

In order to try and find a solution to such problems, I held a flooding roundtable this summer with all the key stakeholders in Staffordshire. They all told me how seriously they take flooding, but not one of them was prepared to say that it was the lead flooding agency or to take responsibility for the specific examples that I gave. It was almost farcical. Let me make this clear: the situation regarding flooding in Staffordshire is not a joke, and this bureaucratic runaround is the same problem that my constituents face every day.

I said earlier that there was a need for a telephone line for constituents to call if they were experiencing flooding, but in tandem with that I am calling for a flood control centre, which is something that I have raised repeatedly, and which has significant local support in Staffordshire. We need a flood control centre with a real person at the end of that telephone number, in Stafford, who is able to do something to help my constituents. It is frankly not good enough for my constituents to have water pouring through their front door, and to call number after number and be sent from pillar to post, when all the while the water is rising and their home and possessions are being destroyed.

Even worse, I have been told by constituents that, on the rare occasions that someone has agreed to help them with flooding, when the agency has arrived it has informed residents that it cannot do anything because, “It is the wrong type of water.” I repeat—“It is the wrong type of water,” and the agency says it is not responsible for it. Another constituent told me they were informed by an agency that, “The water was in the wrong place for them to deal with it.” My constituent was well aware that the water was in the wrong place—it was in her living room.

I am sorry, but this situation is unacceptable. I do not believe that it is my constituents’ job to figure out where water is coming from or the type of water it is. What they want is to have a lead authority for flooding, an authority with statutory responsibility for helping people suffering from this problem—no ifs, no buts, just a lead authority to help them.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Theo Clarke: Mr Hosie, are we allowed to take interventions?

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): You are allowed to take interventions from people on the call list.

Aaron Bell: Thank you, Mr Hosie. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the system is too fragmented; to give an example from my constituency, parish councillor Mike Joynson in Halmer End reported exactly the same problem, but this time it was with developers—there was a dispute about whether it the utility company or the developers were involved. Again, if we had a single point of contact and people knew who was responsible, it would make it much better for people in both her constituency and mine.

Theo Clarke: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The whole point of today’s debate is to say that creating an emergency three-digit telephone number would mean that all our constituents had a direct number to call in flooding emergencies, which would be linked to our Staffordshire flood control centre, and that having an agency with statutory responsibility for flooding would lessen the impact on our constituents.

We must also have a long-term plan to try to prevent people’s homes from being flooded in the first place. To give another example from my constituency, Sandon Road is flooded all too frequently. As rain begins to fall, it is always the Marston and Sandyford brooks that start to overflow and the water often floods into my constituents’ homes. I recently attended the Sandon Road residents’ meeting, where I was distressed to hear at first hand the impact that regular flooding is having on my constituents. I pay tribute to Councillor Jonathan Price for all his efforts to try to help the residents of Sandon Road.

I am very grateful for Government-supported schemes such as Flood Re, which provides insurance for constituents who would otherwise be unable to access it. It is a vital safety net and very helpful when the worst does happen. However, we should strive to do better. Insurance cannot prevent the fear of flooding that my constituents have every time it rains. Insurance cannot replace priceless items such as family photographs, and floods can often

destroy and take away the lives of many of my constituents, with days, weeks or even—in many cases—months being blighted by the impact of their homes being flooded. I therefore believe we need to do more to stop water getting into people’s homes in the first place.

Councillor Price helpfully put out a letter to local residents in Stafford last week in which he said that he has arranged the delivery of sandbags in case of imminent danger of flooding. While that may slow down the water, I am afraid it will not stop it coming in eventually. That is the crux of the problem. While it is vital that we continue to provide short-term emergency support for residents affected by flooding, that will only be truly successful for the residents of Sandon Road and elsewhere in Stafford if it is accompanied by properly funded long-term measures.

I welcome the Conservative party manifesto commitment to £4 billion in new funding over the coming years for new developments as part of a £100 billion investment in infrastructure. I was also pleased to hear the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs confirm in March that the Government will honour that commitment and spend £4 billion on flood defences over the next five years. Agencies have told me repeatedly that they do not have the funding to maintain and improve the waterways in Staffordshire to combat flooding effectively, so I look forward to working with the Minister and the Department constructively to see how some of that funding can be used to tackle the significant problems in Staffordshire.

I believe that, having left the European Union, the Government have a great part to play in promoting the role of farmers and landowners in preventing residential flooding. We should encourage our farmers to protect land, improve access to the countryside and take measures to prevent residential flooding. Farmers in Stafford should be congratulated on the work they are already doing in this area. I recently visited farmland in my constituency that is very prone to flooding, which has been replanted with willow trees. The area has become a thriving sanctuary for wildlife. I urge the Minister to investigate making such schemes more attractive to farmers, to allow compensation for some of their land to be flooded and to ensure that we can encourage nature as well as protecting homes.

The impacts of climate change will mean that, unfortunately, there will be an increase in both the severity and frequency of flooding in Staffordshire in the future. It is therefore vital that we have robust plans in place to deal with flooding not only over the next year but for the next decade, and to look to the future.

I am afraid that, when we try to look up the true picture of what is going on with flooding in Staffordshire, it is very hard to find out. I have welcomed the Government’s reviews into flood risk management and flooding, but it has been difficult to find a clear picture of the impact of flooding today. The people of Staffordshire completely understand that the Government do not have the power to control mother nature and that they cannot expect the Government to stop the rain from falling or the rivers Penk and Sow from flooding. However, they are asking for our help. They want help to know who exactly to call when water is pouring through their front doors, help to encourage and properly compensate farmers whose land is being submerged by flood waters in order to protect their neighbours’ homes, and help to

[*Theo Clarke*]

fund flood management schemes to ensure that no one in Staffordshire lives in fear that one bad spell of rain could leave their house or their family home destroyed.

I am not demanding the impossible from the Minister. I do not expect her and DEFRA to hold back the tide, but I am asking for the measures I have outlined to be implemented to help us to tackle flooding and level up the country so that whether someone lives in Westminster or Stafford, they will know that the Government are doing their best to protect them, their family and their home from the devastating effects of flooding.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I want to start the summing-up speeches at a quarter past five. There are six more speakers, so if they could take five minutes each it will all be super.

4.45 pm

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) on securing this important debate, and sympathise with the difficulties she and her constituents have experienced.

As Members know, 2020 has not been a great year. We started with the wettest January and February on record, with catastrophic results for many people as their homes and businesses suffered horrendous flooding. My own experience is slightly more positive than that of my hon. Friend; I felt that when severe flood warnings were in place, the stakeholders involved worked well together to keep the public safe, preparing for an emergency response, if needed, and keeping me updated as matters progressed. As grateful as I am for their support during those tense nights when we waited to see if flood defences would breach, I think much more work needs to be done all year round, not just as an emergency response.

The flood defences held in Burton town centre, but in villages, such as Marchington and Rolleston on Dove, residents were not so lucky. Following storm Dennis in February, I visited the village of Marchington. I met with parish council representatives and residents who, time and again, have battled with flooding. They have bought their own sandbags and prepared their own flood defences. One constituent told me she was woken by a flood warning alert at 3am and, upon looking out of her window, was already surrounded by a foot of water. Even though she had spent £1,000 on flood barriers, water was starting to enter the back of her property.

Residents and the parish council have worked tirelessly to set up a flood warning scheme that would allow them to close the road through the village and minimise the flood damage caused to surrounding homes. Some 18 months on, that flood warning scheme is still not in place. Bureaucracy seems to stop progress at every level. I urge the Minister to look at what we can do to support the flood warning scheme and ensure that communities get the training and support they need, in order to implement these measures and protect their villages.

For those who have not suffered the horrors of having their homes flooded, it is not a case of just needing to get rid of the water afterwards. The flood water contains

all the dirt and grime that has been collecting in the drains, which brings me to the second issue I would like to raise—the ongoing maintenance needed for drains and gullies.

In another area in my constituency, Branston, there are streets that flood with the lightest of rainfall. The local authority works hard to ensure regular drain cleaning, but in July this year silt levels in Branston were at 60%. Regular jetting did not work and the council had to bring in expensive, specialist equipment to clear the drains. Can we look at what further support our local authorities need in order to provide regular drain clearing and equipment to undertake that work?

We also need to find a way to ensure all those with responsibility for drainage are playing their part in its upkeep, whether it is housing developers, highways teams, the local authority or water companies. We must ensure that we are regularly inspecting, repairing and renewing the existing infrastructure, so that our communities have the best possible chance to withstand flooding from heavy rainfall. These long-term cross-departmental projects seem to be where the projects stall, much to the frustration of constituents.

I started by saying that 2020 has not been a good year. After the flooding in January and February, I am not sure we would have expected to go straight into a pandemic. Our emergency response teams across many services have been stretched to their limits and I am grateful for their ongoing dedication and support. It is quite possible that going into 2021, we may have to respond to severe floods while operating under the restrictions that coronavirus brings. I urge the Minister to ensure plans are put in place to consider how responses may need to differ this year, with particular households with vulnerable people and those who may be shielding.

I hope the strategic coordinating group in Staffordshire, which supported residents unfailingly at the start of this year, has been given the tools it needs to continue that support throughout the coming months.

4.49 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) for securing the debate.

It has to be said that although I am an MP in Staffordshire, we are the most hilly bit of the county, as the name of my constituency might suggest. In many ways I feel a slight fraud for standing here and taking part in the debate when I know many of my colleagues have such dreadful, systemic problems with flooding. On the whole, we in the Moorlands tend to create the water and send it to them, and I therefore feel a bit guilty about that. That is not to say that we do not have some areas of significant flooding; I have residents who suffer enormously with flooding in their homes whenever there is even the slightest rainfall. On the whole, however, the Moorlands is home to the heads of the Rivers Trent and Dove. We have the heads of many brooks and streams, which all feed into the big rivers. I am afraid that they feed into the back gardens and roadways of many of my hon. Friends present, and I have great sympathy with them.

I will touch quickly on some of my local issues. There are some very specific issues in the Moorlands. I want to raise the matter of the village of Endon, which is on the

main A53 road between Leek in the centre of my constituency and Stoke-on-Trent. Endon is at the bottom of the valley and therefore suffers from flooding. I was due to visit and see the work that the locals were doing and what support they needed, but unfortunately lockdown happened and we have not yet been able to find an opportunity for a physical meeting. I want to go and see my residents there and find out what is happening and what we can do to help. The idea that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford has for an individual phone number is very good, and I know lots of people in Endon would welcome that.

There are newbuild homes in the Moorlands, and some of them have been built on floodplains. Looking at the topography of the Moorlands, it might seem extraordinary to think that there might be floodplains, but there are. Homeowners in the area really suffer, and I urge the Environment Agency and others to work really hard whenever there is contact from those homeowners, to make sure that they have the protection they need.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths) about drains and gullies. There is no doubt that the proper cleaning of drains and gullies would stop many of the problems. The fact that I am starting to see such problems in the Moorlands tells me that we really need to deal with this issue at source.

My final point is about what we can do in the Moorlands to help our work on flood defences. I have visited many of the examples of natural flood defences, including Tittesworth reservoir, just inside the Peak District national park, where Severn Trent Water has been putting in special watercourses, woodland areas and log chicanes in order to slow the water down and to try to stop the flood risk further downstream. Likewise, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust does incredible work. I was at Gun hill—anyone who does cycling will know the Gun hill climb on the Tour of Britain. Right at the top of Gun hill, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust is ensuring that rewilding happens and that protection of the natural peat bogs is maintained, so that the flood defences are the best they can be and are sustainable.

I have to mention that we had a dreadful fire on the Roaches a couple of years ago, which was the result of a barbecue that was left during very dry weather. It caused absolute devastation. It was not just devastation for the wildlife in that area; it was the impact on the peat that really will affect my hon. Friends' constituencies. I fear that the damage that was done will be very long lasting, but Staffordshire Wildlife Trust is doing great work to repair that.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford on securing the debate. I support her idea for a phoneline, and I hope that the Minister can take account of the natural flood defences that we can introduce and help to support the Wildlife Trust and others to do the best they can with that.

4.54 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) on securing this important debate, and I absolutely endorse what she says.

Last year's floods were terrible right across the north midlands, sometimes with long-lasting effects. While campaigning for the general election, I met residents in

Fonthill Walk in my constituency who suffered severe run-off flooding from Hulton Abbey park. I raised this issue with the council, which I am glad to say has undertaken work to improve drainage around the bungalows and the pool that is supposed to prevent flooding in the first place. Long-term damage, such as mould, was caused to their properties, and residents felt forgotten.

Keeping existing flood defences working needs constant attention. This includes the drains, of course. Even in the highest elevated part of my constituency at Bagnall Road, there is a problem with water not draining away. Too often, we see the drains are full and too often there is a tussle over whose responsibility it is to unblock them. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley).

In Joiners Square, a Mr Mandley has had to put steel supports under his house because a broken drain has swept foundations away. To make it worse, he has been told that, because Severn Trent did not admit responsibility soon enough, he has no recourse to compensation. Six years have elapsed—that cannot be right. I will raise this case directly with the Minister. Mr Mandley has been told his house is now uninsurable.

It could be so much better, and I am increasingly confident that it will be. The River Trent runs through my constituency and work is at last under way to let people know that it is there. For years, the Trent has generally been hidden away when it should have been one of Stoke-on-Trent's greatest assets. It has been engineered into concrete channels and culverts, but it is sometimes fenced off and overgrown. That has exacerbated flooding from time to time, not just from the Trent, but from various brooks that have likewise been channelled through concrete.

Floods can leave behind some very nasty things. I know of cases of toilet waste, used sanitary products and even a used syringe. There is also a problem with Himalayan balsam invading more and more of the city along water courses and flood plains, crowding out natural flora.

The more of the concrete engineering we can remove, the less of a problem there will be, making our beautiful waterways a visible asset to the city and increasing its appeal. At Boothen, the old Stoke City football ground—the Victoria ground—has been transformed into much needed housing. This has given us the opportunity to re-channel and rewild the Trent there. BBC Countryfile featured the project the other week as an exemplar of bringing the countryside, wildlife and biodiversity back into urban space. It is a hugely exciting flood prevention project offering so much more than flood prevention.

At Etruria, a shovel-ready link road has this month seen shovels hit the ground as part of a multi-million pound Department for Transport and Stoke-on-Trent City Council scheme to improve the Fowlea brook with 100 trees planted along it for flood prevention purposes, which will also make a nice walk. Further down from the Fowlea brook, in the historic centre of Stoke town, I am delighted that the Environment Agency is funding flood prevention works that will protect 300 properties and allow 300 more to be built. This will keep the town and the Spode works, an increasingly important tourism and arts destination, open and far less vulnerable to floods. It is wider benefits such as this that build public support for costly flood prevention measures beyond the residents affected by the floods, nearly 200 of whom currently benefit from the Flood Re insurance scheme.

[Jo Gideon]

At Bucknall park, one of the few places where people can already walk around the Trent in Stoke-on-Trent, the footpath is partly lower than the grass on either side of it, so it readily floods. It has been suggested that the lower part of the park be made into a water meadow, so raising the path or building a boardwalk would be necessary to accommodate the many residents who use the lower park walking route, not least for walking their dogs. It could be both beautiful and useful if got right, and would help to win support for the SUNRISE project's proposal for a permanent water meadow.

To conclude, the water courses of Stoke-on-Trent are gradually being reengineered so that they are a source of enjoyment for all in the future, not, as now, a source of worry for the few. The meandering Trent and the lush floodplain in the centre of my constituency are both beautiful and oddly unknown, but things are getting better. By getting it right in Stoke on Trent, we will make it better down valley for the rest of Staffordshire too.

4.59 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. It is also a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) who was with me at the opening ceremony for the Etruria valley link road the other day, which will increase the links between her constituency and mine to the mutual benefit of all our constituents.

I congratulate the other Members who spoke, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke), who secured this debate. She is a doughty champion for her constituents in Stafford. As she said, too often residents across Staffordshire are passed from pillar to post, frequently between the council and the water authority, and they are supposed to somehow referee between the authorities. It should not be for them to do that. It often falls to us to do it, and we are happy to. Our constituency staff teams do a great job, but it really should not be for them, either. There should be a solution put in place, and I know the Minister will respond to that.

Over recent months, I have been contacted by constituents whose properties have been flooded as a result of heavy rainfall, capacity issues in the sewers and blocked gullies. In most cases it appears to me that the main cause of blocked gullies is not debris, although that is sometimes the case, but tree roots. Sneyd Avenue in my constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme is a clear example of that. Owing to a culmination of capacity issues and blocked gullies, residents of Sneyd Avenue have experienced serious flooding for several years. One constituent who has lived there since 1982 says that it is getting increasingly worse.

Following hydraulic modelling undertaken by Severn Trent Water, for which I thank it, it was identified that six properties are at risk of being flooded once every two years as a result of water capacity issues. Severn Trent had previously uncovered a taproot in the drainage system that required a precision cut to be removed. Tree root ingress is a main cause of blocked drains, pipes and sewerage systems in the UK. It is common for fine tree roots to gain access to the drainage system, and once inside they develop into taproots and root masses. That is what comes through to me in my constituents' correspondence.

Staffordshire County Council is responsible for the highway drains. I know that it routinely cleans the gullies, based on the road classifications, but there is also a need for improved management and preventive measures with regard to the tree roots. For instance, CCTV drain inspections can identify drainpipes that are in close proximity to trees and hedges before a serious problem, such as root ingress, develops.

Flooding in Newcastle-under-Lyme appears to occur most frequently in the residential suburbs to the south of the town centre in areas such as Clayton, the Westlands, and Thistleberry. Many of the streets in those areas, such as Sneyd Avenue and Howard Place, are lined with trees, and therefore the tree roots are likely a contributing factor.

Earlier this year, on 12 August, communities across north Staffordshire experienced widespread flooding after scorching temperatures led to very heavy rain and thunderstorms. It led to some of the worst flooding that residents had seen. Together with the local borough and county councillor for Newcastle South, Mr Stephen Sweeney, I went to see residents of Lincoln Avenue in Clayton to see for myself the damage caused.

Lincoln Avenue rises gently uphill in both directions from the centre of the road, and the houses in the dip have long been plagued by flooding during heavy thunderstorms. Severn Trent addressed the issue approximately 15 years ago, but unfortunately the issue is now back and I can see for myself the damage caused. Again, it seems that tree roots are the issue. My constituents certainly believe that and have been advised of it by people who know about such things. I am pleased to report that Severn Trent has responded to me and undertaken to survey the local sewerage network.

I understand how disruptive floods are. I have heard about the awful cases in Burton and Stafford, although not so much in the Moorlands, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who is no longer here. I entirely appreciate the frustrations of all the constituents whose properties have been flooded, especially when it has happened on multiple occasions. In one case in my constituency, an elderly constituent could not return to her home for several months, and still has concerns about it flooding once again.

As the winter months approach, it is vital that Severn Trent Water and Staffordshire County Council work together to alleviate the significant disruption caused by flooding. They should employ the appropriate technology, such as hydraulic monitoring and CCTV drain inspections. I look forward to working with all my colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, who secured this debate, to find a solution to the problem.

5.3 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) for securing this important debate because my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North, and Kidsgrove and Talke, is fortunate to be close to the sources of several rivers, brooks and streams. Although my constituency does not have mighty torrents running through it, it is by no means immune to flooding.

Through Norton Green runs the canal feeder to the Caldon canal and the River Trent. The river is hardly dredged. The canal feeder is man-made and beset with

historical issues and when it rains, both flood: a double hit to the village of Norton Green. The river is the responsibility of the Environment Agency, and the canal feeder is the responsibility of Severn Trent Water: two agencies that, if they co-ordinated their work, could help alleviate the problem that my constituents face in Norton Green when it rains.

The houses in between the river and canal feeder are regularly cut off on an island of their very own when the Trent and the feeder flood the only roads to the village. I must give credit to the residents of Norton Green who pull together, and to the three local councillors, Dave Evans, James Smith and Carl Edwards, as they lend a hand to bail water out of the village.

Further downriver, properties and families who live on the strategic A53 Leek Road, which connects the major settlements of north Staffordshire, regularly face flooding. The road is not on a floodplain—it is relatively high up—but water drainage from the road runs into the River Trent; when the river levels increase, it backs up the drainage and floods the road, cutting the main arterial route connecting Newcastle, Stoke and Leek.

Further to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths), I highlight two examples of my constituents tackling flooding caused by poor drainage. First, Mr David Barber contacted my team pleading for something to be done about flooding on The Avenue in Kids Grove, which runs down his neighbour's property and obstructs pedestrians, including schoolchildren, with ankle-deep water. An investigative team from the council was sent out and discovered a severe blockage in the drains on both sides of the road. Repairs are finally being made, but the stress it caused residents is extremely unwelcome.

Similarly, Mr Amrik Rai has been battling poor drainage for the past 12 years, with his home being severely flooded twice over that period. The family is consumed by worry every time it starts to rain. Councillors in my patch have been fighting for Severn Trent Water to undertake work to link storm pipes, to prevent the overloading of single pipes during heavy rainfall years. Like Amrik, residents of Braithwell Drive have been fighting localised flooding due to poor drain management for more than a decade.

Staffordshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council continue to face funding pressures, meaning that routine maintenance of gullies and highway drainage is less regular than it used to be. Across Stoke-on-Trent, though, £4.2 million from various partners is being spent on flood alleviation schemes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) referred to, including on redirecting the River Trent downstream in the neighbouring constituency of Stoke-on-Trent Central, which will benefit floodplains upstream in my constituency.

Locally, we suffer from a Victorian drainage network, underfunded and over capacity. Clarity is needed as to which authority, agency or company is responsible for what drainage. Disputes between Severn Trent Water and local councils in Staffordshire over responsibility for drains and ditches take years to resolve, but the actual work needed to alleviate the flooding takes only days to carry out. There is something wrong when it takes longer to establish who is responsible for the works than the time it takes to carry out needed improvements. We need to adjust the priority given

to everyday maintenance and drainage of rivers and amend the gap in everyday funding for such essential services.

5.7 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am not a Staffordshire MP—I am from Shropshire—but I join the debate because it is obviously a great pleasure to support our friends and neighbours across the border. Shropshire and Staffordshire are very much interdependent. Many people have businesses or homes on both sides of the border; as I say, we are mutually interdependent.

A caucus of 44 Members is campaigning on flooding from the River Severn, the longest river in the United Kingdom. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) has joined that caucus. She realises that the River Severn's continuous flooding has a deleterious impact on her county as well as mine. We have received £40 million of investment for a more holistic management of the river going forward—the operative word being “holistic”. For far too long, we have depended on small, ad hoc, piecemeal flood barriers that protect a small number of properties and push the problem further downstream. For the first time ever, Members of Parliament are working across a whole region and a whole river, with DEFRA, to come up with solutions to holistically manage these rivers, because the economic consequences for all of us and our constituents, in terms of lost business, the inability of companies to get insurance and the devastation caused to residents, is something that many constituents will no longer tolerate.

I am meeting the head of the River Severn Partnership, Mark Barrow, on Saturday to evaluate where we are and how we have spent the £40 million to date. I will continue to lobby the Minister and keep her informed about how this money is being spent and what additional resources we will require for the River Severn partnership. We have also invited the Minister to visit the River Severn; I very much hope that she and her officials will find time to do so later in the year. Many constituents are already worried about what will happen this winter, and how their homes will be affected by flooding. The investments, although they are extremely welcome, will take time to implement and to bed down.

I want to end by praising the Minister. She has been absolutely on the ball and attentive. She has engaged extremely well with the River Severn partnership, the council and officials. I do not envy her the position that she has, given its responsibility for something that has, historically, brought so much misery and devastation to so many large parts of the United Kingdom. I have every confidence that she and her officials are doing everything possible to ensure that the massive, multi-billion pound investment announced by the Government will be spent in the most erudite and cost-effective way. I look forward to working with the Minister, and also our friends and neighbours in Staffordshire, on a cross-party and regional basis, to make sure that such an important part of the west midlands will be protected more effectively.

5.11 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) for securing this important debate. She spoke passionately on behalf of her constituents, calling

[Stephanie Peacock]

for the creation of a flood control centre in Stafford to co-ordinate the responses to flooding. It is an excellent idea. A joined-up approach is required to manage flood risk and co-ordinate multi-agency flood responses.

Labour is calling on the Government to protect at-risk homes and businesses now. The climate crisis, surprisingly, has not been mentioned in the debate but it means that flood events will only become more frequent and severe. It is not enough to stand in wellies in front of TV cameras and commit to action. Flood-hit communities want deeds, not words.

I begin by paying tribute to our emergency services and first responders, who work so hard to protect us and are often first on the scene to deal with crises. As hon. Members have mentioned, residents too often do not know who to call, and that becomes incredibly frustrating. That came up throughout the debate. The hon. Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths) spoke about support for a flood warning scheme, and the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who is no longer in her place, outlined how water and flooding affect many areas of the country and do not respect or follow boundaries.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) raised important issues about flood insurance and the difficulties that residents can face in insuring their homes. The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) spoke about the increased frequency of flood events, and the fact that those are becoming more of a problem as they happen more often. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) rightly paid tribute to residents pulling together to respond to devastating local floods, and the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) spoke about how all our areas are interdependent. That is absolutely right.

As hon. Members have stated, constituents' businesses across the country—not least in Staffordshire—have been badly affected by flooding. Many people's lives and businesses have been turned upside down, and we need adequately funded prevention schemes. For every £1 spent on flood defence and prevention, £5 in property damage is avoided. Such damage has been felt repeatedly in Staffordshire over the years. The flooding there late last year and more recently in August resulted in hundreds of thousands of pounds of damage to listed buildings, as well as to residents' homes and businesses, as we have heard today. I know that Staffordshire Members have been making the case for further flood mitigation schemes and a more co-ordinated approach to respond to those crises. I agree with their concerns and must ask why the Government are not engaging with all areas and voices to build a long-term plan that addresses their concerns.

Local authorities work on the frontline during flood events to protect homes and businesses. Yet under the present Government the capacity of councils across the country has been decimated by a lack of funding and support. My local council has faced the biggest cuts in the country, and there has been a 40% reduction in its day-to-day spending in the past 10 years.

Despite that, it worked hard to respond quickly to November's floods, which left 89 homes in Barnsley with flood damage. However, our councils need adequate resources to deliver their services and to ensure that they have the capacity that they need to react to flood

events to the best of their ability and to support residents. I welcome the action taken by Staffordshire County Council to improve its road network and to fix problem drains and gullies to prevent future flooding. That matter was discussed quite widely in the debate.

It must be noted, however, that the Conservative councillor responsible for highways and transport spoke last month about the pressures on public finances and the impact on the council's ability to maintain Staffordshire's road network. In August, the *Express & Star* newspaper reported that the Environment Agency did not have the funds required to protect Sandon Road, where homes and businesses have been flooded several times over the last few years. Flood defence works would cost £2 million; the Environment Agency has £400,000 available.

I shall bring my remarks to a conclusion by asking the Minister to address some points raised during the debate. How will the Government ensure that all regional voices, including those in Staffordshire, are listened to? It was only last week that the Government gave a date for the long-awaited South Yorkshire flooding summit, which was promised back in November, so how will Ministers ensure that Members of this House do not face the same difficulty that I had in attempting to secure that summit? As I have this opportunity, I would like to press the Minister to set a date for all future Yorkshire-wide and Staffordshire flood summits, which I think the Government should hold. In the case of Yorkshire, they did commit to it in writing, so I think we should have that in Yorkshire and we should get a date, but I also think that it would be a very worthwhile thing for the Staffordshire region. We need more local control over decision making relating to flood risk protection or funding, because for too long Whitehall has sidelined regional and local stakeholders.

What are the Government doing to improve access to affordable insurance for homes at risk of flooding, and will they commit to acting on the recommendations of the Blanc review on affordable cover? After reading posts for the Stafford Borough Flooding Support and Action Group and the Help for the Victims of the Sandon Road Flooding group on Facebook, I am concerned that many reported difficulty in insuring their homes and properties.

Finally, what are the Government doing to ensure that responses to flooding are co-ordinated across agencies, regulators and local government bodies, so that flooding solutions do not merely shift the problem from one place to another? This has been discussed in the debate today. We need catchment-wide planning that makes use of natural flood management measures now, to deal with the challenges brought on by the climate change crisis. Whether in Barnsley or Staffordshire, our communities feel forgotten and they have been left to face increasing flood risk without the means to protect themselves. The homes and livelihoods of people from our communities will continue to be at risk unless a fully funded long-term plan is agreed, so I will conclude, as many other speakers in the debate have done, by urging action now.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to serve under your auspices, Mr Hosie. This is my first time back in Westminster Hall, so I think this is quite an event for us all.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) on securing this really important debate. She has been an assiduous proponent on behalf of her constituents, which is the right thing to do as the MP representing her area. She has bent my ear many times, it must be said, on some of the issues that she has talked about today.

I thank all hon. Friends and the shadow Minister for taking part in the debate, and showing a really strong and concerted effort on behalf of Staffordshire. I think that it demonstrates that, far from the regions not being listened to, we do listen to the regions in government. I think that our Severn colleagues would reiterate that, given the work that we have jointly all done for the Severn valley before.

In February this year, Storm Dennis brought more than 40 mm of rain in 24 hours. That deluge of rainfall over a short period caused 181 properties to flood in Staffordshire. Flooding affected properties, shops, homes, transport networks, towns, including Burton, Stafford and Rugeley, and the villages of Barton, Marchington, Handsacre, Hinksford, Rolleston and Yoxall.

I know that my hon. Friend has held a number of meetings with local residents about the impacts of the flooding. I know also that this summer she hosted a flooding roundtable with key constituents to raise these issues. I know that Staffordshire has suffered, but I do want to say that of course the Government are absolutely committed, as is the EA, to combating flooding. Flood and coastal risk management is a very high priority for Government.

We know of course that flooding has a severe impact on communities, individuals and shops. I know that from my own experience in Somerset, where we have had terrible flooding over the years. However, I am pleased to assure my hon. Friend that the existing flood defences across Staffordshire already protect 25,000 properties, and did so during the winter floods; that figure includes 4,555 in Burton-on-Trent alone.

Over the current six-year investment period, which runs to 2021, we will spend £40 million to better protect 5,500 properties from flooding, and this sum includes £37 million of direct central Government funding. We expect over the next investment period, which runs from 2021 to 2027, to invest a further £26 million, of which £24 million will be funds from central Government, and that investment will better protect over 3,000 more properties in Staffordshire from flooding. These last figures that I have just given all relate to Staffordshire, so the Government are certainly committed to providing funding in Staffordshire.

In addition to this investment in new defences, I am pleased to assure my hon. Friend that Staffordshire has also benefited from a proportion of the £120 million of recovery funding awarded by HM Treasury to repair assets damaged by the 2019 winter floods. Approximately £160,000 has been allocated to projects in Staffordshire, including on floodbank repair in Marchington, which I believe is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths), on repairing flood warning telemetry at Coven, and on removing deposited silt and stone from a channel in Yoxall.

I will expand a little on some of the successful schemes. Phase 2 of the Burton-on-Trent scheme, which is the largest investment project in Staffordshire, is under

construction. It will reduce flood risk for 4,555 homes and 1,000 businesses, and it will upgrade 3.7 km of existing defences. The scheme is expected to be completed in February 2021. During the February 2020 floods, the scheme continued to protect homes and worked perfectly, even during construction. I think that we can be proud of all the work that has been going on there.

In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford mentioned the funding of, and her support for, natural flood defences. The Government are very committed to such schemes. A project that both the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and the Environment Agency are involved with was cited by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who has now departed from Westminster Hall, among others. Through the new environmental land management scheme that is coming in now that we are leaving the EU, we anticipate that natural flood management will be one of the public goods that can be paid for and delivered by our farmers to help to tackle flooding. It will deliver lots of other public benefits, but it will help to tackle flooding, so I am pleased that hon. Members have raised the issue of natural flood defences.

Of course, there are still challenges and lots of those challenges have been mentioned by hon. Friends today. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford mentioned Sandyford brook and the issues there, which in October 2019, I think, affected 50 homes. I understand that the brook is a confined channel running through a densely populated area. A preliminary economic analysis has suggested a cost in the region of £2 million for that scheme, and it would provide economic benefits to the area of around £4.5 million. However, delivery will be dependent on sufficient partnership funding contributions being available, as the scheme would only be eligible for £400,000 of flood defence grant in aid under the updated partnership funding rules. I understand that the Environment Agency has been in negotiations with a potential contributor, but further negotiations are required.

I also wanted to say, because lots of colleagues have mentioned it, that the EA aims to finalise a delivery plan this autumn—autumn, going into winter—and to set up strategic delivery groups, as an opportunity to encourage local flood resilience forum partners to help deliver key activities, such as on highways issues, planning permissions and community support.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend supports the significant amount of money that the Government are pouring into flooding and flood defences. Our new £5.2 billion capital programme will continue to be allocated in accordance with DEFRA's partnership funding policy. It is my duty as Floods Minister—I take the responsibility very seriously—to take a national perspective on flood risk management and to ensure that the available funding is fairly and consistently distributed. Although I appreciate that there can be challenges in securing the partnership funding, it would be contrary to the aims of the partnership funding policy for DEFRA to fill funding gaps for individual projects, and we have made no provision to do so.

I want to touch on my hon. Friend's one-stop shop suggestion. I listened to her with great interest, and I definitely encourage her to continue to engage with at local level with the EA and any relevant risk management authorities. I know that we have seen successful collaborative working of this kind elsewhere in the country, particularly

[Rebecca Pow]

in the Calder valley, where the eyeoncalderdale.com website provides a one-stop shop for flood information. Clearly, solutions of this kind need to work for the community and one cannot use the same approach everywhere. I urge my hon. Friend to go and meet colleagues there in order to learn lessons from them.

Similarly, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for his input and his kind words. There are lessons to be learned from what is being done in the Severn valley, and that partnership working will be invaluable as we go forward.

I want to touch on a couple of other issues that have been raised. The issue of blocked drains was mentioned by a number of colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Burton and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). In August we published an independent review into surface water and drainage responsibilities, which looked at some of the complexities of determining responsibility for surface water and drainage assets. The Government have already accepted a number of recommendations from that review, including new measures to strengthen partnership working.

We are also implementing the 22 actions set out in the surface water management plan in order to improve understanding and to strengthen actions to reduce surface water where it impacts on drains. That links to the issue of who takes responsibility for what water, where and when. There seems to be a lot of angst about that, but the local sewerage network is the responsibility of the local water company. It is a risk management authority, and the Floods and Water Management Act 2010 sets out a duty to co-operate with other risk management authorities to manage flood risk, so that is for the water companies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) touched on tree roots. He is doing exactly the right thing by getting in contact with the water

company, because it is largely a local issue. I am nearing the end of my speech, but, to link to the one-stop shop suggestion, the EA runs a comprehensive flood warning system that works 24 hours a day non-stop, and 1.4 million properties are signed up to that free service. We also have a really comprehensive flood forecasting centre that is improving its services all the time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford for securing the debate. She raised many important and interesting issues, but I hope it is clear that the Government are absolutely committed to tackling flooding and the terrible issues that people and communities face. We have upped all the funding towards that. However, if my hon. Friends have any other issues that they would like to discuss with me, they know that my door is always open.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Theo Clarke for the briefest of summings-up.

5.29 pm

Theo Clarke: I thank the Minister for taking the time to respond to this important debate and all my Staffordshire colleagues for their support, as well as our neighbour from Shrewsbury. I hope the debate has demonstrated how important a problem and how Staffordshire-wide flooding is. I urge the Minister to reflect on what she has heard and implore her to make a lead agency to have statutory responsibility for flooding, to create a Stafford flood control centre that my constituents can contact on an emergency phone number 24/7 for them to receive help; and to ensure that we have sufficient Government funding. I urge the Government to make those changes as soon as possible to ensure that the people of Staffordshire no longer live in fear of flooding.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered flooding in Staffordshire.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 7 October 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Powers Over the Office for Nuclear Regulation: Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): Later today, the annual report to Parliament setting out the use of the Secretary of State's powers exercised to the Office for Nuclear Regulation during the year will be published.

This is in accordance with section 108(1) of the Energy Act 2013.

[HCWS494]

TREASURY

Freeports Consultation Response

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): On 7 October, the Government responded to the recently closed public consultation on freeports.

A freeport is a place to carry out business inside a country's land border but where different customs rules apply. A firm can import goods into a freeport without paying tariffs, process them into a final good and then either pay a tariff on goods sold into the domestic market, or export the final goods without paying UK tariffs. They also allow goods to be temporarily stored without paying duties. Countries around the world have successfully used freeports to drive investment and prosperity.

The creation of freeports across the UK will be a cornerstone of the Government's plan to level up opportunity across the country. Freeports will be national hubs for trade, innovation and commerce, regenerating communities across the UK. They can attract new businesses, spreading jobs, investment and opportunity to towns and cities up and down the country.

Our published response confirms our intent to deliver freeports and sets out how our proposals will be achieved. At the centre of our new freeports policy is an ambitious new customs model which will improve upon both the UK's existing customs facilitations and the freeports the UK previously had. Our model also introduces a package of tax incentives for businesses to invest in freeports to level up some of our most deprived communities. We are introducing new measures to speed up planning processes to accelerate development in and around freeports and new initiatives to encourage innovators to generate new ideas to create additional economic growth and jobs.

Freeports will be selected through a fair, transparent and competitive process, and will be expected to collaborate closely with key partners across the public and private sectors.

We want all the nations of the UK to share in the benefits of freeports. As such, we are working constructively and collaboratively with the devolved administrations to seek to establish at least one freeport in each nation of the UK.

The "Freeports Response to the Consultation" CP302 has been laid in Parliament. Copies are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office, and also at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/freeports-consultation>.

[HCWS493]

Public Service Pensions: Indexation Consultation

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): The Government are today publishing a consultation on "Public Service Pensions, Guaranteed Minimum Pension (GMP) indexation". The consultation sets out how the Government propose to ensure they continue to meet their past commitments to public service employees regarding the full indexation of public service pensions, including for any GMP element related to membership of a public service pension scheme.

On 6 April 2016, the Government introduced the new state pension (nSP). The reformed system simplified pension provision but removed the mechanism that enabled those public servants in "contracted-out" employment to have their guaranteed minimum pension (GMP) fully price protected. An "interim solution", full indexation, was introduced in 2016, which was later consulted on and extended until 5 April 2021. This ensured that public service pensioners had the GMPs they had earned in public service fully indexed by their public service pension scheme.

The consultation will last for 12 weeks and close on 30 December 2020. The consultation document can be found on: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/public-service-pensions-guaranteed-minimum-pension-indexation-consultation>.

[HCWS495]

TRANSPORT

High Speed 2: Phase 2b Western Leg

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I have today published new information on the development of the western leg of HS2 phase 2b, running between Crewe and Manchester with a link to the west coast main line. This includes:

A Government consultation on four proposed changes to the design;

A response to western leg changes included in the 2019 design refinement consultation;

A route-wide update, which sets out how the route has developed, including changes in response to feedback from affected communities; and

Updated safeguarding directions for the western leg.

The Government have accepted the findings in the review by Douglas Oakervee that phase 2b should be delivered in smaller sections with legislation brought forward as it is ready. Therefore, HS2 Ltd has taken forward work to develop legislation for the western leg of HS2 phase 2b.

The Government have also accepted the Oakervee recommendation that plans for HS2 and other major schemes need to be brought together in an integrated rail plan (IRP) for the north and midlands.

The IRP will set out the form, scope and phasing of the phase 2b route, across the western and eastern legs, and the Government will therefore consider responses to this consultation alongside the IRP outcomes. If the IRP favours any major changes, further redesign will need to take place. This consultation seeks to ensure that unnecessary delay is avoided in the event that the IRP does not support change.

Work on HS2 phase 1 from London to Birmingham is already well under way at over 250 active sites, stimulating the economy and providing jobs through the approximately £10 billion worth of contracts already announced, two thirds of which will go to small and medium sized enterprises.

Legislation for phase 2a, from Birmingham to Crewe, is currently being considered by Parliament.

The proposals I am putting forward today are the next step in developing the design and legislation for the western leg of phase 2b, following the 2019 design refinement consultation. Phase 2b of HS2 is key to delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) and the consultation includes proposals to integrate the designs at a series of “touchpoints”, which are pieces of infrastructure to enable future connections between NPR and HS2. These proposals have been developed in partnership with Transport for the North and will reduce the amount of infrastructure required to deliver NPR in the future.

This consultation deals with four technical refinements to the western leg of phase 2b: a new Crewe connection, which would also support the vision for a Crewe hub; changes to the already proposed rolling stock depot at Crewe; expansions to the stations at Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport; and a newly proposed facility for stabling rolling stock at Annandale in Scotland.

Changes at Manchester Piccadilly to facilitate Metrolink and Manchester Airport High Speed station are subject to the agreement of local funding contributions. We continue to collaborate positively with Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Manchester Airports Group and other Greater Manchester delivery partners on this matter. Greater Manchester partners have confirmed that they are prepared to prioritise the funding of the local proposals for Metrolink underground at Piccadilly in future funding rounds. This will form part of the shared programme between DfT and Greater Manchester in implementing the Manchester HS2 growth strategy. In the 2020 Budget, the Government made £4.2 billion of funding available to eight city regions for intra-city transport initiatives over the period 2022-23 to 2026-27.

In addition to today’s consultation, I am publishing my response to the proposed western leg changes included in the June 2019 phase 2b design refinement consultation. The Government has decided to proceed with these changes subject to the outcome of the IRP.

I have also published a route-wide update which sets out wider developments to the route. The safeguarding directions for the phase 2b western leg route have also been updated to reflect the project’s updated land requirements.

Engagement with affected communities is at the heart of our plans for HS2 and it is our commitment to ensure we listen to those affected by these proposals. Restrictions put in place in response to the covid-19 pandemic mean that we will not be able to hold local information events in the same way that we usually would as part of our formal consultation process. HS2 Ltd will deliver information events via digital platforms instead. These digital events will allow those affected the same opportunities to understand what refinements are being proposed and to ask any questions that they may have to our representatives. Where owners of land or property are newly affected by the proposals, they will be contacted directly by HS2 Ltd to arrange online or telephone appointments.

Copies of the consultation Command Paper and safeguarding directions will be placed in the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries.

[HCWS492]

TRANSPORT

Covid-19: International Travel

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I committed to keep the House updated on proposals for testing international arrivals to safely reduce the 14-day self-isolation period in my statement on 7 September; this statement provides an update on next steps.

The introduction of travel corridors in July was a major step forward in safely re-starting international travel whilst retaining the Government’s ability to act quickly if public health was at risk, with international passenger numbers handled at UK airports up by around 400% between June and July to 3.1 million passengers.

However, many of our major markets remain or have become high risk, and therefore are not eligible for our travel corridor list. A potential solution that has been widely debated is the use of testing to reduce or replace the need for self-isolation.

As I made clear in my statement to the House on 7 September, based on scientific evidence, the Government do not support the use of a single test on arrival as an alternative to self-isolation. However, a combination of self-isolation and testing is promising.

Since then, my Department and the Department of Health and Social Care have been working extensively with clinicians, health experts and the private testing sector on the practicalities of such a regime. My ministerial colleagues and I have agreed that a regime, based on a single test, provided by the private sector and at the cost of the passenger after a period of self-isolation, could achieve our objectives.

The next step is to further develop how this approach could be implemented. Therefore, I am pleased to announce that, at the request of the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and I are standing up the global travel taskforce.

The overall aim of the taskforce will be to consider what steps the Government can take, both domestically and on the international stage, to enable the safe and sustainable recovery of international travel. To do this, the taskforce will work at pace to consider:

How a testing regime for international arrivals could be implemented to boost safe travel to and from the UK;

What steps we can take to facilitate business and tourist travel on a bilateral and global basis, through innovative testing models and other non-testing means; and

More broadly, what steps we can take to increase consumer confidence and reduce the barriers to a safe and sustainable recovery of international travel.

The taskforce will further consider what day that testing should be taken on, informed by public health analysis of when this would be effective, but taking into account economic and other factors, as well as finalising a delivery plan. However, testing is not the only solution and so the taskforce will also consider steps to support the recovery of international travel more broadly, including non-testing based interventions.

Facilitating safe international travel is not a task that can be undertaken by the Government alone, so this taskforce will operate in collaboration with the transport industry, the tourism and local business sectors and the

private testing sector. It will also engage with partners from governments across the globe, including on the development of bilateral testing pilots.

Each country has understandably implemented its own measures, but these are confusing and complex for the consumer and for operators, so we will show global leadership by developing a framework for international travel to provide that global consistency, while protecting public health.

The taskforce will be chaired by myself and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. It will include collaboration between officials from Departments across Government, and will liaise with the travel sector in order to work on the operationalisation of testing approaches designed to safely reduce self-isolation.

The taskforce will operate at pace for a time limited period, and will formally report back to the Prime Minister no later than early November. I will update the House on its conclusions and outputs. I have published terms of reference alongside this statement on gov.uk and will place a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS496]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 7 October 2020

EDUCATION

Draft Apprenticeships Regulations 2020

The following is an extract from proceedings on the Draft Apprenticeships (Alternative English Completion Conditions and Miscellaneous Provisions) (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 on 30 September 2020.

Gillian Keegan: I believe I am right in saying that the service is run by the National Careers Service, and there has been more investment in the National Careers Service overall to ensure that it has the capacity to deal with this.

[Official Report, Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee, 30 September 2020, c. 9.]

Letter of correction from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Member Chichester (Gillian Keegan):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the Committee.

The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: I believe I am right in saying that the service is run by the **Education and Skills Funding Agency**, and there has been more investment in the **ESFA** overall to ensure that it has the capacity to deal with this.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 7 October 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	894	SCOTLAND—continued	
Engagements	894	Covid-19: Response Throughout the UK	892
SCOTLAND	885	Covid-19 Restrictions: Tourism and Hospitality	894
Autumn Budget: Devolved Administrations	889	Covid-19: Support for Businesses	892
Coronavirus: Employment	885	Strengthening the Union	891

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 7 October 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	27WS	TRANSPORT	28WS
Powers Over the Office for Nuclear Regulation: Annual Report	27WS	High Speed 2: Phase 2b Western Leg	28WS
TRANSPORT	30WS	TREASURY	27WS
Covid-19: International Travel	30WS	Freeports Consultation Response	27WS
		Public Service Pensions: Indexation Consultation..	28WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 7 October 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	7MC
Draft Apprenticeships Regulations 2020	7MC

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**not later than
Wednesday 14 October 2020**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 7 October 2020

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 885] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Scotland
Prime Minister

Conveyancing Standards [Col. 906]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Marco Longhi)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Pension Schemes Bill [Lords] [Col. 909]

Motion for Second Reading—(Dr Coffey)—agreed to

Public Health [Col. 965]

Motion—(Helen Whately)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 992]

Policing in South-West London [Col. 993]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

China: Labour Programme in Tibet [Col. 117WH]

Rule of Law [Col. 141WH]

Online Harms [Col. 149WH]

Covid-19: Financial Implications for Schools [Col. 175WH]

Flooding: Staffordshire [Col. 183WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 27WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 7MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
