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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 October 2020

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Free Trade Agreement: Japan

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on farmers and food producers of the free trade agreement with Japan. [907219]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to maintain the UK's (a) food and (b) animal welfare standards in future free trade agreements. [907225]

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on farmers and food producers of the free trade agreement with Japan. [907229]

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps she is taking to maintain the UK's (a) food and (b) animal welfare standards in future free trade agreements. [907253]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): The deal with Japan will go further and faster than we had under the EU, including by increasing the number of geographical indications from seven in the EU-Japan deal to up to 70 in our new agreement, from Cornish clotted cream to Scotch beef. Furthermore, Japan has guaranteed market access for UK malt exports under an existing quota, which is more generous and easier to access than the EU quota.

Dehenna Davison: My right hon. Friend recently visited Grange Hill farm just outside Bishop Auckland, and John, Jane and Becky—the farmers there—are rightly very proud of the high-quality beef products that they produce. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how this and others deals she is seeking, such as the deal with the USA, will benefit British beef farmers right across our United Kingdom?

Elizabeth Truss: I hugely enjoyed my visit to Grange Hill farm with my hon. Friend. Our deal means that British beef going into Japan will have lower tariffs. We also announced last week that the first beef for 24 years

was shipped from Britain to the United States. In the United States trade deal, we will seek to remove the 26% tariff on British beef so that we can get even more of that great product into that market.

Cat Smith: I have been contacted by many constituents who are concerned about the animal welfare standards in a US-UK trade deal. They ask me why the state of California can ban imports of products that do not meet its animal welfare standards but the UK Government are not willing to do the same.

Elizabeth Truss: We are absolutely clear that we are going to stand up for our high standards in any deal we strike, including with the United States, and make sure that the high standards our farmers operate to will not be undermined.

Rob Roberts: May I start by praising my right hon. Friend and her Department for the sterling work that she is doing in making us a global trading nation once again? As well as the wonderful beef exports of the north-east, it will come as no surprise to her that Welsh lamb is a major part of the Delyn economy. It would be remiss of me not to stand up for the agricultural sector in my constituency, so what message can she give me to take back to my local farmers to tell them that they will not only do well in the new arrangements, but thrive, prosper and grow?

Elizabeth Truss: Welsh lamb is some of the best in the world, and in the new Japan trade deal, Welsh lamb will be recognised as a GI for the first time. We got our first Welsh and British lamb into Japan for over 20 years last year, opening up a market worth £52 million. My next target is to get the ban on lamb removed in the United States, which would be a huge market. The US is the second largest lamb importer in the world.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: I was interested to read that the members of the Trade and Agriculture Commission were calling for parliamentary scrutiny on all future trade deals. The head of the Government's Food Commission has said the same, so can the Secretary of State show that she is listening to her advisers by guaranteeing this House of Commons a debate and a vote in Government time on any trade deal with the USA?

Elizabeth Truss: I can confirm that we will have a world-leading scrutiny process, comparable with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. That will mean the International Trade Committee scrutinising a signed version of the deal and producing a report to Parliament, a debate taking place and then, through the CRAg—the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010—process, Parliament can block any trade deal if it is not happy with it.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We have spent countless hours in this House and in the other place debating the impact of imports on food standards—a debate that has captured the attention of millions of people across the country—but I would like to boil it down to asking the Secretary of State one simple question today. If it is her argument that we do not need Labour's amendments because bans on the

relevant imports are already enshrined in law, can she please tell us which law prevents the importing of pork that has been produced on American farms that continue to use sow stalls?

Elizabeth Truss: The right hon. Lady is talking about an animal welfare issue and, as I made very clear earlier, we will not allow the high animal welfare standards of our pig producers to be undermined.

Emily Thornberry: I listened very carefully to that response, but I do not really think that it was an answer further than rhetoric. The point is that there is no import ban against pork produced on farms using sow stalls because, as the Secretary of State says, it is an issue of animal welfare, not of food safety. That means that, if the Government drop tariffs on US pork, British pork farmers will be undercut by cheap imports from American agricultural companies using practices that have been banned in our country for the past 21 years. Will she please listen to reason and write into law the protection of all UK farming standards against imports that do not meet them?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, of course in any trade deal that we strike we will take into account our high standards, to ensure that our farmers are not undermined, but if the right hon. Lady is suggesting a blanket ban on any foodstuffs that do not comply exactly with British farm regulations, she is talking about preventing developing countries from sending their foodstuffs to the United Kingdom. Is she saying—*[Interruption.]* She will understand that under most favoured nation rules we have to apply the same standards to every country that we deal with, so is she saying that she wants to ban Kenyans from exporting their products to us if they do not follow exactly the same farm standards as here in Britain? I want to ensure that our farmers are able to continue with their high standards, but I do not want to stop developing countries exporting their goods to us.

Mr Speaker: Let us calm it down a little with the Chair of the International Trade Committee, Angus Brendan MacNeil. There is no more calming influence than Brendan.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: Tapadh leibh, Mr Speaker, and a nice calm morning in the Hebrides it is too.

In 2014, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised Scotland that the choice was between independence and all options of devolution, and all indeed were possible—as well, of course, as guaranteed EU membership. Leaving that aside, the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill is expected to do the opposite of that on devolution. Given that the USA has differences across its states, can the Secretary of State guarantee that no attempt will be made to grab powers from the devolved nations to present the entire UK on an easily consumable platter for USA negotiators when it comes to a UK-USA trade deal?

Elizabeth Truss: I can absolutely say that we are not grabbing powers; we are using the powers that were previously in the hands of the European Union to create a strong internal market across the United Kingdom. That it is vital, because Scottish farmers need to be able to sell their lamb and beef into England, Wales and Northern Ireland without impediment.

Scotch Whisky: US Tariff

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What discussions she has had with her US counterpart on that country's imposition of a 25% tariff on single malt Scotch whisky. [907221]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The Government take very seriously the punitive US tariffs on UK goods, including on single malt Scotch whisky. We are fighting for the removal of all such tariffs and are pushing for a negotiated settlement to the underlying World Trade Organisation civil aviation cases. The Secretary of State raised these issues most recently with US trade representative Ambassador Lighthizer in September.

Brendan O'Hara [V]: Exactly a year ago, the United States imposed 25% tariffs on Scotch malt whisky, devastating exports and threatening thousands of Scottish jobs. Despite the Minister's Department making the removal of those damaging tariffs a priority, his Government have failed to move their special friend in the White House an inch on these issues. Could he explain exactly why the Scotch whisky industry, apart from being £360 million poorer, is in exactly the same place today as it was a year ago?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Member for that question. We oppose these tariffs vigorously. We are stepping up talks with the US and we were pleased that in August the US did not extend the tariffs to blended whisky, and actually removed them from shortbread. The irony is that the Scottish National party are urging us to enter into direct trade talks with the US—something that we are already doing, but something that we would not be able to do if we followed its policy of rejoining the European Union. I just remark on the SNP's chutzpah in urging us to do something to which it is fundamentally opposed: engage directly with the United States on trade policy.

Free Trade Agreement: United States

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What progress she has made in securing a free trade agreement with the US. [907237]

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What progress the Government have made on trade talks with the US. [907240]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): We are making good progress on a deal with the United States. We have just finished round 4 of the negotiations and we are discussing detailed tariffs and texts. We will carry on working right up until 30 October, just before the presidential election.

Craig Tracey: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I also congratulate her on the excellent work her Department is doing to help to secure our independent trading status once we have fully left the EU. Does she agree that it is really important that, whatever the outcome of the US presidential election, we continue to work with the parties on both sides of the aisle to ensure we get the best possible deal for the UK?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—*[Interruption.]* The Opposition are laughing at our largest single country trading partner, because they frankly do not care about the jobs generated or about the opportunities from expanding our relationship with the US. We are in discussions with senior Republicans and senior Democrats to ensure that there is full support for a US-UK trade deal right across the United States political spectrum.

Neale Hanvey: The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, has warned that there will be absolutely no chance of a trade deal should the UK Government override the Brexit withdrawal agreement. Does the Secretary of State agree that US trade talks will be dead in the water if the UK Internal Market Bill passes into law, because such a deal would never pass Congress, even with the support of the probably outgoing President Trump?

Elizabeth Truss: We have been absolutely clear with all our trading partners and, indeed, with the EU that we are committed to the Good Friday agreement. We are committed to having no hard border on the island of Ireland, and on that basis we are progressing talks with the United States.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: Hormone-injected beef should never have been part of the trade talks with the United States. Can the Trade Secretary confirm that she told her US counterparts that the UK would drop the digital services tax if the US dropped its insistence on market access for its hormone-injected beef? If she has not made such an offer, can she tell us why *The Mail on Sunday* says she has? After all, it would not invent such a story, would it?

Elizabeth Truss: I would caution the hon. Gentleman that not absolutely everything published in *The Mail on Sunday* is the gospel truth. I hope that, over time, he learns that. Let us be clear that the digital services tax is a matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer in this country, not a matter for the trade talks, and that food safety regulations are a matter for the Food Standards Agency in this country, and not part of the trade talks.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): As my right hon. Friend may be aware, Willis Asset Management, a large US aircraft manufacturing and maintenance firm, is already based at Teesside international airport. What assessment has she made of the opportunity that a free trade corridor between a free port on the River Tees and our local airport would provide for US-UK trade and regional growth?

Elizabeth Truss: I know that my hon. Friend is a staunch advocate of free ports, especially one in Teesside, and I know he will have been delighted by the announcement yesterday from the Chancellor that there will be 10 new free ports across the United Kingdom by the end of 2021, bringing more trade, more opportunities and more growth to areas right across the nation.

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

Mr Speaker: We come now to Richard Graham's question, but he is not here, so I call the Minister on this group of questions.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Pursuing accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership is a Government priority and a key part of our trade negotiations programme. We have engaged with all 11 member countries at both ministerial and official level to discuss UK accession, including the first ever meeting of senior officials between CPTPP members and a non-member on 9 September, and all members have welcome the UK's interest.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for the update. However, when the non-partisan Centre for Economic Policy Research assessed the United States accession to the original and similar trans-Pacific partnership trade deal, it concluded that wages might rise for the top 10% of earners but fall for everybody else. What assessment has his Department made of the impact of CPTPP accession on income levels in the UK, and what guarantees can he give that worsening income inequality would not be a consequence here?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that interesting question. I have not seen that study on the original TPP, but I will say two things. First, when the UK applies, we will be publishing a scoping assessment—an impact assessment—looking at how the deal will affect the UK economy. Secondly, liberal-minded, like-minded democracies such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand have embraced CPTPP with great enthusiasm, which gives me some encouragement in this space.

Stewart Hosie: It is just not the UK that is seeking to join CPTPP; Thailand, for example, is actively investigating it. Thailand's faculty of pharmaceutical sciences has assessed that because of the way CPTPP rules on patents and on market approval for generic drugs that impact on Government procurement and so on work, the costs of drugs would rise. Given the *Bangkok Post* headline that CPTPP would lead to "soaring" drugs bills, what guarantees can the Minister give that a similar rise in the cost of medicines to the NHS, for the same reasons, would not be the consequence here?

Greg Hands: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. Nothing in any trade deal prevents us from setting domestic pharmaceutical prices, and that would remain true in respect of CPTPP. Let me have a look at why the Scottish National party is questioning the potential to join CPTPP. I have the feeling that the SNP is just not in favour of any trade agreements; I have had a look at CPTPP members, and the SNP was against doing a deal with Canada, against doing a deal with Japan in Brussels and against doing a deal with Singapore. So I feel that whatever intricate, detailed questions he has on CPTPP, he will not support our joining it.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Government of Malaysia are delaying ratification of CPTPP because they have become concerned, belatedly, about the impact of the treaty's provisions on Government procurement and on investor-state dispute settlements. So before our Government go full steam ahead into negotiations to join CPTPP, will the Minister provide an assessment of those provisions for our country?

Greg Hands: The UK is a different economy from Malaysia, and the UK has never lost a an investor dispute case through the investor-state dispute settlement.

Secondly, Government procurement is a huge opportunity for this country. Just yesterday, we were delighted to see our accession to the World Trade Organisation's Government procurement agreement, as a sure way to make sure that Government procurement remains open for UK businesses and UK procurers. A bit like the SNP, I have checked the hon. Gentleman's record on CPTPP and he has opposed doing the deals. He voted against on Singapore, abstained on Japan and even went further than his Labour colleagues in voting against CETA—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—taking effect. A bit like the SNP, he is trying to find fault in an agreement that he has no intention of supporting, at any point.

Human Rights: Trade Agreements

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on the inclusion of human rights clauses in future trade agreements. [907226]

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on the inclusion of human rights clauses in future trade agreements. [907235]

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade, what recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [907261]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): This Government have a strong history of promoting our values globally. Although our approach to agreements will vary between partners, our strong economic relationships allow us to have open discussions on a range of issues, including human rights. We will not compromise our high standards in trade agreements.

Kate Osborne: The Government have listed 20 countries and one trading bloc where negotiations are ongoing about rolling over existing EU trade deals beyond 31 December. Are human rights part of those discussions? Will the Minister guarantee the inclusion of human rights clauses in any eventual deals reached with those countries?

Greg Hands: We have been absolutely clear throughout the continuity trade deal programme that there will be no diminution of UK standards, and that also applies to human rights. We will make sure that our strong, proud record on human rights—we are a world leader in ensuring and guaranteeing human rights—continues throughout all the continuity trade programme.

Janet Daby [V]: The UN group of experts has concluded that all parties in Yemen, including the Saudi coalition, are violating international law on an ongoing and consistent basis and that countries such as the UK, which are selling arms for use in the conflict, are showing a blatant disregard for the violations. Can the Minister explain why the independent panel of experts is wrong and he is right?

Greg Hands: Some of this is subject to ongoing legal proceedings, but I remind the hon. Lady that we discussed this at some length last month in the House in an urgent question, which I answered. May I also remind her that,

at all times, we follow the consolidated criteria, which provide a robust framework by which we assess export licence applications?

Afzal Khan [V]: China is the largest cotton producer in the world, with 84% of the cotton coming from the Xinjiang region. The entire global clothing industry is tainted with forced Uyghur labour, and the UK is no exception. In the light of that, does the Minister agree that we cannot put trade above human rights, and will he outline what steps his Department is taking to ensure that human rights concerns are considered during bilateral trade negotiations between the UK and China?

Greg Hands: We are absolutely clear that more trade does not have to come at the expense of human rights. Indeed, there is a very strong positive correlation between free trade and human rights through the world. On Xinjiang, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been absolutely robust in our criticism, our condemnation, of what has been happening to the Uyghurs in the province. I reiterate that today, while reminding the hon. Gentleman that we are not negotiating a trade deal with China.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House has been encouraged by the Minister's warm words on human rights, but let us test them with a specific example. I understand from the high commissioner of Cameroon that virtual negotiations on UK's roll-over agreement are taking place as we speak, the first such negotiations in more than a year. Perhaps the Minister will update us on those talks and on any side discussions on the attendee development. For the purposes of this question, can he tell us whether his intention going into those negotiations is to assert a full essential elements human rights clause into the roll-over agreement with Cameroon rather than the current obsolete cross-reference to Cotonou? If so, how does he plan to enforce that clause effectively? Is it by penalising the Biya Government for their continued human rights abuses or, preferably, to persuade them to stop those abuses in future?

Greg Hands: I thank the right hon. Lady for that question. She is referring, of course, to the Cotonou agreement, which is shortly to expire. There are two things to take away from this. The first is the importance of keeping the continuity of our trading relations with Cameroon. That is very important for the Cameroon economy overall. Secondly, we continue to raise at every level with Cameroon our concern about human rights, both across the country in general and those affecting the anglophone community in the south-west of the country. On the deal itself, there will be no diminution in the human rights clauses of the existing EU deal, which I think is what she is seeking to criticise.

Free Trade Agreement: Australia

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What progress she has made in securing a free trade agreement with Australia. [907227]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Australia is a key and proud ally of the United Kingdom, a country with shared beliefs in democracy and free trade. We are working closely at pace with our

Australian friends to secure a deal that will benefit both countries, and we will reach a gold standard agreement to lead the world in free trade.

Jacob Young: My right hon. Friend knows that Teesside has a long history of exporting to Australia, including a small project known as the Sydney harbour bridge. Can she assure me that, as we leave the EU, Redcar and Cleveland, particularly the steel and chemical industry, will be at the forefront of her mind in future trade talks?

Elizabeth Truss: Redcar and Cleveland are a key priority as we negotiate the Australia deal. There are 13,000 small and medium-sized enterprises in the United Kingdom that already export to Australia, and I see lots of opportunities for them to benefit from our close trading relationship, including in the areas of steel and chemicals, food and drink and digital and data.

Technology Sector Exports

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the value of technology sector exports to the UK. [907228]

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the value of technology sector exports to the UK. [907244]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Technology is an important and growing sector. In fact, sales of our digital tech exports totalled £23 billion last year, and Oxford Economics thinks they will be worth up to £31 billion by 2025. Our ambitious approach to digital trade in free trade agreements will boost exports, and support economic growth, job creation and prosperity. We have negotiated strong measures, not least in Japan, and will seek similar outcomes in our talks with the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

Andy Carter: Will the Minister tell us a little bit more about the UK-Japan free trade agreement, and particularly how it will help businesses in Warrington South and the north-west to do more business with Japan?

Graham Stuart: There are specific issues including not having to worry about the added cost of setting up data servers in Japan because of the elements that look at data transfer; a guarantee that the trade secrets underpinning innovations of entrepreneurs in my hon. Friend's constituency are protected and do not have to be shared across borders; and a clear commitment that entrepreneurs on both sides of the agreement will be able to operate in an open, secure and trustworthy online environment.

Marco Longhi: The deal with Japan includes some very ambitious chapters on digital and data, and a deal with the United States is set to benefit tech firms. Will my hon. Friend advise how Black Country firms can make the best of these future opportunities?

Graham Stuart: Tech firms in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the UK will benefit from the opening of markets and the minimisation of barriers to trade, which will allow them to expand internationally, not least in the Asia-Pacific region. The joint DIT and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport digital

trade network, which was launched by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in June, will significantly improve our support for businesses from my hon. Friend's constituency in that fast-growing part of the world.

Foreign Investment: Don Valley

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage foreign investment in Don Valley constituency. [907230]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): My Department recorded 331 foreign direct investment projects in the northern powerhouse in 2019-20, creating or safeguarding more than 11,000 jobs. DIT is dedicated to supporting international investment into the UK, and it can be argued—in fact it is quite hard to argue against—that we are the most successful major economy in the world in attracting foreign direct investment to our shores. Our dedicated staff across the north work closely with partners in Yorkshire and Humber to attract new and existing investors, match them to opportunities and maintain our position of having more foreign direct investment than any other nation in Europe.

Nick Fletcher: Does the Minister agree that with all the new markets his Department is opening up for the UK, the Government must do all they can to support the many young entrepreneurs of Don Valley?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. How refreshing it is to have a representative in the Don Valley who cares about business and recognises that trade needs to look at the wide scope of issues but at its heart is about the economic benefit that it brings to local people. Again and again, in session after session of these questions, the Labour party focuses on everything other than the economic benefit—the jobs and prosperity—that trade brings. That is why this Government will continue to support entrepreneurs; the Opposition come up with complex and sophisticated arguments, but again and again they oppose the very measures that will help to ensure employment and prosperity for the people of this country.

Israel

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What discussions she has had with her Israeli counterpart on UK support for expanding Israel's commercial ties with the Gulf states. [907231]

John Howell (Henley) (Con): What steps she is taking to strengthen the UK's trade relationship with Israel. [907232]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Britain's trading relationships are already strong in the middle east. In the year ending March 2020, we had bilateral trade of £43.7 billion with the Gulf Co-operation Council countries and £5.1 billion with Israel. I know that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the Prime Minister's appointment of Lord Austin—former Labour MP for Dudley North—as trade envoy to Israel. As Britain has now taken back control of her trade policy, I can confirm that we are now able to start scoping and probing for talks for a new higher-ambition trade agreement with Israel. We have already launched a

joint trade and investment review with the GCC, taking us on the next leg of the journey to free trade with its members.

Alexander Stafford: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Lord Austin, who is a balanced and fair parliamentarian, on his great role, and we look forward to his work there. Given our strong and very positive relationships both with Israel and the Gulf states, the UK has a key role in striking deals. Will he update the House on what further plans we have for striking deals with these countries, as this will not only be good for UK exports but for our international relations as well?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is right. I am delighted that the United Kingdom-Israel trade and partnership agreement was one of the first agreements to be signed by the Department, and relations will be enhanced as we further deepen our work with Israel. As I mentioned, we have recently launched the United Kingdom GCC JTIR—joint trade and investment review—which will facilitate agreements with our friends there to broaden our trade relationships and realise new opportunities in areas such as education, healthcare, and food and drink. Recently my Department’s lobbying secured an improvement in the United Arab Emirates’ labelling rules, which has allowed businesses such as sports nutrition start-up Grenade in Solihull to continue to grow in the market. I look forward to securing many more opportunities for businesses across the country.

John Howell: It is unsurprising that Israel is one of the first countries to sign a post-Brexit trade agreement with the UK because bilateral relations are, as the Minister says, very strong. What progress is being made in expanding those opportunities, and how do they go beyond the agreements that have already been signed by the UK?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is right to be very ambitious for Britain’s future as we unleash the potential of every corner of our country. I was very pleased to see that last year this growth included new export wins totalling £1 million in his constituency. He is a great champion of exports and he is right that there is more that we can do. There are exciting opportunities in sectors such as financial services, infrastructure and technology. We are working with Israeli counterparts to realise those, including through reinstating plans to host an Anglo-Israeli trade and investment conference in London.

Covid-19: Economic Recovery

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support economic recovery from the covid-19 pandemic through UK exports. [907233]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Since the start of covid-19, my Department has been committed to doing everything it can to help exporters. Helping them to bounce back with extensive economic recovery measures continues to be a major priority. After significant monthly decreases in UK trade during the early stages of the pandemic, the UK is now seeing record month-on-month increases in exports, rising by 16.5% in June and a further 5.6% in July.

Mark Fletcher: I recently visited Blachford UK in Holmewood in my constituency. This brilliant manufacturer enjoys fantastic relations with many countries around the world, particularly Canada. Does the Minister agree that it is a shining example to exporters around the country and we need more companies like it, particularly in Bolsover?

Graham Stuart: Absolutely—we need more companies like Blachford. That is why we are transforming our digital offer to exporters and negotiating a continuity agreement with Canada. It would be great to see Opposition MPs joining us in encouraging their local exporters in the manner of my hon. Friend. I understand that he planted a maple tree at Blachford on a recent visit. I suggest that we should all be planting trees and celebrating our local exporters.

Public Procurement

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with UK trade partners on ensuring that public procurement is excluded from future trade deals. [907234]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): We are delighted that in Geneva yesterday the UK was admitted to the World Trade Organisation’s government procurement agreement, which will secure access to a public procurement market worth £1.3 trillion. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming this significant step for the UK as an independent trading nation.

Sir Mark Hendrick [V]: The NHS currently strikes huge multi-billion-pound deals with drug providers around Europe that deliver huge benefits to the NHS and minimise drug costs to patients. Will the Government be allowing the US, through a trade deal, to gain access to NHS drugs procurement, and what are the implications for drug prices?

Greg Hands: We have been absolutely clear that in terms of the US deal the NHS is not on the table, and that includes drug pricing and other aspects of delivery of healthcare services. Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that the European Union is also a member of the government procurement agreement, and therefore we look forward, on a bilateral basis between the UK and the EU, to UK companies being able to take advantage of these procurement opportunities in European markets and also UK procurers being able to give their contracts to European companies.

Carbon Tariffs

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the potential merits of using carbon tariffs to reduce emissions associated with international trade. [907236]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Britain has reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation since 1990; and we were the first major economy to legislate for net zero emissions, too. This people’s Government will make sure the British people benefit from being at the forefront of clean wind energy. We will spend £160 million on port and factory upgrades to create jobs, build turbines and increase our offshore wind capacity, which is already the

biggest in the world. The hon. Gentleman can be sure that we will continue to push for ambitious international action to protect the environment, including through our trade agenda. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already made it clear that the environment is one of her top three priorities for British leadership at the World Trade Organisation.

Matt Western: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his position on the Front Bench, having worked with him on the International Trade Committee for a couple of years. Contrary to the points being made by certain Ministers, I would say that many of us on this side of the House speak up for businesses and are very proud of the contribution that our world-beating businesses and industries make. Carbon border taxes are an important measure not just for the environment, but for preventing carbon-intensive industries from relocating to countries with lower emissions standards and therefore a lower cost base. Can the Minister assure us that there is nothing in the deal that the Government have signed with Japan or nothing in the deals being struck with the US in the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is far too long in both cases—we will not get anyone else in at this rate. Minister, try and do the best you can.

Mr Jayawardena: My Department really does recognise the role that trade and tariffs can play in reducing global carbon emissions, and we are clear that trade does not have to come at the expense of the environment, but growing trade is important for so many more reasons. It delivers the things that our people care about: better jobs, higher wages, greater choice and lower prices, and our new global tariff helps to deliver that, as well as supporting the environment, by liberalising tariffs on 104 environmental goods that we are promoting.

Digital Trade

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What progress has been made in the UK/US trade negotiations on digital trade. [907242]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The UK has published its US negotiation objectives, which outline our intention to include provisions that facilitate the free flow of data while ensuring that the UK's high standards of personal data protection are maintained. They include provisions to prevent unjustified data localisation requirements.

Damian Collins [V]: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm that under a trade agreement, American businesses processing UK citizens' data in America would still have to abide by UK data laws, and also that a trade agreement will do nothing to undermine the age-appropriate design code for social media?

Greg Hands: On the second point, nothing in any trade agreement would prevent us from legislating against online harms in this country. On the first point, the UK's trade policy seeks to maintain high levels of data protection by committing parties to legislate for the protection of the personal information of users of electronic commerce. That means that users of electronic commerce will have legal certainty over the protection of their personal information.

Free Trade Agreement: New Zealand

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What progress she has made in securing a free trade agreement with New Zealand. [907243]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): A free trade agreement with New Zealand is a priority for the UK Government. Trade negotiators from the UK and New Zealand held the first round of negotiations between 13 and 24 July 2020, and a second round of negotiations is due to begin on 19 October. New Zealand are a global leader when it comes to trade policy and trade agreements, and it is always a pleasure to deal with them.

Karl McCartney [V]: I thank the Minister for his answer. He may be aware that prior to my first election in 2010, I worked closely with our colleague the Prime Minister in his former role as London's Mayor and various members of the New Zealand Government to secure appropriate recognition for Sir Keith Park, the defender of London. I am pleased therefore to see our strengthened trade links with New Zealand, but does my right hon. Friend agree with me and others that we need to go further to strengthen commercial and political ties between Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK and seize the chances that Brexit presents for the UK?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for his words of praise for the previous Mayor of London, who did a much better job than the current incumbent. I recently met the New Zealand high commissioner. The Secretary of State speaks regularly with the New Zealand Trade Minister. I did a webinar with New Zealand businesses recently. We want to have a cutting-edge deal as soon as possible. In terms of the broader relationship with Canada and Australia, I am very sympathetic to what my hon. Friend says, but I think the answer to that lies within the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, of which Canada, Australia and New Zealand are members.

Export Finance Guarantee Scheme

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the export finance guarantee scheme. [907247]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Export finance guarantees are provided through UK Export Finance, the UK's world-leading export credit agency. UKEF's mission is to ensure that no viable UK export fails for lack of insurance or finance, while operating at no net cost to the taxpayer. It recently introduced a new export development guarantee, which has seen £500 million provided to Jaguar Land Rover and Ford of Britain, with more in the pipeline.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Minister for that helpful answer. Does he agree that the take-up of the scheme among companies in Northern Ireland is not as high as it should be, and there needs to be more marketing and development of the scheme? Will he agree to a meeting between officials from his Department and me, and discuss with companies that have tried to access it, the problems they have encountered so that we can ensure the scheme benefits companies in Ulster?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the need to market more effectively. We have a brilliant suite of products. UKEF is world leading—again and again it is voted the best export credit agency in the world—and it is doing great work. We would love to open it up to more businesses, which is why UKEF is part of various bounce back plans, including my launch in Northern Ireland of our tech bounce back plan. I would be delighted to organise a meeting with him to ensure that Northern Irish businesses are aware of all the products that are on offer.

Topical Questions

[907189] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Over the last month, we have made significant progress to establish the United Kingdom as an independent, free-trading nation. We have agreed in principle a deal with Japan that goes further and faster than the EU deal in areas such as digital and data, food and drink and financial services. We have set out our pathway to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and yesterday we joined the WTO Government procurement agreement, which gives British businesses access to a £1.3 trillion global market.

Chris Green: Just as Israel has signed a peace treaty with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, it is innovating to create an instant covid-19 test that is currently being trialled at European airports. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to work with innovative Israeli companies in that area?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate Lord Austin on becoming the new trade envoy to Israel. I am delighted to see the reaction on the Labour Benches—they are obviously very pleased with that appointment. We have already signed a continuity FTA with Israel, and we want to go further in a new free trade agreement in areas such as tech, digital and data. We are two tech superpowers, and there is huge opportunity for British businesses and Israeli businesses to work more closely together.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I was listening to the Secretary of State on the “Today” programme yesterday morning, when she twice repeated the Government’s mantra of wanting a trade deal with the EU just like Canada’s. But the Government will not agree to non-regression clauses on environmental protection or workers’ rights, both of which are in the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—the trade deal between Canada and the EU. The Government also will not commit on state aid beyond WTO rules, while CETA contains stronger agreements on subsidies. Could the Secretary of State share with the House whether the Government are planning to change course and accept those provisions in their deal with the EU, or will she just admit that they do not really want a Canada-style deal at all?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that what the EU is demanding goes far beyond Canada in terms of an ex-ante regime on state aid, as well as alignment with rules and regulations. We will not accept that. We do

want a Canada-style deal. The reality is that the Labour party would not even accept a Canada-style deal with Canada.

[907190] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): It is an undisputed fact that capitalism and free markets are the surest route out of poverty. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on how the Department is using trade to boost development in Africa?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Before I returned to the Department, I was the chair of the trade out of poverty all-party parliamentary group in this place. We have achieved duty free, quota free access for 39 African countries, and only yesterday the Prime Minister appointed 11 new Africa trade envoys. However, what would be unhelpful to our trade relationship with Africa is Labour and SNP Members’ proposals to dictate domestic production standards in the developing world, which has the potential to kill off our trade with those countries. I would ask them to look those countries in the eye when the Ghanaians cannot sell us their cocoa, when the Caribbean cannot sell us bananas, when the Kenyans—

Mr Speaker: Order. [*Interruption.*] No, no, no. Minister—and I will say this to both Front Benches—topicals are meant to be short and punchy. They are not meant to be for debating points like other questions. That is why topicals were brought in. Both Front Benches have taken advantage, and none more so than the Minister then. Let us head up to Preston with Sir Mark Hendrick. Come on: calm is needed.

[907191] **Sir Mark Hendrick** (Preston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: May I ask the Secretary of State how she can agree the terms of a trade deal with the United States Government when neither they nor we currently know the extent to which the UK’s regulatory framework will be permitted to diverge from the European Union’s?

Elizabeth Truss: We are absolutely committed that we are going to have our own independent regulatory regime, and we are no longer going to be permanently aligned with the EU. We have made that very clear: that was the point of Brexit.

[907192] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): Stockton is a town of firsts—be it the first passenger railway or the invention of the friction match. How will our future trade agreements help the latest generation of innovators export across the globe?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Innovation has always given our businesses an edge. Virtual reality and 3D specialist Amazing Interactives in my hon. Friend’s constituency is an example of how innovation can continue to take business and exports forward. Today’s innovators, like Amazing Interactives, will benefit from our new FTAs.

[907196] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Macallan single malt whisky bottled at Edrington in my constituency is just one of many iconic Scottish products suffering under the 25% US trade tariffs. A

year down the line, can the Secretary of State explain why single malt whisky is not at the top of our US negotiating list?

Elizabeth Truss: I am absolutely determined to get these tariffs removed. The reality is that the European Union, which the hon. Lady and her colleagues want to rejoin, has failed to sort out this issue with Airbus for 15 years. We now have an opportunity—we have an independent tariff policy starting next year—and I am determined to get those tariffs removed.

[907193] **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): Businesses in Warrington South tell me they want to do more business around the world. Can my hon. Friend tell me and the House how they can do that with the benefit of our new free trade agreements?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): I know that many businesses in Warrington are already flying the flag. Earlier this week, I was delighted to learn that Warrington's ICC Solutions has secured a deal with a major US acquiring bank so that its technology will be used to make card payments safer in America. This company does great work as one of our export champions too. Ultimately, FTAs are going to create better jobs, higher wages, more choice and lower prices for all parts of our country. An ambitious FTA with the US could boost the economy in the north-west by £389 million per year.

[907203] **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: In response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, the UK has been at the forefront of EU sanction action against Russia, which this Government have reiterated their support for in two written statements to the House this year. Does the Secretary of State accept an obligation to operate the same principles in relation to trade with the illegal Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories?

Greg Hands: Sanctions are a matter for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and I will pass on the hon. Member's views to it. However, to answer the first part of her question, the UK has been absolutely robust in its approach to Russia on many fronts, not least the illegal annexation of Ukraine, which we have opposed at all points. We will continue to highlight that injustice at every international forum available.

[907194] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): I would like to congratulate the Secretary of State and her turbo-charged Department on the Government procurement agreement, the Japanese free trade deal and progress in many other areas. It was a pleasure to welcome her to North Cornwall recently to demonstrate our great British food offer. Then it was cheese; today it is shellfish. North Cornwall has a lot of shellfish fishermen who hope to take advantage of our new trading independence. Can the Secretary of State tell me what consideration her Department has made of potential opportunities for crab and seafood exports to Asian countries such as Korea and Taiwan?

Elizabeth Truss: There are huge opportunities for great Cornish seafood in Japan, Korea, and all of Asia. Our Japan deal will see tariffs reduced on salmon, and

the Cornish sardine properly recognised. We are holding a webinar on 26 October to help seafood exporters, including crab exporters, crack the Japanese market.

[907206] **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): I have had more representations on the overlapping issues of food safety and animal welfare in trade agreements than on almost any other issue for a long time. The Conservative party was keen to insert animal welfare provisions into EU trade agreements—indeed, the issue was in its 2015 manifesto. Why was the inclusion of animal welfare provisions in EU trade agreements good enough then, but not good enough to be written into UK legislation now?

Elizabeth Truss: In each individual trade agreement we consider key issues such as animal welfare. We are consulting closely with the farming industry, including the pig industry, which sees all the offers we put forward in individual deals. Each deal will be scrutinised by the International Trade Committee, and the implications for animal welfare will be independently verified. Parliament will have an opportunity to debate those issues. We take this matter seriously, and as the hon. Lady said, those issues come to light in each individual trade deal.

[907195] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Despite the best efforts of Scottish National party Members, Scottish businesses want to trade around the world. What efforts are the Government making to ensure that Scottish businesses are able to trade around the world in the way they wish?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right, and last week I announced a new trade hub in Edinburgh, which will help businesses in Scotland to grow internationally and recover from the impact of coronavirus. The hub will promote opportunities for Scottish companies, and FTAs will provide access to our global network, which is provided in 115-plus markets. There is the support of UK Export Finance—[*Interruption.*] It is hard to hear oneself think with the chuntering from the Opposition Front Bench. Would it not be great if we saw the same interest in trade, and promoting trade, not least in Scotland, rather than chuntering and sideline messages?

[907210] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We have had five years of horrific humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and over that period the Government have traded and made profit from £6.5 billion-worth of licensed arms. At the same time, they have given only £1 billion in aid. The UN has said that a consistent pattern of harm to civilians is being caused, so will the Secretary of State say why profiteering from arms sales is more important than supporting civilians in crisis?

Mr Jayawardena: I understand the hon. Lady's point, but Her Majesty's Government take their arms export responsibilities very seriously. We assess arms exports in accordance with strict licensing criteria. Those are consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria, and we draw on a lot of available information, including reports from non-governmental organisations and our overseas network in doing so. We will not license the export of equipment where to do so would be inconsistent with the criteria.

[907197] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State on the radio this week talking about the benefits of free ports, and there is a fantastic bid for a free port at East Midlands airport. Does the Minister agree that that could have a transformational effect in the east midlands?

Graham Stuart: First, let me praise my hon. Friend. If the allocation of free ports was based purely on the championing of their case by Members of Parliament, it would be a certainty that he would have one in his area. Yesterday, Her Majesty's Treasury published the response to the consultation on free ports, which outlined how free ports will help to level up the UK economy, bring in new investment, create high-skilled jobs, and provide new opportunities in ports and the areas around them. Although it will be an open, fair, and transparent process, I have no doubt that the advocacy of my hon. Friend will set a precedent for others and, I hope, lead to a successful outcome for him.

[907213] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On Monday, farmers from across the whole United Kingdom will be demonstrating in Parliament Square to make the point that, to them, future food standards and animal welfare provisions are essential. Will the Secretary of State join me in meeting them to hear from them at first hand the importance of this?

Elizabeth Truss: I have met farmers from right across the United Kingdom, and indeed the Trade and Agriculture Commission that we have set up to advise us on these

issues is conducting a series of regional meetings with MPs and farmers to get their views, to make sure that our policy on every free trade deal works for farmers right across the country.

[907214] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Welsh Government have not been allowed to negotiate with the EU, so if Welsh farmers, some of whom voted in favour of leaving the EU, find that they face tariffs and border controls on lamb, will the UK Government give the Welsh Government compensation to give to those Welsh farmers and other sectors that have lost out through a badly negotiated deal?

Elizabeth Truss: Both the Farmers' Union of Wales and the National Farmers Union Wales are represented on the Trade and Agriculture Commission to ensure that there is a full voice for Welsh farmers on future trade agreements. Under the recent Japan deal, Welsh lamb is now going to be recognised geographical indicator, and we are fighting to get lamb into the US market. There are lots of opportunities out there for Welsh lamb farmers, which we are pursuing vigorously.

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

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

10.34 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for next week will include:

MONDAY 12 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Agriculture Bill.

TUESDAY 13 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Fisheries Bill [*Lords*], followed by motion to approve the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (England) (Amendment) (No.5) Regulations 2020, followed by general debate on covid-19.

WEDNESDAY 14 OCTOBER—Opposition day (12th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion relating to “fire and re-hire tactics”, followed by a debate relating to covid-19 contracts and public procurement. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

THURSDAY 15 OCTOBER—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill.

FRIDAY 16 OCTOBER—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 October will include:

MONDAY 19 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill.

TUESDAY 20 OCTOBER—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) (No. 2) Bill, followed by business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 21 OCTOBER—Opposition day (13th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER—General debate on covid-19.

FRIDAY 23 OCTOBER—Private Members’ Bills.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for both the Opposition days, but I am concerned about the consequences. Last time the Opposition voted on an amendment to the Trade Bill, the House Twitter account was suspended and I am not sure why, because all it does is present the facts, the explanatory memorandum and the votes. I do not know why that has been stopped—unless, of course, he is afraid of the competition to his own Twitter account, but he just talks about teddy bears, whereas what the House Twitter account has done since 2012 is to inform the public about the procedures and policies of the House and the votes, in a non-political way. It just presents the facts. Could he please ensure that it is restored and given back to the House?

Something is missing: the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care throwing himself down on the green Benches when he has to come and answer questions. We are still entitled to ask questions, are we not? I am just checking, because I would like to ask the Leader of the House where the evidence is for why large parts of the north and the midlands are under lockdown when other areas with higher rates of infection are not.

Let me give the facts: Richmond in North Yorkshire has 73 new cases for every 100,000—no lockdown. Newark and Sherwood District Council has 84 cases—no lockdown. Wolverhampton has 56 cases, a lower figure than the others, but is in lockdown. Barrow and Furness, 112—no lockdown; Darlington, 110—no lockdown; Wakefield, 73—no lockdown, so can we have an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Health on these inconsistent, chaotic decisions? We need an explanation.

The Leader of the House will know that good public law is based on making a decision and giving reasons, and it is also based on giving the evidence. Otherwise, I am afraid the lefty lawyers and the do-gooders will have to hold the Government to account, as democracy wants us to do. We are quite happy being the do-gooders, although I am not sure what that makes the Government: the no-gooders—a Government up to no good?

I am pleased that the Leader of the House has provided time for the debate on the 10 pm curfew. Let us try again, as the Leader of the Opposition asked yesterday: can we have the evidence published before the debate? That will inform the debate.

We have a series of Departments that are spending £56 million on consultancy fees. Apparently contracts have been given without competition—nobody else has been allowed to compete; they have just been handed out. The Government’s own Minister, Lord Agnew, said:

“Aside from providing poor value for money, this infantilises the civil service by depriving our brightest people of opportunities to work on some of the most challenging, fulfilling and crunchy issues.”

There is chaos and waste of public money. It is a problem of the Government’s own making because they downsized the civil service. They have lost five senior civil servants, including the Cabinet Secretary, from Whitehall this year. Will the Leader of the House therefore ensure, ahead of the Opposition day debate, that all the contracts that the Government have outsourced are in the public domain, with the amounts and the connections with the Government? We would also like to see the measurable outcomes. It is no good giving out the contracts only for people to turn around and say, “It doesn’t work,” and then the Government have to foot the bill again.

We have silence from the Twitter account, silence on the evidence for lockdown, silence on Government contracts. It is as if the Government were sailing adrift at sea with no radio contact. There is also silence on when fans can return to football stadiums. I saw Walsall prepare their ground, taking three weeks to ensure that it is covid-safe so that all our fans can return. Staff have already taken a reduction in wages. Now the Government are holding those businesses with their hands tied behind their backs. They cannot raise income from fans returning, which helps fans’ health and wellbeing. I do not know whether any Cabinet members go to football matches, but there were some fantastic results last weekend. Fans would have wanted to see them. [*Interruption.*] I meant that I wonder whether Cabinet members had been to football matches previously. There have been dramatic results. We want to go to our local matches at Walsall. There are dramatic matches there, too. May we have a statement on when football stadiums can open safely? There has not been clarity from the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

[Valerie Vaz]

I know that the Leader of the House will say that Foreign Office questions is next Tuesday, but will he ensure that the Foreign Secretary gives the House an update on Nazanin and Anousheh and the meeting with the Iranian Foreign Minister? If he does not give it to the House, will he please give it to the families?

I ask again for a statement on the EU Council meeting on 15 October. It can be given on the Friday or the following Monday.

Mr Speaker, he did it. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) jumped from a plane. He fundraised for Florence and came out unscathed. Today is Gift Aid Awareness Day and I suggest that all hon. Members use that tick and ensure that the charities get their money. Well done to my hon. Friend and all the best to Florence.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Today is not only Gift Aid Awareness Day; it is also Octopus Day. We will be getting our tentacles into many important issues today. If any of us suffer from polydactyly, we will be able to model ourselves on octopodes—as I think the plural of octopus might be.

Let me go through the various important points that the right hon. Lady raised. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) on a fine charity-raising achievement. Thank heavens that it has gone safely.

On football, I think that you are not entirely happy with some of the recent results, Mr Speaker, and believe that we should probably have a debate on the unfairness of the result and perhaps have it reversed by statutory instrument. Unfortunately that is not part of the Government's programme, much though I wish to oblige you, Mr Speaker, whenever possible. Even I have been to football matches. I have been to see Keynsham Town and Paulton Rovers—two fine clubs in North East Somerset. I absolutely understand the issue that the right hon. Lady raises, which is a matter of concern to many Members. The Government are keen to help football clubs and have been working with them, but the question is ensuring that grounds can reopen safely, as the right hon. Lady acknowledged in her question.

Let me come on to Twitter. The right hon. Lady says that I tweet about teddy bears. I do indeed, and about Bath Oliver biscuits and the failures of socialism, which is a regular theme of mine. I try to remind people that socialism is fundamentally dangerous and not in the interests of this country. However, the House of Commons Twitter account needs to be rigorously impartial and there were concerns about simply putting out the explanatory notes, which are written by a side that is interested in the result and *parti pris*. It is not right for the House of Commons in any sense to intervene in the debate. The votes are recorded and there is an excellent app that people can download. Did you know that, Mr Speaker? There is a terrific app—CommonsVotes—on which you can look up every single Commons vote. You can wander around with your telephone and see exactly how every Member of Parliament has voted. That is provided by the House authorities and is absolutely magnificent. The right hon. Lady moans that we have not heard enough from the Secretary of State for Health. We have had 40 oral statements from the Government

during the coronavirus pandemic. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has been an assiduous attender at this House to ensure we are fully informed.

Valerie Vaz: Only when asked.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Not only when asked. He has made statements. He has volunteered to make statements.

I am very glad to say that we now have a system where issues of national significance will be debated on the Floor of the House. I note the 10 pm curfew is a nationally significant measure. Even though it was not strictly caught by the Health Secretary's commitment last week, the Government took the decision to move the debate to the Floor of the House in recognition of the level of demand for the debate. We are being responsive to what is being asked for and ensuring proper scrutiny. The fact is that scrutiny helps to improve Government policy. That has always been true and it is one of the key roles of this House.

As regards evidence for individual measures, the Government are acting on the advice of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. The Government have consistently acted on the advice of SAGE and all measures come in on the best available advice. That is the whole point of having SAGE in the first place.

The right hon. Lady says we have lost five civil servants. It sounds a bit like:

“James James

Morrison Morrison

Weatherby George Dupree

Took great

Care of his Mother,

Though he was only three.

James James said to his Mother,

‘Mother,’ he said, said he;

‘You must never go down

to the end of the town,

if you don't go down with me.”

And they went down to the end of the town and got lost. They haven't got lost at all! Some have retired, some have moved on. This is in the natural course of events. Out of the many thousands of civil servants, for five to have changed jobs really seems to me hardly excessive.

As regards outsourcing, a motion arises on an Opposition day debate on Wednesday, when that issue can be discussed in all its glorious, technicolour detail.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): In my constituency, we have light industry and retail to the east and tourism to the west, so transport links are of vital importance to many of my constituents. Although transport is devolved, many aspects of transport infrastructure are not. The A55 in north Wales is arguably one of the most important roads in the UK in terms of international trade. Upgrades to it are therefore of national, as well as local, importance. To date, I have had minimal success with the roads Minister in obtaining those upgrades, which were part of our 2019 manifesto. What options can my right hon. Friend suggest to get this vital project prioritised for my constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is a massive upgrading of roads programme, with £8.6 billion of infrastructure spending. Sir Peter Hendy has been asked by the

Government to consider a range of options to connect the nations within the United Kingdom. The review will be broad in scope and will look at how best to improve road, rail, air and sea connections across the United Kingdom such as the A55, which my hon. Friend mentions and is indeed a very important road. The Government will take their decisions based on the expert advice of Sir Peter. I encourage my hon. Friend to carry on lobbying and perhaps ask for an Adjournment debate on this important subject.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I begin by commending you, Mr Speaker, and in particular the Doorkeepers, for demonstrating by example earlier in the week the need to wear face coverings when moving around the building. I hope the leadership that was demonstrated by you might rub off on the Government when it comes to looking at the procedures in this place and how we debate things.

I want to start by asking the Leader of the House where he has got to in his consideration of the recommendations of the Procedure Committee with regard to remote voting in this place. This is all the more pertinent given that the coronavirus pandemic is not going away. Indeed, it may well get worse before it gets better. We already have in various parts of the United Kingdom, and particularly in Scotland, quite severe restrictions. They may intensify and that may mean many Members will be unable to travel to this place if they wish to follow the guidance of their local health authorities and their national Government to avoid inessential travel. It seems to me somewhat perverse to be in a situation where the travel of Members of Parliament has to be essential only because we choose to turn off the means by which we can make it inessential. In other words, if we have the ability to participate remotely, we would not need to make journeys to this place. So, first, I would like to know where the Leader of the House has got to in his consideration of that.

Will the Chancellor update the statement he made a couple of weeks ago concerning the continuation of support for businesses that are unable to trade because of the pandemic? The announcement on the job support scheme only has relevance to those businesses that are able to start trading at a reduced capacity. It has no relevance for businesses that are told to close, cannot trade at all and have no income coming in. When can we have a statement on that?

Finally, on a completely different topic, I wonder whether I can tease the Leader of the House to answer a question that the Prime Minister refused to answer. In May next year we have elections for the Scottish Parliament. If the Conservative party and other Unionist parties are successful in gaining a majority of seats in that Parliament in that election, would the Leader of the House regard that as a topical mandate for the Union at that election?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There was a vote in 2014 of the people of Scotland, who decided to remain in the United Kingdom. The SNP at the time was under the leadership of Mr Salmond—a figure SNP Members perhaps do not talk about as much as they used to for reasons I am not entirely clear about. All sorts of interesting things about Mr Salmond and Mrs Sturgeon are currently in the papers—all sorts of conversations between them—to which people may want to pay attention. None the less, SNP Members do not like talking about him much

anymore. At the time, Mr Salmond said it was for a generation. Now, I know that we have been talking about octopuses on World Octopus Day, but a generation is longer, I imagine, than the lifespan of the average octopus. It is the lifespan of an individual. A generation is 25 to 30 years. It is a good length of time. We have had the referendum, and we won. The Unionists won. Even the Labour party won in that sense. It is therefore something that we can be very pleased about that happened in 2014.

As regards proceedings in this place, it might be helpful if SNP Members were more rigorous in attending to the details of the rules but, leaving that to one side, we need to turn up to do our job. We are an essential service. I think it is pretty wet, quite frankly, to expect doctors, nurses, police officers, people working in supermarkets, and the cleaners in the House of Commons to do their jobs, and for us to say that we have to stay at home because we are not willing to come here. We have a duty to be here—our public duty. We were elected to be an assembly of the nation, not people sitting remotely throwing stones. There are facilities for people to participate in interrogative proceedings, and there are facilities for people to vote by proxy because of their individual conditions but, fundamentally, the business of the House needs to go on in the Chamber of the House.

Finally, on the Chancellor and updates, as I said earlier we have already had 40 statements from the Government during this period. The Government are committed to keeping the House regularly updated on important policy changes.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Leah Sharibu is the only teenage girl of her group not yet released after Boko Haram terrorists kidnapped her and 109 other girls from their school in February 2018. Leah remains in captivity after bravely refusing to renounce her Christian faith. Does the Leader of the House share my concerns about the need for Leah's plight to be raised with the Nigerian authorities to secure her release?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for raising a grave and important point and for her continued efforts to campaign for the rights of Christians and religious minorities. She is one of the House's true champions of religious freedom across the world. The plight of the young girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria has caused horror around the world. The Government wholly condemn the terrorist group's attacks in north-east Nigeria in recent years and have offered the Nigerian Government a range of technical support to help improve the local security forces' capacity for responding to the terrorist threat. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's concerns are passed to my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for notice of the time on Tuesday 20 October, and the Backbench Business Committee proposes that it would be timely for a debate on Black History Month. Could we ask for a minimum of three hours' protected time or that the debate can run until the moment of the interruption, whichever is the later?

I also want to give notice of another time-sensitive debate application. We have a heavily subscribed application for a debate on International Men's Day, which is on Thursday 19 November, and it is regrettable that we have not been able to facilitate a debate on Baby Loss

[*Ian Mearns*]

Awareness Week, which runs from tomorrow 9 October until next Thursday 15 October. We also have another time-sensitive application for a debate on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which is on Wednesday 25 November.

Any time that the Government think the business may run short, given that speaking lists for debates are known in advance, may I suggest that we could find debates to fill that time to facilitate the House not rising early on particular days?

I also thank the Leader of the House for writing to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on my behalf following last week's exchanges, but he has been at it again. The Health Secretary suggested earlier this week that the Government had put an extra £10 million into local authorities in the north-east to support contact tracing. That came in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (*Liz Twist*). I would love to know where the money is, so can we have the cheque as soon as possible? The local authorities and the directors of public health are anticipating it eagerly.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said about facilitating the debate on 20 October on Black History Month. It is not always possible to provide debates on specific month, day or week events, although the Government try to as far as possible. I note his point about what happens when Government business runs short, and it is a point I am sympathetic to. It is not always possible to predict; it is sometimes frustrating for Members if a Backbench business debate is scheduled and then Government business runs full time, and people find that their speeches have been written in vain. It is a difficult balance to get right, but I am well aware of the need to use the parliamentary time that is available well.

On the £10 million, I am sure that if the Secretary of State has said there is £10 million coming, the cheque is in the post.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Several weeks ago, a number of Football League clubs demonstrated that they could safely welcome back fans into stadiums. Indeed, I was fortunate enough to be at Bloomfield Road to see Blackpool beat Swindon in one of those very successful pilot games. And yet, in spite of those games going ahead smoothly, clubs and fans are concerned that we may go an entire season without welcoming fans back on to the terraces. I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is currently in dialogue with the football authorities, but the perilous finances of many clubs mean that the situation is becoming increasingly urgent. Does my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House feel that it would be in order for the Secretary of State to give a statement to the House on these discussions and the steps that he is taking to welcome fans back on to the terraces?

Mr Speaker: I have a big list to get through. We are really going to have to speed up questions and answers.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would like to commend the Football League clubs to which my hon. Friend refers, which have shown that they can manage the return of fans to

watch live sport in a safe and effective fashion. The Government know that the decision not to reopen stadiums to spectators on 1 October will have major consequences for sports and clubs across the country that relied on those grounds for income. That is why the Government are working urgently with clubs and their representatives to ensure that as many as possible are not adversely affected by that. I would add that the football authorities are giving a lot of support to smaller football clubs. Nine football clubs in my constituency have benefited, and the Government are certainly grateful for the support that football is finding for itself.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last month, Nationwide Building Society announced that it was closing its branch in Little Sutton. Since then a number of elderly vulnerable residents have contacted me, alarmed about the closure of their local branch. It seems that, even on Nationwide's own figures, there has only been a 1% decline in visits to the branch, which, in the current context, is remarkable, and a flimsy basis on which to close the branch. Nationwide says there has been no consultation; it have already made a decision. May we have a debate, please, on what more can be done to ensure that there is greater accountability from large organisations like that to the communities that they are supposed to serve?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing that matter to the attention of the House, because I think it does put pressure on large companies when these things are raised in the House. I understand the dissatisfaction when banks close their branches, but decisions on opening and closing branches are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis, and it would be wrong for the Government to intervene in those decisions. But since May 2017 the major high street banks have been signed up to the access to banking standard, which commits them to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures. If Nationwide is not following that, I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to ask for an Adjournment debate to raise the matter and keep up the pressure.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that I have argued strongly for the aviation industry to get Government support in order to get going again. I will continue to do that, but I am particularly concerned about one of the consequences of the collapse of aviation and of tourism. In many parts of the developing world, we are seeing a resurgence in poaching and in the illegal wildlife trade, and real pressure on conservation projects in a way that I think will have a lasting impact on endangered species and on local resources. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Foreign Secretary, as we head into COP—the Conference of the Parties—year, in which there will be many other major environmental events, to look at what else this country can do through its aid budgets to support conservation in the developing world, lessen the threat to endangered species, and ensure that we are doing the right thing?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is right that this crisis has thrown up many problems that continue to develop. I reassure him that Her Majesty's Government are at the forefront of international efforts to protect

endangered animals and plants from poaching and illegal trade. In 2018, the UK convened the largest ever global illegal wildlife trade conference, at which 65 countries signed up to the London declaration, committing them to take urgent, co-ordinated action against illegal wildlife trade. I will certainly pass on his message to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate to review the progress and work of HS2 and its phased priorities? Clearly, the pandemic has led to a restructuring of the economy, a new normal, a change in working practice and so on. Also, some of the practices of HS2, such as the diversion of the A425, which was announced just a couple of days ago and which will take place in three weeks, are having a massive impact on our local economy. There are also the working practices of the National Eviction Team.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise those issues and bring them to the attention of the House. I remind him that Transport questions will be on 22 October, which will be an opportunity to raise those issues again. There are issues relating to HS2 that are within the House's consideration in other ways, but he would certainly be entitled to ask for an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate on that matter.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The Kniveden Project offers tailored mental health services to people in the Staffordshire Moorlands, but the covid crisis has had a real impact on the services that it can provide, and I am sure that it is not alone. With World Mental Health Day this week, will the Leader of the House find time for an urgent debate on this very important matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Mental health is an issue taken seriously by all the parties in this House, and overall mental health funding has increased to £13.3 billion in 2019-20. It is at the heart of the NHS long-term plan to see the largest expansion of mental health services in a generation. There will be at least a further £2.3 billion by 2023-24 of additional taxpayers' support to help 380,000 more adults and 345,000 children. There has been temporary support of £9.2 million to help mental health charities during this crisis. I absolutely understand what she is saying, and I will pass the message on to Health Ministers on her behalf.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): May we have a debate on the scourge of fly-tipping and littering, which has sadly increased in my beautiful part of Yorkshire during the pandemic? Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all the community groups, including Pride in Linthwaite, Holmepride, volunteers from Hade Edge and Honley villages, and many more, who have been out tidying up their communities during this troubling time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Absolutely I will thank the community groups, including Pride in Linthwaite, Holmepride, the Hade Edge village volunteers and the Honley village volunteers. This is fantastic. This is Britain at its best, with local people doing things to try to make their communities better and cleaner. Fly-tipping is a disgraceful

and criminal activity and a blight on local communities. I am sure that many MPs wish to campaign to stop it happening and to reduce the amount of litter that we see. There was an Adjournment debate on that last Thursday, so it is an issue that is being discussed in the House.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: We really need another debate on, to my mind, the inadequacy of the UK Government's job support measures during the coronavirus pandemic. Particularly, we have a jobs emergency across tourism, hospitality and on-sales trade. We have just had to implement new restrictions, very necessarily, across the Forth Valley. They may need to be rolled out in other parts of the UK as well, so we really need to have a discussion about the inadequacy of the UK Government's support, because we are not out of the woods on this yet.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That question is fundamentally flawed. The Government have provided a huge amount of taxpayers' money, £190 billion-worth, in support. They have helped 12 million people in jobs, at a cost of £53 billion—£40 billion for the furlough scheme and £13.5 billion for the self-employed scheme. We have provided £19 billion for small and medium-sized businesses and large businesses through the coronavirus business interruption loans; £38 billion via the bounce back loans; £11 billion in business grants; and £10 billion in business rate relief. To call that insignificant and insufficient is to assume that there is a bottomless pit of money—there is not; there is taxpayers' money, and that has been used to try to preserve jobs and protect the economy.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made an excellent speech earlier this week, when he referred to expanding wind energy. The development of that industry has been of great advantage to my constituency. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth to come to the House to give more details on how we can expand the servicing, offshore maintenance and manufacturing capability?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is such an effective campaigner for Cleethorpes that almost every Government policy is specifically designed to benefit Cleethorpes, as is only right and proper. I am pleased he supports the new plans to build back greener, making the UK the world leader in clean wind energy, creating jobs, slashing carbon emissions and boosting exports. That includes £160 million that will be made available to upgrade ports and manufacturing infrastructure across communities in the UK, and a target to produce more electricity in a year than every home in the country uses now through offshore wind by 2030, with the creation of 2,000 construction jobs, and 60,000 jobs directly and indirectly in ports by 2030. These are exciting plans and he should take credit for pursuing and campaigning for them.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is almost a month since fire engulfed the refugee camp at Moria on Lesbos, leaving 13,000 refugees homeless. Organisations such as Becky's Bathhouse, which was established in memory of Rebecca Dykes, who lost her life while working for the UK Government in Lebanon, are doing amazing work there, but what are the UK Government doing? May we have a statement from a Minister please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this concerning issue and to congratulate Becky's Bathhouse on what it has been doing. We are so lucky in this country that we often have good charitable organisations that take on key work. It is so important that this House recognises those organisations, and business questions is often an opportunity to do so. I do not have a full answer on what the Government's plans are, but I will get him one.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Last weekend, my constituency suffered one of the wettest October days since records began. Homes and businesses were flooded, and raw sewage engulfed gardens and even a school playground. Will my right hon. Friend advise me of the best parliamentary means to safeguard against similar events in future and to ensure that there are adequate flood defences, given that many thousands of houses are projected to be built in an area of flood risk in Aylesbury and the surrounding villages?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I deeply sympathise with all those affected by flooding. It is a terrible thing to happen and when raw sewage is involved it is particularly problematic for the clean-up that has to follow. The Government are spending record amounts to help to protect communities from the threat of flooding, including £5.2 billion as a long-term package to protect homes, businesses and jobs between 2021 and 2027. I encourage my hon. Friend to take this up with Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but I will pass his question on to them directly and encourage him to keep campaigning for Aylesbury.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Now more than ever, when we are promoting all the positive benefits of walking for our mental and physical well-being and for the environment, while still seeing significant costs to the NHS, claims against local councils, and worse, personal injury, and loss of confidence and independence, will the Leader of the House consider a debate on the funding levels and the priority accorded to the humble pavement, which is mission critical if we want to keep people stepping out? This is a matter of particular concern in Eastbourne.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously, that is a matter for local councils, which have responsibility for pavements, but my hon. Friend is right to make herself a champion of pavement politics, because people want pavements in good condition. The Government have made record amounts of taxpayers' money available to local councils, so urging them to ensure that pavements are in a good state of repair is the right thing to do.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): My city of Bath has two successful universities, which the Leader of the House and I share, and so far daily cases remain low. I want to commend and thank the universities, the council and our students for everything that has been done so far, which includes new testing facilities. However, the experience of other cities is that covid cases can rise very quickly and stay high for a prolonged period of time. Therefore, the absolute focus has to be on how to keep numbers low, so can we have a statement in the House about the preventive measures we need in low-covid areas and how the Government intend to support areas to keep their cases low?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government have taken many steps, which are clear across the country. The rule of six is in place in the south-west even though cases are currently low. The 10 pm closure of restaurants and pubs is in place in the south-west, so I think the Government have a very consistent record across the country of having rules that help keep levels low where they are already low and that will help to try to lessen the peak in areas where they have been rising. I say again that we have had more than 40 statements from the Government—regular updates to this House—and they will of course continue.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con) [V]: I will touch on the same issue covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). As the Leader of the House will know, when it comes to sporting prowess, East Anglia is very much top of the pile, as he would have witnessed at Lords when Essex edged past Somerset in the County Championship final. However, it is not just in cricket that East Anglia is at the forefront, but in football too. He will know that Ipswich Town football club is one of the great clubs of this country, with Sir Bobby Robson part of its legacy, as well as FA cup and UEFA cup wins. However, right now they are struggling. They were going to be a test case that would have allowed 1,000 season-ticket holders into the stadium but that was cancelled at the last minute. Ipswich is an area with very low levels of covid-19, fortunately, and it is very much the view of Lee O'Neill, our managing director, that we could allow a small number of spectators into the ground very soon to enjoy our soon-to-be promotion to the championship. Will my right hon. Friend—

Mr Speaker: We have got the message—I call the Leader of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I did not much like the beginning of the message, about Essex and Somerset. The match was pretty much rained off and it was not a proper County Championship this year anyway, but Somerset still have not won—it is my lifetime's hope that Somerset will one day win the County Championship, but there we go.

In relation to stadiums and visitors, I reiterate what I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). The decision not to reopen stadiums to spectators will have major consequences for sport and clubs across the country, and the Government are working hard with sport organisations to mitigate the economic consequences. Sport England has provided £195 million to support community sport throughout the crisis and has recently added a further £15 million to its community emergency fund to help grassroots sport further. I absolutely accept that this is a problem, and it is one of the consequences of the coronavirus.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in supporting World Osteoporosis Day on 20 October and encourage colleagues to join the soon-to-be newly relaunched all-party group on the issue? This is especially important this year as NHS services to treat people with osteoporosis have been slow to restart following the lockdown and many preventable problems have been building up. Can we therefore have a statement on what the Government are doing to support people with this condition and to restart NHS services as fully and as quickly as possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am more grateful for that question than the hon. Lady may realise, because the Royal Osteoporosis Society is based in my constituency in Camerton, and it is an absolutely fantastic organisation that does really important work. The disease is one of concern to many people and it is a condition that is very debilitating, so I commend her for raising it. You may have noted that, Mr Speaker, as a request for an Adjournment debate, which, if I have any influence on Adjournment debates as Leader of the House, which I do not think I do, I would encourage you to accept.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On Tuesday, instead of the Minister filling the time with newspeak designed to obscure the blindingly obvious, will the Leader of the House ensure that they focus rigorously on the key question—namely, if lockdown measures are the answer, why are they not working?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend reminds me of a 1979 Conservative election sticker that said, “If Labour’s the answer, it must have been a silly question.” The lockdown measures have been implemented to try to stop the spread of the disease. A disease that is communicated by people meeting is bound to be reduced in its circulation if people meet less. We saw that with the first lockdown—it stopped people meeting, and therefore the numbers affected by the disease declined. On his main point about whether he will get good answers from Ministers, I can assure him that he will get brilliant answers from them.

Mr Speaker: May I congratulate the next Member, who ran a virtual marathon and raised over £1,000 for charity?

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

This House will be more covid-safe now that Mr Speaker has required us to wear face masks in shared spaces on the parliamentary estate, but on days when there are votes, the 500-plus of us who are not self-isolating for health or public health reasons are required to be here to vote, crowding into corridors and halls of this building and putting ourselves and staff at additional risk, particularly as so many Members do not seem to respect the Government’s rule on spacing. The Leader of the House keeps saying that we should continue with business as normal, but covid means that all workplaces have had to compromise and adapt. What level of infection here or in the country will it take for the Government to let us return to online voting in this place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House has adapted. If you seek a monument, look around—look at this half-empty or quarter-empty Chamber. There is none of the excitement and pizzazz that the Chamber normally has, and I know that it grieves many Members that we have to be like this. We also have to get on and do our duty, rather than democracy being suspended when doctors are at work, nurses are at work and supermarket workers are at work. We are not some priestly caste above the rest of the nation. We are part of the rest of the nation. It is our duty to be here, representing our constituents and voting. Of course Members should be responsible and socially distance in the queues to vote—that is absolutely right—but we have a duty to be here, and I am surprised that Members do not wish to do their duty.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): One of the great successes of levelling up under this Government is the towns fund. I am left bemused when Opposition Members bemoan the fact that towns like Kidsgrove, which felt forgotten for decades, are getting up to £25 million, with the Government recently approving a £750,000 advance payment to refurbish Kidsgrove sports centre and improve some of our local parks. Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on the rejuvenation of town centres and the important role they play in local communities, such as the historic towns of Burslem and Tunstall?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree with my hon. Friend that the £3.6 billion towns fund is central to this Government’s ambition to level up the country and ensure that everyone, wherever they live, can contribute to and benefit from economic prosperity. The towns fund is bringing much-needed investment to towns and high streets across the country, supporting towns that are the birthplaces of our industry. I am excited by Kidsgrove’s plans and those of many other towns that are reaching for this opportunity for regeneration. In due course, we will bring forward a competitive round of the towns fund and will welcome proposals from more towns to be part of this important programme. It will include improving transport and digital infrastructure, supporting skills development and making the most of planning powers to create a good environment for businesses and residents. My hon. Friend should ask the Backbench Business Committee for a full day of debate to celebrate this wonderful Government policy.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Every October in this place, there is a fantastic photo call to celebrate breast cancer awareness and the month that we use to mark it. Obviously, it cannot take place this year, but this is a very serious subject, because the pandemic has seen screening and diagnoses delayed, and it is imperative that we heighten awareness. Will my right hon. Friend give time for a debate so that we can talk about breast cancer in this place, even if we cannot all wear it pink?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is so right to raise this important issue. Although over 200,000 people were treated for cancer during the peak of the pandemic and NHS England is now back at a near 100% level of radiotherapy treatment, if I can make one key point from this Dispatch Box, it is this: anyone who is worried that they have symptoms of cancer must visit their doctor, must ensure that they are treated and must have no reticence about feeling the need for treatment. I cannot promise a breast cancer awareness debate in Government time, but it is a subject that Members across the House think ought to be debated. If the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) is still watching our proceedings, I hope that he will have heard this plea for a Backbench Business debate.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House find time when we can scrutinise the lamentable performance of the Department of Health and Social Care in answering written parliamentary questions? I now have several questions that have still not received a response after way over a month. For example, at the beginning of September, I tabled question 86714, in which I pointed out that we needed testing in place in

[Peter Kyle]

cities such as Brighton and Hove—places with low covid numbers into which thousands of students were imminently going to arrive. That question has still not been answered. The level of coronavirus in those towns has increased fivefold, as they have in Exeter, since I asked that question. This is a key way for us to give voice to our constituents—it is not just about MPs asking questions—and to point out to Departments what is happening on the frontline of our communities.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, I heard your response to a point of order yesterday, and I endorse your comments entirely. It is an obligation of Ministries to respond in accordance with the timelines laid down in Standing Orders in relation to named day questions and to make their best efforts on other questions. Likewise, I have reminded my right hon. Friends about this obligation with regard to correspondence. That the responses to correspondence and written questions are slow is affecting Members across all parties. I am taking up any issues raised in business questions directly with Secretaries of State and trying to get responses for Members that way, but I appreciate that that is a limited palliative. On behalf of the Government, I take this problem very seriously and will do whatever I can to try to ensure that answers are given in a timely fashion. It has been the job of Parliament since 1265, when the House of Commons first came together, to seek redress of grievance, and we do so via questions. I have the greatest sympathy and agreement with the hon. Gentleman.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Yesterday, the World Trade Organisation agreed that the UK will be able to join the agreement on Government procurement as an independent party from 1 January 2021. Will the Leader of the House please reassure the residents of Ashfield that this will benefit businesses, including small businesses, across every part of my constituency—from manufacturing and professional business services, to advertising and construction?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is quite right to stand up for businesses in Ashfield. The whole country will benefit from joining the WTO agreement on Government procurement as an independent party. At last, we are taking back control. From 1 January, British businesses in diverse sectors, including small businesses, from every part of the UK will be able to bid for procurement opportunities around the world, worth over £1.3 trillion. That is not a misprint or an error. I did not mean billion or million—£1.3 trillion a year. That is good news, and I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: We mark Challenge Poverty Week this week, but Save the Children reports today that more than one third of families on universal credit and child tax credit have had to turn to charities for food or children's clothes over the past two months alone, and their debts now average £1,700. Can we have a debate on how to repair the damage that the Government have done to our social security safety net before winter makes things even worse for children and families?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am sorry to say that I reject the whole premise of the question. This Government have a proud record on tackling poverty. We saw the biggest ever cash increase in the national living wage this year, worth an extra £930 for over 2 million people. There are more than 1.2 million fewer workless households since 2010—a record low—and 200,000 fewer people in absolute poverty than in 2010. We have put an additional £1.7 billion into universal credit and implemented a total working age welfare spend of £95 billion of taxpayers' money. We have taken unprecedented steps during this crisis to help vulnerable people, especially children, by providing £380 million of free school meals, £16 million to food charities to get food to those who are struggling and 4.5 million food boxes to vulnerable people who were shielding. That is a proud record of an excellent Government.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen early-day motion 972 about tackling child food insecurity, which is backed by Marcus Rashford, a former Sports Minister, and a former Prisons Minister? *[That this House believes no child should go hungry; welcomes Government action to provide Free School Meals over the school summer holidays; recognises that families are still struggling to afford food, that 11 per cent of parents and 6 per cent of children have directly experienced food insecurity in the last month and that food bank usage is expected to be 61 per cent higher in winter 2020-21 than last year; believes that further action to protect vulnerable children is needed; calls on the Government to implement the recommendations in the National Food Strategy Part 1 to increase the value of and expand eligibility for Healthy Start vouchers, expand eligibility for Free School Meals, and extend the Holiday Activities and Food programme; and notes that alongside minimising child food insecurity these recommendations will also address inequalities, improve the long-term health and resilience of the population, reduce childhood obesity, improve children's academic performance, support parents to stay in work during the holidays, and ease the strain on the welfare system.]*

The early-day motion notes that 11% of parents and 6% of children have experienced food insecurity in the past few months and urges that free school meal vouchers should be extended over the holidays, alongside an expansion of holiday activity clubs. The Backbench Business Committee has agreed to a debate, but we are waiting for parliamentary time. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that we have that debate in the Chamber on this vital issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I had indeed come across early-day motion 972, because my right hon. Friend had the courtesy to tell me about it, so I knew what he was proposing. I also know that he is a great campaigner for young people as a distinguished Chairman of a Select Committee. The work that he does is of great importance, and campaigns he is involved in are often very successful.

Let me reiterate what the Government have done: expanding free school meals to all children aged five to seven, ensuring that a further 1.4 million pupils receive a free nutritious meal each day; a £1 billion fund to create more high-quality affordable childcare; and £35 million into the national school breakfast programme, benefiting up to 2,450 schools in disadvantaged areas. I note that my right hon. Friend has won his debate

from the Backbench Business Committee, and I am always aware of demands from the Committee for more Chamber time.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: Some £12 billion has been allocated for test and trace. Much of that has been squandered on outsourcing giants, such as Serco, that not only have records of failure but have been fined in recent years for ripping off the public purse. The Leader of the House is a proud advocate of outsourcing and privatisation, but perhaps even he thinks it has gone too far when these companies are putting lives at risk. Will he condemn the private sector companies undermining our test and trace system, and will he grant a debate on this?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be the first to acknowledge that life here in Westminster has been a bit different for the past few months. Our meetings are virtual; Members are asked by well-meaning members of staff to move their chairs or simply to move on; and of course face masks are now part of our dress code. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these measures are necessary to keep us safe, not least from ourselves, and that Parliament has a clear responsibility to set the right example?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that really important question. We do have an obligation to lead by example. I will not begin to pretend that I like wearing a face mask, but, under your guidance, Mr Speaker, I have taken to wearing one when walking about the Palace, partly because we all have a duty as Members of Parliament to set a lead and an example and partly because it may have a benefit and stop the spread of the disease, in which we all share a responsibility.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend mentions staff asking Members to move apart and observe social distancing. I would encourage everybody to recognise that this is done in a spirit of good will and to help us and keep us all in accordance with the rules. Please bear with members of staff when they do this. They are not doing it because they enjoy being officious; they are doing it because they have been asked to by Mr Speaker, by me and by my right hon.—the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). I was about to call her my right hon. Friend; in this context, we are all working together. The Commission is very keen that people should observe the rules. This House has done such good work to make this a covid-secure environment. We all have our part to play. We have to lead by example by being here, but while we are here, we must follow the rules.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): This week, the National Audit Office released a highly worrying report indicating that taxpayer exposure to the Treasury's flagship business bounce back loans could be as much as 60%, which is £26 billion, as a result of fraud and debt repayment default. Considering that the scheme was launched in May, well into the crisis, we should expect better due diligence. Therefore, will the Leader of the House arrange for the Chancellor to come to the House to make an oral statement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is too early to say, I think, how the various schemes have been allocated, but the Government had to provide urgent resources to businesses to keep them in business. The £26 billion that the hon. Gentleman refers to was a necessary step to take to keep jobs open and to keep the structures of the economy in place. Any fraud is wrong, and any fraud must be investigated and, I hope, prosecuted, but urgency was the priority.

Mr Speaker: We can now unite Somerset—I call Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating the anniversary of the battle of Carhampton, which is in my constituency in Somersetshire? Carhampton was of course the scene of the historic clash between the Danish invaders and King Egbert of Wessex, granddad of the creator of Britain, King Alfred. Our county—our great county—is once again under threat from the divisive plans put forward by the so-called county council, God help us, which does not represent the county at all and has mounted an invasion against common sense. King Egbert and his son King Aethelwulf, and the great King Alfred himself, would have fought against it. Can we have Government time to stand with our great kings and fight this rubbish before it is too late?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Egbert is one of the great kings of Wessex who extended the borders of Wessex and became the *bretwalda*—that is to say, the high king—of the Anglo-Saxons and put Mercia in its place, at least briefly. That is worth remembering, because Gloucestershire is Mercian territory, so Somerset got one up on Gloucestershire, which we always quite like. With regard to my hon. Friend's key message, it is worth bearing in mind that he is right to say “the so-called county council”, because the county council does not cover the county of Somerset but an administrative district of the historic county, and people should remember that.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Could we find time to have a debate about heritage buildings in the north of England? When we do, we could celebrate the £250,000 of Government money that is supporting the restoration of Darwen tower, topping up the tens of thousands of pounds that have been raised by Darwen Rotary club. You will agree, Mr Speaker, that up on Winter hill, the boundary between our constituencies, Darwen tower is a building in which we can all take pride.

Mr Speaker: You are absolutely correct. From out of my window I look at Darwen tower and Winter hill in the constituency of Chorley.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can think of no better way of spending £250,000 of taxpayers' money than improving the view of Mr Speaker. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the importance of local landmarks to Britain's communities. It is great to hear that the towns fund has supported the imposing octagonal Darwen tower, which has stood over Lancashire for 122 years commemorating Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. Let us hope, as we approach the 70th anniversary of Her Majesty's own accession, that we may think of similar grand schemes for celebrating that. I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the Government's

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

spending of taxpayers' money in town centres and high streets from the towns fund. This is essential to our efforts to level up our regions and create places across the country where people want to live and thrive. Our local history, as noted in the exchange between me and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), is incredibly valuable, and the Government are committed to preserving and enriching our heritage.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Safe and covid-secure pubs, bars and restaurants in South Shields found out from the press last night that today the Government will decide whether or not to close them down again. I have no polite words for our collective anger. Can we have an urgent statement and a vote on these measures?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary said in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) when he made it clear that issues of national significance would be brought to the House for a debate and a vote before they are introduced. It is the Government's intention to honour that commitment. I, too, have read speculation in the newspapers, but as far as I am aware, no final decisions have been made, and if any were to be made, they would be brought to this House.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): As the pandemic continues, the mental health of our nation is of particular concern. As a father, I am particularly worried about the impact of covid-secure rules on children, especially in the early years. Will my right hon. Friend, as a father, seek to provide time for a debate or a statement in Government time on the impact on children's mental health of these measures?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. Early education lays the foundation for lifelong learning and supports children's social and emotional development. It has been encouraging to see more nurseries and childminders opening to more children each week, and many families sending their children back to early years settings so that they can gain educational and wellbeing benefits of early education. He is also right to raise mental health, because at the heart of the NHS long-term plan is this large expansion of mental health services, which will include additional support for 345,000 children, and I entirely agree with him that this is the right way to be going. As a note, I also remind him that Education questions take place on Monday.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): On Clean Air Day, may I raise an issue that the Leader of the House may have seen reported in the media this week, which is research that finds a link between air pollution and the development of Alzheimer's? It has been some time since we have discussed dementia in the House, and people living with dementia are some of the hardest hit during the pandemic, so can we have a debate in Government time on support for research into dementia and for people living with dementia?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am personally extremely sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I had the most touching letter from a constituent who has been able to

visit her father only three times during the pandemic. He is in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's, and she had to see him 6 feet 6 inches away with a screen between them. There was no ability to hold his hand or to have any personal contact, and she wrote to me saying that, therefore, her father did not even know that she was there. This is such a sadness in people's later lives and therefore understanding it better is important. As so often, I cannot promise Government time for this, but my sympathies are very much with the hon. Gentleman's request.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): With more children conducting their studies online, may I ask my right hon. Friend whether the Government intend to implement part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 rather than wait for the online harms Bill to be brought forward? Currently, serious long-term damage is being done to our children who are being exposed to online adult content, and I believe that what is seen cannot be unseen. I am sure that he will agree that inaction in this area will have devastating consequences.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I assure my hon. Friend that tackling online harms is a main priority for the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Government as a whole. As we announced on 16 October last year, we will not be commencing part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 in its provision on age verification for online pornography as originally intended. Instead, we will repeal part 3 of that Act, and the online harms regime will include provisions to protect children from unsuitable content, including pornography. The Government's commitment to protecting children online is unwavering. Adult content is too easily accessed online and more needs to be done to protect children from harm. Protection of children is at the heart of our approach to tackling online harms. This recognises that online harms can be particularly damaging for children and their mental health and wellbeing, and I share his view that what is seen cannot be unseen, but I will ensure that his question is passed on to the Secretary of State.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Yesterday morning, in Grantham in my constituency, a Lincolnshire police officer was struck and injured by a vehicle driven by a suspect whom she was seeking to apprehend. Will the Leader of the House join me in sending our best wishes to the injured police officer? Will he agree to a debate on how we can best keep our police officers safe in the line of duty?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, of course, I will send my best wishes. I think the whole House would also wish to send their best wishes to the police officer who has been injured. The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) nods as does the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). Attacks on the police are always very worrying, and we should be so grateful to our brave police who stand on duty courageously, never knowing quite what might hit them. My hon. Friend is right to be asking for a debate on this. Obviously, there will be opportunities as legislation comes forward to debate it in Government time. None the less, the Backbench Business Committee is the main source for debates of this kind along with Adjournment debates, but, as he knows, this is an issue that the Government take very seriously.

Before I conclude, I forgot one thing earlier, which is my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Walsall South on notching up an important milestone this week—four years as shadow Leader of the House. In the United States, when somebody has achieved four years, often the cry goes up, “Four more years!” I have a feeling that the whole House will be joining me in saying “Four more years” to the right hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: Four more years.

Points of Order

11.39 am

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am very glad you are in the Chair for this, which relates to the remarks of the Leader of the House. In response to a question from my good and hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), the Leader of the House said that it is the duty of MPs to be here and hold the Executive to account. I draw your attention, Mr Speaker, to the 90-minute public health debate that took place yesterday, covering restrictions in the regions of the north-east, the north-west and the north of England. Back-Bench Members had 150 seconds to hold the Government to account. The Government have endless time at the Dispatch Box and in the media, but MPs had 150 seconds. Mr Speaker, may I refer to your statement of 30 September before Prime Minister’s questions? In your opinion, does the Government’s handling and the opportunities they are giving to Back-Bench Members square with your advice on 30 September?

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Gentleman does not want to draw me into a political decision and discussion, but, first, I thank him for notice of the point of order. The 90-minute limit for debate to which he refers is governed by Standing Order No. 16. However, it would be within the Government’s gift to vary the time limit by a separate business of the House motion. That would be a matter for them, not for me, but I do have sympathy, given how many constituencies were affected. I recognise that if we did have more time, it would allow Members to give their views and opinions to help the Government to be more informed. I hope that that will have been taken on board.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, yesterday the Government announced the scrapping of the Unionlearn fund of £11 million a year, which helps 250,000 learners across the United Kingdom. A study by Unionlearn and the Department for Education in 2018-19 showed that every £1 invested in the fund resulted in an economic return of £12.30. The announcement was made without recourse to Parliament as far as I am aware, so can we have an urgent question or a statement on this vital matter, which will potentially affect 250,000 learners?

Mr Speaker: As the right hon. Member and Chair of the Education Committee is aware, that is not a point of order for me, but it has certainly gone on the record. Hopefully the Government can respond. If it were up to me, perhaps things might be different on that basis.

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

11.42 am

Sitting suspended.

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

Backbench Business

Planning and House Building

Mr Speaker: Before I call Bob Seely, I inform all Members that we are starting with a four-minute limit in order to fit in as many speakers as possible, to ensure that our constituencies are represented.

11.46 am

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Government's levelling up agenda and supports appropriate housing development and the Government's overall housing objectives; further welcomes the Government's consultation, *Planning for the Future*, updated on 6 August 2020, as a chance to reform housing and land use for the public good; welcomes the Government's commitment to protect and restore the natural environment and bio-diversity; and calls on the Government to delay any planned implementation of the changes to the standard method for assessing local housing need proposed by the Government's consultation, *Changes to the Current Planning System*, published on 6 August 2020, and Proposal 4 of the Government's consultation, *Planning for the Future*, on a standard method for establishing housing requirement, until this House has had the opportunity to hold a debate and meaningful vote on their introduction.

I speak in support of the motion, which is supportive of the Government's aims overall but requests that the new algorithm, process and formula should not be introduced without a meaningful parliamentary vote, I assume in a Bill next year.

In our manifesto, we promised to level up and connect the country so that everyone can get a fair share of future prosperity. If levelling up means anything, it surely implies an integrated plan for infrastructure, jobs and housing to revive overlooked northern and midland towns and to stop the endless drift of jobs and opportunities to the south, the shires and the suburbs. I support levelling up 100%, but broadly speaking, the danger in the way the new targets have been shaped is that the biggest housing increases will be in rural shires and suburbs, and the biggest falls will be in the urban north and midlands. The worst of all worlds would be to hollow out our cities, urbanise our suburbs and suburbanise the countryside, yet I fear that that is what we might accidentally achieve. That is not levelling up; it is concreting out, hence this debate.

The figures I will be quoting from the House of Commons Library show that in rural and suburban England, excluding cities, the new algorithmic process demands an additional 772,072 homes—more than three quarters of a million—or more than 100 new towns of 7,000 souls. The new total for shire England, minus the cities, is 1,513,529 properties, or more than 200 new towns. Both those figures are underestimates, in that, for example, they do not include Dorset, Cornwall or the Isle of Wight. So over 15 years, compared with current agreed local plans, rural and suburban Gloucestershire will see an additional 29,000 homes, taking the total to 54,000; rural and suburban Surrey will see an extra 45,000, creating a new target of 84,000; and in rural and suburban Northamptonshire, an extra 26,000 will take the total to 72,000.

However, while the suburbs and countryside see dramatic rises, the numbers for the cities, where there are already infrastructure and services, will fall. For example, over 15 years, against the current standard method, Manchester

falls by 14,000 over 15 years, but Cheshire East rises by 10,000; Nottingham city falls by 3,700 while Nottinghamshire rises by 25,000, and Southampton falls by 2,500 while Hampshire rises by 26,000 to 115,000 overall. Targets for Liverpool and Newcastle are 48% and 56% lower than their current building rates, and 30 local planning authorities in the north have targets lower than their current building rates.

We have shrinking targets in cities and rocketing targets in shires. The glaring exception to that urban free pass is London, which sees astonishing rises against local plans over a 15-year period. Westminster's housing requirement is up 438%; Barnet sees an additional 50,000 properties, Bromley 27,000 and Hillingdon 21,000.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): My constituency of Kensington sees a seven-times increase relative to the December 2019 proposed London plan. While we all want to see more housing, does my hon. Friend agree that targets need to be achievable and realistic?

Bob Seely: If the targets are unrealistic, it will cause grief for no purpose, so I thank my hon. Friend for her remark.

In the last three London boroughs that I mentioned—Barnet, Bromley and Hillingdon—alone, the algorithmic process demands a total of 153,938 new properties, or the equivalent of 20 small new towns in three London boroughs. I am sure the Minister and I would agree that we need to increase density to make better use of land, but we need our targets to be achievable.

All this is being done for the absolutely laudable reason of affordability. That is exceptionally important, but the Royal Town Planning Institute says that increases in house building do not necessarily have a discernible impact on price. The why is complex; developer choice, foreign investment purchases, stamp duty and slow wage growth all play a role, but, above all, land banking may show why the liberalisation of permission does not necessarily equal more supply.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I praise my hon. Friend for the work he has done on this; the Isle of Wight is incredibly lucky to have him as its MP. Will he consider that we have a million permissions unbuilt in England and we have failing councils, such as in Eastleigh borough, which I represent a part of, that still do not have a local plan in place. Should we not be looking there as one of the ways of trying to get to the 300,000—an absolutely right figure and a manifesto commitment—before we start some of the destruction he talks about?

Bob Seely: I am just coming to that point. The 10 largest developers control 70% of supply. They withhold land to inflate value; while 80% of residential permissions are granted, half remain unbuilt and 900,000 permissions, as my hon. Friend says, are outstanding. If just 10% of those were finished every year, the Government would be close to or on target. That raises two critical questions. First, is the problem with the system, or with the building firms that are abusing it, maybe because of the foolish laws being put in place? Secondly, do we need to scrap the current system and potentially face the law of unintended consequences, or do we need to reform it?

I think the Minister and I can both agree that the market is failing first-time buyers. The answer is not greenfield sprawl or unachievable targets, but a new

generation of community-based, affordable housing, accompanied by creative rent-to-buy schemes accessible to first-time buyers in existing communities, whether in city, suburb or countryside.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the detailed work he has done and the figures he has shared. Does he agree that this is not about the national figure, which many Members on this side of the House fully support and want to see built, but that the test of any good planning system is whether it reflects the true geography of an area and fully takes into account the need to protect things such as national parks, to take care of floodplains and the inability to build on them, and to make full use of brownfield land?

Bob Seely: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and I agree wholeheartedly.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done supporting communities such as mine in Totnes in south Devon. He talks about the need for a plan to be reasonable, but it also has to be realistic for our communities. He has also just mentioned engaging communities and ensuring that there is a community spirit about the way in which we develop. It was our party that pushed forward the idea of neighbourhood plans, and neighbourhood plans must be enshrined in the development of housing across the country.

Bob Seely: I agree with my hon. Friend and thank him for his intervention.

I will now make a few brief points about my constituency. The Government tell rural England that it needs to do its bit, and the Isle of Wight has a story that is similar to many others. Since 1960, the population of our beautiful small Island has grown by 50%—not 15%, but 50%. In the same period, the populations of Newcastle, Sunderland, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, and Stoke-on-Trent have all declined, not relatively but in absolute terms. The message from many parts of Britain is that we have been doing our bit for decades, and levelling up is about other people now doing theirs. The new standard methodology simply does not make sense for the Island. It is based on local income calculations, but housing demand in my patch, and others, is driven by other factors—in my case, the migration of retirees from across Britain.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, particularly because he emphasises the localism that comes into question. Areas such as the Isle of Wight are distinct. Kent is also distinct. Does he agree that local control exercised by local councillors at county, district and borough level is exactly where this should lie?

Bob Seely: I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend. The good folks who retire to the Isle of Wight use assets. They use cash from house sales, not income, to buy. Therefore, affordability criteria based on income make little sense and artificially inflate our housing need by 70%. Our targets have little to do with our need. The indigenous population of the Isle of Wight is expected to decline by 11,000. Official figures show that all our population growth until 2034 will come from

those who are 65-plus, either indigenous or retirees. It is great that we have retirees—don't get me wrong—and I look forward to being one, one day. However, the demographic imbalance damages our society as well as our economy. For the first time in 50 years, we need the White Paper to prioritise Islanders, young and old, and not primarily to build for a mainland retirement market. I have yet to meet a single Islander who disagrees with that agenda.

We face exceptional housing constraints. We have our own housing industry. As a legal baseline, our housing industry can build 200 to 250 units a year. We have managed 350 units in the past few years—not affordable, and almost all on low-density greenfield estates that damage our tourism economy. The Government might as well be asking us to lead a moon landing programme, for all our ability to deliver either the current targets or the new ones. We are being set up for failure, and like other Members, I find that difficult to accept. If the Minister wishes to build for young Islanders, I will show him where and how to build, and I will tell him what we need. The answer is not low-density greenfield sprawl, or the numbers demanded. The Isle of Wight Council and I are at one on that.

Time prevents me from going into other reasons such as infrastructure, all of which are made worse by the Island's electricity, sewerage, water supply and hospitals, which are under pressure. In 40 years, we have had a 50% increase in population, and we had half a mile of dual carriageway, and some cash last year to tinker with the wrong roundabout in Newport. Our 1938 rolling stock on Network Rail will now be upgraded to stock from 1970, which I suppose is modernity of a sort.

Anthony Mangnall: I am sorry to have two bites of the cherry, but—

Mr Speaker: Order. For people on the call list to have one intervention is pushing it a bit, but to have two is a little discourteous, given the amount of people who also have major constituency interests. If the hon. Gentleman wants to go ahead, fine, but he will go down the call list.

Anthony Mangnall: Fine, Mr Speaker, but my hon. Friend is making an important point about the need for infrastructure. Our manifesto said that it would be “infrastructure first”.

Bob Seely: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, as well as you, Mr Speaker. In general, whether we represent suburbs or national parks, islands or cities, there is worth in the beauty of nature and place. We cannot keep ramming in housing without damaging our stewardship of the world. We must think long term, and not just until the next election. The poet Tennyson and the painter Turner did not come to the Island because it was convenient; they came because it was beautiful and it inspired them. That is one reason why the Island is an UNESCO biosphere reserve. Our beauty has an economic as well as a moral value. Visitors spend half a billion pounds a year on the Island, and the greater the urban sprawl in the name of random algorithmic targets, the greater the damage to our economy, our quality of life and the intrinsic worth of our landscape and natural beauty. I fear that long-term overdevelopment in some parts of Britain is now destroying the things we love.

[Bob Seely]

As I am keen to get as many other people in as possible, I am just going to make a couple of points on the White Paper, but I will speak for no more than another three minutes or so. There is good stuff in the White Paper, but I fear the Government have not made the case for why the current system should be scrapped, as opposed to reformed. What are the unintended consequences here, and is the way to stop building firms land banking to give them more land with which to land bank? I am not quite sure that that makes sense.

Here are some ideas that a Conservative Government should follow, in my humble opinion. They should stick to the levelling up agenda; if not, shire Tories will be furious and red wall Tories betrayed. They should legally exhaust brownfield sites before greenfield is allowed; give communities the right to ban low density greenfield development; strengthen, not weaken community engagement; respect the rural, suburban and, indeed, city natures of a place; and develop a plan-led system. Above all, we need to change the incentives. If the Minister wants a sustainable future, let us be radical: put VAT on greenfield sites and provide financial incentives for brownfield sites; make developers pay council tax on undeveloped plots—that will get them focused; incentivise small developers to build out small plots or build above shops, where there is much more popular support for unused buildings; free up Government land for large-scale projects, but let us make it beautiful and respect the work done by Sir Roger Scruton and others; and, potentially in London, tighten the rules on foreign buyers who leave property empty and ban offshore shell purchases.

The White Paper needs to herald an era of sustainable, greener development in significantly greater harmony with the world around us. I hope this will not be a missed opportunity, and for that reason I support this supportive motion.

12.1 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), not least because it means that I am second on the grid for once. I notice that there are 55 Conservative Back Benchers hoping to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, no doubt all to heap praise on the Government's overhaul, or shall we say overturning, of the planning system—not only in the White Paper, but in the consultation and the changes to permitted development rights.

These certainly do bring many disparate expert practitioners to the same conclusion. The president of the Royal Institute of British Architects says that

“these shameful proposals do almost nothing to guarantee the delivery of affordable, well-designed and sustainable homes... they could also lead to the creation of the next generation of slum housing.”

The Campaign to Protect Rural England says that the “acid test for the planning reforms is community involvement and on first reading, it's still not clear how this will work under a zoning system.”

The Mayor of London says that it

“will be a disaster for London and will ride roughshod over communities and locally elected representatives. It will mean fewer social and affordable homes being built every year, poorer quality housing and local people left with out-of-place buildings and no opportunity to have their say.”

Shelter says:

“Section 106 agreements between developers and councils are tragically one of the only ways we get social homes built these days, due to a lack of direct government investment. So, it makes no sense to remove this route to genuinely affordable homes”.

Is anyone happy? Yes, developers are happy because it slays their opponents—the provision of affordable housing and local democracy, and in the time I have I want to touch briefly on those two points.

Removing the locus of the public from individual applications destroys half a century during which local communities, either through their elected representatives or directly, have been able to influence the built environment—the very substance of where they live. I do not know about other Members, but I regularly speak at my planning committee. I am engaged with about 30 schemes at any one time. I meet—now, I Zoom—residents and I make representations to developers on their behalf. Councillors do the same, and there are the formal powers that a local authority has. However, this is not just about elected politicians. I have the most amazing amenity societies, such as the Hammersmith Society, the Fulham Society, the Hammersmith and Fulham Historic Building Group and many ad hoc groups. Between them—not only using their own skills and expertise, but through judicial reviews and planning consultants—they make a real difference, and stop the worst excesses of the state when it is brought to bear locally. I can think, in the last 10 years, of the campaigns we fought to stop the demolition of Charing Cross Hospital, the West Kensington estate—750 good social homes—and Shepherd's Bush market. We have a history in this country of mistakes made by top-down planning. Look at the destruction of communities and charities that occurred in the '60s and '70s. A lot of political capital is expended on stopping things happening. I do not regret a moment of that time, but I do regret that those powers will now be taken away from local communities.

The Government have a terrible record on affordable housing. The removal of section 106 agreements, which, as Shelter says, is one of the few methods of getting affordable homes, the exemption up to 40 or 50 units allowing developers not to include affordable housing, and the permitted development rights will together destroy a majority of the very limited provision for affordable housing that we have.

We need subsidy. We need developers to stop sitting on a million approvals that should already have the green light. We need the Government to actually work to incentivise and enable the building of housing. It is a red herring to say that the planning system is preventing that.

These are appalling proposals, which will make misery for our communities, and I hope that Government Members will also oppose them.

12.6 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate on a very important subject, and on his excellent speech.

We need to build more homes; the Government are absolutely right about that. We need to level up across the country; the Government are right about that, too.

But the problem with the algorithm on housing numbers is that it does not guarantee the building of a single extra home and, far from levelling up, it forces more investment into London and the south. That is a mechanistic approach and it is ill-conceived.

We need to reform the planning system. We need to ensure that that planning system sees the right number of homes being built in the right places. But we will not do that by removing local democracy, cutting the number of affordable homes that are built and building over rural areas. Yet that is exactly what these reforms will lead to. We do need, as I said, to build more homes, but we will not do that by forcing local authorities to grant more planning permissions to developers so that they can build more homes to bring the price down, because developers simply will not do it.

The Government need to think again, and they need to understand the impact that their proposals will have throughout the country—an impact that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight so ably set out. But I want to focus on my constituency. For the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, the housing target will go up by 21%. Given a previous planning inspector's decision, most of those homes will be in Maidenhead, not in the Windsor part of the constituency, and there is already an implication that green belt needs to be built on. But those numbers are less significant than the increase that is faced in the part of my constituency under Wokingham Borough Council. That council, over the past three years, has seen the delivery of homes over and above its target, but its target of 789 homes per year is now to be more than doubled, to 1,635 homes per year.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour in Berkshire agree that councils such as Wokingham Borough Council and Bracknell Forest Council should be given some credit for delivering against mature local plans, and that very well run councils like them are best placed to understand the local requirement, instead of having national targets imposed on them?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on those points. What seems to be happening is that if councils have delivered in the past—and they deserve to be congratulated on that—they are being forced to deliver even more in the future. Yet, by definition, if you have delivered in the past, you have less land on which to deliver in the future. It just does not seem to make sense, particularly when those who have not delivered are being rewarded by lower target numbers. That is the opinion of parish councils and town councils across the Wokingham area, including those in my constituency—Charvil, Remenham, Ruscombe, St Nicholas Hurst, Sonning, Twyford, Wargrave, and Woodley town council, part of which covers my constituency. They have urged the Government to think again, and to ensure that a realistic and manageable plan is put in place, that is achievable and does not create more problems than it solves.

I say to the Minister that one of the strongest arguments, if not the strongest, against this new housing algorithm—I would have thought that the Government might have abandoned algorithms by now—is that it simply does not deliver a single extra home. We want those homes to be built, but one of the problems that we see at local level is that developers just constantly put in planning

permission applications. What we will see is not homes being built, but more planning permissions being built up by those developers.

One of the difficulties is that councils often find that, because of the way the five-year land supply is calculated, they reject planning permission and it is then allowed on appeal because there is not a five-year land supply. Why not count previously granted planning permissions in the five-year land supply, giving developers an incentive to build them out, because otherwise they would not get planning permissions in the future?

What the algorithm does is build up planning permissions; it does not build houses. As Cox Green Parish Council in my constituency has said:

“The real block to delivery is the developers’ appetite to build at a level which will affect house prices and their profit margins.”

It says of the Government’s approach:

“All that this strategy will accomplish is to further undermine public confidence in the planning system.”

My second objection was about the fact that this does not level up, as was very ably set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight. What the new algorithm does with regard to levelling up is fly in the face of the Government’s flagship policy. My point is simple: these proposals do not deliver on Government policies. The Government need to think again and come back to this House with a comprehensive proposal for a proper debate and—dare I say it?—a meaningful vote.

12.11 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. Our planning system is critical to delivering on some of the most important challenges that we face: the desperate need for new homes to address the housing crisis and the urgent need to tackle the climate and ecological emergency, decarbonise our economy, and protect and enrich our natural environment. To meet those challenges, our planning system must establish a clear and ambitious vision for our country, set high standards for design and environmental performance, give strong protection to the buildings, spaces and landscapes that people value, and actively support the involvement and engagement of a wide and diverse range of voices in decision making.

Yet the Government are not concerned with reforming the planning system so that it can address those urgent challenges. They are applying the usual, natural Tory instinct to deregulate, regarding the planning system as red tape to be cut through rather than as a valuable toolkit that must be further improved to secure genuinely progressive, sustainable planning outcomes, particularly in terms of the provision of new, genuinely affordable homes.

The reforms proposed in the planning White Paper are undemocratic. They will reduce the opportunity for local people to have a say on planning applications in their neighbourhood. By front-loading community involvement to the plan-making process, communities will be denied the opportunity to have a say on the specifics of new development. Under the Government’s plans, communities will have a say on only the broad designation of the site and an identikit pattern book of designs. There will be no opportunity for residents to have their objections heard and considered by a democratically accountable planning committee.

[Helen Hayes]

The Tories are going even further than that, and removing the need for planning permission altogether in a wide range of circumstances. In 2013, the Tory-Lib Dem coalition Government relaxed planning rules to make it possible for empty office or light industrial buildings to be converted into housing without the need for planning permission. That policy resulted in some of the most appalling housing the country has seen this century, in unsuitable locations with no amenities and often not adhering to even the most basic standards of design.

The coronavirus pandemic has shone a bright light on the injustice and inequality of our housing system. The Prime Minister's instruction to the country on 23 March to stay at home had profoundly different consequences for people depending on their housing situation. The experience of lockdown for people living in cramped, overcrowded, damp housing was worsening physical and mental health, family relationships strained to breaking point, an impossible environment for home schooling and, for those in the private rented sector, often the fear that as soon as the eviction ban was lifted they would be made homeless. Lockdown provided, lest we need it, a stark reminder of the public health consequences of inadequate housing, and the urgency of delivering the genuinely affordable homes that my constituents in Dulwich and West Norwood and so many people across the country desperately need.

The Government's planning reforms allow building owners to convert shop units into housing without the need for planning permission. That will not result in high quality, affordable sustainable homes or thriving town centres and high streets; that will result in high streets and town centres across the country being undermined by gaping holes in their retail frontage, reducing further the critical mass of reasons for shoppers to visit and support local businesses, when across the country our high streets and town centres face a perfect storm of economic challenges.

We need a vision for every part of our country, based on high quality, low-carbon jobs, distinctive and special town centres at the heart of every community, good public transport connections and genuinely affordable homes. We need a planning system with the core purpose of addressing the climate emergency, delivering the new homes we need, improving public health and involving everyone in shaping the future of their neighbourhood to deliver those vital outcomes. The deregulated, identikit, box-ticking, algorithm-generated mess set out in the White Paper will not.

12.15 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare an interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council and the North Northamptonshire shadow authority. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on bringing this matter to the attention of the House. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who is always a doughty champion for the concerns of her constituents. She is quite right to say that the proposals will reduce local say in where new housing is built.

I want to bring to the attention of the House the malign impact the proposals will have on North Northamptonshire. For those hon. Members who do

not know, North Northamptonshire comprises the boroughs of Corby, Wellingborough, Kettering and the district of East Northamptonshire. Several years ago, they came together to establish what I think was the country's first joint planning unit, which has been co-ordinating housing developments over the past decade or so.

Despite that innovation in planning, the key proposal in the Minister's recent consultation is to change the method for assessing local housing need. That will have a devastating impact on the ability to deliver new houses in North Northamptonshire, because it will mean that across the four boroughs and districts we will now have to deliver a staggering 3,009 homes every year. That is 72% more than the adopted joint core strategy requirement. At the moment in Corby, 506 houses a year are required under the existing formula. That will rise to 799. In Kettering, presently it is 526. That will rise to an unrealistic 853. In Wellingborough, 348 goes up to 535. In East Northamptonshire, presently it is 457 a year. That will go up to 821. Across North Northamptonshire, it will go up from 1,837 a year to 3,009 a year. On average, since 2011 we have only managed to build 1,640 a year and at the very height of the market the maximum that was achieved was 2,100, so the target is completely unrealistic and undeliverable.

It is a shame that we are faced once again with another mutant algorithm and I urge the Government to reconsider. The local housing needs assessment for North Northamptonshire under the formula means that my local area will be the highest for any authority in the Oxford to Cambridge spatial development arc. That is completely nonsensical since North Northamptonshire is right on the edge of the arc and all the towns in our area are only regarded in planning terms as of secondary economic importance.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): My constituency, like my hon. Friend's, contains areas of high urbanisation as well as areas of environmental sensitivity. Does he agree that those factors should be taken into account in the final algorithm the Government are currently consulting on?

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents, who are lucky to have him, and he puts his finger on an essential point, which I hope the Minister will take cognisance of.

I have to say frankly to the Minister that the scale of growth proposed is not supported by local people. It will work against any kind of community consensus on the local plan that North Northamptonshire will begin to prepare in 2021 to replace the existing plan. If the Government proceed with the revised standard method they propose, at the very least, the formula should be amended to remove the affordability adjustment in high-delivering areas such as North Northamptonshire, where housing land constraints are not the major factor in local house prices. Just like in the Isle of Wight, house prices have been driven up in North Northamptonshire because of incomers being attracted to the local area, due to the existing councils delivering high-quality housing. It is not related to local income growth levels.

The Government are being sent a clear message by Back Benchers today that they have got this wrong and they need to think again. I will leave the Minister with

the words of the local joint planning unit, which said that it is “inconceivable” that new house building could be accelerated to an average of over 3,000 a year

“unless the local economy is transformed and there is a firm commitment by Government... to make substantial and sustained investment in infrastructure and services.”

The Government have been warned: they need to think again.

12.20 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): People in Wirral West care passionately about the environment and the green belt and green spaces that make Wirral West such a beautiful place. They care, too, about nurturing wildlife habitats and addressing the urgent issue of climate change. In some areas, flooding is an issue that really brings that urgency home. There are numerous campaigns to protect green belt and green spaces, including campaigns against proposals to build a golf resort in Hoylake, against building on ancient glebe land in Rectory Road in West Kirby and against the development on green belt right across Wirral West. I fully support my constituents in those campaigns.

Currently, people have a legal right to oppose specific developments when individual detailed development applications are submitted, but this Government seek to do away with all of that. The Government’s White Paper is a developers’ charter. It sweeps away the right of local people to challenge developments on their doorstep, tearing up democratic rights that have been there for over half a century. The Government have plenty of rhetoric about putting local communities at the heart of the new planning system, but they have failed to deliver—in fact, worse than that, they are taking rights away.

Instead of improving local accountability, this Government seek to take away the voice of local people. Constituents have written to me with their concerns that, under the Government’s proposals, while local people will have a say about whether their areas will be growth, renewal or protected zones, once those zones are set in place, they will have no say at all on individual developments. I share their serious concerns. As the Wildlife Trusts have pointed out,

“public engagement in planning tends to be when individual detailed development applications are submitted and the impact that these will have on local people, infrastructure and nature becomes clearer. Under the new system, public engagement at this point would not be possible.”

We on the Labour Benches oppose this attempt to prevent local people from formally objecting to inappropriate developments in their neighbourhood. We want to see local people given a bigger say on the development of their neighbourhoods, not less.

The Government have said that their reforms will ensure that

“Valued green spaces and Green Belt will continue to be protected for future generations, with the reforms allowing for more building on brownfield land.”

However, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England has warned that the Government’s proposals

“would weaken protection of green space designated for growth or renewal, and offer no additional safeguards for those earmarked for protection.”

According to the CPRE, the Government’s proposals give “no consideration to the importance of undesignated green spaces near to where people live.”

There is no guarantee on protecting existing green spaces and green-belt land.

The Government’s proposals risk delivering a dystopian nightmare in the heart of our communities, with no regard to the consequences for the environment, flood risk, climate change or quality of life. Let us be clear: our country desperately needs new homes, and it needs those developments to be on sustainable and brownfield sites. The “Planning for the Future” consultation document refers to driving up the provision of affordable homes, but the Royal Institute of British Architects has described the Government’s proposals as “shameful”, adding that they will

“do almost nothing to guarantee the delivery of affordable, well-designed and sustainable homes.”

RIBA says that the proposals

“could also lead to the creation of the next generation of slum housing.”

Could there be any more indictment of the Government’s proposals? The Government must respond to the outcry from people right across the country and drop these reckless proposals.

12.24 pm

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The debate is timely for my constituents, who are currently fighting unsuitable and unsustainable housing developments across my West Yorkshire constituency. Developments include those on Netherton Moor Road, in Crosland Moor on Blackmoorfoot Road, in Pentlands on New Mill Road and on Wesley Avenue in Netherthong. Labour-run Kirklees Council’s local plan is leading to greenfield sites being dug up for unsuitable and unsustainable developments, much against the wishes of local people.

A few weeks ago, I joined hundreds of local residents from Netherton in opposing a 250 Persimmon Homes development on a picturesque greenfield site on the edge of their village. The planning committee met virtually, but I and other objectors were cut off halfway through our statements. The development was controversially passed, despite legitimate concerns about flooding, highways and local ecology and wildlife. Residents were left feeling angry and disenfranchised by the planning committee’s shoddy conduct. The scale and nature of the development is unsustainable for the community of Netherton, and there are similar concerns about plans for 700-plus houses in Crosland Moor.

That is why I have deep concerns about the “Planning for the Future” White Paper. We need more local control and democracy when it comes to developments. We need more protection for green spaces—not just green belt, but the green fields that give my village communities the much-needed green lungs.

It is all well and good making a local plan sacrosanct, but what if it was rammed through against local wishes and has not got the confidence or support of local people? We have lost confidence in Labour-run Kirklees on planning. Hundreds of houses keep being imposed on village communities, with no regard for highways provision, school places, doctors’ surgeries and so on. When there is section 106 money, supposedly for local amenities and infrastructure, it just disappears into a general pot. We need more local involvement and more opportunity for local people to scrutinise and have their say on local planning applications. More priority needs to be given to brownfield sites and building more affordable

[Jason McCartney]

homes to meet local needs. So often, the developments are for four and five-bed executive homes, crammed on to greenfield sites.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), I have huge concerns about the supposed new housing formula or algorithm. I think we have all had enough of algorithms this year. I fear that the new formula will allow developers to build hundreds of new houses on much-valued greenfield sites in my patch.

My constituents and I are fed up with the wrong houses in the wrong places. The White Paper should give local people a bigger say in the future of their communities. I agree with CPRE. Let us create a planning system that delivers genuinely affordable homes and protects locally valued green spaces, while boosting trust and participation in the planning system of the future.

12.28 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Our planning system is not fit for purpose. I am sure that Members across the House agree that it needs urgent reform, but the Government's proposals do not offer the solutions for my constituents in Vauxhall.

The current system is already weighted in favour of local councils and developers, and the Government now want to frontload local participation towards development of the local plan and away from individual applications. That will not benefit my constituents, many of whom are already involved in long-running battles to protect their quality of life and the homes and communities that they love so much and have invested in over so many years. In my experience, that is not about nimbysism or vexatious complaints. My constituents have valid, legitimate concerns and I support them in their battle to ensure that their homes, streets and neighbourhoods are not blighted by unsympathetic developments. We must remember that, at the end of the day, when the planning officials and developers have left, they are not the ones who have to live in the area and suffer the consequences of the developments. My constituents and your constituents will. I have seen long-established, stable communities broken up and divided by inappropriate planning decisions, whereas if we invest in and contribute to these communities, they will create the social cohesion and collective wellbeing we all want.

Last week, I had the pleasure of welcoming the Earl and Countess of Wessex to Vauxhall City Farm in my constituency. They were able to meet local schoolchildren, the staff and the trustees in the community centre, which was built by a section 106 development. The Government have promised that the new planning system will develop at least as much affordable housing, if not more, yet we have no detail on what mechanism will replace section 106 and the community infrastructure levy.

It goes without saying that it is fundamental for our democracy, whereby we govern with consent, to allow constituents and local residents to have their say at every stage of the process. Does the Minister agree with the 61% of Conservative councillors in a recent poll who said that the reforms will make planning less democratic? We must ensure that we think about the

people who are going to bear the brunt of these proposals, and I ask the Minister to come back with an answer to that.

12.30 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I declare an interest as a sitting member of Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council. There is much to be supported in the planning White Paper, not least the Government's commitment to a brownfield-first strategy, the recognition of the need for appropriate supporting infrastructure for new developments, and higher design and style standards.

Several brownfield sites in my constituency have lain derelict for years, while developers have been enabled by the local authority—Wigan Metro—to build a tide of houses on green fields over the past decade. It is vital to prioritise brownfield above the green belt or greenfield sites to regenerate northern constituencies such as mine, but we must be diligent in ensuring that standards are upheld. Too often we see traffic impact assessments for planning applications that belong in the fiction section of the local library. On one site in my constituency, West Leigh Waterfront, Wigan Council seems hell-bent on seeing development on land categorised in part as having a level 3 flood risk. Such bad practice must be driven out of the system.

As for infrastructure, my constituents regularly point out that, aside from the East Lancs road and the sadly unfinished Atherleigh Way bypass, which has languished in such a state for roughly 35 years now, we have broadly the same main roads as we did in 1750. So furious are my residents at this state of affairs that a recent planning application for 69 more houses in the village of Lowton generated over 1,500 objections from residents sick of congestion and poor air quality. Councils such as Wigan Metro must be held to account for those failures.

Turning to the design, style and type of new properties, too many developments suffer from shoddy so-called affordable or social housing thrown up in a corner, often almost as an afterthought. They often manifest as undesirable, cramped two-storey blocks of flats—too small for young families seeking their first home and unsuitable for single pensioners seeking to downsize from a three or four-bedroom council house to a council bungalow. We must ensure that social and affordable homes are of the right quality, even if it means they are fewer in quantity.

That brings me to my final point. Across my constituency, from Astley to Atherton and from Pennington to Golborne, grave concerns have been expressed about the sheer number of houses proposed by Wigan Council, whose only concern seems to be an insatiable thirst for the revenue generated by new properties without any regard for infrastructure. The number of properties that local authorities set out to build must be both reasonable and sustainable, and I worry when I hear talk of 300,000 houses being built, mainly because I fear that Wigan Metro may volunteer to build every single one of them.

12.34 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Let me start by declaring an interest: my husband is a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute.

I particularly wish to speak about the parts of the White Paper that propose to phase development areas into three categories—“growth”, “renewal” and “protected”. That proposal gives rise to great concern in Richmond and Kingston. I cannot think of any part of my constituency that would fit neatly into any of those categories. My constituency contains some beautiful neighbourhoods of great architectural and historical interest, and all of its neighbourhoods have their own distinctive features. We would like to see some of those preserved and some regenerated, and there absolutely is space for growth, but it would be difficult, even in the most environmentally and historically sensitive sites, to say that no possible development could be permitted in an area. Equally, I cannot think of a site where unrestricted growth, with plans going unanalysed, would be at all desirable. Any kind of development can be agreed only by considering each site on its merits, which is why I am really opposed to the idea of adopting this phased approach to development.

I welcome the White Paper’s emphasis on local plans, which are good for local communities. I agree that local authorities should do more to get local communities engaged in that. In Richmond Park, we have already embraced the opportunities offered by local neighbourhood forums and their recognised role in developing neighbourhood plans. I wish to pay a particular tribute to the North Kingston Neighbourhood Forum, which I have been a member of in the past, and its incredible chair, Diane Watling, and to the very successful neighbourhood forum that was built up in Ham and Petersham. They have made a great contribution to local planning and thinking, and more of that sort of thing should definitely be encouraged.

We heard earlier from the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) about some of the issues with our current planning system that stem from private developers getting permissions that they then do not build. That provides part of the evidence of market failure in some aspects of our private sector housing development, and if we were able to encourage more public sector housing development, that could provide the competition we need to see prices driven down, and improvements in carbon standards and in building quality. That is much more the sort of change we need to see in our planning, rather than the ones proposed by this White Paper.

Above all, I wish to emphasise that taking decisions away from local communities makes it much harder to co-ordinate local services. In Richmond Park, we have a proposal for a development on the old Stag brewery site in Mortlake involving 1,275 homes. The massive issue we have with that is that it is no longer going to be decided by the local authority, because it has been called in by the Mayor, and the local authority no longer has oversight of what kind of development is taking place in its area. It cannot think about the impacts on schools, health services and transport, and the development will be difficult to integrate without that overview.

The proposal to allow building upwards without permission will be a massive problem in my constituency, where we have some beautiful views. Turner painted one of the views from the top of Richmond hill. We have so many views that we want protected and we need the

powers in our local authority to prevent building upwards—I am very opposed to that aspect of the White Paper.

12.38 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): On my way here in the mornings, I go past an abandoned factory site right next to the railway station in Market Harborough. It was given planning permission in 2004, yet it is still derelict. If I were Housing Minister, I would be focused on giving councils the powers and tools they need to unstick those stuck sites long before I came to look at anything to do with this housing algorithm. What people object to in my constituency is not that we are building more houses. We have a quarter more houses in the Harborough district than we did in 2001—we are pro-development. What people object to is being told that in the Harborough district we will double our housing target, whereas Leicester’s will be slashed by a third, with its decrease perfectly cancelling out our increase, no extra houses built and the only thing being achieved is a sprawling outwards of that city, despite the fact that it is full of brownfield land that should be developed first. This is the wrong approach.

This formula is flawed in so many different ways. It is driven by population forecasts, so we see what is sometimes called the “Matthew effect”, named after the gospel, whereby to those who have, more shall be given, meaning that because somewhere took houses before, it is going to get even more now. That is fundamentally flawed, a fact acknowledged in the consultation, yet it is there in the formula and still driving a big part of the problem.

The second part of the problem is that the so-called affordability in this formula is nothing of the kind. It is a ratio of workplace-based median earnings to median house prices. What we are doing—because people commute into cities, and that makes their workplace-based earnings look higher and affordability look better—is comparing the house prices in an area with the incomes of people who do not live in that area. That cannot be intellectually defended and it is one reason why we see the anti-urban bias in the formula.

We are then using earnings to house price ratios. Geoffrey Meen at the University of Reading—one of the doyennes of this field, whose modelling is always used by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—says that this “reveals little information” and that

“increases in the ratio over time do not necessarily imply a worsening of affordability... For these reasons, price to earnings ratios are rarely advocated in the academic literature”,

and yet we are using them. If instead we were to look at total income—not just earnings—and all housing costs, including the costs of people who are social renters and private renters, who are more common, of course, in cities, we would see that the housing problem, the affordability problem, in this country is concentrated in cities. That is where the poll shows that people are worried about there not being enough housing, so instead of sprawl we should have a more urban-focused approach.

A sprawl-focused approach is bad for the environment and for the Prime Minister’s target of net zero. In cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester, the household emissions are 15% lower than the national average. The transport emissions are 35% lower—there is more walking, more cycling and more public transport—and yet they are

[Neil O'Brien]

being asked to deliver 37% fewer houses than they are delivering at the moment, so that is bad for the environment, exercise and health, because people who live in cities walk twice as much as those who live in villages, and there is more cycling. It is also bad for productivity because the places we are slashing the housing targets for are those that are seeing faster productivity growth. Successive Governments have been trying, whether with the northern powerhouse, the modern industrial strategy or now levelling up, to target urban growth to get the productivity of our great cities going again. That is what we were trying to do instead of just going back to a south-east-centric, shire model of growth and what we had in the 1980s.

In conclusion, Ministers should fundamentally rethink this formula so that it actually hits the target. Yes, we should build more houses, but we should do it in the right places. We have to reflect the advantages of building in urban areas and bring in caps, because if we have huge increases, the pace of change is part of the problem. People do not object to change. They do not object to more houses—in fact, they want more houses—but they do not want to see the character of their area change overnight. That is why we need caps back in the formula. There are so many good things in the White Paper. Ministers have so many good things to talk about. I wish we could solve the issue of the flawed housing algorithm, so that we can get on with doing all those good things.

12.42 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The latest Government figures show that about 2.5 million planning approvals have been granted by councils since 2009-10, but only about 1.5 million have been actioned, so I am not sure that councils are the problem. In my constituency, the lack of action to tackle developers who breach planning laws is a major concern: 97% of residents in my local survey want a quicker and easier system to address that. They also want a right of appeal on applications that have a major impact on the character of their area and change of use applications.

Raising the minimum number of houses before a developer contribution applies will not improve the supply of affordable housing. Affordable housing need does vary. It is a major issue in Birmingham, and I feel that thresholds would be better determined locally based on local needs.

The abolition of section 106 payments could rob local communities of benefits that they derive from new developments. Government statistics released in November last year showed that nearly half of all affordable homes in England delivered in 2018-19 were financed or part-financed through section 106 agreements. We need to know that the infrastructure levy will be at least as good as the system that it is replacing.

Like the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), I have concerns about proposals to allow additional storeys. I am not clear whether that will apply to student accommodation, but I say to the Minister that there is already an issue in my constituency with landlords who build unsuitable extensions. They are basically seeking to cram in as many rooms as possible, and I am really worried about the safety implications of this proposal.

Finally, reducing the planning timescale from 16 weeks to eight weeks will reduce the time for people to marshal objections to unwelcome proposals. In fact, moving all the notifications online will further curtail local awareness of proposals, so I wonder whether the Minister wants to look at that again.

12.45 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): We were elected 12 months ago on a platform of building more houses, and we need to build more houses; there is no doubt about that at all. But we were also elected on a platform of rebalancing our economy, protecting our green belt and looking after natural England. I am afraid that although I praise many elements of what the Minister is trying to achieve, this housing algorithm is completely inconsistent with the promises we made a year ago.

If we go ahead with a housing approach of the kind that the Government are setting out in the algorithm, the reality is that economic growth, the brightest and best people in society, and opportunity will continue to be sucked into the south-east of England. That is exactly the opposite of what this country needs to achieve. If we are to be successful in the future, we need to be more like countries such as Germany, where the economic centre of the nation is not in one place, but is spread out over a number of successful and prosperous cities. If one walks around the cities of the midlands and the north, it is clear that there is not a lack of developable land and opportunity; there is plenty. There are endless relics of more prosperous times for those cities in the past that can and should be regenerated for the future. The solution is not simply shoehorning more and more into the south-east.

I represent one of the constituencies that will be directly affected if the Government go ahead with this policy. The Office for National Statistics says that our future housing need is around 250 new houses a year. The previous target, which was unsustainable, was already 579. This algorithm would push the number to over 600. I represent an urban constituency where the available land is either green belt or parkland, but there are some opportunities. I have myself put forward to the local authority a proposal to build several thousand new houses by remodelling the commercial areas. We can build on the strengths of the area, which has one of the finest creative universities in the country, and create new business premises in an integrated urban village environment where people can live close to work. We can develop a new generation of digital and creative businesses. It is a real opportunity, which we can deliver.

We can deliver new homes—new homes aimed at first-time buyers and at the right demographic to keep people in our area—but what we cannot do is build 600 new houses a year in perpetuity. It is simply not possible. Actually, it is possible: by tearing up the manifesto commitments that we made a year ago and building all over the green belt. Even then, we will still probably need to build lots of tower blocks, which goes diametrically against the commitments we made about protecting communities.

In a nutshell, this policy simply cannot work for a constituency like mine. It is impossible to deliver it and keep the promises that we made to the electorate, and it is the wrong thing to do. It will have the counterproductive

effect I have described of sucking economic activity into the south. It will destroy the environment in the area I represent. It will congest already congested infrastructure. Of course, it is also based on so many false premises, because, as with many other constituencies in Surrey, the algorithm forgets altogether the income from commuters by focusing on affordability, so it misses altogether the incomes of the most prosperous people in my area, who work elsewhere and get the train into the City in the mornings. It only focuses on the incomes of those who live and work in the constituency.

I praise the Government's ambition. I simply say that the mode of implementation—the route they are currently following—is the wrong one for the country and for the constituency I represent. I urge the Minister, who is a good man, to think again, because I regret to say that, even as a loyal supporter of the Government, I cannot support this policy in its current form.

12.49 pm

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this debate and for his superb speech. I used to be generally against development, but since being elected I have come to see just how difficult it is for young people to get on to the housing ladder, and I have changed my views. Many of my constituents have changed theirs, too. However, like them, I have grave reservations about these proposals.

My first reservation is about the undermining of local democracy. In 2017, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) introduced new housing targets. The people of Farnham in my constituency, to give an example, did the right thing; they did not really want more houses, but they found the places to put those houses. Councillor Carole Cockburn undertook painstaking local consensus building, and 88% of the town supported the neighbourhood plan in a referendum. But then we were told the local plan was not ambitious enough, and they had to go back to square one. Once again, they painstakingly found where to put new houses and put it to the people of Farnham, and this year they got 95% support. Now they are about to be told that that is not good enough. Increasingly, it looks like the Government are not interested in what local people think at all. I urge the Minister to think about the impact of showing contempt for local democracy. In the end, if we want more houses, we have to carry people with us.

My second concern is about affordable housing. The average income in my constituency is £39,000, much higher than in many parts of the country, but the average house price is £447,000, so someone needs to be on £60,000 to afford an entry-level house. That is way out of the reach of a nurse, a police officer or a teacher. However, simply increasing the housing targets does not help them, because the price of new stock is set by the price of existing stock, and all that happens is land banking, which is why in my constituency currently, only 28% of all the housing permissions granted are actually being built out. These proposals will make that problem worse, not better.

Finally, I am concerned for the local countryside. Some 77% of my constituency is green belt, area of outstanding natural beauty or area of great landscape value. Upping the housing targets by more than 20% will

inevitably force the local council to encroach on those beautiful areas. People sometimes say that the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 was a sort of mistake in planning policy, but we should be incredibly proud that we can drive in virtually any direction from this place for an hour and be in the most beautiful countryside. That is an enormous achievement for our country. One of the best things about our country is the beauty of the English countryside, and we lose that at our peril.

In short, I am concerned that these proposals do not recognise serious risks. The argument for building new houses has been won, but what is on the table risks eroding local democracy, reducing affordable housing and encroaching on our beautiful countryside. The Government must think again.

12.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). I agree with what he said.

Anyone who has ever visited York will understand why we must not make a mistake with planning. Layers of history lie under our streets. The minster dominates our landscape and the green strays reach into the heart of York. "Planning for the Future" threatens that, it threatens our economy, and it will not meet our housing need.

York tells the story of planning. The inspirational Rowntrees, through their work on poverty, moved York's slums into the UK's first garden village, New Earswick, more than 100 years ago. They built spacious and well-proportioned houses with gardens, with allotments and amenities nearby. The Rowntrees met need and provided the very best of housing.

This is not just about numbers; it is about the quality and type of housing. It is so necessary to address those things, but the White Paper does not. Seebohm Rowntree held the first land inquiry in 1912, which sowed the seeds for the first Housing Act in 1919, based on his experience in York. The White Paper removes local democracy, residents' voices, and investment in amenities and the environment. It is a handout for the development industry, not a hand up for those in housing need.

Before I highlight a couple of failings in the White Paper, I want to dig underground. Archaeology is the springboard to York's tourism. All archaeological interest, perhaps, as yet, unrecorded, undesignated and currently undiscovered, must have time for a full desk and field evaluation. Getting planning wrong, as was the case with the Queen's Hotel in York, which was built in 1989, left archaeologists unable to prove where our Roman forum lay. That resulted in an obligation being placed on developers in 1990 to safeguard archaeology in the planning system. The White Paper "Planning for the Future" puts this back, as planning permission goes before archaeological evaluation in both growth and renewal areas. It is turning back the clock on planning by 30 years. Our economy depends on good archaeology. It must come before planning decisions.

We have a housing crisis in York. Last year, only 22 homes for social rent were built in my constituency. More houses were sold under right to buy and, with need increasing as we speak, more than 1,775 people are on the housing waiting list. This White Paper does not address that need. Homelessness, overcrowding, poor placement of housing and, of course, extortionate costs

[*Rachael Maskell*]

for the private rented and purchase sector means that people and skills are being moved out of our city, skewing our economy as a result, so we must address the housing need before us. With local determination removed, there is automatic outline planning permission in growth areas, presumption in favour of development and renewal in infill areas, and no obligation in those areas on affordable housing. That is wrong and a huge mistake by the Government. We will find out about this only through digital portals, which excludes those who are not connected but read the printed planning proposals in York's press. We must keep those traditional methods in place.

Finally, let me turn to York Central. The Minister and I need to talk. This densely planned housing development will choke off York's economic opportunity for the future, building luxury houses for the investment market rather than building houses to meet the housing needs of my city. That will further skew the housing economy. "Planning for the Future" is not what our city needs. What we need are proper plans, which involve local people shaping the future of York for all.

12.56 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Central (*Rachael Maskell*).

In the late 1990s, as a new MP, I led a campaign in my constituency against plans by John Prescott, now the noble Lord Prescott, to impose top-down centralised targets for house building in Ashford. I would have been shocked and depressed had I thought that, 20 years later, I was having to make all the same points about proposals from a Conservative Government.

Of course, life moves on. The latest manifestation of the gentleman in Whitehall knowing best comes with that essential 2020 attribute—an algorithm. People have said enough about algorithms already today, but I say gently to the Minister that algorithms are a tool for mathematicians, not politicians. I object to this particular algorithm for two reasons: in principle, because a national algorithm destroys local decision making; and, in practice, because it will bake in over-development in the south and under-development in the north. It is exactly the opposite of what the Government's excellent levelling-up policy should be about. This will not be levelling up; it will be levelling over green fields with concrete.

I know what links the bad proposals from the 1990s with today's bad proposals: the eternal view of the Department, which has changed its name many times but which is always fixed in its views, that we do not build enough houses because local councils pay too much attention to nimby residents. That may be true in some places, but I can absolutely say that it is not true in Ashford, where local plans for years have designated building new homes in the high hundreds and where the physical evidence can be seen in new estates. The same is true all over Kent. My neighbouring colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Maidstone and The Weald (*Mrs Grant*), for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (*Gordon Henderson*), and for Dover (*Mrs Elphicke*), make the same point. We are in danger of turning the garden of England into a patio.

What is frustrating is that I agree with many of the things that the Government are trying to do: we need to build more homes; we need to design them better; we need to take more account of the countryside, and that includes green fields and not just green belt; and we need to continue with levelling up. The instincts are right, but it is the execution that is wrong. I have stood at that Dispatch Box often enough to know that it is all very well to hear people around you moaning, it is what should be done instead—that is an entirely reasonable thought. The answer for the Minister is that, instead of taking away local powers, the Government should be looking at the number of planning permissions given that do not result in houses being built. The Secretary of State has said that it is his ambition to build 1 million new homes during this Parliament. CPRE—I should declare an interest as vice-president of Kent CPRE—has pointed out that there are about 1 million housing plots with planning permission in this country. The Secretary of State could achieve his very laudable ambition without granting a single extra planning permission in this Parliament.

At this point, it is usual to blame greedy developers for land banking. I do not blame them. If anyone had a product that they could sell for £200,000 this year and £250,000 next year, they would delay selling it as well. It is the system that is wrong. There are any number of ways of changing the system. We could have planning permission lasting only for a few years. We could charge council tax, perhaps at punitive rates, on the plots of houses that are not being built. There are a number of other ways that I know people could think of to make sure that planning permissions actually turn into homes, because it is new homes that we want.

There are good parts of the planning Green Paper, but if the Government do not respect local input into decision making about numbers as well as zones, the good will be thrown out along with the bad. I urge Ministers not just to prepare a few minor concessions, but to start again, scrap the algorithm, work with local communities, not against them, and give us the planning policy the country desperately needs.

1 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I say to the right hon. Member for Ashford (*Damian Green*) that one thing has changed more frequently than the title of the Department, and that is the Housing Ministers themselves. In the past 10 years, we have had 10 Housing Ministers, five of them lasting less than six months. That suggests that the importance given to housing is not that great, but it is certainly the biggest issue for my constituents.

I would therefore like to be positive and suggest 10 things that the Government might want to take on board. No. 1: I know it may be contrary to some people's view, but not all green belt is green. I do not mean the genuinely rolling fields, ancient woodland or areas of outstanding natural beauty; I am talking about the car washes, the waste plants and the scrublands that no one would ever dream of calling green. There are 19,334 hectares of unbuilt green-belt land within a 10-minute walk of London train stations, where there is enough space for 1 million new homes.

No. 2: it is time for the Government to say to councils, to the Ministry of Defence and to the NHS that it is mad to sell their land simply to the highest bidder.

Instead, the first consideration for any piece of publicly owned land should be: can it be used for housing and can it be used for social housing?

No. 3: I am glad that the Government are now interested in modular homes, but there is a catch—they are not having them until 2030. Where is the ambition? Modular homes are cheaper, quicker to build, more efficient, and ready to go right now.

No. 4: it was reported last year that there are now more than 216,000 long-term empty properties in England. That is equivalent to 72% of the Government's annual new homes target alone. Let us get some money out there and get those homes back into use.

No. 5: How can it be right that one in 10 adults owns a second home while four in 10 do not own their first? Even the stamp duty holiday is exacerbating that difference. It is not a sustainable future for our country or our democracy.

No. 6: we must deal with land bankers. In 2019, the FTSE 100 house building companies were sitting on a land bank of more than 300,000 plots between them. If we add in the rest—the FTSE 350 house building companies—then the collective land bank was a staggering 470,068 plots. Yet they completed just 86,685 homes in the previous year. Where is the punitive or preventive action on land banking?

No. 7: what about the reducing the proportion needed to buy into shared ownership, to let families and single people buy at 5%, 2% or 1% rather than the 20% floor, giving them the opportunity to buy and to get in on home ownership with a smaller deposit?

No. 8: why are we not incentivising the development of more specialist accommodation for the elderly, improving the options available for older people, while releasing some of the current housing stock?

No. 9: why are so many properties across our capital owned internationally, rather than by Londoners and people in this country? Let us take ideas from some other countries. I am really sorry; I am not going to get to No. 10, Madam Deputy Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: "Go on!"] All right!

No. 10: I have offered all these questions in a similar situation back in other debates. Everybody has good ideas, so let us just get on with it.

1.4 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for all the work he has done on this and the Backbench Business Committee for granting time to debate this important matter. With dozens of colleagues still wanting to speak, I am going to make just three short points. First, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) made the point that people now accept that we need more homes and that, for affordability, we need to increase the number of homes, including in constituencies such as mine in East Hampshire. However, we need to look not only at the aggregate number but at the mix, and for people on low incomes, focusing on the median price may be largely irrelevant.

My second point is about the algorithm, or, as we used to call them back in the olden days, the formula. With any such exercise, of course it is right to look at the input elements and to consult on whether they are

the right ones, but it is also right to look at what happens when we run the numbers to see what the output is. If the outcome of that formula or exercise is to entrench historical patterns of population growth and contraction, in tension with the Government's correct emphasis on levelling up and in some ways in direct contradiction to that emphasis, we need to look afresh at the formula.

Steve Brine: Is not the other problem with the formula or algorithm, or whatever we call it, that it seems to have a tin ear to constituencies such as my right hon. Friend's and mine, where vast parts of the districts in question are covered by national parks? The algorithm does not seem to consider that.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is bang on. That is going to be my third point, which I will come to in a second.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend and I share a local planning authority, which has already been meeting the five-year supply requirements, but the algorithm means that the numbers will go up by 50% in our constituencies. Does he think that is acceptable?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend makes a good point—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members are getting very upset about the clock, and I apologise, but do not worry, I will come in at well under four minutes anyway.

My third and final point is indeed about national parks. The local authority that I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) is bisected by a national park. If a housing needs assessment is made on the basis of the local authority area but it then has to be heavily disproportionately implemented in the area outside the national park, that causes two sets of problems. First, inside the park, in areas such as Petersfield and Liss, housing will become more and more unaffordable over time. Also, just outside the national park, in places such as Alton and Four Marks, there will be a great deal of pressure and it will be difficult to keep up in terms of service provision. If two different parts of an area have very different constraints, a separate housing needs assessment should be made for each one. The Minister is a good Minister and a good man, and I take it very much at face value that this is a consultation. I encourage him and the Government to think again about some of these important matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We seemed to be having a bit of a problem with the clock. I will keep my eye on the four minutes, so if hon. Members would like to look at me, I will gesticulate appropriately when it gets towards the end of their time.

1.8 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The "Planning for the Future" White Paper states that it plans for local communities to have control over where development goes and what it looks like, in its plan to build the homes this country needs. I wholeheartedly agree that local communities should have a great deal more agency regarding building developments in their area. However,

[Apsana Begum]

given the recent activity in my constituency of Poplar and Limehouse, I very much doubt the Government's credentials in this field.

The controversy surrounding the Westferry Printworks development in my constituency illustrates that this Government's priorities lie in serving billionaires rather than the interests of local people. I believe that viability assessments must be undertaken centrally, and published, for sites on which affordable housing is contested. By allowing private companies to undertake their own assessments, controversies such as that of Westferry Printworks become built into our housing system.

In a BBC report, one of my constituents was quoted as feeling "cheated" and described local people as losing out as a result of the Westferry Printworks development. That controversy is indicative of a failing housing system—a system that has led many in my constituency to live through the covid-19 pandemic in overcrowded housing.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Apsana Begum: I will not.

Some of my constituents now face the threat of homelessness with the evictions ban lifted. One fifth of residents in my borough are paid less than the living wage of £13,650 a year. We have one of the highest average rents in London, while at the same time having some of the highest levels of poverty in the entire country. Clearly, the combination of high rents and low wages is toxic. With the Government's already patchy pandemic support being withdrawn, we are facing the possibility of mass homelessness this winter.

It is therefore shocking that now, of all times, our Government plan to further empower private property developers, instead of turning their efforts to building social housing to deal with a winter homelessness crisis that is around the corner. Since the Prime Minister was elected, the Conservative party has received £11 million in donations from property developers. This White Paper is evidence of the influence such developers have bought themselves from our Government, with many referring to the Government's planning reforms as a developers' charter.

For many, job security has been hit hard by the covid-19 pandemic. With the Chancellor's financial support being gradually withdrawn, many are facing a winter of uncertainty. To illustrate the point, it has been reported that there are now more food banks in the UK than McDonald's restaurants. That statistic is an indictment of the lack of care that our Conservative Government have for so many in our society. Can the Minister explain what adjustments will be made to proposed housing reforms to combat the oncoming homelessness crisis that we may face?

Algorithms used by the Government have been in the news for negative reasons recently. The A-levels fiasco illustrates the flagrant lack of regard the Government have for the welfare of those living in less affluent areas. This White Paper sets out the use of a new algorithm and compulsory standardisation methodology that will dictate the allocation of new housing across local authorities. The planning and development consultancy Lichfields has reported that the algorithm will result in greater

levels of planning allocation in rural areas as compared with built-up metropolitan areas. With areas such as Tower Hamlets facing some of the greatest housing poverty in the UK, the algorithm looks set to be another design to further engrain the social inequalities we face in this country.

1.12 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Test Valley Borough Council historically has delivered new housing numbers above target and produced local plans in accordance with local need. Indeed, that is unlike the neighbouring borough of Eastleigh, where my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes), who cannot be here today, is pressing the Liberal Democrat council to do the same. Test Valley has played its part, but sees the projected increases from the algorithm as punishment for having done so. My contribution to today's debate is most certainly not about saying, "No more house building here"—we need more houses—but it is about saying, "Let local councillors who have a track record of delivery carry on delivering."

The Housing Minister and I were first elected in 2010 on a manifesto that committed to no more top-down housing targets, and this algorithm looks suspiciously like a top-down target. I have urged both residents and local councils such as Wellow parish council, which wrote to me just this week, to complete the "Planning for the Future" consultation, because the sensible voices of Romsey and Southampton North must be part of the process. I urge the Minister to heed their thoughts, because Wellow has been working hard on delivering a neighbourhood plan, recognising the special situation of a village that sits part inside a national park, in close proximity to sites of special scientific interest and flood plains.

Test Valley has benefited in recent years from the development of specialist housing communities for older people. First homes are crucial, but so are last homes, which free up larger properties for growing families. Under the current system, when calculating numbers, such homes count for only 0.7 of a dwelling. I am not sure how anything can be 0.7 of a home; it is either a home or it is not. As the population ages, we need to find solutions for those who wish to downsize. I urge my right hon. Friend, when he is inevitably reviewing this algorithm, to also look at how he can resolve that arithmetic anomaly.

Like so many colleagues in the Chamber this afternoon, I want measures to tackle land banking. The Romsey brewery site has extant planning permission, but Stanborough Developments is building on it at a glacial pace. I was 11 when the last brew started, and will confess to our being a few decades on from that. Powers against developers who blight brownfield sites in that way must be retrospective and they must be powerful; perhaps, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) suggested, there could be punitive council tax for houses not yet built.

But what Orwellian horror might pattern books produce? What about innovation, imagination and variety? If we must have new homes, can we not just entrust local councillors to decide what has kerbside appeal and what does not?

Turning to green belt, in Hampshire we have none, save for a tiny corner in the south-west, which is designed to prevent the spread of the urban conurbation of

Bournemouth—a town, of course, in an entirely different county. Please will my hon. Friend the Minister think a little about those counties that have no green belt and might want to introduce some?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) spoke of the need to repurpose commercial areas. We know that, over the course of the past six months, town and city centres have been left like ghost towns and there is an enormous amount of commercial property that we would need to use a great deal of imagination to bring into residential use. That is the sort of innovative planning for the future that we need: one that will recognise the planning needs that exist and the numbers that are needed, but provide new ways to solve them, not simply a mathematical one.

1.16 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I also speak as a sitting local councillor in my constituency of Luton South, which has many examples of the housing failures of 10 years of Tory rule, most recently brought to my attention by the Luton Community Forum. A lack of genuinely affordable housing and the changes to housing benefit and universal credit for the under-35s have increased the reliance on houses of multiple occupancy. Alongside that, an increase in unfit housing created through permitted development rights means that young people and families alike are living in substandard, overcrowded conditions, and house prices and private rents are unaffordable for many.

So what is the Government's response? Cutting red tape—or, as I would say, removing regulations and democratic oversight that are there to ensure good-quality, safe homes. As the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects put it:

“Deregulation won't solve the housing crisis.”

The Government's “Planning for the Future” White Paper fundamentally misdiagnoses the cause of and the solutions to the housing crisis in this country. Affordable homes are no longer affordable and there are not enough homes being built, particularly for social rent.

In Luton, we have more than 13,000 people on our council house waiting list. Luton Council's affordable housing document identified an unmet need of around 5,500 affordable dwellings, but there are few brownfield sites left in our town to develop. The duty to co-operate has been more or less ignored by neighbouring authorities.

Alexander Stafford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Hopkins: I will not.

Key workers in Luton are struggling to pay rent. The very people we have relied on throughout the pandemic to keep us safe—our nurses, hospital cleaners and care home staff—are going home worried about keeping a roof over their own and their families' heads. The latest End Child Poverty statistics state that 46% of children in my constituency live in poverty. The Government should be supporting children out of poverty, not consigning them to it. A good-quality, secure home is the foundation for a stable future.

While the planning system needs reform, simply slashing red tape ignores some of the real issues, including the fact that there are no measures to force developers to use unimplemented planning permissions or to tackle land banking, as has been raised by many hon. Members.

As the Local Government Association has noted, nine in 10 applications are approved by councils, with more than 1 million homes that were given planning permission over the last decade yet to be built. That must be addressed.

The White Paper's front-loading of public participation towards involvement only in the development of the local plan and away from individual applications strips local people of their voice in planning applications and removes their ability to formally object to specific developments in their area. It deprives elected councillors and communities of the ability to shape their area and shifts the balance in favour of developer choice instead. If we want to build back better, local people and communities must be at the heart of any regeneration and they should have more say, not less.

Scrapping red tape and extending permitted development rights will lead to the creation of more slum housing that does not meet the needs of local people. My constituents in Luton South desperately need a better plan, one that will build high-quality, genuinely affordable and environmentally sustainable homes. The Government have fallen way short of the mark for a decade as the situation has worsened, and now they have presented the House with a plan that takes local communities further away from planning decisions, while lining the pockets of wealthy developers. The Government need to rethink.

1.19 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who gave a splendid exposition of the issue facing us today. Although she is no longer in her place, I also agree with the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) in wishing that our planning Ministers stuck around for a bit longer than they have done during the past 10 years. I do not wish to sentence my right hon. Friend the Minister to a life sentence in that post, but he is perfectly able at the job, and I look forward to his continuing for a great deal longer than his predecessors. Indeed, I can think of no greater comparison than with the late Lord Stockton, who was a man of great erudition and charm—qualities that my right hon. Friend possesses in abundance. No doubt he will be an equally successful housing Minister.

Contrary to the impression we sometimes give, Conservative Members are not bananas, and we are not part of the “build absolutely nothing anywhere near anybody” brigade. On the contrary, we believe in building more homes but, as many colleagues have said, we must build them in the right places. I congratulate the Government on their “brownfield first” policy. In my borough of Stockport, that policy made the council realise, once it was compelled to have a proper look around, that it could make available not 7,000 housing units on that type of land, but 12,000 units.

I thank the Minister for the work that Homes England continues to do. I recently visited a site off Melford Road in Hazel Grove—a partnership between Viaduct Housing, Stockport Homes and Mulbury. That is a great example of where pump priming from Homes England can make brownfield sites more viable for development. I am also pleased by the greater focus on rezoning, particularly of commercial and retail sites into housing, which is welcome.

[Mr William Wragg]

Arguments about planning will continue to rage for as long as we have an adversarial system for that. We will continue the argumentative process until we abandon the notion that planning is something that is done to communities. Instead, we must revive and continue to champion the neighbourhood planning process, which actually gets more built because communities are bound together and see the need for such a process. In my constituency, neighbourhood forums are developing in Marple, High Lane, Mellor, Marple Bridge, Mill Brow and Compstall, and that is exactly the sort of thing we should encourage. Those plans need even greater strength in law, so that we can allow homes to be built where communities see a need for them.

The land-banking disgrace must be remedied and rectified quickly: 1 million units with permission remaining unbuilt is not a story to be proud of. Given the number of times that I have made this speech I might sound like an old record, but the green belt is sacrosanct. We must protect it. The vagaries around the Greater Manchester spatial framework and the Greater Manchester combined authority must be tackled, but I reiterate that the green belt must be protected intact, as it is now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues can see, a large number of right hon. and hon. Members still wish to speak, so after the next speaker I will reduce the time limit to three minutes.

1.23 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): There is an elite dining club called the Leader's Group. It is a club exclusively for the super-rich, and to join, a member must donate £50,000 to the Conservative party. The Conservative party's website described the group as follows:

"Members are invited to join the Leader and other senior figures from the Conservative Party at dinners, post-PMQ lunches, drinks receptions".

I say "described" because, as *The Daily Telegraph* reported this summer, that page has been quietly removed from the website, along with the public register of the Prime Minister's dinners with the party's biggest donors. I draw attention to that because some of the Conservative party's biggest donors are property developers who qualify for membership and will have attended those dinners.

In the Prime Minister's first year in office, the Conservative party has received more than £11 million from these super-rich developers and construction businesses. These people have paid small fortunes to sit down with Cabinet members and talk about whatever it is property developers like to talk about with the people who decide planning policy.

Eleven million pounds is a lot of money, but with this planning White Paper, property developers have really got value for money, because this White Paper is a developers' charter. It strips away local oversight of planning applications, with pre-approved applications in designated zones getting an automatic green light. It significantly raises the threshold needed for section 106 requirements, meaning that for many more projects,

developers will not need to provide any contribution to affordable housing. It cuts away what the Government call red tape, rather than learning the lessons from the Grenfell Tower tragedy on the need to raise standards and safety.

As the Campaign to Protect Rural England highlights, these plans contain no new protections for green-belt land. Instead, they "weaken protection" of undesignated green spaces in what the CPRE describes as a "free-for-all for development". The president of the Royal Institute of British Architects has described these plans as "shameful" and said that it could lead

"to the creation of the next generation of slum housing."

Housing charity Shelter says that social housing could face "extinction" under the plans, and dozens of my constituents have told me of their concerns. They fear for our green spaces under these plans, which too often are already under threat. They know that the priority for Coventry is council and genuinely affordable housing, but these plans do nothing to meet that need.

This White Paper is a good deal for developers, but for the thousands of people in Coventry struggling to pay rent, for those on the housing waiting list desperate for a decent home and for people praying to get on the housing ladder, it is a rotten plan set to make a bad situation worse. Instead of a planning system rigged for developers, it is about time we put human needs first. That means the biggest council house building programme in generations, with local councils given power and funding to build the homes that people need. It means rent controls, and ultimately, it means a Government who are no longer in the pockets of developers.

1.27 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) has been listening to the debate, but every single Conservative Member has talked about having the correct development, not unrestricted development across the country.

In the short time I have, I want to concentrate on my constituency of Dartford, which is a very proactive builder. It has allowed a garden city with some 7,500 homes to be built on a brownfield site in Ebbsfleet, which is less than 25 miles from the Chamber of this House. I defy any Member to point to a development within 25 miles of the Chamber that has been put forward with less controversy than the garden city in my constituency. Dartford Borough Council has ensured that it has exceeded its target each and every year.

Last year, Dartford built a new house for every 104 local residents. In comparison, Manchester built one house for every 389 people, and the West Midlands built one house for every 1,340 people, so we cannot be accused of not playing our part. However, I regret to say that our housing target has been doubled under these proposals, while neighbouring Gravesham has seen its housing target halved. Anybody who knows Gravesham will vouch for the fact that it is a fairly similar local authority, with a similar mix of rural and urban areas. It is very Kentish in its identity, and it has similar house prices. We therefore find ourselves in a bit of an odd situation.

It is essential that we bring local authorities with us in proposing these targets. Good, proactive councils that are already building houses need to be encouraged, but

there is a danger that they will get rebuffed and end up building fewer houses as a consequence. I spoke to the leader of my council, Jeremy Kite, who rightly said that house building is at its best when there is an enthusiastic relationship between the developers, the local authority and local residents. We need to ensure that that continues.

People are realistic about housing targets. They realise, because they have youngsters at home who want to get on the housing ladder, that we need to build new houses. However, that is only up to a point. What they fear is a lack of infrastructure. Too often, we see Governments of all persuasions sitting down and working out where we can put more houses and more developments on brownfield sites and how we can get local authorities to build, when people at home are saying, “How can I get an appointment with my GP? How can I get a place for my child in school? How can I get to work through the congested roads?” We need to also concentrate on infrastructure.

1.30 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I hope the Minister for Housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), who I thank for listening to my concerns, will forgive me if I do not praise the good bits in his White Paper because I do not have time to do so.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said, the real flaw in the White Paper is that all it does is concentrate building in the south-east and central south of England, and does not use the Prime Minister’s wish to build more infrastructure to level up the rest of the country. It is really important that a planning system is led by a well-executed local plan. National designations under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, such as national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and green belt, must be respected. I understand the Government’s desire to increase housing numbers. A formula or algorithm, if correctly designed, will always achieve that. However, it is a very blunt instrument that does not take into account any local variations.

There is a particular concern about the proposals, which deal with housing needs and requirements, between the housing numbers in the planning White Paper and the algorithm in the change in the planning system consultation. The Cotswolds is 80% AONB and the current local plan requirement is 420 houses. The proposed standard method would deliver a staggering 1,209—a 188% increase. If every area had a 188% increase, the Government would hugely overrun their targets. The current formula will certainly increase the numbers, but will not necessarily improve affordability. It is fundamentally wrong to automatically assume that affordability will be solved in areas of housing demand. It is the housing mix, not housing numbers, that is really important. In my area, what we need are small one and two-bedroom flats to meet the aspirations of first-time buyers, the young and the old. As was so ably said by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), if we stripped out those people who live in the Cotswolds but who do not actually work in the Cotswolds, both housing prices and average salaries would come down immeasurably and we would be nearer the average on affordability.

The current proposals need to be looked at seriously. The present proposals would so radically alter a very special area like the Cotswolds, which the planning system to date has so successfully protected, that future generations and visitors alike would not be able to visit the area and see why it is so special.

1.33 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): In East Surrey, neither I nor my constituents deny that we need more homes. When I go to schools, I ask the teachers if they live in the area. They rarely do and that is a red flag. It comes up in my work, from trying to increase GP provision, to talking to families who tell me that their children cannot afford to live nearby. We should not be blind to that, as it is the current residents who will suffer from worse public services and local investment if working families cannot thrive.

However, I seriously worry about centrally designed housing numbers which do not take into account a local area’s capacity to deliver. This is a legitimate concern raised with me by many with longstanding expertise, such as Councillor Jeremy Webster, who led the work on the Caterham local neighbourhood plan. There is already a major worry in my area about a potential new village or town of thousands of homes in south Godstone. As one of the highest green belt areas in the country, in East Surrey we do have particular constraints and they must be taken into account. If high housing targets have to be met by ’70s tower blocks in Oxted or Horley, we will not be serving old or new residents well.

I would, however, like to thank the Secretary of State and his team for their many conversations with me about my concerns. I hope we can hear more from them about their assurances about the numbers, in particular that the final target will be decided with local input and that only once that has been agreed between local and central Government—only then—will that number be binding. That would be an important distinction between a binding number, foisted on local communities by central Government, and a number that is agreed by local people but which then local government is bound to deliver—in other words, a binding build-out rate, which I would support.

My second point is that it is mission critical that we address the very legitimate concerns of local residents. In the past 10 months alone in this job, I have heard from families in Smallfield facing raw sewage overflow inside their homes because the sewers are at capacity; from the Caterham Flood Action Group, which says that inadequate maintenance and overdevelopment has put existing homes at risk of flooding; and of the sore need for investment in our creaking junctions on local roads. My East of Surrey local economic taskforce, which I run with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), is working to ensure that we get our fair share of funding for infrastructure. We are making progress, but there is much more to do.

Lastly, it is crucial that the new homes live up to our Conservative principles of creating places that strengthen rather than erase family ties. I would like to see an ambitious, affordable target of 40%, with homes that are affordable for local people, and earmarked for local people and key workers. We must also ensure that they meet local design aspirations, to create communities

[*Claire Coutinho*]

where families can thrive, and that they come with the required infrastructure and provisions to protect and enhance our natural environment. I believe that that can be done, and look forward to ongoing conversations with the Secretary of State, and his Ministers and team, to ensure that that is the case.

1.36 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I have three minutes, and I will be brief. I welcome the fact that the Government are looking at this area. I stand by the manifesto commitment to increase housing numbers by 300,000. That is the biggest change in 70 years, and we therefore need to get it right, which is why I also support today's motion to have further debate and a meaningful vote.

Even before covid and the consultation, planning was the biggest issue in my inbox. Hinckley and Bosworth is a good example of where planning gets into difficulty and the current system fails. Since being elected, the current Lib Dem-led council has no local plan or five-year housing land supply, which has resulted in speculative, piecemeal development with no overall strategy. That causes community resentment and loss of trust in the aspects of planning.

Hinckley and Bosworth has a willingness to take its fair share of sustainable development across Leicester and Leicestershire, but the following must be considered: under the formula consultation, I am concerned that the affordability aspect is based on work-based median house prices, which appears to assume that residents live and work in the same place. That is demonstrably not true in a constituency such as mine.

I am also concerned that the formula does not take into account infrastructure, as has been mentioned, or future plans for generations. My working days in this House are spent trying to improve the infrastructure of the likes of the A5 and such schools as Hinckley Academy. We need to future-proof our communities, and of course our country, especially in areas such as mine that attract young people, as they will have families. That will only compound the issue of a low level of amenities and connectivity.

Finally, on the algorithm, the numbers produced by Lichfield analysis suggest that Bosworth increases its numbers by almost 100% of current levels; yet Leicester city, only 15 minutes away, is dropping by 30%. How can that be levelling up? How can that be building better? How can that be using brownfield sites and quality regeneration? One solution that I might offer is to turn the formula to use 0.75% of housing stock, not the 0.5% in the consultation.

We can consider the algorithm, but we must also consider the White Paper, of which I am broadly supportive. Zoning and the pattern books are a great asset. The key thing is to ensure that who makes the decisions in zoning and patterns is transparent to local people. Without that, I fear that councils will be unable to bring residents with them.

The final thing to mention is neighbourhood plans, which need to be simplified and strengthened. The likes of Bagworth, Stoke Golding and Market Bosworth are all at various levels trying to do so, but they need to know that the Government are listening to what they are saying. Otherwise, what happened to localism?

1.39 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to speak in this important debate because this subject is so important to my constituents. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing the debate. It is so vital that we have this moment to discuss this issue and make sure that our constituents' voices are heard.

Planning applications are probably some of the most difficult issues we deal with as MPs. The impact on residents of the suggestion of an inappropriate development or a speculative planning application causes so much stress and anxiety. I know that residents living on Moorland Road in Leek are absolutely beside themselves with fear at the moment about what a planning development could be like if it is given permission to be built just behind their homes, with inappropriate housing included in that development.

One of the things that has helped people cope with and live with planning is that it is the decision of local councillors, and that it is a matter for those locally elected representatives to make the decision. I, like the Minister, was so proud to be elected in 2010 on the premise, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), that we would have no top-down targets: we would get rid of the regional targets, we would get rid of central targets and we would let local people decide what housing needs there were in their areas. I have been absolutely thrilled to see neighbourhood plans being worked on in my constituency. I pay great tribute to Staffordshire Moorlands District Council for the years and years it has put into developing and finally agreeing, only in the last few weeks, a local plan. The local plan has local support, which will allow us to have the right housing mix in the right locations in the constituency.

How can it be the case that the Government are now considering any form of central target, because that is exactly what the algorithm looks like? I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who I know is a very good man and a constituency neighbour of mine—well, not a next door neighbour, but a fellow Staffordshire MP—that he should trust the good folk of Staffordshire to make the decisions and trust the good folk to elect the right people to make those decisions. He should take the measures that were suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) to deal with land banking, which causes so much grief and anxiety, and please just stop this algorithm.

1.41 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Very many colleagues have said that we need to build more houses. I am not sure that that is entirely true as a statement in itself, because the planning system so far has built very many houses. What it has not done is built the kind of houses that young people in particular can afford. It has failed in that respect, and it has also not built enough houses that older people may want to downsize into, thereby freeing up the houses they formerly lived in.

As was so very eloquently said by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), we are building the wrong kind of housing. It is pointless to come to Gloucestershire and build more three, four or five-bedroom houses. All

that does is concrete over green fields and perhaps the green belt—and, indeed, floodplains in my area, which I will come back to in a minute—and create all those extra car journeys, and we are still left with the problem. We are left with the problem because the wrong kind of houses have been built.

Of course, house building has never—certainly not in living memory—been a free market, open-ended way of going about business; there have always been restrictions. However, when the state does intervene—and I think it is right that the state should intervene in planning—it needs to make sure that it intervenes in the right way. We really do need to get away from this idea that having more and more houses therefore makes them more affordable. In itself, it will not, and we have to think beyond just the housing numbers.

We also have to think about where we are building those houses. Tomorrow, I am visiting an area in my constituency called Twigworth, just north of Gloucester, and I am visiting it because very many fields there are flooded. That is not unusual in my constituency, which has always had a lot of flooding problems. The reason for visiting those flooded fields is that there are diggers on them: 500 houses are being built on those fields. It is ridiculous. If we are going to go forward with this algorithm or any other system that insists that my area builds thousands and thousands of houses, I have to tell the Government that those houses will be built in flood risk areas and on the green belt. Does that not go against the policies that this Government and the party I support also have about protecting such areas?

Councils, as I understand it from the White Paper, will be given the opportunity to designate certain land as protected, but will that protected land take precedence over the housing numbers when they are handed down by the Government? I do not think that it will. As things stand, I think that the housing numbers will take precedence. That is wrong and it goes against what we stand for as a party. We want more affordable houses, we have to redefine what “affordable” means and we have to build them in the right places.

1.45 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I recognise that the building of homes is one of the biggest domestic issues facing our country. I am unashamedly pro home ownership. A large contingent of people in my constituency are stuck in the rental trap, and I want to be able to provide them with the opportunities that many other people in the UK already enjoy. So although there is a legitimate debate to be had about housing numbers, the much wider issue is about the tenure of those homes and where they are built.

For years, we have seen a planning system that has been far too rigid, a lack of adequate and appropriate land coming forward, and huge disparities in the way applications are being considered, not only between different authorities, but within individual planning departments. We have to recognise the inadequacies of the current system. Houses being built predominantly by large house builders puts huge pressure on local services immediately. At the moment, there is little involvement for small and medium-sized builders in the planning system. We are faced with constant section 106 delays, which help no one and delay the building of

affordable housing. We also have to wait a long time for infrastructure because we have no community infrastructure levy to provide some of that support.

Although there are some challenges within the White Paper, I broadly welcome the idea of highlighting areas for growth, renewal and protection. I also recognise the need for local authorities now to engage with town and parish councils to bring forward land for development and areas for protection. We recognise the challenges in Cornwall, which relate to people getting deposits; people being stuck in the rental trap; the cost of land; the lack of land; and the lack of housing opportunity.

What do I want to see in the planning Bill? I know that the Minister probably has not heard that he has not been ambitious enough, but on self-build I encourage him to go further. We have an opportunity to get serviced plots in some of these areas where people do not have ownership of any land or housing. Why not give young people in Cornwall the opportunity to be able to build their own home? That is what I would like to see, as I am excited about what that might mean. The Minister has done an excellent job in bringing forward 30% discounts for key workers, and for local people in communities such as mine. For the first time in a long time, we are able to see a design guide in Cornwall—since the abolition of the district councils, there has been no design guide, and we have seen samey, identical houses that are all standard and no character—and I am excited about that.

I have a couple of questions to ask in the 20 seconds I have left. How will neighbourhood plans that have been out to referendum fit in with land allocations? How will the 30% discount work in terms of developer contributions? Will the community infrastructure levy be ring-fenced? Let me finish by saying that I cannot turn a blind eye to the people in Cornwall who want a plot of land or a house.

1.48 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Some time ago, I had to make a three-minute speech on why it was not a very good idea to spend £179 billion on putting our deterrent into four submarines, when I found myself as the only Conservative putting forward that view. So I am delighted that on this incredibly important issue of planning the tide of opinion seems utterly uniform: the presentation that the Government have made is potentially catastrophic for delivering the wider objectives of Government policy. I have listened to this debate, and to the great speeches made by a former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and all the glitterati of colleagues elected at the same time as me and after who have made a better fist of their careers in this place than I have. They have demolished the algorithm, in particular, and the basis on which it is done.

However, it is necessary for us to come forward with proposals for the planning system that will help the Government to deliver. Some of the analysis is fine. It points out the lack of public trust in local planning authorities. It is hardly surprising—we are engaged in a massive con trick. Local planning authorities do not have any real authority over planning because they are given a number that they have to deliver; they then find that the number has been changed by fiat at the Dispatch Box by up to 30%, and now—in the case of Reigate and Banstead—they find that the number is going to double again. That is quite remote from local circumstances.

[Crispin Blunt]

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) is now my neighbour and we shall fight London's green-belt cause determinedly, but we need a fundamental reappraisal of the whole planning system. I used to believe that if local planning authorities were given the real power, those that wanted to protect quality of life and the environment and were elected to do that would promote development in areas of the country where economic development was a more important priority, thereby leading to a natural levelling-up process. I am afraid that that is simply not good enough. It is certainly not good enough if the Government produce a target on the scale that they have done and expect it to be delivered.

The introduction to the White Paper refers to the Dutch and German planning systems. It is quite a good idea to have a look at them. We have to move to a national plan-led system. We must achieve what we are trying to do with the northern powerhouse and deliver for the honour of all our new colleagues. That means that inner cities in the north of England must have the kind of vision that we have already provided. We did it in 2000. It was a Labour Government and Lord Richard Rogers co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group for London's green belt with me.

The message to the Government is that we have got to think again. We must think strategically about how we will deliver national and local plans and sound environmental policy.

1.51 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I want to note something for the record, which colleagues have also seen: there is not a single Liberal Democrat MP in the Chamber. I mention that because between 2006 and 2010, West Worcestershire was a Liberal Democrat target seat. I remember campaigning vehemently against Gordon Brown's top-down, Stalinist imposition of a regional spatial strategy on the midlands. I have a horrible feeling of *déjà vu* when I look at the way in which the algorithm has been approached. It seems incredibly top down.

I am proud of the fact that, under Conservative and Conservative-led Governments, we have increased house building in our country. We have managed to get it from lows under Gordon Brown to heights of nearly 250,000 units a year. I fully sign up and aspire to delivering 300,000 units a year by the end of this Parliament and to providing 1 million new homes. We are the party of home ownership and what we have done in the last decade should be sung from the rooftops.

We have delivered the dream of home ownership to so many people through incentives and bottom-up reforms. For example, I want the neighbourhood planning strategy to become stronger and have a statutory footing in the reforms that the Minister proposes. I also want the bottom-up involvement of local communities in determining their housing need to be greatly strengthened. The new homes bonus was a powerful way of showing communities the value of welcoming new building in their areas.

Let us have bottom-up reforms and Conservative principles of economic incentives for home building. Let us move away from the Gordon Brown approach

and the top-down imposition of Stalinist housing targets, and let us get a new algorithm and abandon completely the one that we have.

1.53 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I have seven points to make to my right hon. Friend the Minister. First, whatever the housing targets are, please will he ensure that they are on a manageable scale locally? For the two local authorities that cover my constituency, current targets would mean 60,000 new homes over 15 years. That would be the equivalent of building seven towns the size of the largest town, Biggleswade, in my constituency. That does not seem a reasonable burden.

Point No. 2: will my right hon. Friend please ensure that the burden is shared? No algorithm will fix the country as a whole, but equally, my local authorities have the same housing target as Cambridgeshire, which is three times the size. We are part of the Oxford-Cambridge arc and it would be better to share across the two counties.

Point No. 3: we were elected on a manifesto commitment to infrastructure first. Delivering ahead of new housing developments the GP surgeries, the schools and the roads is a crucial part of making my right hon. Friend's reforms successful.

Point No. 4: as we have heard many times in today's debate, delivering houses is essentially a contract of trust between the state, nationally and locally, and the developers who build the houses. If the developer does not fulfil its part of the contract, trust is broken and therefore we need some remedy in the form of penalties for not building planned homes when given approval.

Point No. 5: there are a number of what I call "creepy" developers who are using loopholes in the current local planning system to build housing in areas that really do not want it and where it changes the local character. Can the reforms please make sure that those creepy developers are pushed to one side?

Point No. 6: if we are going to continue with neighbourhood plans—I think it is essential that we do—they really need some teeth and they must matter.

Point No. 7: my right hon. Friend the Minister will have heard today a torrent of voices pushing in one direction, and that shows why change is so hard, but he should not be dissuaded from his central task. The planning system needs reform. He is on to something, and I urge him to work with his colleagues on the Government Benches to get it right.

1.56 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I rise to support the motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). He was quite right to praise the Government's levelling-up agenda and to offer support both for the Government's overall housing objectives and for appropriate housing development, and I join him in supporting those aims, but the key issue is how we get there.

I have concerns about the algorithm and the targets that it has produced, apparently without regard to local policy objectives, supply constraints or environmental impacts. Those concerns are shared by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bromley

and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) who, like me, represent constituencies in the London borough of Bromley. In recent years, Bromley has consistently surpassed the targets required by the local plan—typically by 10% in an average year—but the proposed new standard method would require an increase of 288% on the current local plan requirement and 252% on the rate of current delivery.

Much of the London borough of Bromley is green. Indeed, two thirds of my constituency of Orpington, which is on the south easterly edge of Greater London, is rural. The White Paper rightly seeks to retain green-belt protections—I welcome that and would oppose any attempt to water them down—but the massive targets imposed by the new standard method would lead to a situation in which Bromley could not possibly achieve the numbers required without creating a series of high-density, high-rise housing developments all over the borough. Existing family housing may well have to be demolished to find sufficient space.

Orpington town centre and outlying villages such as Petts Wood and Chelsfield, could be turned into high-density housing estates more common to central London than to rural Kent. That point is especially important because, despite Orpington being classed as an outlying part of Greater London, it is historically part of Kent and still has far more in common with neighbouring Sevenoaks than with Southwark, Camden or Islington. Having such changes forced upon local people would be the very opposite of progress. We desperately need the right number of houses in the right places with the right infrastructure to support them. Starting with an aggregate national number and retrofitting everything else around that will, as top-down algorithms tend to, lead to unintended consequences and bad outcomes.

The Government could take alternative approaches, and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight outlined some of them, as have other hon. Members during this debate. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform our country for the better, and we must not get it wrong, so I urge the Government to heed the words of hon. Members in this debate and to revisit the proposals.

1.59 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this incredibly important debate. It is also a pleasure to follow my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), whose sentiments I entirely endorse.

I want to make one central point today, which is that we must take the green belt into account when calculating housing targets. Of course we need to build houses and help families to get into their first homes, but we cannot be blind to local geographical circumstances when setting these targets. The White Paper sets out many laudable changes to modernise the planning system. It says that the green belt will be protected, and that is right, but we see no evidence that this is being taken into account in the algorithm. I understand that the algorithm reflects housing need and not a target, but it would be wonderful to hear from the Minister how the aspirations in the White Paper will be met so that we take the green belt into account, because the figures that it is suggesting for Sevenoaks are simply undeliverable.

My constituency is 93% green belt. The district is 142 square miles, of which 10 square miles are available to build on. The algorithm is suggesting that we build 12,000 new homes on those 10 square miles over a period of 15 years—10 square miles, I should point out, that are already highly developed. My local council has done a brilliant job in the last five years. It has delivered 357 houses a year, which is more than double our current target, but less than half of our new target.

In Sevenoaks, we have reason not to trust the planning inspector. Our new local plan delivers more than 600 new homes, but the planning inspector gave no flexibility for the green belt. There was no concern for protecting our local area. This is simply not good enough. Sevenoaks needs the ability to build sustainably, led by our local council, so that we have homes that local people need, but this must not come at the expense of our precious green belt.

I support the White Paper, but we must be clear how the aspirations are met in the housing targets that we are given. I hope that we will take the green belt into account, deliver on our promises in the White Paper, and trust local councils to deliver the houses that our local people need.

2.1 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I want to begin by saying that there are some positive elements in these proposals. The emphasis on a national design code and locally produced design guides is very welcome. Getting local plans in place all over the country is only going to be a benefit, and the idea that we should aim to create more certainty about what is or is not allowed is welcome. Bringing consistency to infrastructure payment values is also positive, but I am afraid that I have some real concerns about some of the proposals, and, more importantly, what is missing from them.

Let us consider infrastructure and the proposed community infrastructure levy. If payments are only made at occupation, how are we going to ensure that infrastructure is there for people from day one? I am sure that most Members here have experienced a situation where three quarters of a new housing estate is built and occupied, but the amenities promised to residents are still nowhere to be seen. We want to encourage more developments, but a lot of small developments could add up to a big impact on communities, so that must not be an absolute get-out.

I am not clear from the proposals whether we are going to fix what I see as a big part of the challenge: deciding how the funds are spent. Look at the NHS, for example. I am afraid that it is all too common for consideration of the NHS to be entirely absent from planning decisions. I am not clear how changing the levy is going to address that. I shared the incredible frustration of residents in my constituency, who saw a housing development approved by the Government despite it being against the local plan and the neighbourhood plan in a local authority with more than a seven-year housing supply. There was not one mention of the NHS in the Government's decision or the inspector's original report, despite the fact that Leighton Hospital has seen an incredible increase in demand and attendances at A&E. In fact, a recent decision by the Government around planning said that as long as the NHS has fed into the local plan, that is all that needs to be done to

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

take it into account. That shows a misunderstanding of how the NHS plans for and responds to consultations, and estimates demand locally. I would like to understand more about how these issues are going to be tackled in practical terms.

We must also be frank about the behaviour of the companies involved in the industry. As constituency MPs, we all know that too many big developers do not act in good faith or reasonably, and that they use every possible opportunity, opening or excuse to get their way. Importantly, they can afford to employ entire legal teams purely for the purposes of getting what they want, and they will keep going and going. Local planning authorities need to win their arguments every single time. Developers only need to win once. I want to touch on the suggestion that permission might be given automatically if decisions are taken after a certain length of time; I can see that becoming a favourite of developers, who will target local authorities that are behind the curve.

I recognise the desire to build more homes. That is the right thing in the long term. But my plea to the Government is that our focus should be on what is barely mentioned in the proposals, which is getting build-out rates up and stopping land banking. More than a million homes are available to people through planning permission that has already been given. Why are we going down a route that is likely to cause upset and tear up some local decision making when we could tackle the issue through that existing route?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sadly, we have to come to the wind-ups now—I apologise to the 28 Members who were unable to get in on this debate. That shows you what an important subject matter it is. With Westminster Hall now being fully operational, perhaps there will be many more opportunities for the Minister to address the concerns of Members.

2.5 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) not only for securing such an important debate, but for speaking so eloquently and passionately. I am in a strange position as the official Opposition spokesperson, as I feel as though the speech has been written for me. There is a lot of agreement across the Chamber, which I shall come on to.

These proposals have come at a time when there is a lot of talk, and rightly so, about building not just to solve the housing crisis, but as a way to boost the economy, create that stimulus and sustainable jobs and move towards a net zero target. The oft-peddled Government mantra during this covid and economic crisis is “build back better”. As has been echoed across the Chamber, some of the proposals, at face value, such as design standards, codes and quality, and neighbourhood plans being on a statutory footing, were outlined in Labour’s planning commission in September 2019, so there are some positive steps. Yet Members across the Chamber, and certainly many of our constituents and people in the housing sector, do not have to scratch far beneath the surface to discover that the very DNA of

these proposals is a shift of control, power and influence from our local communities to developers. It is a developer’s charter.

In reality, these announcements will do very little to build back better, beautiful and greener. In many cases, they do exactly the opposite, creating a framework of chaos—permitted development with bells on in terms of the statutory instruments, these monstrosities appearing in our communities, two-storey extensions on every house in every street, the green light for even more houses in multiple occupation ghettos throughout the land and, as the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), and the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) pointed out, concrete over much of London and the south-east. This is a real threat to our green belt.

Coming on the back of a decade of austerity and the current economic crisis because of the health crisis, these reforms further undermine our local councils, as has been pointed out from across the Chamber. They strip away power and finance from local planning authorities, but, crucially—very importantly—they take away the ability of local communities to have their voice heard. The zonal approach is particularly concerning because it risks creating a free-for-all where—this was again outlined by a number of Government Members—well-resourced developers can simply outplay, out-shout and out-shape our local residents and communities. Indeed, in the retort to concerns expressed by Tory shire leaders, bypassing democracy was this week described by the Secretary of State as

“at the heart of the moral mission of being a Conservative.”

I am pretty sure that Conservative Members do not actually agree with that—the very same moral mission that was applied to an unlawful planning direction in the Westferry scandal. Sixty-one per cent. of Conservative councillors think that these reforms are anti-democratic.

I have done a count but it was hard as people were moving in and out of the Chamber. Fifty or so hon. Members have spoken very eloquently for their communities, outlining similar concerns. Over 250,000 supporters of the countryside charity the Campaign to Protect Rural England argue the same. We have all had CPRE emails and its lobbying, along with that of the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Town and Country Planning Association, the Royal Institute of British Architects, Civic Voice and many more organisations in and beyond the housing sector. I ask the Minister on their behalf, what role does he believe local democracy should have when it comes to decisions about house building and community development?

The Government’s concept of good placemaking seems to be to put the decision not just in the hands of developers through this developer’s charter, but into the maths of an algorithm that has now told the Government that we need to build—concrete over—to achieve an increase of 161% more homes in London and the south-east, but that in places such as the one that I represent, in the north, there will be 28% fewer homes. As the former Prime Minister said, how is that levelling up? It is simply not.

I think the Minister needs to have a chat with the Education Secretary when it comes to the merits of an algorithm—one that created heartache and chaos for

thousands of young people, their families and carers, and one that pours concrete over London and the south-east while hollowing out communities such as mine in the north. It simply does not fit with the levelling-up agenda for the north and the midlands.

I would like to hear the Minister's comments when it comes to environmental protections in the White Paper. It is not clear how the Government can reconcile their proposals in the planning White Paper with their existing commitments in the Environment Bill—a concern expressed by the CPRE and others.

The Government's consistent inability to build enough housing—of all tenures—for our population should not be misdiagnosed as a failure of our planning system. I and all other Labour Members are utterly committed to tackling this housing emergency, ending rough sleeping, and helping a more genuine jobs recovery by getting decent homes built, improving the homes we already have and fostering happy and healthy communities for us all. The proposed reforms do the opposite. They will devalue planning as an essential part of the housebuilding and placemaking process, and simply make it easier for large developers to ignore local voices, local communities and local democracy. As pointed out by the previous Prime Minister, there are still 1 million unbuilt housing permissions from the past 10 years, yet the White Paper does nothing to ensure that those houses are built. Hon. Members have put forward ideas for incentivising developers, but the key is to put teeth into the proposals. There have been some great suggestions from across the House.

The lack of mention of social housing in the White Paper means that we remain over-reliant on private builders and market cycles to get homes built. If we are serious about maximising housing delivery of all tenures and meeting the 300,000 target, the Government need to stop ignoring the answer right in front of them and build a new generation of social housing. They built only 6,300 homes for social rent last year. We have yet to see the publication of the White Paper on social housing and the Minister refuses, despite being asked time and time again, to set a new target for a new generation of social homes.

The Local Government Association found that 30,000 affordable homes would have gone unbuilt over the past five years if the Government proposal to scrap section 106 agreements for developments of under 40 or 50 homes had been implemented. That risks, in particular, the future of affordable housing supply in rural communities, which many hon. Members across the House represent. It will hammer smaller developers. If the Government are serious about not just building but building good-quality affordable homes, why are they making it easier for developers to put forward only schemes that avoid building any affordable housing at all? Will the Minister outline the evidence behind that?

I would also like to hear more from the Minister about the new proposed levy to replace section 106 and the community infrastructure levy entirely. We have heard very little detail about how this works.

The current proposal for councils is that they provide the cash upfront, but that presents a serious risk. When we look at the funding pressures on councils right across the land, we can see that the proposal has no bearing on reality—on the pressures that councils are facing. On top of that, why continue with this absurd extension to permitted development when the Government

know very well that it will create bad homes—we all have examples of them—and blight our communities? The Secretary of State seemed to claim at a party conference event that it was thanks to covid-19 that he realised how damaging it was for people to live in rabbit hutches—in flats that were no larger than a parking space—but he made no reference to our motions against these proposals or to his Back-Bench rebellion. Hallelujah, he saw the light. In fact he and his Minister even put it in this statutory instrument.

Permitted development bypasses the planning system and makes it impossible for local authorities and local communities to stop dodgy developers building unsafe, low-quality buildings in unsuitable areas without contributing to local infrastructure and affordable housing. I know that that causes serious problems in all our communities up and down the land, including in mine. Streets, villages, towns and cities will be littered with inappropriate two-storey extensions, pitching neighbour against neighbour. Furthermore, high streets will be hollowed out with former shops converted into houses of multiple occupation, and wheelie bins will be flowing out onto the streets—nothing beautiful or better about that reality. Unsafe flats will remain unsafe, but just two-storeys higher. This will mean multi-billion pound windfalls to freeholders. The millions of leaseholders trapped in a feudal system are still waiting for justice, despite promise after promise from successive Ministers.

In conclusion, as a nation, we cannot cheat our way out of this housing crisis. A home should be a basic human right for all. Building healthy and sustainable homes should be the response to this pandemic. We should be putting communities at the heart of good planning, strengthening the resources of our planning system and—I think we can all agree on this—strengthening local democracy. Those in local areas must be in the driving seat if we are to create decent, safe, affordable housing for all.

2.17 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I am grateful for the contributions of all 39 right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today, and I do not for a minute underestimate the insight and the wisdom that I have heard, not least that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) in his very kind but entirely unsolicited testimonial during his remarks.

I hope that we will not lose sight of where we have come from, because this Government have delivered more than one and a half million new homes since 2010. We have built more than 241,000 in England in the past year alone. This year, we will announce a £12.3 billion package of affordable homes, which will see more than 50% of them delivered at discounted rent. We will take no lectures from representatives of the Opposition: we built more council homes in one year than they built in the entire 13 years. In Wales, they managed to build just 12 council homes last year—not even enough homes for a Welsh rugby team.

We can be rightly proud of our success, particularly as it has been achieved despite a slow and outdated planning process. We are determined to deliver on our manifesto commitment and deliver 300,000 new homes each year by the mid-2020s in the areas that really need them to meet that most fundamental Conservative value to own our own home and to have a stake in the country and the future of it. We want more people, especially

[Christopher Pincher]

younger people, to realise that aspiration. We also want to enhance our environment, protecting our green belt, increasing biodiversity and safeguarding our precious green spaces.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): In that spirit, will my right hon. Friend, as he looks at the consultation responses, make a commitment to giving a measure of consideration to those of us in constituencies such as mine and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler), where we have had national infrastructure like HS2 forced through us, and take that into account when it comes to further development land that is required?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to my hon. Friend. I shall certainly look very closely at the representations on the consultation that he makes.

The Prime Minister has made it absolutely clear that we have to be bold in our vision for the future of planning in our country. That is why we have put forward two sets of proposals for consultation to address our needs both in the short term and the longer term. The first, on changes to our current planning system and local housing need calculations, closed last week. The second, on our White Paper “Planning for the Future”, which sets out our long-term ambitions, closes on 29 October.

Our long-term proposals will create a reformed system that not only delivers the homes that we need but puts communities at the heart of a process that encourages more local community involvement, fairer contributions from developers, more beautiful homes and communities, and stronger environmental outcomes.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend has spoken of Conservative principles. He will agree, I am sure, that any Government who blighted the countryside with more ubiquitous, huge housing estates would not deserve to be called Conservative. I know that he is a notable aesthete. Will he give the House an assurance that he wants to build better and more beautiful, in line with the views of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, and indeed, in doing so, quash some of the fears and quell some of the doubts?

Christopher Pincher: I can give my right hon. Friend that absolute assurance.

On the question of the near-term local housing need calculation, it might be helpful if I explain the background to our proposals to revisit it. In 2018, we introduced a standard method for calculating local housing need that was designed to give communities the transparency they deserve by showing the minimum number of homes that areas need, but it is clear that the current formula for local housing need is inconsistent with our manifesto aim to deliver 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. Existing adopted local plans provide for only 187,000 homes per year across England. This is not just significantly below our ambition but lower than the number of the homes we delivered last year. It is also lower than the estimate of groups as diverse as KPMG and Shelter who say that we need to deliver homes for sale or for rent north of 250,000 per year to meet our need.

To address that in the short term, we committed to reviewing the standard method at this year’s Budget. The consultation is now closed, but I can assure the House that over the past two months my Department has actively engaged with the sector and is listening to feedback. Many right hon. and hon. Members will know that I too have been listening and discussing carefully. I am especially mindful that Members are concerned about geographic imbalance—having too many homes in the south and not enough in the midlands and the north. Equally, I recognise anxieties about what these changes might mean for our countryside in contrast to our urban areas. I therefore want to reassure the House that through this consultation process we are committed to addressing any supposed imbalances. I recognise that our future is not just about what we build but where we build it. The standard method has focused on affordability. That is natural, because our concern is that there are areas that are least affordable, and it cannot be right that where historically supply has not kept up with demand, people are prevented from living where they most want or need to live. But we must also consider other factors. The House has considered, and we will consider, such factors as stock renewal, so we level up those areas of our country—not just the midlands and the north; there are areas of East Anglia, too—that suffer from poor-quality housing and infrastructure; and brownfield regeneration, so we improve home-building opportunities in our towns and cities on urban land for too long derelict or unloved.

Our changes to the standard method in the short term will be just a starting point. We know that the housing numbers generated by the standard method will not necessarily be the numbers that areas plan for, because of the physical and geographic constraints placed on them, as my right hon. Friends the Members for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), my hon. Friends the Members for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) and for Leigh (James Grundy) and many others mentioned. Land availability or local constraints might mean that there is a need for neighbouring areas to meet demand more appropriately. We look forward to giving our detailed response to the consultation following a careful analysis of all responses. Until such time, all the figures that are bandied about in the media, some of which were quoted in the House today, are entirely speculative.

Our White Paper “Planning for the Future” represents our long-term aspirations to reform our planning system to make it fit for the future. Anyone who knows our planning system knows it to be opaque, slow and almost uniquely discouraging for all but its most expert navigators. Currently, it takes on average seven years to complete a plan and a further five years for associated permissions to be granted. Our planning White Paper proposes a modern, digitalised and map-based system, with up-front strategic controls, leaving local planning authorities and, crucially, local communities much more empowered to design the neighbourhoods that they want, that look the way they want, and that have the infrastructure they need.

The House will be concerned to hear that only around 3% of local people respond to planning applications. In local plan consultations, engagement can fall to less than 1% of the local community. That is simply not acceptable in a modern democracy, and we will change

the system to increase local involvement. Our planning White Paper proposes a simpler, clearer process for planning design.

Felicity Buchan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that when it comes to designating zones, it is important that that is done by local authorities rather than metro Mayors, since they are closest to local communities?

Christopher Pincher: Local planning authorities have a crucial role to play. They are the building blocks of local democracy, and certainly they should be responsible for designating what goes on in their local authorities.

Importantly, one of the factors we have to contend with is land constraints such as national parks, green belts and flood risk, so that we identify the most appropriate land. We continue to welcome views on how we can best implement this and will reflect very carefully on those before proceeding, particularly on the incentives we can provide to small and medium-sized enterprises and other developers to get building—that was mentioned by a number of Members across the House—and how we can encourage greater neighbourhood involvement. I am keen to ensure that the present neighbourhood planning system and neighbourhood plans find their place in our new regime, and I encourage contributions and thoughts on how that might be achieved.

Importantly, a number of Members raised the issue of infrastructure, including my hon. Friends the Members for Leigh, for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). We welcome further thoughts on how best to deal with this.

For many proposed new developments, a key concern and source of local objections is the lack of critical infrastructure. Today's system of developer payments for affordable housing and infrastructure is slow and uncertain. Negotiations between councils and developers, where big developers have greater firepower, cannot be relied upon to provide what communities truly need. Indeed, 80% of local authorities tell us that the section 106 system of contributions is too slow. Our White Paper proposes a nationally set infrastructure levy, which will not only simplify the system but ensure fairer contributions from developers, increasing the overall revenue we raise for infrastructure such as schools, roads, clinics and playgrounds. As a result, we intend it to deliver at least as much affordable housing as presently and provide much-needed infrastructure much earlier in the process.

We are keen to receive feedback, including on whether the proposals for a national levy might benefit from greater localisation. The consultation is open until 29 October, and I encourage all to contribute and set out their views on how our proposals can be improved. We will then set out our final decisions and proposed next steps through a Government response.

In closing, I wish to thank again all those who have spoken today. I very much welcome the contributions, which, though short in duration, were long on local wisdom and value to this important debate and to our consultations. We will reflect carefully on what we have heard and the feedback we receive. As we advance, we will endeavour to keep the House well-informed of these important changes, because make no mistake: they are important. They are what we need to do to deliver 300,000 good-quality new homes a year in the places that need them, and in the long run, they are what we need to do to build back better after covid-19. They are what we need to do to meet the aspirations of the people we serve now and in the generations to come.

2.32 pm

Bob Seely: I read this morning that this was going to be a traditionalist rant, but actually it has been a very thoughtful debate, as we are trying to balance the needs of constituents and the needs of the environment with new housing. There is a clear message from this House, which I hope the Minister has heard from almost every single Government Member. My hon. Friends the Members for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for East Devon (Simon Jupp), for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) would also like to state their support for this motion. If we get this wrong, we will do a great deal of harm, not just politically but environmentally, economically and socially. If we get this right, we can do a great deal of good, and I do not think we are there yet. I hope the Government will take that on board. I thank the Minister for his time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's levelling up agenda and supports appropriate housing development and the Government's overall housing objectives; further welcomes the Government's consultation, *Planning for the Future*, updated on 6 August 2020, as a chance to reform housing and land use for the public good; welcomes the Government's commitment to protect and restore the natural environment and bio-diversity; and calls on the Government to delay any planned implementation of the changes to the standard method for assessing local housing need proposed by the Government's consultation, *Changes to the Current Planning System*, published on 6 August 2020, and Proposal 4 of the Government's consultation, *Planning for the Future*, on a standard method for establishing housing requirement, until this House has had the opportunity to hold a debate and meaningful vote on their introduction.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will suspend for three minutes for Members to exit safely and for the sanitisation of the Dispatch Boxes.

2.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport: Support Measures

[Relevant Documents: e-petition 320711, Offer more support to the arts (particularly Theatres and Music) amidst covid-19, and the Third Report of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors: First Report, HC 291.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I ask Julian Knight to move the motion, you will see from the call list that quite a number of hon. Members wish to participate. We can start on five minutes, but I suspect later on, when Dame Eleanor takes over from me, she may wish to look at that again.

2.37 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the spending of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on support measures for DCMS sectors during and after the covid-19 pandemic.

I am truly grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate, which affects so many of our constituents. I also thank my co-sponsor, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan).

The past six months have presented us with the challenge of our lifetimes. From the moment the coronavirus pandemic took hold, it has posed an existential threat to the areas of the economy that enrich our lives the most—whether that is the ability to attend sporting events, the theatre, or a gig, to enjoy our world-class museums or galleries or to go on holiday somewhere in the UK, in one fell swoop we could not do any of those things anymore. The DCMS sectors faced a complete shutdown that, despite an easing of restrictions, largely remains.

Our world-leading cultural sectors have been on their knees as a result of covid-19, with their major source of funding cut off. Media and broadcasting organisations have struggled as advertising revenues have fallen off a cliff. The very existence of at least 10 to 15 of our professional football clubs lies in the balance. DCMS sectors also rely on freelancers more than any other sector, more than one third of whom were unable to access a penny of the Government support for the DCMS sector.

More than six months have now passed; many businesses remain unable to open due to Government restrictions, while the Treasury's vital, job-saving furlough scheme is winding down. The arts and leisure sectors are disproportionately affected by that, as 30% of workers in those industries are still on furlough today. We do not yet know when crowds will be permitted to return to the football or when theatre performances will be able to take place without social distancing, which is the only way those performances can be viable. Many businesses face catastrophe, with recent figures showing that 155,000 jobs in the creative industries have effectively ceased to exist since March.

The Government have rightly taken steps to protect those sectors. The culture recovery fund is the largest ever investment in the arts, and I know how hard the Secretary of State personally worked to secure the £1.57 billion package. The furlough scheme gave those who could not work due to Government restrictions a chance to keep their jobs. There have been measures for

charities on the covid frontline, but the money allocated fell £3 billion short of what the sector said that it needed for just a three-month period during lockdown. There has been a bespoke deal to ensure that film makers can access reinsurance and keep producing the films and television shows that we know and love, but that, too, took many months to get over the line and applications opened only last week.

I thank the Government for their efforts to support the sectors, but those measures do not go far enough. There remain large gaps in the Government's response, and many industry figures are concerned that some within Government have failed to understand either the needs of the sectors or the immense value that they add to both our economy and lives. I, though, absolve individual DCMS Ministers of such a charge, because I know exactly the level of engagement that they have had with all those sectors and the hard work that they have put in.

My Committee conducted an exhaustive inquiry into the impact of covid-19 on the DCMS sectors. We found that no sector has been unaffected by this seismic shift in the way we work and live. We have had hundreds of conversations and received evidence from almost 700 organisations and individuals, including charities, tech companies, broadcasters and some of our most innovative businesses and best known public figures.

The contribution of the DCMS sectors individually is immense; yet charities not on the frontline in the fight against covid, for example, have been largely excluded from Government support, despite their work being indispensable in so many ways. Cancer Research UK, for example, which does vital, life-saving work, has told us that its research budget has been cut to the extent that 1,500 fewer scientists are now working on treatments and cures for cancer: a disease that statistically affects one in two of us.

The theatre industry, which was thriving before the pandemic, struggles to make performances viable if fewer than 70% of tickets are sold. Even at a metre, they are still running at 25% to 30% capacity. Although the UK is exceptional at fostering world-class music talent—9% of global music comes from this island—music venues also rely on selling 70% to 80% of tickets to sustain their businesses. News that the Royal Albert Hall may reopen for Christmas is welcome, but what about the many pantomimes that will not, and cannot, take place in regional theatres, some of which have now closed? That is up to 60% of their annual income.

The leisure sector has taken a hit, too, with gyms shut at precisely the time that more and more people are looking to get fit and reduce their chance of suffering from the effects of covid. Travel restrictions are causing immense pain for the UK tourism industry, as inbound tourism numbers have plummeted to historic lows. UK tourist destinations, which draw millions from all over the world, face absolute ruin, and 7% of seaside businesses went under just during lockdown.

One perception of the DCMS sectors that I especially want to push back on is that these businesses do not hold their own or are not net contributors to the UK economy. They are growth sectors, and prior to the pandemic they were growing at twice the rate of the economy as a whole. In the creative industries, the rate was five times the economy as a whole. If those

sectors had not been contributing in the way that they have been, we would have been in recession for three of the last four years.

For every pound spent in a theatre, another six is spent supporting the local night-time economy. The contribution of the DCMS sectors is so often overlooked, even by those in the Treasury. “Why are they giving money to the arts?” some people say. I will tell hon. Members why: because they make money back. The DCMS sectors are diverse and often composed of very small businesses. They are not regulated industries in the way that, for example, financial services are, which perhaps explains why their needs are not as well known to the Government, but they are no less in need of support as a result of a pandemic; in fact, they need it more.

These sectors, while representing a quarter of the economy, comprise only 0.5% of Government spending. Every single time, DCMS Ministers have to go cap in hand to the Treasury for even the smallest amount of governmental loose change. That cannot be right. DCMS needs to be able to punch its weight even more in the Government and to have a higher margin of spending and greater discretion. What can be done? Well, there are a number of steps my hon. Friend could take, starting with sector-specific support to protect jobs. As the furlough scheme winds down, it becomes clear that the job support scheme simply will not meet the needs of thousands of DCMS sector businesses, which remain unable to generate any income whatever. The sectors desperately need support that recognises the restrictions they are under.

Without restrictions, those businesses would be growing. These are not zombie jobs. Sector-specific support would mean that those who currently cannot work, but who have jobs that remain viable in normal times, are supported for longer. No support means those essential creative jobs could disappear, possibly forever, as more and more creative businesses fold as a result of not being able to generate any income.

The theatre tax credit could be repurposed for marketing to show what is on offer and to encourage people to come back once it is safe to do so. Reinsurance schemes would restore business confidence for organisations that are struggling and fearful of the risks of reopening only to be shut down again. We need clear timelines, with “no earlier than” dates to aid in planning for the next few months, as well as rapid and top-notch test and trace. Those are all changes that could make a big difference for businesses that lack certainty about the future. The reality is that we do not know what is around the corner. Whether a vaccine is or is not found, we need to find a safe, smart way for venues to open at or near capacity.

Perhaps the bigger question is the opportunities the pandemic presents to reshape our DCMS sectors. It is a chance to look at competitions, such as the premier league, and decide how we want them to look in the future. We can explore whether the current model of operating is right for the UK and its many millions of football fans, and whether the balance between the top tier and other tiers of football is fair. That is just one example. The pandemic is a real chance to improve standards in areas that have long raised concerns.

There is also a chance to drive more investment and innovation in areas such as tech, spurred on by the Government’s commitment to rolling out gigabit-capable

broadband nationwide by 2025. There are new opportunities for tourism and industry, too, which are so often a Cinderella consideration.

Throughout the past six months, I have heard from cultural and creative businesses that even where they are likely to survive, the depletion in their resources means they will not be able to offer the same outreach programmes that directly contribute to the Government’s levelling up agenda and create opportunities for young people and black and minority ethnic communities across the country. Those who will suffer the most from the blow to our cultural sectors are the people who can least afford to do so.

Finally, it bears repeating that the DCMS sectors are one of the UK’s great success stories. Britain truly punches above its weight in all these sectors. The past few decades have cemented that success. Our artistic, cultural, sporting and touristic excellence is a source of great pride to me and, I am sure, to many Members of this House. The people who work in those sectors deserve our support. We simply cannot afford to put so many years of progress at risk.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There is a five-minute limit.

2.47 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I was very pleased to join our Select Committee Chair in applying for and securing this debate, which is most timely. I declare my interests as a member of the Musicians’ Union and the Ivors Academy of Music Creators.

At the end of the month, the Chancellor’s job retention scheme will come to a cliff edge and the self-employment income support scheme will offer those freelance musicians, actors, artists, recording engineers and so on—those whom the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) was talking about—who are lucky enough to qualify, just 20% of their average profits. That is despite the delay to the return of audiences that he described, despite nightclubs remaining shut, despite theatres, cinemas and grassroots venues closing down due to the financial pressures of operating under social distancing and despite local lockdowns countrywide.

Earlier this week I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate about the contribution of the arts and cultural sectors. I again stress the value of the arts and culture in and of themselves, leaving aside economic matters, but the Chancellor must also recognise that the fastest-growing sector of the UK economy relies on a talented, entrepreneurial, highly-skilled, creative workforce who now face a deeply uncertain winter with just 20% of their normal expected income—if they are lucky. As the Musicians’ Union has noted, 72% of freelancers in the music industry are not covered by the self-employment income support scheme. I urge DCMS Ministers to go back to the Chancellor and make the case again for our creative workforce.

Earlier this week in his controversial ITV interview, the Chancellor implied that those working in the sector should consider retraining and doing something else; for those who say that he did not, I have the full transcript. It is not surprising, on reading it, that musicians were so annoyed by what he said. The Chancellor can

[Kevin Brennan]

easily prove that that was not what he meant by putting in place the right kind of package to help get the creative workforce through this crisis. Deeds trump words in this case.

I wish to draw the attention of Members to my early-day motion 978, which congratulates “Whispering” Bob Harris on his efforts on behalf of musicians with a charity release later this month. I also congratulate the new CEO of UK Music, Jamie Njoku-Goodwin, on his appointment. Yes, he is a former Tory special adviser, but it is an excellent appointment, and I look forward to working with him and the chair of UK Music, Tom Watson, to support our music sector. They have made clear that under social distancing rules and without Government support, some performances are not economically viable. Given that that is a result of their regulation, the Government have a moral responsibility to do more to support those businesses to resume their events in a way that protects public health.

We need from the Government a bridge to the future—a proper support scheme for creative freelancers that, when combined with tax incentives and grant funding for live events, and in compliance with social distancing guidance, would help to generate supported work for freelance performance across the UK. That is not something for nothing; it is a partnership to enhance the wellbeing of the population, and support the national effort to overcome the depressing impact of this virus on our lives. If beating the virus is a kind of war, we must garner all our national resources, including our cultural resources as much as any other, to get us through this.

The report by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee published last July called on the Government to introduce enhanced measures for freelancers and small companies, in addition to a sector-specific recovery package. I welcome the culture recovery fund that the Government have announced, but it is yet to pay out, it has been delayed, and it will not be enough without the kind of additional targeted support that the Committee and I suggest.

In their understandable focus on the pandemic, and their addiction to hyperbole about so-called world-beating schemes, the Government are failing to protect something very precious and genuinely world-beating right under their nose: our fantastic creative industries. I say to the Minister, do not take that for granted. This pandemic is like an asteroid crashing into our lives, and we must not allow it to cause a cultural climate emergency by wiping out great creative institutions, and causing an employment-extinction event for those who work in the sector.

The creative and cultural sector in the UK is a flourishing but fragile ecosystem that is already being undermined by a culture war against things such as the BBC. Our creative sector contributes hugely to human happiness and wellbeing, and it is also the fastest growing part of our economy. We must not damage it and its workforce through a lack of creativity and imagination in Government.

2.53 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure, once again, to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on this subject, and I congratulate him and my hon. Friend the Member for

Solihull (Julian Knight) on securing this important debate, and on the tremendous work they both do in championing the sector.

I will focus my remarks on the creative industries, and particularly on musicians. Having been a musician, I tried to eke out a living as a composer in a former life, and I had to play the piano in various restaurants and hotels in London, and teach. It was not easy then, even in the best of times, but now with the pandemic biting it must be so much harder.

The Government have provided the £1.5 billion cultural recovery fund, which was hugely welcomed on all sides, but I would like to raise some concerns about that with the Minister. In a Westminster Hall debate earlier this week I mentioned the Cheese and Grain, which is an arts and music venue in my constituency. It has thrived for many years, and although it applied to the fund back in July, it is yet to hear whether it has been successful. What is the procedure for accepting or declining applications, and how can we push things on a little?

The furlough scheme is now over, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull mentioned, but the job support scheme is of little use to such venues because they are effectively closed down, which means that there is no employer contribution. I wonder whether DCMS could work with the Treasury to provide some sort of bespoke furlough scheme for businesses in this position, because there are many of them across the country.

I spoke to my mum the other day, and she told me that over the past few weeks she had been to the cinema a couple of times to watch Arthur Miller plays being projected. At one of those performances, there were just three people in the audience, and at the other, just five. I would like to add my voice to those who are calling for some sort of empty-seat subsidy or grant to enable more venues to open and still be economically viable.

I also want to talk about the self-employed, who have been mentioned already, and self-employed musicians in particular. On Tuesday, many Members will have seen the hundreds of freelance musicians performing spectacularly in Parliament Square, knocking out a bit of Holst. Perhaps Members saw it on social media. It was moving stuff, and it absolutely highlighted their plight. The Treasury has worked out that 95% of the self-employed can get access to the self-employed income support scheme, but the music industry is structured in such a way that up to a third of them cannot. A venue without musicians is pretty pointless, and musicians without anywhere to play are facing financial ruin.

I very much support UK Music’s call for the Government to provide an indicative date for stage 5, or full reopening, because without that, and without their cultural funding, venues such as the Cheese and Grain in Frome will have to make nearly all their employees redundant by Christmas, and the redundancy fees alone will push them into insolvency. I know that the Chancellor is facing calls from all sides, and he has quite rightly said that he cannot save every job and every business, but I hope that DCMS can work with him to ensure that we do not lose an entire sector, and such a crucial one at that. The creative arts have sacrificed an enormous amount over the past few months. I am pleased that this debate is taking place, and I hope that it will pave the way for more redress for the sacrifice they have suffered, so that they can get the support they desperately need.

2.57 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton). The creative industries are one of our greatest exports and a symbol of our national identity. They attract millions of people across the globe to visit and to live and work in the UK every year. I am proud that many of my constituents work in the sector as musicians, actors and producers in TV, theatre, art, design and dance. However, as we all know, the pandemic has dealt them a severe blow and looks set to prevent many organisations from reopening anytime soon.

I want to focus my comments today on those who work in the creative industries. This is an extremely talented, diverse and world-leading workforce. Office for National Statistics figures indicate that just over 30% of them are self-employed, with the subsectors most impacted by the pandemic, such as theatre and music, having a self-employed workforce of around 70%. As has been raised countless times in the Chamber, the design of the self-employed income support scheme has excluded at least 3 million self-employed taxpayers from any support. That was avoidable, and countless calls for the scheme to be amended have fallen on deaf ears.

I have received a huge number of emails from constituents who are affected, for example by being excluded from the SEISS and the job retention scheme because less than 50% of their income is from self-employment. This has impacted local musicians in particular, who often rely on a mixture of PAYE work on zero hours contracts alongside self-employed earnings. Constituents whose trading profits are just over the £50,000 threshold for support have been left with nothing because of the cliff edge. Constituents who operate under limited companies receiving remuneration through dividends—including video editors, producers and many more who have had to establish themselves in this way as a contracting requirement—have been excluded through no fault of their own. It is a travesty that these people have been excluded by the Government, and the just thing to do would be to find a solution. Instead, the Government are turning their back on them and, from November, reducing the grant to 20% of an individual's average monthly trading profits. That is not enough for anyone to survive on. Further, the Chancellor's comments this week, implying that struggling musicians and other arts workers should retrain and get a new job, are frankly insulting. The exemption measures are why so many creative workers have been put in an impossible situation. It is no fault of their own.

The job support scheme is similarly having dire effects on the creative workforce. In the past week alone, I have received numerous emails from constituents. One wrote telling me:

“I have worked in the theatre industry for over a decade and am now facing redundancy as our theatre simply cannot, by current legislation, open its doors. The latest wage subsidy plan won't reach far enough in our industry, as we are simply unable to work up to a third of our normal working hours.”

Another constituent wrote saying:

“I am a freelance worker who, recently, was employed full time as a Resident Director in the West End, a job that I had been working towards for almost 2 years. I benefitted from being on furlough but was then taken off and made redundant when the

government were being unclear on when theatres will open again. Since March I have spent all of my savings that I worked so hard to get.”

Despite the very obvious challenges facing workers, the Culture Secretary's voice in all this has been extremely quiet. Why is he not lobbying the Chancellor, fighting the corner of the creative workforce? That is what those in the creatives industries want to see happening. This is one of the most unique and special sectors in the world. The Government need to urgently review how they expect the industry to survive in these conditions and introduce measures that will save creative jobs—and these are viable jobs. That can be done so long as the political will exists among the Government's culture team. Sadly, at the moment that seems lacking.

3.1 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): This is an important discussion. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) and the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) for bringing it to the Chamber today. It is absolutely vital. For brevity, my comments will focus on two important DCMS sectors: tourism and theatres. I will start with tourism,

Before the outbreak, tourism made a significant contribution to our nation, supporting 3.1 million jobs, while also protecting and displaying our cultural heritage. However, the sector has, like many others, been damaged by the pandemic. DCMS spending now needs to be channelled in a way that restores that contribution, while also enhancing it. For my constituency, that is imperative. Tourism is vital to our local economy, with some 9,000 jobs in Tendring linked directly to the industry. Some 6,500 of those jobs are full time, representing 17.4% of all employment in the area. Economically, tourism in Tendring has an impact worth £392 million. That is simply irreplaceable in the short to medium term. Without a strong local tourism industry, we would return to the slow coastal decline we saw before, rather than the growth and prosperity we all want and need.

The same is true for destinations right across the country, but Government spending on tourism specifically has, beyond the usual schemes to which all businesses are entitled, been insufficient so far. Of course, some tourism businesses will benefit from the culture recovery fund, which is excellent given the overlap between the sectors, but this is simply not enough. I ask the DCMS to seriously consider introducing a tourism recovery fund that would operate and provide grants in the same way that the CRF does.

I also ask the DCMS to divert funding in a way that creates and sustains demand within domestic tourist destinations, as that will help their long-term recovery. We have seen heightened footfall and demand this year, and the strongest recoveries in UK resorts compared to pre-virus norms. That is good news, but we cannot expect that to persist. New travel options, the deteriorating weather as winter comes on, and the rise in cases will all act now to limit demand within domestic destinations, so we need to safely create that demand ourselves, even during the low season. Creating that demand in tourism destinations is key for their recovery after the covid-19 outbreak. I ask the Department to look at ways in which we can intervene with spending to do just that—whether that be a voucher or cheaper food options, as we have seen before—and to attract footfall, as I mentioned in the Westminster Hall debate earlier this week. This

[Giles Watling]

would be a bespoke intervention certainly, but one that would deliver real rewards and growth for the industry and communities that depend so heavily on the economic outputs of tourism.

Turning briefly to theatres, I was generally pleased with the culture recovery fund. I thank DCMS Ministers for all they did in that area and, of course, Treasury Ministers for their support, but we need to go beyond that now. We need to extend the culture recovery fund into the next financial year. It is not automatic, which means that unspent funding could be lost, even though coronavirus is likely to run well beyond next April. As theatres will probably be the last industry back into action, we need rapid testing to reduce risks, Government assistance in the provision of insurance for the theatre sector—that was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull—and a temporary increase in theatre production tax relief to reduce the costs of staging shows when theatres eventually open.

We need to increase the retail business rates discount for theatres. Currently, this is set temporarily at a 100% discount—zero—but it will revert to a level below that offered to retail businesses, cinemas and live music venues, which is unfair on theatres, and that could be easily changed. These are areas and suggestions that DCMS will be championing and supporting in its own spending. I recognise that further funding may be required, which is why I wrote to the Chancellor last week, supported by 154 parliamentarians, to lobby for the suggestions I have set out.

To conclude, we need DCMS to push for more spending in the creative sector. I believe that by doing so we can create year-round demand for our vital tourist destinations, while also stimulating and sustaining a recovery for our theatre sector. My final words are in support of the freelancers—the actors, the costumiers, the producers—who have fallen through the net of all other spending. These people need supporting now. We are losing talent permanently every day, so please support the freelancers.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. After the next two speakers, we will go to a time limit of four minutes.

3.6 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Members for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on securing this important debate.

The sectors represented under the remit of DCMS are varied and wide-ranging, and I hope to cover a few issues that are critical in my constituency as well as more widely. Although I welcome the £1.57 billion funding package, with its Barnett consequential of £97 million for the Scottish Government, it is clear that these, alongside the other support schemes, have not properly recognised two key issues: the seasonality of many DCMS areas and the nature of the workforce in the industry, which often does not fit into the tick-box core employment methods on which the Government have focused their efforts.

I would like to start by highlighting the cross-party letter that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) has written to the Chancellor. In it, she highlights a simple ask from the exhibitions and events sector, which is that it be allowed to be reopened, when appropriate, in line with Government-approved guidance and that it be provided with support until it is able to do so. The Events Industry Alliance estimates that some 80% of the exhibitions workforce—consisting of events suppliers, organisers and venues—will be made redundant in the coming weeks: over 90,000 people. This is due not only to continued event closures as we see infection rates rise, but to the inability of employers in the industry to access the new job support scheme, as they are not able to trade at all during this time.

In my own constituency of North East Fife, I have a number of businesses in the mobile catering sector that support such events and festivals but have never been able to access support, often because this was, prior to the pandemic, a growing sector, with many entering it as recently self-employed. This meant that they could not access self-employment support grants and that changes made to support other areas of hospitality, for example, had some unintended knock-on consequences.

A key factor that I want to highlight is the seasonality of many DCMS areas, whether in sport—for example, the shinty season runs from February through to the end of September, so there has in effect been no season for this amateur sport—or in relation to cultural and historic visitor attractions, which are so dependent on tourism during the summer months. Events such as the popular Pittenweem arts festival have been cancelled, and the Saint Andrews Voices festival has been rescheduled to later this month, but will be delivered in a virtual format.

As my constituency is the home of golf and I am a trustee of the St Andrews Links Trust, I would point to the impact of golf from a tourism perspective. Yesterday, I met the Scottish Inbound Golf Tour Operators Association, and I would highlight that, although populated by small traders, this sector brings in an estimated £13 million a year to Scotland by welcoming visitors from the US, Canada, China and elsewhere. They are now in a situation where they need support to survive to the spring of 2021. They have rolled over bookings, but there are no guarantees, returning deposits would be challenging and staff have no active employment now. They need the whole Scottish package of attractions—distilleries and other visitor attractions—to present to their clients. Unless Scotland and the UK are ready to welcome visitors back when they are able to, through effective testing and tracing and other mechanisms, other countries, such as Ireland, may beat them to it. They need support now, and what is currently available is not sufficient.

The second issue I wish to highlight is how people work in the sectors under the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport umbrella. This is what my constituent who works as a self-employed rigger, sound technician, engineer and production manager—these people are multi-skilled—told me:

“I am a sole trader working as a freelancer and I am employed on an event by event basis...My skills and services contribute to the creative industries...which were worth £110 billion to the annual economy as evidenced in the Government’s website DCMS figures

I am not eligible for the Self Employment Income Support Scheme as less than 50% of my income came from self-employment in the tax years from 2016 to 2019. Nor am I eligible for the Newly Self-Employed Hardship Grant”—

which the Scottish Government offered—

“as I was registered as self-employed before 6 April 2019...I contacted Fife Council to ask whether allowance could be made...but was told it could not. I have therefore fallen through a crack in the system of support”.

Another, who works in sound and lighting, has said:

“Whilst the arts are getting support from the government, which is brilliant, it does not actually reach many of the people that need to be helped in the sector.

The company I work for currently relies heavily on the furlough scheme, as we have had...no income since...March...It is not as simple for us that when lockdown starts to ease further income will automatically return again...the worry is that the money will not reach suppliers and manufacturers such as us...I am asking for more support for our industry...In Germany, they have extended their furlough scheme for their equivalent of our industry, until March 2021”.

Finally, I have been told:

“I am a musician. Having spent the last 7 years building towards being self employed...My business turned over £65,000 in revenue last year, supporting myself and other musicians...I am sure that cumulatively our impact on tax revenues is hardly something to sneer at.

Mr Sharma’s comments that we should ‘get better jobs’ is deeply insulting and condescending. I don’t need a better job. I’m in it already”.

To conclude, DCMS sector spending has been welcomed, but it has not truly recognised either the seasonal way in which many areas operate or the different ways in which many work within it. Both the UK and Scottish Governments—I note that to date the Scottish Government have committed only £59 million of their allocation to support packages—need to do more. We will all be the poorer otherwise.

3.12 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I wish to centre my remarks on two areas. First, our Government deserve great credit for the unprecedented support they have given companies, charities, workers and individuals in this sector during the pandemic. It would also be awesome if we could not continually misquote the Chancellor. Any of us who has served in government knows how slow the Whitehall machine can be, so we should marvel at the furlough scheme, the SEISS, the grants we have put out there through local authorities in England, and the Government-backed loan scheme. There is no doubt that they have saved millions of livelihoods and businesses, so credit should go to Ministers for making them happen, while we recognise, as we must, that every single penny is the British public’s—I always say that in this Chamber—and one way or another every single penny will have to be paid back. These support measures have absolutely helped the DCMS sector, albeit with notable exceptions, which I wish to focus on.

The first of those exceptions is the UK events sector, which has been brought to its knees by covid, as the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) mentioned. It is so sad, because the exhibition and events industry was a vibrant, growing sector before covid hit, contributing some £70 billion of economic impact to the nation. At a stroke, the industry became unviable, because Government restrictions mean that, basically, no UK events are permitted to take place—I should

imagine this will last until March at the earliest. The Meetings Industry Association estimates that some 700,000 people are employed in this industry and there have been just north of 120,000 job losses so far. We are talking about catering and front of house staff; event and account managers; the technical staff; the many freelancers who build the events; the sound engineers; the people who hire out the stands and the furniture; and, of course, the audiovisual guys and girls.

I do welcome the Chancellor’s new job support scheme, but a salary subsidy for companies that are not able to trade is not the stuff of dreams. I totally get the honesty in government talking about “viable jobs” in the changed post-covid economy, but we have to be honest and say that there is a difference between an unviable business and one that is not allowed to be viable, as is the case with the UK events sector.

Furthermore—this goes back to the much wider point about the events world, although it involves many who work within it—the self-employed support scheme has troubled me from the off, and I have said that many times in this House. The intention to achieve parity between self-employed workers and those on PAYE was absolutely the right thing to do but, as paragraph 12 of the conclusions in the Committee’s report on the “Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors” states, the fact that

“too many self-employed people have missed out on support to date, means the future of our creative workforce remains at significant risk.”

It continues:

“From October 2020 at the latest”—

this month—

“the Government should introduce flexible, sector specific versions of the... SEISS guaranteed for the creative industries until their work and income returns to sustainable levels.”

The Treasury Committee’s report on the “Economic impact of coronavirus” proposed some practical solutions as to how that might be achieved, and we endorse it.

To return to the UK events sector specifically, I understand that DCMS proposes a targeted economic support package for the business visitor economy, which will be a crucial and welcome move. If the Minister can say anything about that, we will be all ears.

Last year, the UK festival and live music sector contributed £4.5 billion to the UK economy, supporting over 200,000 jobs. Festivals themselves—I declare an interest—generate £1.75 billion and support some 85,000 jobs. The catastrophic impact of covid on the sector cannot be underestimated. According to the most recent survey by the Association of Independent Festivals, at least 50% of the workforce faces redundancy. The festival season, which is obviously between April and September, was of course totally abandoned this year, and the sector is working towards, but not hopeful of, returning next year.

Part of that hopeful return involves the DCMS festivals working group, for which I thank the Department. It has now had three meetings, and several drafts of the covid operational festival planning guidance have been produced. I understand that a working draft will be produced next week and hosted on The Purple Guide website, which is a “good to go” industry standard for health, safety and welfare at music and other events. It is imperative that we take that seriously.

[*Steve Brine*]

In closing, the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund is excellent. Heaven only knows why it has taken so long to get the money out, but I understand that it starts tomorrow and then again on Monday. Above all, when the funds do get to the arts sector next week, I hope that that the wonderful Theatre Royal in Winchester, which has done so much to help itself, will have some help from Government to continue its great work. That will be a nice October surprise.

3.17 pm

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). Without the Government's support for tourism and hospitality, the economies of constituencies such as mine would have been hit harder than we ever imagined. The temporary 5% VAT rate supporting tourism and hospitality and leisure helped to keep staff on the payroll, beer, wine and, of course, cider flowing, and delicious meals sizzling and, crucially, gave the country a welcome dose of normality as they ventured out for the first time in months.

I recently spoke in a debate about tourism secured by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). Members from across the House called for the VAT cut to stay in place to support the industry through the tough winter months, and the Secretary of State heard our call. The tourism Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), responded to the debate and made it clear that he understood the need for the measure to continue. A few weeks later, the Chancellor announced that the measure would stay in place until the end of March. This is a welcome move from a listening Government.

It is not just the businesses that we can see that have struggled through the pandemic. Local radio played a crucial role throughout the lockdown, keeping people company and letting listeners know about community support schemes and local services. DCMS responded with support for the community radio sector, providing financial help to help ensure the on-air lights stayed bright. Sadly, the loss of advertising revenue hit some smaller commercial radio stations harder than most, and Devon will lose one of its two independent local radio stations by the end of the year.

One of the major fixtures of any proper local radio station is hearing the results of sporting fixtures across the area. I recently visited Exmouth Town football club to meet the volunteers who put their heart and soul into their local club. They have worked tirelessly to ensure the club is safe for supporters and players, and I am pleased that the Premier League gave the club £4,000 to support those efforts. Sidmouth Town will also receive £2,000 to help the Vikings continue their battle on their pitch and across the south-west. However, local rugby is also in need. Sport England's community emergency fund gave Topsham rugby club £9,000—a big boost for a club that punches well above its weight. However, further support is needed to secure a future for Devon sport—and sooner rather than later.

I am proud to have the mighty, and previously profitable, Exeter Chiefs based in my constituency. Sadly, the Chiefs are currently losing around £1 million a month because games are being played behind closed doors.

They employ 200 staff and bring joy to thousands across the city and the south-west, and much further afield. The losses are hitting the club hard and they will need a helping hand over the coming months. I urge DCMS and the Treasury to draw up packages of support to help the Chiefs and many professional rugby union clubs survive the winter.

If we really want to achieve our goal of improving the health of our nation, what sort of message would the closure of sports clubs across the country send fans, supporters and future sporting stars? We must act now or it is game over.

3.20 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp). I offer my congratulations to the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on securing this debate and my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I record my thanks to the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) for organising the cross-party effort voicing concern about the self-employed working in the sector.

It is a huge and diverse sector, but in the limited time available I shall focus on the pandemic's impact on UK journalism and our cultural institutions. The "Press Gazette" estimates that we have lost over 2,000 jobs in newsrooms across the country, with many more journalists taking pay cuts to save their jobs. Despite that, the Welsh culture committee has warned of an impending avalanche of redundancies and closures in the regional media when the furlough period ends—very shortly.

Regional media were already under threat even before covid. In recent weeks, I and other hon. Members have voiced concerns about the BBC's plans to cut local and regional programming, with the threat to award-winning current affairs programmes such as "Inside Out". In an era of fake news and social media conspiracy theories, trusted, reliable and accurate local journalism and regional media have never been more important. The sector is quite right to ask why it has been sidelined and excluded from support for culture and the arts.

The National Union of Journalists' news recovery plan has presented Ministers with detailed proposals to safeguard the industry. Unlike many recovery plans, the NUJ has identified a within-sector means of funding the package—a windfall tax on the tech giants who have seen their profits soar during the pandemic. The comprehensive programme to safeguard and strengthen UK journalism is too extensive for me to do it justice today, but I would respectfully ask the Minister to meet me and the NUJ to consider the merits of implementing such a plan.

I acknowledge that the Government have provided some support to newspapers by putting money into public health advertising. However, I ask the Minister that any future advertising take a bottom-up approach, with the advertising spend going to independents in hyper-local news titles like *East Durham Life* in the first instance, before moving up the newspaper title hierarchy.

We need to ensure that any taxpayers' support to industry comes with duties and responsibilities. I hope the Minister will commit from the Dispatch Box that no public money will be made available to firms making redundancies, cutting pay, curtailing frontline journalistic

roles, taking excessive executive bonuses or blocking trade union organisations, and I do not believe it is unreasonable to make specific demands of businesses and sectors that require public support as part of their covid recovery plans. I praise the work of the Public and Commercial Services Union cafeteria and retail workers at the Tate galleries, who took strike action in an attempt to avoid compulsory redundancies and won significant concessions. We have heard about the culture recovery fund, but it is yet to save a single job in seven specific areas where the PCS is in discussions, including the V&A, Historic Royal Palaces, the Royal Collection Trust, the National Gallery, the National Museums Liverpool and the Southbank Centre.

3.25 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is always a great pleasure to follow my good friend, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris).

We have all become accustomed to using the word “unprecedented” at an unprecedented rate. There has been an unprecedented Government response to genuinely unprecedented issues, but in these sectors, as well as the general case that needs to be made for our economy and society, there is a further case. Many of these organisations and activities have not just been impacted by coronavirus; they have been expressly forbidden from operating. For others, the fixed capacity nature of what they do means that they are neither able to continue, nor to remodel their business to operate with social distancing.

As a number of colleagues have said, we recognise that the value of these activities, arts and sports goes far beyond the economic. They are part of the joy of being alive—part of what makes our civilisation and gives us shared experiences. For many of them, if they go, they are gone forever; these are not sectors where some organisations may go, only to be replaced by others.

I welcome the Government’s support, including the sector-specific support such as “eat out to help out”, the temporary VAT reductions and the culture recovery fund. I also want to mention what local councils have been doing. In my council area, support has been given to the likes of Grayshott Concerts, the Phoenix theatre and Petersfield rugby club, but more is needed. I commend to Ministers the recent report of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which I know they have just responded to—but having responded to it does not preclude them from further referring to it for inspiration.

In the very brief time I have left, I want to talk about hospitality and tourism, which, as it happens, was my career before coming to this House. The sector is important to my constituency because of attractions such as Jane Austen’s house, Gilbert White’s house and the Watercress line heritage railway, as well as being at the gateway to the South Downs. The sector is also important to the country. It may surprise many people to hear that travel and tourism last year contributed more to UK GDP than it did to French GDP or Spanish GDP, and that this was the only European country in the top 10 for employment growth in travel and tourism in the five years coming up to this crisis, which has now hammered that growth. Although focus is rightly on the current crisis, we need to carry on focusing and building for the future, including by pressing on with the sector deal, focusing on skills and ensuring that the T-levels development carries on at pace.

I welcome the formation of UKHospitality as a strong voice for the sector. We now have to get the destination management and marketing organisations right; they are going to need a sustainable method of operating and being financed, which should start with central Government funding, but will have to move to a self-sustaining mechanism thereafter. We are also going to need national level marketing for our inbound tourism to give investors confidence. I welcome the drive for more hotel rooms, which I hope the Government will reaffirm. I also welcome the fact that there is a focus outside London, but we need to recognise that London is key to UK tourism. If it turns out that office accommodation is less in demand in the future, I would love it to be made as easy as possible to convert office space into hotel rooms.

Finally—I have totally run out of time—if there was one year to test out the staggering of school holidays to extend the season, it is 2021. It could be done for a single year on a pilot basis to see whether the practical difficulties and objections can be overcome.

3.29 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The covid-19 pandemic has impacted industries across the UK, threatening countless people’s livelihoods. Many families now face serious financial hardship. The arts and culture sector has experienced untold difficulties, with live performances unable to go ahead, venues unsure when they will reopen and many performers uncertain about their future.

The industry contributes so much to our lives, from the films we watch and the books we read to the music we listen to. It enriches and expands our world view. The creative industries in Scotland account for 70,000 workers and 15,000 businesses. They are estimated to support around £9 billion of activity in the Scottish economy, contributing £5.5 billion to Scotland’s GDP.

However, since March, countless east end constituents have contacted me about how their lives have been affected by the pandemic and how inadequate the support for the arts and culture sector has been, with many self-employed and freelance artists and performers excluded from the original Government financial support packages. In Glasgow East, the showpeople community is a vital part of my constituency. They put on seasonal fairs, from summer fêtes to Christmas markets. Currently there are 340 members of the Scottish Showmen’s Guild. Each is a small business owner and all of them have families, numbering 5,000 across Scotland.

More than that, showpeople have been a rich part of Scotland’s tapestry for hundreds of years and have a proud history and heritage extending back many years in my constituency. I am deeply concerned that most major fairs have been cancelled this year due to covid-19, greatly putting at risk showpeople’s livelihoods. At the heart of the issue is the fact that the financial support offered to the tourism industry during the pandemic continually excluded showpeople. Due to the manner in which showpeople operate, for example, not having a static business or a shop front, they have often been left out of Government financial support packages. The community provides so much, not only to my constituency and to Scotland, but across the British isles. They deserve financial support and guidance as we head into the winter months and the second wave of coronavirus, which we find ourselves in now.

[David Linden]

The Showmen's Guild has been excluded from the recreation and leisure taskforce and has been asked to be represented by the Association of Circus Proprietors. That is akin to asking the Brownies to represent the Scouts. It is unacceptable. I encourage the Government to look again at including the Showmen's Guild in their recreation and leisure taskforce, which will almost certainly have to be reconvened as a result of the second wave.

We should also focus on the steps that other European countries have taken in providing financial support, specifically to showpeople. In Belgium, the Government have put in place several support measures including the delay, the reduction or the exemption of the social contributions to be paid in 2021, and a bonus of €4,000, and, after 21 days of non-activity, €160 per day.

I would also like to use today's debate to call on Scotland's 32 councils to exercise the maximum flexibility on licensing for showpeople. We can acknowledge how difficult it has been for showpeople, but actions speak louder than words and it is time local authorities in Scotland started treating showpeople a lot more fairly when it comes to the licensing regime.

Along with other members of the all-party group on fairs and showgrounds, I have been working closely with the Showmen's Guild on these issues and I will continue to urge the Government to put in place serious provisions to help showmen, who are a significant part of this island's culture.

3.32 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I ask you to keep this to yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have always had—do not tell Andrew Lloyd Webber—a burning ambition to sing “Don't Cry For Me Argentina” from “Evita” on the London Palladium stage. That is because I have always had a love of the arts and the theatre. It is embedded in me. One of my earliest memories is of going to see a pantomime at the New Theatre in Cardiff with my nan. It is a shame that the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) is no longer here—I am glad that he brought the debate to the Chamber with my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight)—because he will no doubt remember my outstanding stage management of Radyr Comprehensive's production of “The King and I”. I am therefore so proud of the west end in my constituency of the Cities of London and Westminster. It is the heart of arts and culture in this nation.

I was very proud to lead my first ever Westminster Hall debate on Tuesday, in which a number of Members spoke about the importance of theatre, live music and cultural venues for local economies. Members from Glasgow, Cardiff, Liverpool, London, Clacton, Northamptonshire and the west country spoke passionately about the arts and culture sectors in their constituencies and their place at the heart of local economies. I have learned, particularly during this dreadful crisis, that theatre and culture play an intrinsic part in the ecosystem of the west end. With the theatres and our marvellous cultural venues closed, such as the Royal Albert Hall, the Coliseum and the Royal Opera House, the heart of the west end has died at the moment. We must get these theatres back.

I pay tribute to the DCMS ministerial team, who have been outstanding during this crisis and led the way. There has been a £1.5 billion support package, which I welcome, and other brilliant support schemes such as the furlough and the VAT cut. I ask Ministers to consider continuing some of those schemes, particularly the VAT cut, and to look at business rates. We need reform in this country. I ask Ministers to extend the rates holiday and—particularly in my constituency, where rateable values are so high—to look at extending the threshold from £51,000 to £150,000. It is a lot of money, but that would make a huge difference to not only the arts and cultural sectors but retail and many other businesses across central London.

We know that this virus is not going away, and I understand that theatres and other venues must stay closed for safety reasons, but the industry needs a date for stage 5, when they can open. I ask the Minister to work with the industry to ensure that we can allow these venues to open as soon as possible. We all know about the importance to local economies, but more importantly, theatre, arts and culture are the soul of our nation, and they are so important for our mental health and wellbeing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): If there are other Members on the call list who are in their offices but intend to speak in the debate and have not withdrawn officially, it would be useful if they appeared around the Chamber in the next 10 minutes or so, in order that we can help with timings. I call Bambos Charalambous.

3.37 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I share her love of musicals—I just wish we could all dream a dream of a better future for the industry.

I declare an interest, as a member of the APPG on music, and my speech will be about support for the music industry. At midday on Tuesday, I was in Parliament Square, and I listened to 400 highly trained freelance classical musicians perform 20% of the great masterpiece “Mars” from Gustav Holst's “The Planets”. I congratulate Let Music Live and #WeMakeEvents on organising such an amazing event. The event was visually and musically stunning. The silence after just two minutes was poignant and demonstrated how quickly after music there is silence. It was a metaphor, if one was needed, of the plight of many musicians since covid-19 restrictions were introduced in March, who have seen their livelihoods dwindle to nothing overnight.

A number of freelancers have contacted me, and I want to read a few lines from one of the emails I received from a freelancer who wants to remain anonymous. They said:

“I have applied for various jobs...I have got rejections for all of them. The vast experience I have playing the violin, whilst extremely highly skilled, means nothing when applying for anything non music-related. Ultimately I have lost my home, my work and the only way of life I have ever known.”

That is true for many musicians who are struggling at this time.

There is no doubting the estimated £10.8 billion a year contribution of the arts scene to the UK economy by those in the creative industries, but unlike other sectors, the cultural sector has had nowhere near the support it

needs to survive. Little thought has been given to this sector. It was not until July that the Government announced the culture recovery fund, and despite calls from many organisations such as Chickenshed Theatre in my constituency, the vast majority have not received anything from that fund. With nearly all venues closed, some of which will never reopen, there is little opportunity for musicians to play. While DCMS funding for venues and arts organisations may be welcome, it does nothing for the vast majority of workers in the arts, as most freelancers do not qualify either for the JRS or the SEISS and therefore make up part of the 3 million workers who have been excluded from help during the pandemic. According to Musicians' Union research, 70% of musicians are unable to undertake more than a quarter of their usual work; 65% are facing financial hardship now; 36% do not have any work at all; and 34% are considering abandoning their career in music while 37% are not sure. The truth is that while this was once a viable industry, it is now met with empty diaries and no plans for the majority of musicians.

There are two things that the Government could do to resolve this: have a similar scheme to eat out to help out for venues so that tickets can be subsidised, and help those freelancers who are in desperate need. A few weeks ago, there was a big campaign to get "Land of Hope and Glory" played at the last night of the Proms. That is taken from the Elgar piece, "Pomp and Circumstance", but now we need to overcome the covid circumstance, and we must ensure that we let music live.

3.41 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who I serve with on the Procedure Committee. I, too, have had emails from freelance musicians who are struggling enormously. He set out the issues so well and it is an honour to follow him. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) and the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) for securing this important debate.

I was once the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, so I know these sectors pretty darn well. The Minister worked there closely with me, so he will know some of the things that I am about to say. I know that there is nobody on the Government side of the House who does anything but recognise the contribution that the sectors DCMS represents make to this country, including—absolutely—economically. When I became Secretary of State in July 2016, the sectors that DCMS represented contributed 13% of the UK economy. By the time I moved to Northern Ireland in January 2018, it was over 16%, demonstrating just how those sectors grow much faster than the economy at large and really contribute so much.

However, they also give us so much more. They are the soul of our nation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) said. They give us joy. They have a role to play in so many parts of our lives, including in education. These are areas that might grasp that child who really does not know what they want to do with the rest of their life, taking them away from crime or gang culture and giving them a focus and a purpose.

If global Britain is anything, it is our creative industries. Goodness me, if we want to punch above our weight, have a look at what our creative industries, sporting institutions, arts and museums do. They are so well known around the world and they open doors for us in a way that nothing else can. When I was a Minister in the Home Office visiting Pakistan, if I wanted to have a conversation with any senior Minister, it was much easier to open the conversation by talking about cricket than it was security, representation and how we might possibly help each other with our security exports.

There is also the economic impact of inward investment. We want companies to invest in Britain. We want companies here in the United Kingdom to put their money in and create jobs. They are not going to put employees in places where there is nothing for them to do when they get home in the evening. They want a strong cultural sector. They want sporting events. They want to be able to take part in charities. They want to be part of more of society than just going to work every day. That is why it is so important that so far, the Government support for DCMS sectors has been there, but we need to make sure that the sectors continue to be supported.

I want to raise a few local issues. I have the privilege of being the Member of Parliament for Alton Towers—I suspect many Members have visited Oblivion and Nemesis and have enjoyed their trips to Alton Towers. Alton Towers has been open this year. It has been fantastic. I have been a couple of times with my family and we have been able to really enjoy the rollercoasters and the feeling of being in this great place of fun. It is so grateful for the VAT cut and the fact that it has been extended, but it really wants to see that continue. It wants to see support for businesses like Alton Towers so that it can continue. Having lost out on the school trip season and so many other parts of the season, it wants to make sure that it can extend its season and get support where it needs it.

On sporting events, we must get fans back. That is absolutely something I miss so much. Not being able to go to the Etihad and watch my beloved Manchester City score goals is a great trauma for me, so please can we get them back? We must also get support for freelancers and sole traders—that is absolutely vital.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Andy Slaughter will be the last speaker on four minutes. I want to try to get everybody in if we can, so we will then go down to three minutes.

3.45 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Like other Members, I too spoke in Tuesday's Westminster Hall debate on the contribution of the culture sector to local economies. While I do not intend to repeat what I said then, I want to re-emphasise just how vital culture, media and sport organisations are to my constituency, not just culturally in terms of promoting diversity and their success in the way that they represent this country, but economically. In constituencies like mine they are as important as manufacturing or finance are to other constituencies.

We have live music and entertainment venues such as the Eventim Apollo, which is a beautiful art deco building that has been fully restored by its new owners, the Shepherd's Bush Empire, Bush Hall, and the Riverside Studios, Lyric and Bush theatres, all of them in new or

[*Andy Slaughter*]

expanded premises, and all of them thriving before covid. In a small borough, we have two premiership clubs and one championship football club—Chelsea, Fulham and QPR—again, all doing really well, whether in building new stands, looking for new grounds or rebuilding their existing grounds. Last but not least, in terms of exhibitions and events, we have lost Earls Court but we still have Olympia, which is being refurbished and restored to its Victorian splendour by its new owners.

These are great successes, but that is not mirrored by the support that they have been getting from Government over this time. I urge Members to sign the letter that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) is writing on the events industry, because the neglect of the events industry has been one of the great scandals throughout covid. What all these enterprises have in common is that they are the worst affected. They cannot operate but they are getting the least help. Government schemes do not work for them. They do not work for their staff and they particularly do not work for the freelancers on whom many of them depend. I will make just two points. First, these are successful organisations that help themselves. Secondly, the Government schemes are not working for them.

I also have the privilege of having had 75 years of the BBC in my constituency. However, we are losing TV Centre because of the cuts in support for the BBC made by the Cameron Government in not supporting the licence fee, and now the BBC is being further undermined in so many ways. The BBC supports the cultural sector with £1.2 billion, the largest single such investment, going into its content. That is three times what Netflix does, which is half of what public service broadcasting does. Yet that is also being undermined by the further cuts that are going through at the BBC.

Finally, let me quote from something I saw when I was waiting for this debate to start—an email that I got from a very successful hospitality business called Beds and Bars based in my constituency. It also operates in Europe. One can feel the anger when the managing director, Murray Roberts, points out that the UK faces mass redundancies in these sectors while jobs in mainland Europe will be saved. He says:

“What we see in the rest of the Europe is that those governments want to help the hospitality sector but the Job Support Scheme in the UK is not going to help anyone. I haven’t heard of a single operator who has said the Job Support Scheme is any good or is even something they can work with.”

He says that whereas the Europeans say that

“there’s no question of making mass redundancies...Sunak’s Job Support Scheme is all smoke and mirrors. It’s time we started shaming the actions of the government. The support we will be getting is appalling and we will face huge redundancies.”

That is the truth and the challenge that the Government are not meeting at present.

3.49 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) and the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) for securing this important debate today. It is good to see so many Members here to talk about this subject. I

will be brief and concentrate my remarks on two areas: first, the creative industries; and, secondly, broadband, which seems to have been forgotten in this debate until now.

First, on the creative industries, I wish to talk about the supply chains, but, before I do so, I will just mention Theatr Hafren. What I say is: never mind the west end, because in mid Wales, Theatr Hafren is where it’s at. This fantastic theatre is linked to Newtown College, which is causing it problems in accessing funding through the Arts Council of Wales, the Welsh Government and other Government agencies, because they are saying that it could lean on the college. Well, our colleges are also under financial strain and, of course, they should focus on their core mission of education. I ask the Minister to work with the Welsh Government and find out whether there are any vehicles or avenues to support the theatres that are linked to colleges, or, indeed, to schools. These are the least subsidised theatres in Wales, and they are the ones that have been delivering during these tough financial times and the ones that I would argue need the most support.

Let me turn now to the supply chains in the creative industry. Mid Wales Music Centre, which is the largest music retailer in Wales, is run by Phil and Bobbie Barnwell. It is a brilliant shop, with a huge reach. It has been operating for 33 years, but it is now restructuring to try to get the family business to survive. It has stepped up and provided equipment to music tutors to help them through tough times. It is incumbent on the UK Government, the Welsh Government and other agencies now to support it.

Given that I have just one minute left, I will touch very briefly on broadband. If there is one thing that this crisis has brought out, it is the need for a decent broadband connection. Representing a constituency that covers 840 square miles, I can say that broadband is incredibly important to many of the businesses and residents. I welcome the universal service obligation and I welcome what the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the UK Government and other partners are doing in this regard, but as we come out of covid, we must not forget the lesson that we have learned about how much we need those internet connections. Some 12.5% of my constituency qualifies for USO, which means that 12.5% of my constituency currently get less than 10 megabits. That is not a stable connection and my constituents, like others, have struggled.

In conclusion, we must support the rural economy. Our creative talent and supply chains mean as much there as they do in the west end. Can we carry on rolling out that USO and get some decent broadband?

3.52 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency of Vauxhall lies a short distance from this House. Members need only look across Westminster Bridge to see its enormous positive impact. Our world-leading cultural organisations lend huge respect to our national identity and international reputation. We can see iconic landmarks such as the London Eye, the National Theatre, the British Film Institute and the South Bank Centre, the origins of which date back to the Festival of Britain, and which houses the Hayward Gallery and the Royal Festival Hall, home of the world famous London Philharmonic Orchestra. Every Member

in this House will be able to understand why so many of my constituents—more than 800 of them—signed a petition urging the Government to do a lot more in terms of support for the arts.

These cultural icons are not just buildings; they attract so many tourists and visitors from outside and around the UK. They contribute millions of pounds to the Exchequer, not to mention the economic and social contribution they make to so many businesses such as cafés, restaurants and hotels, which provide employment for local residents in Vauxhall and make our city a pleasure to visit and to live in.

Let me reference some of the smaller independent community theatres, such as the Waterloo East Theatre and the Clapham Omnibus Theatre, which I took my two children to last year on Boxing Day, when most Members here were probably still resting, to see “The Little Prince”—when you have a four-year-old and a two-year-old, you do not get to sleep on Boxing Day. Now these theatres desperately need our help. The Chancellor’s winter economic plan does not do anything to help some of those in the creative and night-time industries who cannot work because of covid-19. These restrictions, whether it is in music, the comedy clubs or the theatres, are having a big impact.

The Government’s £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund was welcome, but that was announced in July, and to date less than 3% of that money has been allocated to live music venues and independent cinemas, all of which are hanging by a thread. Just yesterday, a small independent picture house in Clapham in my constituency announced it will be closing tomorrow. So many jobs are going to be lost. Like many other people, a few years that is where I went to see “Black Panther”. The local people will not have that local cinema now. The tourism sector has lost this summer, and now Christmas is coming and it will lose that period too.

Lastly, I want to put on record my criticism of the Government for not acting quickly enough to help our freelancers who have fallen through the gaps. These are highly skilled people, many of whom who have invested many years in specialist training, and they cannot just retrain. Without them, our cultural organisations would not survive. Can the Minister confirm when our theatres will finally see the money, and will he lobby the Chancellor to ensure that our amazing cultural sector gets the targeted support it needs?

3.55 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The arts and culture sector is at the beating heart of my city, and we are so proud of what is on offer in Bath. I am happy to add my support to the #WeAreViable campaign. Many of my constituents are writing to me, worried about the future of local institutions such as Komedia or The Bell. The Little Theatre Cinema, very similar to the one the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) mentioned, which opened its doors in 1935, will now once again temporarily close them.

However, there are also some uplifting success stories. Bath’s Theatre Royal has opened its doors with three plays and a Christmas show, the Assembly Rooms are hosting the Mozartfest in November, Moles is welcoming live music lovers again, and a fabulous Grayson Perry show can be enjoyed at the Holburne Museum. Please, all come to Bath.

Clearly, some venues find it more difficult than others to adapt, and even those that are open again cannot operate at full capacity. The culture recovery fund is welcome, but it is not yet reaching all those who need it. The Arts Council England decision has been delayed until next week, adding to the uncertainty and anxiety already felt by those who see the fund as a final lifeline.

Live music events have been hit particularly hard; we have already heard a lot about that today. According to the Production Services Association, not one of its members has received anything from the Arts Council England funding for freelancers, and 20% of its self-employed members have had no access to furlough or the self-employed income support scheme. I commend the Stagehand Crew Relief Fund, which has been set up for crew workers in the live music sector. Some £100,000 has already been given to start off the fundraising, but much more will be needed. Highly skilled freelancers urgently need our support, and we must always remember that we need those skilled workers behind the musicians and actors.

Much Government support will end just as it becomes viable to consider reopening again. An extension of the furlough scheme is needed, but there is also room for creativity. Edenred is calling for a tax-based hospitality voucher scheme that employers could make available to employees, who could spend them on tourism, hospitality and the leisure sector. Countries across Europe have already tried similar schemes, with positive effects.

We cannot afford to lose our vital culture sector. Arts and culture bring together communities, provide solace to those struggling with mental health and entertain us all. We need more of them, not less.

3.58 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). Bath is not the only spa town in which the arts and culture are absolutely foundational to our way of life. A defining characteristic of much of the sector is that it is social. It consists of bringing people together as audiences, as spectators and as teams, so music venues, theatres and sports grounds have been particularly hard hit by the social distancing requirements. Those have been carried out on behalf of us all, but those places have borne the brunt of them, and so it is right that they have been singled out for special treatment.

I called for and welcomed the culture recovery fund announced in July, but it is a long time since it was announced, and organisations across the country need to have the allocations from the fund. I think of The Forum in Tunbridge Wells, a small, independent music venue that has been a hotbed for musical talent since 1993. Just a few weeks ago it was declared *Music Week’s* grassroots venue of the year for the whole of the UK. However, it is too small to open with the audiences that are necessary for it to be financially successful, so it absolutely depends on the funding, which I hope will come through.

I hope, too, that the Government will be creative in looking at ways that more venues can reopen and at how other countries are able to bring venues back into use. Some are coming back—the Assembly Hall theatre in my constituency is staging shows again—but an

[Greg Clark]

accomplished musician in my constituency told me that across Germany, many more venues are coming back into use. Let us look at what they are doing. If we can safely copy their practice—perhaps including the availability of rapid testing in other countries—we should apply that.

For all the size of the fund available, I am worried that not all of it will reach through the institutions to the people who are employed in the sector, especially those who operate on a freelance basis, whether they are actors or singers on the stage, performers in orchestras, or people such as directors, designers, choreographers and technicians. Many people in this sector work as freelancers, and it is vital that they are supported alongside the institutions. Being an orchestral musician is not a job that can be picked up and put down; it is a lifetime's dedication—it is a vocation—and that needs to be recognised in the support that is available.

I hope that the constraints and specific circumstances that are particular to this sector will be recognised, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said. It is a sector that injects life and vitality into all our communities and the whole country.

4.1 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): At the latest count, about 500 people in my constituency had signed the parliamentary petition asking for support for the arts sector. People are deeply concerned about what is happening.

Before coronavirus, the UK's creative sector was growing at five times the rate of the wider economy, employing more than 2 million people directly and contributing £111.7 billion to our economy, but the west midlands creative sector is now braced for the loss of 51,000 jobs in what the Creative Industries Federation has warned is a "cultural catastrophe". The Musicians Union says that 65% of musicians are facing financial hardship and 34% are considering leaving the profession altogether. Maybe that is music to the Chancellor's ears.

The winter economic plan does nothing to help those in the creative and night-time industries. There are 660 shuttered nightclubs and live entertainment venues across the west midlands. They are not receiving any help; as we have heard, most of the Government's much-vaunted £1.57 billion culture recovery fund has yet to reach theatres, live venues and other organisations. I understand that the first tranche was due to be allocated on Monday, but it has now been delayed until 12 October. Many organisations are still waiting to hear whether their applications have been successful. They will be gone if they do not hear some good news soon.

In Birmingham, our 107-year-old Rep theatre began consulting on redundancies in July; 50% of the Hippodrome's staff are facing redundancy; the Midlands Arts Centre theatre is closed and letting most of its staff go; Symphony Hall and the Town Hall are consulting on redundancies for half their staff; the Electric Cinema, the UK's oldest working cinema, has had to get rid of all its staff and remains closed; and the NEC Group, which had revenues of £160 million before the pandemic, has seen them fall to zero and is consulting its 2,300 staff on job cuts.

4.4 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I recognise a number of the points made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). A number of speakers have referred to the need for help for musicians, freelancers and, indeed, theatres. I have the Roses theatre in my area, and I know that help is certainly needed. It is needed also in the pubs and restaurants sector. I know that goes a little wider than the Minister's responsibility, but very many people are concerned about the 10 pm curfew and the effect that it is having on many businesses without any discernible good coming from it. I hope that it will be reviewed.

I will speak in the two minutes that I have remaining on behalf of horse racing. I have the pleasure of being the co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on racing and bloodstock, and I have Cheltenham racecourse, one of the greatest racecourses in the world, in my constituency. I have to stress that it is not a wealthy sport in the best of times. At the moment, it is suffering very acutely. Almost 50% of the revenue of racecourses comes from paying customers. Spectators go every day—it is a seven-day-a-week sport—and at the moment they have lost that revenue entirely.

There have been a couple of trials and pilots, which seemed to go very well, so it is really rather disappointing that the Government have stopped any further pilots or trials, especially given that racecourses are, of course, vast areas where social distancing would be very easy. There are also question marks about why hospitality suites cannot be open, when we can all go to a restaurant where there might be 50 or 100 people—again, suitably socially distanced. Why can that not be replicated at a sporting arena?

Other sports as well, not just horse racing, are having problems. Everybody understands why there are restrictions, but we have to look at the wider health implications of them. Sport is a very valuable asset to many people's lives, both physically and mentally, and we really have to be careful that in containing the coronavirus disease, which we all want to do, we do not inadvertently cause other health problems. I make a plea to the Minister to think very carefully about reopening sporting venues, allowing, in a controlled way, crowds of a limited size to start attending again.

4.6 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The cultural and creative industries are central to our economy and communities in Dulwich and West Norwood. I am proud of our local institutions, including the South London Theatre; the Dulwich Picture Gallery; the Black Cultural Archives; Brixton House theatre, which we are proud to have poached from my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) and which is due to open shortly in beautiful new premises; three Picturehouse cinemas, including the iconic Ritzzy cinema; and a wealth of grassroots music venues.

Many of my constituents work in big cultural institutions in central London as musicians, actors, dancers, set designers, costume makers, lighting or sound technicians, graphic designers and many other roles. Six months on from the start of lockdown, many cultural venues are still unable to reopen on a basis that is safe and economically viable, and those that have reopened are operating with a devastating loss of income, to maintain social distancing

on their premises. The Government must provide support to recognise the additional challenges with which our precious cultural sector is confronted. The support provided to date is not adequate to the task.

Workers in the cultural sector are highly skilled. Many have trained for years to perfect their craft, but that capacity will be lost without more support. We have already seen millions of freelance workers cut adrift by the Government. Many have been enormously creative. Musicians have been teaching via Zoom. Performances have gone online. Costume designers have been making masks and scrubs. Those efforts, however, cannot possibly provide an income to sustain people for the long term.

The Chancellor has denied that he told musicians that they should retrain, but that was exactly the implication that could be drawn from his remarks because he did not have anything else to offer them. I want to raise my concerns about the lack of support for grassroots music venues, such as Off The Cuff, Hootananny and Effra Social in my constituency. The music industry, like football, is a pyramid. Superstars do not emerge from nowhere, fully formed, at Wembley Arena or the O2. Emerging acts need venues in which to develop and grow. Grassroots music venues make that opportunity available to a wide range of performers. Without them, the sector as a whole will be poorer. Yet, despite extensive representations to the Secretary of State, only 135 venues have benefited from any support so far, and 400 are at imminent risk of permanent closure.

I will highlight very briefly the devastating impact that the imminent closure tomorrow of three Picturehouse cinemas in my constituency will have, and 100 jobs are at risk as a consequence. Will the Minister intervene with Cineworld, which is not the most scrupulous employer in the country and ask that it work harder to keep its arthouse cinemas open, which have much more flexibility and are not dependent on Bond? Those jobs can be saved if the Government show more leadership.

Our cultural sector is vital to the UK economy, but more than that, it is how we express who we are, articulate our values, process traumatic experiences and celebrate life in our communities in all our diversity. If the Government allow that sector to perish, we will all be poorer.

4.10 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. The Government's £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund is so important to my constituency, which proudly boasts of its cultural heritage. I am grateful for the grants that Watts Gallery and Sime Gallery have received thus far. Watts Gallery has another bid in with the Department, and I remain hopeful of good news about that. All the support given to our magnificent Yvonne Arnaud Theatre and the funding that Guildford City football club and Alford football club received to make them covid-secure venues for players and spectators alike has been incredibly welcome, along with the generous job-saving measures introduced by the Treasury.

In the short time available, I wish to focus my contribution on the performing arts. Before words were ever written down, story telling and music were the ways that communities were able to pass on history, identity and culture—who were are, what we believe and universal truths about the human condition. Even though the

theatres went dark and auditoriums fell silent, theatres—both professional and amateur—found ingenious ways to put productions online and gain audiences that extend beyond our towns and villages. I commend the Guildford Shakespeare Company for its innovation in order to survive, but we all know that Zoom can never compete with being in the room.

The performing arts have a way of transcending the mundane, and we have never needed that more than now in this difficult time of covid. That is true not just for adults, but for children, and especially for those who learn differently and who find inspiration, meaning and heroes who they seek to emulate when seeing live performance and sport. I will never forget the first live performance that I saw aged 15. It was Rachmaninoff's piano concerto No.2 in C minor, and I was utterly transfixed. I also know the huge privilege of performing for an audience and working behind the scenes to make the magic happen together with others who are equally passionate. I would like measures to be introduced so that our performing arts can continue.

This pandemic will no doubt be the source of creative inspiration, and it will form part of our story telling for the future. However, we are in a world that is currently dominated by a media pantomime that does not fill our hearts with joy, and neither does it let us momentarily leave our cares behind for an hour or two. It does not bring our communities together in the way that our local sports teams or amateur dramatics do, and neither does it give volunteers involved in grassroots activities the satisfaction they receive from giving their time for the benefit of others. We must ensure that all those fantastic institutions endure.

In conclusion, to slightly reword Orsino's opening lines in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night"—I hope the great Bard will forgive me—"If sport, dance, pantomime, theatre and music be the food of love, they must play on."

4.13 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson), and as chair of the all-party group for sport, I will focus my remarks on sport and physical activity and touch on some of the concerns about the impact of covid on that sector. Sport permeates our wider society and public health, and the sector has been hit particularly hard. Sport brings people together, and now more than ever, we need to invest in community sport and activity.

Inactivity is responsible for one in six of all UK deaths, and we know that activity is a key part of fighting coronavirus and keeping us as healthy as possible. The Prime Minister had a nasty experience with the disease, owing to the fact that he was, in his own words, "too fat", which is widely recognised as being a huge problem. Unfortunately, the stats on inactivity in my constituency are pretty woeful, and there is a real problem with significant health inequalities that will only be made worse by losing sports clubs and venues.

The Government have introduced unprecedented support for many sectors, but the sport and physical activity sector is yet to see a huge amount of that. It will need further support if it is to continue to provide invaluable help to our communities. I urge the Government to introduce a sports recovery fund and to invest in the community sports and physical activity that we all enjoy.

[Ben Bradley]

I also call on them to extend the reduction in VAT that has been applied to the culture and hospitality sectors to the sport and physical activities sectors as well.

Sport England's research found that 53% of adults had been encouraged to exercise by Government guidance during lockdown. That includes me—I am a stone and a half down compared with March, following in the PM's footsteps. Those on lower incomes or with disabilities have found it harder than ever to be active during this crisis. Initial social distancing measures meant that access to sport and activity had to be put on hold, but I ask the Minister to ensure that should future lockdowns take place, our access to those venues and opportunities is protected as that is important for our mental health as a nation.

In September, data provided by more than 1,500 community sport and leisure facilities showed just 78 confirmed cases of coronavirus among customers, at a rate of just 0.34 cases per 100,000 visits. That shows that facilities are following the guidelines and are a safe place to be active. I thank all those in grassroots sports—they are mainly volunteers—who are working to keep things ticking over.

Our professional clubs are also at risk, and I know Ministers have had conversations about the football league. I have raised Mansfield Town with the Prime Minister in the Chamber. I am grateful for the attention on that, but countless other sports rely on ticket sales for their income and to remain viable. Almost 175,000 people have signed a petition to get fans back into stadiums, and that is a hugely important thing. These clubs are not just about sport; they are pillars of our community, and through outreach programmes such as "Football in the Community"-type schemes they pervade education as well as tackling isolation and other vital challenges.

I will end by emphasising the importance of the sector. As well as improving the physical health of communities such as mine, it is invaluable for our mental wellbeing, and I hope the Government will step in and protect these vital community and grassroots sports facilities.

4.15 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I start by thanking the Minister and the Department for the engagement and careful consideration they have shown to a number of industries in my constituency. I start with the racing industry in Lambourn, which is not just a major employer—although it does employ more than 1,000 people—and a major source of revenue for our local economy, but something of which we are very proud. It is a core part of our identity. When the lockdown hit, it had very serious consequences, because the horses cannot just be dumped in a field. They are essentially equine athletes who need to be trained and cared for, and that involves high costs and staff retention.

The package of financial support was a lifeline, and so was the support given to get racing going behind closed doors in July, and the industry is grateful for that, but the situation is dire. My remarks that follow are not intended to be a criticism, but a fair reflection of the challenges that face not only racing, but some of the arts venues in my constituency, including the Watermill Theatre in Newbury and the Corn Exchange.

The first great challenge such organisations face is reopening. I will focus on racing for a moment. The industry believes that it could make racecourses secure by limiting numbers, conducting the entire exercise outside and constructing barriers. It could get racing going safely, if only it was permitted to do so. That is not just a top-line concern but one that reverberates around the entire ecosystem of photographers, hospitality and bookmakers.

In that sense of talking about an ecosystem, I would also like to address the challenges of the live events sector. I had a very constructive roundtable with some in my constituency today who provide services to music and arts events, and they make the point that they are viable, in that they would have demand if they could open the doors. They believe that they could do so in a secure way, and they underscore the need for planning. They genuinely do not know what the Government anticipate, what happens next year with a vaccine or without a vaccine, or what happens in a best-case scenario or a worst-case scenario. When they reopen, they will get orders, but it will be two to three months before they actually deliver the service, and they ask for consideration of that.

On the issue of collateral damage, my constituency's much-loved local newspaper, the *Newbury Weekly News*, has been more important than ever in providing a service to people during the crisis, yet its revenues have taken an unprecedented hit because of the loss of advertising. Without direct financial support from the Department, I am genuinely concerned about its survival.

4.19 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I begin by thanking the ministerial team and the Treasury, who are trying to strike a very fine balance between the use of public money and asking the private sector to play a role, too. Everything is being done under the constant need to ensure that the sector plays a role in reducing the spread of coronavirus.

It is welcome that the Government have prioritised allowing local sports to continue. Dozens of groups across Crewe and Nantwich are helping to keep people fit and active, and that is so important for our physical and mental health. I recently visited Cheshire Blades FC and saw how happy all the players were to be back on the field. When visiting LS Gymnastics Crewe Academy, I heard at first hand just what a lifeline gymnastics is to the young members of that club. I welcome the sports recovery package announced at the end of September. The Government have worked with Sports England to provide £195 million-worth of support for community projects. The £9.5 million pitch preparation fund is also a huge boost for smaller local clubs, helping them to prepare for when they might get back to playing matches.

To illustrate some of the challenges still facing the sector, I want to provide two local examples, which are, of course, by no means the only ones. Crewe Lyceum Theatre is a tremendous asset to Crewe. It is a genuine cultural draw from across the region. It has been putting on plays and performances in my constituency for more than 130 years, and plays a crucial role in bringing the community together and supporting the local economy in the town. I can think of only one other time when the Lyceum Theatre was so threatened—when it was almost

entirely consumed by a fire in 1910. The culture and arts sectors were relieved by the announcement of the £1.57 billion support package, but the challenge is getting it to those who need it the most. I was pleased to hear that £3.46 million is being given to 135 grassroots music venues, but the majority of the package is yet to be allocated. We need to make sure we get that money out as soon as possible.

My constituency is also home to Crewe Alexandra FC, which is at the heart of our local community, where people of all ages and background come together to support their local club. Though not technically in my constituency, I should probably also mention Nantwich Town FC, which is facing similar challenges. Crewe Alex's leadership put an enormous amount of effort into getting its venue covid-secure. They were very disappointed with the decision to put back the return of spectators into venues. If fans can accept not being able to be back watching the sport right now, they need to be confident that it will make it through to the other side of the pandemic. The gate money it receives is absolutely vital for its financial future. As I said, it is about striking a balance—asking some of the bigger players in the family to help provide financial support. I appreciate those negotiations will be challenging, but we needed a decision yesterday really. I press Ministers as hard as possible to try to come to some conclusions, so that football fans know that on the other side of the pandemic there will still be a sport for them to go and watch locally.

4.21 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is important to state at the outset that throughout the pandemic the DCMS ministerial team has been approachable, has listened and has responded with bespoke measures to address the concerns of the many businesses, charities and other organisations whose governance falls within its remit. However, notwithstanding that welcome support, many people are facing an uncertain and worrying next few months, with the prospect of further restrictions and local lockdowns stopping a fledgling and fragile recovery in its tracks. Those businesses and other groups employ large numbers of people. Quite often, they have been run by the same families for generations. They are deeply embedded in the culture and wellbeing of their local communities.

The home tourism industry worked its socks off in the summer to catch up on what it had lost in the lockdown. However, research carried out by the British Holiday & Home Parks Association shows that it was not able to do so. With the closures now in place in Wales, the opportunity to make up more lost ground in the coming months may well have been taken away.

Coach companies have fallen through the cracks of the support that has been provided. Belle Coaches, based in Lowestoft and Leiston in Suffolk, is a family-run business that has been trading for 96 years and employs 50 people. The coach sector should be treated as part of the leisure sector and finance holidays should be extended to ensure that no coaches are repossessed this winter.

Indoor leisure and sports centres, such as those run by Sentinel Leisure, are struggling as social distancing measures, customer confidence and limited capacity mean that it is difficult, if not impossible, to be financially viable.

The terms of any loans for which such businesses may apply need to take account of their ability to repay being affected by the inevitable slow recovery.

Turning to local football, Lowestoft Town, who play at step 3, and Kirkley & Pakefield, for whom I have the honour of being president and who play at step 5, both welcome the support that has been provided. However, the season will be tough for both of them. There is a worry that some small community clubs, at step 7 and below, will struggle to survive, and I urge the Minister to consider targeted support for them.

It will be a long, bleak winter. DCMS has done a lot of good work since March, and I urge it to go that extra mile in the next few weeks and months.

4.24 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) in this important debate. It has been an interesting debate to listen to. I want to focus my contributions on the area that has the most direct impact for my communities, and that is community football. We have already talked about this today, but as a Black Country MP, and with the Black Country being at the heart of English football, I could not make a speech without talking about the football sector. I will highlight two of the clubs that I represent: Tipton Town football club and Tividale football club.

On the wider support that the Department has offered to the sector, we have seen an array of packages in conjunction with Sport England and the National Lottery. These have been well received, and the feedback on the whole has been positive. The £150 million funding roll-over and the £55 million sector stimulus are absolutely vital funds, but as we go forward we need to be flexible, as many hon. and right hon. Members have highlighted. I want to reiterate the thanks that many hon. Members have put on record to the Department and to my hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench for their flexibility and openness to having these discussions about vital community assets in our constituencies. It is that flexibility, which we have had to have during these unprecedented times, that has enabled our society to remain open.

I want to focus on why this is important, and I want to talk in particular about those specific clubs that I represent. These are not clubs run by professionals. The people who run them are not paid to do what they do; they are volunteers. For example, Tipton Town football club is run by Ann and Ian. Ian will do a 30-hour shift at a well-known distribution company down the road. He will then come in and set up the matches. He will make sure that the players are there and the kits are ready. He will make sure that the other side know where they need to go. After the game, he will pack up and go away, after ensuring that everyone is sorted. At Tividale, Leon runs the club. Again, he makes sure that the players are ready, and again, he is a volunteer. That is what this is about. These are people who are giving back to our communities, particularly in a community such as mine. In Tipton, up the road from the station, there is an estate known as the Lost City, where kids' chances of progressing are 20% lower than anywhere else in the region. It is those kids who rely on that club. Many of the junior team at Tipton Town come from Tipton and see that as their way out, and their way to achieve

[Shaun Bailey]

something. I say thank you to my hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench for being open and for listening, but we still have more to do. I know that they will be up to the challenge of delivering it for those people in Tipton and Tividale.

4.27 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey). As always, he made some incredibly powerful points. Like him, I would like to start by welcoming the record £1.57 billion funding promised by the Secretary of State to the cultural and arts sector, which is now being delivered. I spoke earlier in the week in the Westminster Hall debate on the importance of providing support to the supply chain companies and the technicians and freelancers who work in the creative sectors, and I know this is something that Ministers recognise.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary media group, I want to highlight a sector that is in need of urgent help—namely, local media, comprising local newspapers, local commercial radio and local magazines, particularly those that are small and independently owned. Examples are the *Warrington Worldwide* and *Village Life* magazines in my constituency. These are publications to which we turn to keep us updated. The owner and editor, Gary Skentelbery, has invested and built a great business, and he goes above and beyond to provide up-to-the-minute news and information. However, because he is not part of a large media group, he does not get the agency ad funding that comes from the Central Office of Information—the Government ad revenue—although it does send him press releases to run in his news pages. That is simply not right.

I echo the comments made by Opposition Members earlier that when we come to look at how we support local media, we should approach it with a bottom-up mentality. The ad revenues of local radio such as the Dee Radio stations in Cheshire, and newspapers such as the *South Warrington News* are forecast to fall by more than 30% this year, and I have to say I think that is a bit optimistic, because I suspect that, in the early part of the lockdown, many saw a fall in revenues in excess of 80%. It is businesses that are normally advertising at this time of year—the entertainment, events and hospitality sectors—that are under further restrictions and simply cannot spend at the moment. We are likely to see a forecast £4 billion reduction in ad spend over the next year, which is a significant cut in the amount of money that will be available to allow commercial media to produce content.

Local content is vital for local media and local reporting. Indeed, we have entered local lockdown in Warrington, and we rely on local media channels to feed the community with news and specific information about the restrictions. Unfortunately, however, journalists are being laid off. I appreciate the work undertaken by the Minister for Media and Data, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). His support for covering commercial radio broadcasters' transmission costs has been incredibly helpful but, sadly, many of the smallest ones missed out, so will he look again and see what help can give to independent media in our local communities?

4.31 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): My right hon. and hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench will be delighted to see my mug before them once again, because they regularly hear from me on sports, culture, Chatterley Whitfield and “silicon Stoke”. I start by praising the Government's £1.57 billion investment into our culture and arts sector, which is unprecedented in these unprecedented times. They deserve full credit for how they have engaged with Members on a regular basis. I thank them on behalf of Middleport Pottery and Ford Green Hall, which received money from the Heritage Lottery Fund to ensure that those vital community tourist destinations will continue and have some help in the dark winter months. As we enter spring and see a bright future ahead, the funds will go a long way.

I add my name to the long list of moaners when it comes to the fact that we cannot get people into football stadiums. Port Vale FC is a fine football club—I am proud to be a season ticket holder—and it had a plan in place to allow 4,000 fans to sit in its 22,000-seat stadium in a safe and secure way but, sadly, we have been unable to have that access. It is a football club in League Two that relies on extensive matchday revenue, and the sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), has spoken with me about this issue at length. He has received a letter from me and the fantastic chair and co-owner Carol Shanahan, and I know that, privately, he would like to see fans back in the stadiums as soon as possible so that he does not have to hear us lot moaning about it from the Back Benches any further.

Turning to the future, because the motion refers to “after” covid, I want to talk about “silicon Stoke”, of which the Minister is all too aware. We received £9.2 million of DCMS funding to install 104 km of full-fibre gigabit-capable equipment. When I say “gigabit” I do not mean 100 megabits; I am talking about 1,000 megabits into and out of the home. That will revolutionise Stoke-on-Trent and put it at the heart of the tech revolution.

We want to build a full-fibre academy that will become Stoke-on-Trent's digital version of the BRIT School and ensure we have a bright future. We want to build a health and social care service that can be delivered through a full-fibre network and to trial and pilot some of the really exciting technologies coming into the health sector. We want a digital enterprise zone, which will enable us to create a digital innovation hub. We want to be the heart of the video game industry, because Staffordshire University is the UK's leader in digital and video game creation. The industry, which is worth more than £1 billion, is based in Dundee and Leamington Spa at the moment, but I want a big chunk of that business in Stoke-on-Trent for the future. I look forward to hearing the Minister support us in trying to become a full gigabit city.

4.34 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As Christmas approaches, the prospects for the sectors supported by DCMS are bleak. That I may not get to go to see Motherwell FC in the new year's Lanarkshire derby, to go to see the “Sleeping Beauty” panto in Derby with my mother-in-law and my kids, or to go with my family to see Scottish Ballet's production of “The Nutcracker” at the Theatre Royal in Glasgow is incredibly sad, but it is

much more than sad for those whose livelihoods are within these sectors—so much more for the performers without an audience, the musicians who will not be heard, the box office staff, the crew, the lighting and sound engineers, the people running funfairs, local journalists, cleaners, ground staff and those who serve the drinks, the ice cream and the half-time pies. For them, it is devastating, and they deserve the support of this UK Government—support not just for the bricks and mortar of venues, as important as that is, but for those who work in them—and wholeheartedly, not the weasel words of the Chancellor and some of the other Ministers.

Many freelancers and contractors have had absolutely nothing at all from this UK Government, having been left out of the job retention furlough scheme and excluded from the self-employment support scheme. They deserve better. Their contribution is significant: their jobs—their lifelong vocations—are viable and as worthy as those in any of the other sectors that are still struggling. They support a whole other ecosystem in hospitality and tourism, and in the supply chain. Ending the furlough scheme must be rethought because, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) pointed out, the job support scheme is of very little use to venues that remain closed because of the public health restrictions, which are necessary to protect us all. We know that stopping the furlough scheme at the end of this month has already put millions of jobs on the line, and as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) laid out, there is a significant impact in constituencies such as his, and in every constituency up and down these islands. It is a choice of this Government, knowing what we know about this virus now, to throw people out of viable jobs and careers into unemployment, because we also know that there will not be enough jobs to go around for people who lose their jobs now.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) laid out how the show people who have worked incredibly hard to entertain us over many generations and those who provide food vans and various other support to events will not be able to go back to normal. It is with great sadness that I see that the carnival at the Scottish Event Campus will not be going ahead this Christmas. As well as that, other events and conferences that support the Scottish Event Campus cannot go ahead either.

The Scottish Government have worked incredibly hard to spread funds around through various schemes, such as the pivotal enterprise resilience fund of £122 million; £23 million through the creative, tourism and hospitality enterprises hardship fund; the performing arts venues relief fund, which is a targeted fund of £12.5 million to support performing arts venues; the grassroots music venues stabilisation fund of £2.2 million to small music venues that cannot open; and the independent cinema recovery and resilience fund of £3.5 million to help small cinemas. I think it would be useful if the UK Government did something for the bigger cinemas, because then people in my constituency would not be losing their jobs from Cineworld closing its doors, along with 5,500 employees across the rest of the UK.

There is also the £15 million cultural organisations and venues recovery fund; the £5 million hardship funds for creative freelancers, recognising the importance of freelancers in that sector and supporting them financially;

the £5 million sustaining creative practice fund for young artists to continue developing creative work during covid-19 and promoting us into the recovery thereafter; the £3 million youth arts fund; and the £3.8 million to the National Trust for Scotland and the £21.3 million to Historic Environment Scotland to protect our cultural and heritage venues.

Museums have also been supported through the £4 million recovery and resilience fund managed by Museums Galleries Scotland. As of last week only 160 of Scotland's 423 museums were currently open. According to the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions, of those attractions that are open, only 28% are operating at an economically sustainable level. Museums have also benefited significantly from furlough, and their skilled employees face an uncertain future as we head into a covid winter.

The tourism sector is facing problems as well, because people are not coming from around the world to visit all of these wonderful venues in our constituencies. As the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) pointed out, the coach sector has been left out completely. The VAT cut has been welcomed, but it needs to be permanent because we will not be out of this any time soon.

As the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) set out, many of our local community sports clubs also play an absolutely pivotal role in their community in tackling health inequalities as well as the other work they do, but many of them are under threat due to the pandemic. Sports such as rugby, hockey, shinty, netball and basketball are really struggling, and they need additional support for the future. Venues have not reopened, and there needs to be more clarity in what consequential funding will be made available through culture and leisure trusts. I note this afternoon that COSLA and the Scottish Government have agreed £139 million of a lost income scheme because the scale of losses within the sector is absolutely significant. That will go some way to addressing it, but we are not out of this crisis yet.

Many clubs, particularly in lower non-league football, as we have heard from many Members this afternoon, rely heavily on matchday income to survive, not least because considerably more people per capita in Scotland go to football matches than in any other country in Europe. The Scottish Government are fully aware that it has been an enormously challenging time for the sporting sector and that the pandemic has put a real financial strain on many sporting organisations, but it is important that we get more clarity in the funding that is coming from the UK Government to Scotland, so that we can get money out the door to sporting organisations in Scotland.

Covid has had a massive impact on the charitable and voluntary sector—the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), the Chair of the Select Committee talked about that in the context of Cancer Research UK. Many organisations and volunteers have stepped up to do more with less money. It would be helpful, on Gift Aid Awareness Day, if the committed to studying the gift aid emergency relief package proposed by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Institute of Fundraising Scotland, the Charities Aid Foundation and a coalition of about 500 voluntary organisations, which would provide a much-needed funding boost and support.

[*Alison Thewliss*]

We have heard from colleagues across the House about the impact of covid-19 in the sectors covered by DCMS. We thank the Government—make no mistake about that—for the support that has come from a UK Government who do have the ability to borrow and the full range of fiscal levers at their disposal, but there is a real sense of frustration, as the Minister will have heard, from across the House. As the Chair of the Select Committee pointed out, the measures do not go far enough. The measures seem to assume that we will all be out of this sometime soon. The recovery will be hampered if the culture, media and sport sectors are allowed to go to the wall by the UK Government, and the UK Government must urgently think again and recognise the reality of the situation that we face in the months ahead. If they do not, we will face a desolate future without these sectors, which are economically significant and bring us the joy that makes our lives worth living.

4.41 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I thank Members from across the Chamber for a really strong and powerful debate about all the sectors covered by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—sectors that touch every aspect of our lives, every day of the week. As we have heard, they have been hit horribly hard by covid. I thank all the trade unions in the sector who are fighting so hard for their members and their livelihoods, along with the ExcludedUK campaign and the trade bodies and associations and advocacy groups. Their tireless work and expertise have also informed a lot of today's debate so powerfully. Finally, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the debate; the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight); and my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), for securing the debate.

We have heard a lot of consensus during today's debate. I think upwards of 35 Members have spoken—too many to refer to individually. I would particularly like to thank colleagues on the Opposition Benches for their contributions.

We have heard that the majority of the DCMS sector is in complete despair. The impact of covid has been exceptionally hard on culture, sport, tourism and the charitable sector. It has hit advertising, which supports much of our broadcast and print media, and we have heard about funding cuts to the BBC, which have meant the loss of 450 jobs in local news. While digital has boomed, especially for those big global tech companies, those across the country with slow broadband, or who have not had access to skills to benefit from digital, are excluded further; and as in so many areas, the pandemic is exposing all too clearly the deep-bedded fault lines in our society.

We appreciate that the Government have tried to help the sector but, as we have consistently said, that help has been limited in DCMS, the bulk of it being too slow. The following hard truth for the Government also needs to be said: if we had a properly functioning test, trace and isolate system, much of the sector would be flourishing right now. We know that, because that is what is happening in other countries—just look at

Germany, with its creative industries back on track, and Denmark's sporting sectors. So that is what is holding us back.

In arts and culture, experienced, skilled and talented live performers, and the people who create, produce and make those economically successful events happen, are being treated by the Treasury as though their jobs were mere hobbies. As we have heard today from across the House, many have had no support since the pandemic hit. People and businesses across the sector constantly tell me that they do not believe the Government understand how the ecology of the sector fits together.

We have had the terrible news this week of the 5,500 job losses at Cineworld, and earlier today, 1,300 job losses at the National Trust were announced. It did not take a crystal ball to work out, at the beginning of this pandemic, that much of the sector would be the first to close and the last to reopen. We had hoped that the Chancellor's winter economic plan would correct some of these failures, but instead we were left disappointed because, as I am sure the Minister understands, you cannot work a third of your hours if your workplace is shut. I know that the Minister will cite the £1.57 billion cultural recovery package, which is obviously welcome, but 97% of that figure has not even reached anybody yet, nearly 100 days on from when it was announced. The focus of the fund is buildings and institutions, not people. Of course buildings are important, but the people who create what is inside those buildings need urgent help—and it is really urgent, as ONS figures suggest that a quarter of a million people in the creative arts sector will lose their jobs within weeks.

The creative industries and sport will be vital to our national recovery, to the public's health and wellbeing and to our economic recovery. These are not things that are nice to have if we have spare money; as we have heard, they have been and can be economically successful, and powerful drivers of future jobs growth and regeneration.

We have heard lots of contributions about sport. Just like the creative industries, I am hearing from sports stakeholders that they feel the Government do not understand how their sector works. I have been contacted overnight by various clubs, talking about what they feel is the illogical nature of today's announcement about a socially distanced event at the O2. It is great to hear about an indoor event, but sports clubs cannot understand why we cannot have some fans back in stadiums, given that stadiums are outdoors. They need clarity and clear communication from the Government on this issue.

Let me turn to tourism. We have heard about the challenges facing our town centres and seaside towns. These are not new, but the pandemic—added to 10 years of a lack of investment—has accelerated the problems and inequalities faced by these areas. The tourism industry projects a drop in income of almost £70 billion this year, and fears there will be a loss of almost 1 million jobs. The unemployment crisis facing this and other sectors is set to wreak devastation throughout the country, but especially in areas where tourism and the interlinked hospitality sector are the main employers.

At the very moment when our society is crying out for help, those who provide it in the charitable sector are also struggling. Some £12.4 billion has been lost from the sector and 60,000 jobs hang in the balance.

The #NeverMoreNeeded campaign has highlighted this exact issue—that charities have supported us, but now feel abandoned.

The message to the Government from across the House in this debate is very clear. Much of the sector risks decimation. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West described a cultural climate emergency and employment extinction. We cannot just help the Crown jewels—as the Government like to call them—because there will not be any jewels if we cut the pipeline of talent that creates them. We cannot simply support buildings and not support those who work in them.

We have a Chancellor who, on 24 September, dismissed these skilled specialist jobs—which have created so much value and wealth for the country, and are the envy of the world—as unviable.

Steve Brine: Except he didn't.

Jo Stevens: He did. How economically illiterate and fiscally irresponsible is that? In other countries, Governments value their cultural heritage, supporting them through this time, ready for when we can emerge from this crisis.

We stand at a crossroads. We can either allow the serious wounds inflicted on the digital, culture, media and sport sector to become fatal, and embrace the Chancellor's viability distinction; or we can, as the Labour party does, soundly reject that idea. This sector was viable before. It was growing and successful. It needs help now, and it needs Test and Trace to work to provide that help so that it can grow again. We have heard plenty of ideas today about how the Government could help that to happen. I hope that they will look at all those ideas, because this is urgent.

I conclude by paraphrasing—and cleaning up—a recent tweet from the musician Liam Gallagher, who said that this country would be nothing without its sport, its music, its TV and its art. I agree with Liam; it's the good stuff in life, and that is what the Opposition will fight for. I hope that the Government will too.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): I congratulate the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), and the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on securing the debate. This is a critical topic that must remain at the forefront of our considerations as we continue to tackle the challenges of the covid-19 pandemic. That is what we have heard from a diverse range of speakers today. I congratulate all of them and apologise for not being able to mention everyone in detail.

Our arts shape us. Our heritage and our history shapes us, and our communities around our sports clubs at every level shape us. That is why this Government have put £1.57 billion into supporting our arts—an unprecedented package. It is why we have put £200 million into supporting our sports, and it is why we will continue to do so to the best of our abilities. This Government are here for culture, here for the arts and here for sport, and we will continue to be so. Whatever ITV might tweet and then have to delete, that is true for the Chancellor as well.

Let us go back to the beginning of this extraordinary pandemic. The Prime Minister rightly instructed us to work at home if we could. That meant millions of people suddenly relying on the internet for endless Zoom calls. It meant millions more people relying on the internet to educate their children, even if they could not work from home, and it meant millions of people relying on the internet for entertainment. Let us not forget that, thanks to the work of our telecommunications networks, the digital lights did not go out. That is hundreds of thousands of men and women working incredibly hard, and I thank them for that. I also thank the BBC, Netflix and other providers that agreed to take some of the load off our networks, so that we could all carry on.

At the outset of this pandemic, we made it clear that we would move to protect our cultural institutions, which are rightly famous around the world. Moreover, they are vital to our economy, to our theatres, to our live music venues and to our museums. They brought in £32.3 billion in 2018, and they employ 680,000 people. It is that income and those jobs that we have moved to shield. It culminated in the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund to tackle the crisis in our most loved arts organisations and heritage sites and help weather the storm of coronavirus. I want to be clear: we are working as hard as we can to get this money out of the door as quickly as possible. That will begin on Monday, and it will continue throughout October and November.

Steve Brine: That is good to hear. If there is any money left in the culture recovery fund after Monday, how soon will the pot be emptied? We do not want any money left in the pot when there are people going to the wall.

Matt Warman: I understand my hon. Friend's enthusiasm. Perhaps it would help if I unpack some of the culture recovery fund, because I, too, do not want to see any money left unclaimed. There is £88 million for heritage institutions, which will provide grants of £10,000 to £3 million; £622 million in recovery grants, and a further £270 million in repayable finance on very generous terms; £120 million to invest in rebuilding and upgrading our cultural infrastructure, as part of a wider effort to bounce back stronger; £100 million for arm's-length bodies such as the British Library, the British Museum and the BFI; and £188 million for the devolved Administrations.

This is not just about big names in London. It is about all our small venues and our communities up and down the country. It is important to ensure that they are not forgotten, and with this fund, they are not. This is about protecting our cultural assets. That is why we have already provided £3.36 million in emergency funding, which has gone to grassroots venues up and down the country, and 42 cinemas across England have already been supported in the first wave of BFI funding. I know how important cinemas are, and the independent sector is a crucial part. The Department has also worked closely with our arm's-length bodies to deliver tailored support packages at speed, including £200 million in emergency public funding to stabilise organisations and protect jobs. We have engaged extensively with the breadth of the sector since the pandemic began, and that is how we will ensure we get the culture recovery fund distributed as quickly as possible.

[*Matt Warman*]

We continue to work at speed with sports clubs across the country to understand the best way of providing as much support as we can. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport officials are working with their Treasury counterparts to ensure that as many sports clubs as possible are not adversely affected. The Government's first duty is to public health, but we must ensure that there are clubs for fans to go back to.

In addition to sector-specific interventions, DCMS sectors have of course benefited from a year's business rates holiday for leisure businesses, bounce back loans and the reduction in VAT from 20% to 5%.

Thanks to our arm's-length body, Sport England, grassroots sport is in the process of receiving a £195 million package of support to help community sports clubs, which are so important at this time. We have recently boosted the community emergency fund by a further £15 million, taking the total to £210 million.

We have supported the return of elite sport to behind-closed-doors competition, which has also enabled vital broadcast revenue to flow into elite sport. The Government ensured that Project Restart was shared with everyone by getting Premier League football on the BBC for the first time ever.

There has also been important support for rugby league and, following the postponement of fans' return to stadiums in general, the Government will come forward with a package to support the most affected sports. That includes help with the immediate needs of the National League football teams that are at the heart of many communities.

Work continues apace to explore new ways of getting fans into stadiums as soon as we can. We have hosted several successful pilots and we have launched the sports technology and innovation group. Its work and our learning from our successful pilot sports events with crowds will ensure that we are best prepared to get fans back into stadiums as soon as it is possible to do so.

I recognise that the business events industry, which is often related to stadiums, is also affected. That is why the Government have put in place the unprecedented package of general support. We will also work with the industry specifically to restart. Pilots undertaken in September have demonstrated that that can be done in a covid-secure way. We will continue to do that as much as we possibly can.

Tourism was one of the first industries to be hit, but the Government acted quickly to help businesses. On top of the wider economic support package, we have provided business rates relief and one-off grants and introduced the hugely significant cut in VAT for tourism. We recognise that the times remain extremely difficult for the sector. We are acutely aware of the seasonal nature of many businesses' trade and we continue to engage with stakeholders to assess how we can most effectively support tourism's recovery across the UK. I point my hon. Friends to the work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and VisitBritain on the aim to extend the season in coastal communities where that can safely be done.

We have announced the £500 million film and TV production restart scheme to assist our creative economy. The scheme will be able to compensate film and TV

productions after they have restarted. It is a temporary measure that supports productions that commence filming before the end of the calendar year and compensates for coronavirus losses until the end of June 2021.

We will work as quickly as we can to reopen theatres. We will continue to work with the sector to develop the pilot that we need to get theatres open. That is a vital part of getting support to freelancers. Our world-beating creative industries are nothing without the work of freelancers and we are working hard to help provide financial support for them in those sectors.

We should not forget the charitable and voluntary sector. It has done great work in these extraordinary times.

I am aware that I have not been able to cover every single aspect of the work of DCMS. We will continue to work with colleagues across the House to ensure that we can answer questions, provide the clarity the sector needs and support that most important of sectors in our country.

4.58 pm

Julian Knight: I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. There have been lots of good ideas and a huge amount of passion, showing exactly how our sporting and cultural institutions are woven into our identity. They are also a crucial part of our economy and our lives. We will miss them beyond words if they are gone. I fear that we are standing on the edge of a cultural, sporting and arts abyss. If we fall in, I can envisage structural unemployment such as we have never seen in this country. We are in serious danger of seeing what makes this country a joy and a great country go under. I hope that Ministers are listening today.

I thank the Minister for his comments. I would make one observation: this was very much about what we have done—that is always the way these things go—but what about the next act in this drama? This will not stop any time soon. Frankly, if our idea is to wait for a vaccine, that is not good enough. We have to get people back in place, we have to get the right testing and tracing, and we have to support these sectors. Without them, words fail me for what will happen to our country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the spending of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on support measures for DCMS sectors during and after the covid-19 pandemic.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, in the planning debate, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) made the point, to put it on the record, that there was no Liberal Democrat in the Chamber at the time she was speaking. I therefore want to take the opportunity also to put it on the record that a Liberal Democrat did contribute to the debate. It was my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), and indeed the hon. Member for West Worcestershire was in the Chamber when she did so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I understand the point that the hon. Lady makes, but I have to say that it is not a point of order for the Chair. I understand why she wants to correct the record, but I will not encourage Members to make such points; if everybody did that every time an incident like that

happened, we would have these points of who was and was not here at the end of every day. I also point out that we are not operating under normal rules at present. Normally, the occupant of the Chair would require everyone who was going to take part in a debate to be there at the beginning, in the middle and at the end, but we are not operating like that now, so the criticism sounds to me to have been invalid too.

PETITION

Universal Credit uplift

5.1 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The most important thing is that you are here, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always good to see a daughter of Elderslie in the Chair.

This is Challenge Poverty Week, and I rise to present a petition in line with that theme. It also follows on from an excellent meeting that I had last week with the Trussell Trust. The petition states:

The petition of the residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Declares that the economic consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic has led to many more people facing increased levels of poverty and financial hardship; further declares that the Government provided welcome support at the beginning of the pandemic when it topped up Universal Credit payments by £20 per week; further declares that it is regretful that the Government has decided not to make permanent this increase to Universal Credit payments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately bring forward additional measures to permanently increase Universal Credit in response to the long-term impact of Covid-19.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002607]

Universal Service Obligation for Broadband

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

5.2 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate and to the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), for extending his Front-Bench stint to respond to it.

As someone from the last generation to be brought up in the analogue age, when pay phones, posted letters and pater by the water cooler were our default ways to communicate, Channel 4 was a novelty, and bookcases were full of books that we actually read, mobile phones and the onset of the internet age have been nothing short of a revelation to me. To the list of essential public utilities—water, gas, electricity and so on—can now be added broadband. It has rapidly become a critical part of our national infrastructure, reshaping the way we do business, access information and interact socially with the world around us.

Yet the speed, reliability and affordability of broadband across the UK are still playing catch-up with the new-found demand, leaving some communities, often rural, falling on the wrong side of what is termed the digital divide. That divide has been exposed and exacerbated further by the pressure put on all our broadband connections at home since the covid-19 outbreak in March. As the Minister said in the previous debate, up to 60% of the UK's adult population were working from home during lockdown, as well as the millions of students who shifted to learning online.

It is therefore a real concern that despite the extensive efforts of those working in the telecoms industry and elsewhere, a recent survey revealed that a third of UK households are still struggling with inadequate broadband speeds, and that as banking and Government services increasingly move online, some communities have found themselves cut off from essential facilities.

In rural areas, including much of my Eddisbury constituency, continued poor connectivity represents a huge missed opportunity for economic development, let alone for help on other important and growing issues such as isolation and access to education. In 2018, 11% of rural premises, where more than 1 million small businesses are based, could not get a 10 megabits per second fixed-line connection, which is the speed required to meet a typical household's digital needs—this is often named the “Netflix test”—and 24% could not get a 30 megabits per second, or superfast broadband, connection.

Let me put that into a local context. As of May 2020, Eddisbury had 2,162, or just under 5%, of all premises unable to receive “decent broadband”—this was two and a half times the national average. Drilling down further reveals figures of 9% for those living in Churton, Farndon and Malpas, 11.1% for those living in Dodleston, Tattenhall and Duddon, and 12.3% for those living in Audlem, Bunbury and Wrenbury. Depending on the subject matter, being 59th on a list of 650 constituencies can be a cause for celebration, but when the list is of which has highest proportion of residents unable to get good broadband it is not one to shout about.

[Edward Timpson]

That is why I was pleased to stand on a manifesto that committed a Conservative Government to delivering nationwide gigabit-capable broadband by 2025, which was backed up by the 2020 Budget statement, which confirmed a total of £5 billion to roll out full fibre across the country. Progress is being made. On 10 September, the telecoms regulator, Ofcom, revealed that more than 4.2 million homes—about 14%—across the UK were now able to access faster, more reliable full fibre services, which is an increase of 670,000 since January. But it remains a real challenge to accelerate the extension of fibre to those hard-to-reach locations where there is an inherent lack of digital infrastructure.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although organisations such as Connecting Cheshire have done a tremendous amount of good in constituencies such as mine, we still have villages that are isolated and cut off? Higher Walton, just outside Warrington, has no fast broadband at all. Organisations such as Connecting Cheshire can really make a difference in getting those sorts of villages really plugged into the network.

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend is right on that. We live not far from each other, and suffer some of the same problems in our constituencies, particularly in some of those black spots, where residents sometimes do not know where to turn. Having a way of co-ordinating that effort to bring together some of the solutions for their poor broadband is a way of trying to ensure that no one misses out as we deliver on our manifesto commitment.

The Government have rightly sought to address this situation, through their gigabit voucher scheme, which I will leave the Minister to explain in more detail, and, as of March this year, through the new legal right to request a decent, affordable broadband connection from BT under the new universal service obligation for broadband. That is defined in law as a service with a download speed of at least 10 megabits per second and an upload speed of at least 1 megabit per second. Ofcom has also determined that a USO-compliant service must cost the customer no more than £46.10 per month. If the existing fixed-line or mobile solution does not allow that level of service, the USO also requires BT to upgrade the connectivity to meet or exceed those requirements, at no cost to the customer, as long as the necessary works cost less than £3,400. On the face of it, that is a significant step forward in ensuring that no household or business is left behind, but it is also fair to say that its implementation has brought with it some serious issues that threaten to undermine its laudable aims, not least in those cases where the cost of delivering on the USO far exceeds the £3,400 threshold.

Let me illustrate that. Where an individual household meets the criteria to trigger a USO broadband service, an installation quote is pulled together by BT to establish the work costs. Where they exceed £3,400, the additional costs must be met by the customer, and herein lies one of the fundamental limitations of the current set-up. Legally, the USO works quote can be calculated only for each individual household that has applied. The subsequent bill therefore cannot be shared out among a wider number of neighbours who would otherwise benefit from the upgrade if it was carried out. The total amount still falls on the shoulders of the original single applicant.

If that sum only dribbled over the £3,400 threshold, there may be some wider level of acceptance of that approach, but we know that quotes are landing on doormats, or, where possible, via email, significantly in excess of that number. For example, in Eddisbury, we have seen five-figure sums. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), the constituency next door, shared with me a quote for a resident in Llangollen of over £85,000. My hon. Friends the Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for North West Durham (Mr Holden) and other colleagues have provided similar stories, not forgetting the well-publicised case of Mr Roberts in the Lake District, who was asked to contribute just over half a million pounds.

While accepting that the situation is often a result of the major engineering and planning work required to connect the hardest-to-reach premises, it still means that overall an estimated 60,000 premises will cost up to 30 times more to connect, with residents still having to fund the excess and some facing waits of up to 24 months to be connected. In the absence of a facility to spread the cost, this is asking the impossible for what should be the legally obtainable.

Eddisbury residents have also told me of not having had the USO properly explained to them, it not being clear who was responsible, and being told they were not eligible when they in fact were. I know that this was not and is not the intention, and I am very aware of and grateful for the work and commitment of the Minister in trying to resolve these issues, but it would be helpful to hear from him this afternoon how the Government are working, and propose to work, with BT, BT Openreach, the wider industry, Ofcom and others to formulate a new approach that does not penalise the consumer in this way, especially those in more remote areas, in the development and roll-out of digital solutions for every house in the UK.

In that spirit of collective effort, may I propose some ways of doing just that? For instance, it seems a nonsense that each individual household should be treated as a discrete case when surrounding houses could also be eligible or, if not, could significantly benefit from an upgraded broadband connection where costs are more equitably distributed. The irony of all this is that if someone were not to go down the USO route but to band together with their neighbours by way of a community fibre partnership or similar model, while also accessing the gigabit voucher scheme, they may well get their 10 megabits per second download, if not much faster, for nothing, or at least a much more realistic price.

The truth is that broadband is not an optional extra anymore in this digital world and rural consumers should not be expected to pay excessive amounts to be connected. Surely the way to go is to allow properties to share the costs under the USO, ultimately to help rural residents, and, depending on how many individuals are involved, to bring the cost below the current cost cap. To that end, it was encouraging to hear from BT that it is developing a way to enable customers to share excess quotes among their neighbours who would also benefit, where there are other nearby households that will share the upgraded infrastructure. Under this, customers would retain the legal right to trigger network build by paying all excess costs, but they would also be given the opportunity to meet the costs together with others. How that is communicated will also be crucial as, at the moment,

someone receiving a jaw-dropping quote is only likely to have their confidence eroded in the belief that the system is fair and the market is functioning rather than failing. It may also be worth considering the impact of the obligation to charge VAT at 20% to those who do pay an excess cost on USO work—something that is not generally applied to publicly funded network infrastructure bills.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister update the House on what discussions are taking place and what progress is being made with BT, Ofcom and other key players to ameliorate the problems in the implementation of the USO, break down the financial and logistical barriers getting in the way of better broadband, and deliver a decent, affordable connection for all? Is he able to say more about the not insignificant £5 billion that will be spent to make this achievable and as timely as possible? Above all, can he reassure my constituents and many more across the country that this is an absolute priority for this Government between now and 2024—and, I hope, beyond?

There is no doubt that our national digital infrastructure has the potential to make or break many of the opportunities and challenges that we as a nation have lying ahead of us. The past seven months have simply magnified and accelerated the necessity for every house in every part of the UK to be able to play its part. It can be done, and I am confident that the Government will ensure it is done, but what my Eddisbury constituents want, whether through the USO or other means, is every support possible to help to make it an affordable reality. If we start getting nostalgic for the analogue age, we have not lived up to that perfectly reasonable request.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) on securing this debate and allowing me to update the House on the broadband universal service obligation.

In 2003, when the first telephony universal service obligations were introduced, the requirement for internet services was that they were functional. Almost 20 years on, the world has changed considerably. Covid has accelerated that change further, digitising almost every part of our everyday lives and making the infrastructure that connects us more important than ever.

That is why, as my hon. Friend says, this is at the top of the Government's agenda. Our need for access to fast broadband speeds has grown rapidly, and with it the capability of the UK's broadband infrastructure. Some 95% of all consumers in the country are now able to access a superfast service, while 57% can get ultrafast speeds, but the Government recognise that the benefits of increased speed have not always been universally felt, with some consumers still unable to access the full benefits of an increasingly digitised society.

In 2018, therefore, the Government introduced the broadband universal service obligation to give consumers a digital safety net—a new legal right to request a decent broadband service that works in the way that my hon. Friend has so eloquently described. It protects customers from paying too much by putting in place safeguards to ensure that the decent broadband service is provided at an affordable price. Since the USO's

launch in March, Ofcom has worked with the telecoms industry, which I would like to thank for its ongoing co-operation, to map the availability of decent broadband services, premises by premises.

As a result of that mapping, consumers can now contact their universal service provider, usually BT, to check whether they are eligible to request a connection under the USO. If they are not, because a decent service is already available at an affordable price from a supplier—possibly by 4G or other means—they are given specific details. I am eager to see that process working as well as it can. Government and industry have done excellent work building new infrastructure in remote locations, reducing the number of premises potentially in need of the safety net provided from 2.3 million in 2016 to just 189,000 earlier this year.

While covid-19 restrictions led to an agreement to launch the USO in a manner that reflected temporary constraints on BT and Openreach capacity, BT has recently informed me that it has notified or reminded consumers at more than 40,000 premises that they may be eligible to apply and, pleasingly, that it has a high-volume mailing programme running to notify the remainder. That has yielded applications leading to approximately 4,000 quotations and more than 500 approved projects to date, several of which are already complete, despite the typically rural and challenging locations. According to BT, more than 4,000 premises are within the scope of projects approved so far, with more in the pipeline.

However, I appreciate that, for those consumers who are currently unable to access a decent broadband connection, that will bring little comfort, and I know many of those people live in Eddisbury, as my hon. Friend said. That is why the Government and Ofcom are working hard to ensure that the universal service obligation is implemented correctly, and any issues that are raised by either constituents or hon. Members are fixed as soon as possible. Before I outline what the Government are currently doing to address the issues he raised, I want to reassure hon. Members that I am taking this issue extremely seriously, as, I know, is Ofcom.

I turn now specifically to the issue of high quotes that have been received by some customers from one of the universal service obligation providers. Many people who have been waiting patiently for the eventual launch of the USO have written to me to express their disappointment and a feeling of unfairness about the way the quotes have been calculated. They are rightly surprised that one household is expected to foot the bill for a piece of infrastructure that will benefit many of their neighbours as well. I will elaborate on some of their concerns for the benefit of the House.

It would appear that initially, USO applicants were routinely being asked verbally for six-figure sums without further information or context, which created some confusion. I understand that more information is now being provided after discussion with Ofcom, but still, in some cases, such as one correspondent from the constituency of Burton, contributions for costs in excess of £50,000 were requested when the neighbouring community was already connected to fibre.

Some of the quotations are eye-watering—in many cases, beyond local average incomes and, in the case of one quotation in the constituency of Copeland, substantially more than the average house price in the area. Another correspondent from the Staffordshire Moorlands

[Matt Warman]

constituency was unable to understand why her quote under the USO was essentially the same as a previous quotation from Openreach under a community partnership scheme, which would have covered the entire community.

Of course, there are situations where applicants cannot see all the technical issues involved when replacing their lines, but local constituents are often very well informed, having lived in these locations for generations, and sometimes their helpful suggestions to reroute cables reflecting current realities, instead of following ancient paths defined by our Victorian ancestors who first laid out the networks, will be valid. I urge BT to think creatively and to take sensible planning decisions when generating these quotations.

When this issue was first brought to my attention, I was equally surprised. Although I cannot promise that every quote received by customers will be lower than the cost threshold, I believe that every quote should be calculated in a fair and transparent manner, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury suggests. When we legislated in 2018 to introduce the USO, we included provisions that require Ofcom to ensure that

“in calculating the cost of providing a broadband connection to a particular location, due account is taken of the extent to which the cost may be shared between multiple locations”.

Although some of the premises eligible for the USO are extremely remote—I am aware of an initial quote of more than £1 million for one island community, but it did require a subsea cable—constructing new networks to reach many of them will be expensive. There are, however, many areas such as those indicated by my hon. Friend where people could reasonably expect costs to be shared and fairly distributed. That is why I have written to the chief executive of Ofcom, Dame Melanie Dawes, to outline my concerns and to ask Ofcom to keep me informed of its progress in resolving this matter.

I have been assured that Ofcom and BT remain in discussions about the most appropriate way to move forward, but I reassure Members that customers who either get a quote from BT or proceed on the basis of a quote that has been provided will not be disadvantaged by any new resolution. I encourage BT and the independent regulator Ofcom to agree on a resolution to this issue; however, I understand that Ofcom is now seriously considering enforcement action. I also want to make it clear that, although there may be a reduction in quotes for some applicants to the USO, it is not guaranteed to reduce them all, especially where a customer has no or very few neighbours nearby who are also eligible for the scheme.

To illustrate that point, more than 250 premises that may be eligible for the USO are situated over a mile from their nearest neighbour, whether they are eligible for the USO or not. Furthermore, around 5,000 potentially

eligible premises are over three miles from the nearest existing fibre, though that is reducing all the time as the Government and industry expand further the reach of gigabit-capable networks. Our efforts to address the current issues will therefore likely bring little comfort to consumers who are being asked to pay quotes that they cannot afford, but that is why, as well as introducing the universal service obligation this year, the Government have also launched a series of other measures that consumers and businesses can take advantage of.

As my hon. Friend said, the Government are investing further in the next generation of broadband connections. Earlier this year at the Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced £5 billion to help to connect the hardest-to-reach premises in the UK with gigabit-capable broadband. That will ensure that people living in rural areas, such as those represented by my hon. Friend and across the country, will be able to access the fastest broadband speeds at the same time as their urban counterparts. Closing the rural-urban speed divide is a crucial part of levelling up across the country. We are making progress with developing the programme, which will deliver those new gigabit-capable connections via procurement from early next year.

In the meantime, as my hon. Friend will no doubt be aware, we will continue to develop improved connectivity through new phases of the superfast delivery programme, which is now supplying mainly full fibre connections. Connecting Cheshire and Building Digital UK are currently evaluating and assuring bids for further delivery within his constituency, which we expect will be announced before the end of the year. Finally, the gigabit voucher scheme is already available to constituents in rural areas, including many of my hon. Friend's constituents in Eddisbury. Those vouchers offer £1,500 per residential premises and £3,500 per business for gigabit-capable broadband. I encourage consumers in my hon. Friend's constituency, and indeed in yours, Madam Deputy Speaker, to go to the gigabit broadband voucher website to see if they are eligible. Some authorities are also topping up our own nationwide scheme through localised voucher top-ups. More information on that is also available on the gigabit voucher scheme website.

In the meantime, as my hon. Friend will no doubt be aware, we continue to develop improved connectivity. I thank him once again for raising not only the general matter of broadband, but the really important issue of making sure the universal service obligation delivers in the way that it was envisaged. Again, I thank him for raising this matter and for the opportunity to provide an update to the House. I hope to see progress on this important issue in the near future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 October 2020

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

No Recourse to Public Funds

1.30 pm

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I would like to remind hon. Members that there have been 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 please respect the one-way system around the room as you leave. Members should speak only from the horseshoe, and they can speak only if they are on the call list. This applies even if debates are undersubscribed. Members cannot join the debate if they are not on the call list. Members are not expected to remain for the wind-ups. I remind hon. Members that there is less of an expectation that they stay for the next two speeches once they have spoken; this is to help manage attendance in the room. Members may wish to stay beyond their speech, but they should be aware that doing so might prevent Members in seats in the Public Gallery—there are none there today, so fret not on that front—from moving to a seat on the horseshoe.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered No Recourse to Public Funds.

I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating the debate in our first week back in Westminster Hall. It is great to be back, and it is very good to see you in the chair, Ms Nokes. I am very pleased to see the Members who have come to take part in the debate, and I am pleased to see the Minister in his place as well. I particularly want to thank the hon. Members for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for their help in applying for the debate.

In a Liaison Committee hearing on 27 May, I told the Prime Minister about a couple in my constituency. Both of them work and they have two children, both born in the UK and holding British passports. The husband's employer did not put him on the job retention scheme, so he had no income. His wife was still working, but her income was less than their rent. They have leave to remain in the UK but no recourse to public funds, so they could not get any help at all—a hard-working, law-abiding family being forced into destitution. I explained that to the Prime Minister, and he responded:

“Clearly people who have worked hard for this country, who live and work here, should have support of one kind or another”.

In my view, the Prime Minister is absolutely right: they should have support of some kind. Unfortunately, however, the Prime Minister's view is not the policy of the Government.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I ask my right hon. Friend whether that suggests to him that the Prime Minister has probably not an advice surgery in a very long time? Does my right hon. Friend think that any London MP would be unacquainted with the facts of no recourse to public funds?

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Any London MP who has done an advice surgery in the recent past would be very familiar with this issue. Under the “no recourse to public funds” policy, the family I spoke of and thousands of others were getting no help at all.

Last Friday I visited the Deptford warehouse of the remarkable charity FareShare, which gathers surplus food from farms and supermarkets and distributes it to food banks and other charities. Before the pandemic, they were sending 1 tonne of food to my borough, Newham, every week. Now, they are sending 20 tonnes every week. Around a third of that increase, from 1 tonne to 20, is about no recourse to public funds. A large number of hard-working, law-abiding families have no income, cannot afford to buy food and are therefore dependent on those charities.

I am full of admiration for all the organisations in our borough that have risen to the enormous challenge, including Bonny Downs Baptist church, Bonny Downs community association, City chapel, Ibrahim mosque in Plaistow, Mana Park Christian centre, Highway Vineyard church, Newham Community Project, the Magpie Project and Alternatives Trust East London—all of them supported extremely ably by Andy Gold and the Newham public health team.

Some people in Government have done the right thing. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government agreed at the start to accommodate street homeless people at public expense on public health grounds, although it is being reported now that they are starting to receive eviction notices. The Department for Education agreed that children in families with no recourse to public funds would be eligible for free school meals, contrary to previous policy. That has been a lifeline, especially since, thanks to Marcus Rashford, those families received meal vouchers for their children throughout the summer holiday. I commend that Department for doing the right thing.

The Home Office, however, has not done the right thing. The Home Affairs Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee, which I chair, both unanimously called for the no recourse to public funds restriction to be suspended for the duration of the pandemic, but the Home Office has not budged. It insists that families must be facing destitution before they can apply for an exemption from the restriction. Previously, families had to be actually destitute, rather than facing destitution. A Court of Appeal case about an eight-year-old boy who had been sleeping rough because of the “no recourse to public funds” policy forced the Home Office, greatly against its wishes, to make the policy less draconian than it previously was, although it remains pretty draconian. Those who apply for an exemption have to wait for a month on average for the Home Office to get around to granting it. I spoke to a family that the Home Office had kept waiting for four months. The whole set-up is a disgrace.

In May, the Prime Minister said to me:

“I will find out how many there are in that position”.

That was a helpful offer. Unfortunately, he has not been able to keep that promise because the Home Office will not tell him. There is extraordinary unwillingness on the part of the Home Office to answer straightforward parliamentary questions on no recourse to public funds.

[Stephen Timms]

I always thought, perhaps naively, that Departments have an obligation to answer straightforward parliamentary questions. That is clearly not the Home Office view.

The Home Office says that it does not know how many people have leave to remain with no recourse to public funds. I understand that it does not know how many people have left the country after having that condition attached to their status. Hon. Members might think that the Home Office could produce an estimate, but it is not willing to do so. Fortunately, others have. Based on work by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, Citizens Advice recently estimated that 1.4 million people in the UK have leave to remain but no recourse to public funds, including families and 175,000 children.

Of course, the Home Office does know how many people it applies no recourse to public funds to each year. I asked a series of questions before summer about that, but the Minister refused to provide a substantive answer to any of them. His colleague, the Immigration Minister, answered a whole series of questions with a single meaningless answer. On 20 May, I asked:

“how many people were given leave to remain in the UK subject to the no recourse to public funds condition in 2019.”

I asked for a number. On 2 June, the Minister’s colleague replied:

“The information you have requested is not assured to the standard required by ONS for publication and as it would be too costly to do so, we are unable to provide it.”

In other words, “We’re not interested in answering your question.”

I complained about that answer to the UK Statistics Authority, and it upheld my complaint. The correspondence is on its website. The Home Office head of statistics responded on 3 July. His letter accepted that that answer was inadequate, and he said that the reason that it was inadequate because no statistician had cleared it. Well, I suppose that clears the statisticians of guilt, but the Immigration Minister saw it and put his name to it. How on earth was he prepared to put his name to such a hopeless answer to a straightforward parliamentary question?

I say this to the Minister: Ministers have constitutional responsibilities to Parliament. It is not good enough for a Minister of the Crown to sign off a completely hopeless answer like that simply because—I don’t know—somebody answering to Dominic Cummings has instructed him to do so. Ministers in the Home Office need to start fulfilling their responsibilities and providing answers to straightforward questions.

The letter from the Home Office head of statistics said they could not answer how many people were given leave to remain in the UK subject to NRPF in 2019, because “Home Office administrative data only captures information on whether visas are subject to NRPF conditions for in-country extensions.”

I have since asked twice in how many in-country extensions in 2019 people were given leave to remain with no recourse to public funds. From the head of statistics who had the information, answer came there none.

In response to the Windrush scandal, the Home Office has just published its comprehensive improvement plan. Theme number four of five is openness to scrutiny—

that will be the day. Can we at least dare to hope that Home Office Ministers might at least stop refusing to answer basic, straightforward parliamentary questions? On how many people were in such a situation, the Prime Minister eventually said that the Home Secretary would write to the Liaison Committee with an answer. She did so but provided no useful information. As such, I am grateful to the Chair of the Liaison Committee, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), for writing the Home Secretary a letter yesterday, also signed by myself as Chair of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, the Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who I am delighted to see in her place this afternoon. In it, we asked to meet the Home Secretary to discuss her failure to provide basic information that the Home Office head of statistics has confirmed the Department holds, but that for some completely unknown reason Ministers are unwilling to provide. Not having the data means not being able to evaluate the policy. That is, as the Windrush lessons learned review pointed out, a large part of the problem of why the Windrush scandal occurred. Now, we are heading down exactly the same tracks with this.

I will make two final points. Among 1.4 million or so people with leave to remain but no recourse to public funds is a large group of overseas students. Many among them were working to support themselves through their studies. The pandemic has ended their work, or their families back home have also been affected by the pandemic, so support from them has dried up. People from overseas studying in the UK do not expect to claim benefits. However, I do not believe it is in Britain’s long-term interests to force into utter destitution such a large number of those who have chosen Britain of all the countries they could have chosen in which to study, often investing their family life savings to do so. Certainly, we need the universities to be flexible and supportive to students struggling to pay fees in this academic year. We want those students to be friends of Britain for life in their own countries. The way we support or fail to support them now will be key. At the moment, we are giving them no support at all.

The Government line over the past six months has been that no recourse to public funds is okay because people could apply to the job retention scheme or the self-employed income support scheme. Of course, millions of UK citizens have been ineligible for those two schemes, which is why 3 million people have had to apply for universal credit in the past six months. People with no recourse to public funds are barred from doing that. There is no safety net for them at all. It is true, though, that some with no recourse to public funds have been supported by one of the Government pandemic schemes. In fact, the family I told the Prime Minister about in May was eventually able to benefit from the job retention scheme. However, those schemes finish at the end of this month. A whole new cohort of working people will have no job, and if no recourse to public funds is attached to their immigration status, there will be no safety net for those hard-working, law-abiding families. Banned from universal credit, foodbanks will be their only option to survive. If they do find work, they

cannot claim the £500 track and trace support payment, so if they get covid they will be forced to carry on working and will be a risk to public health.

Now, more than ever, the Government need to deliver what the Prime Minister said. Those hard-working, law-abiding families who have been contributing to the UK should have support of one kind or another. Suspend no recourse to public funds.

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I am not proposing a formal time limit, but you all have the beauty of a published call list, so you will know that a number of speakers want to speak. If Members could stick to about six minutes that would be appreciated.

1.45 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under a chairman with such experience of this issue. I know, Ms Nokes, that you have done a great deal of work on asylum migration in the United Kingdom over the years.

It was my pleasure to support the bid for this debate today. My experience with no recourse to public funds starts with recognising that it is an extremely complex issue. I have no dispute with the estimates, made by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, of 1.4 million people and up to 175,000 children living in households where there are adults with no recourse to public funds. For many of those households, that is not necessarily an issue of destitution, because for some time NRPF status has been used as a kind of migration amnesty. People are told that while there may be some question mark over their eligibility, they are able to remain in the United Kingdom provided they are not a charge on the funds of the state.

I am a constituent of the Prime Minister. One of the members of the household next door is a lady from India, who is married to a British man of Indian heritage and who has two children who were born in the United Kingdom. She has NRPF status. If the Prime Minister is not aware of that, I am certainly happy to bring it to his attention. It is evidence that in many households this condition has been imposed as a consequence of the person's presence in the United Kingdom, but for many people that is not something that will cause them a problem in their day-to-day life.

Although there is a valid debate to be had about the morality of saying to people, "You can be in the UK but you are excluded from the British safety net," I will focus on some of the practical issues that NRPF status creates for those families who find themselves getting into difficulty. I agree with what has been said about the numbers. One of the challenges in this debate is that because those numbers are not widely available, they are not easily analysed. Understanding what proportion of the estimated 1.4 million people find themselves in difficulty and require intervention is a major challenge.

Starting in 2005, the Government introduced, through the Home Office, a programme of asylum dispersal. I had the pleasure of giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, alongside the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham. Part way into his evidence he said, "I have just realised that I was the Minister who signed this into law, in the mid-2000s, when we introduced this policy of dispersing people through this mechanism

around the country." A lot of the issues we see arising in local authorities are iterations of that policy, which exists to this day. The simple principle behind it is that people should be placed in parts of the country where accommodation is inexpensive and where they can be housed in a way that does not introduce competition with other local families that may be in need. It is a policy that has worked in different forms, with varying degrees of success, over the years.

The challenge seems to arise when the result of those people's journeys through the asylum dispersal system is a decision that they are not supposed to be in the United Kingdom and that they do not have a future here. At that point the NRPF status is imposed on them and they find themselves at risk of destitution. That is where there is a major challenge for Governments of all parties, which is that NRPF is something of a myth, as a status. It is a list of things that are paid for out of central Government funds, which cannot be accessed, at which point the duties of local authorities, dating back to the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Children Act 1989, then come into effect.

What we see, in fact, is a cost shunt from central Government to local government. Those who understandably wish to see a robust policy in respect of migration, and in respect of those who do not have a right to be in our country, have the comfort of thinking, "At least we are not paying for the subsistence costs of those families," but in fact local council tax payers are picking up the bill for that. I know that the Public Accounts Committee has given the matter some consideration over the years. When we look at the information provided by a number of different sources—I pay particular tribute to the No Recourse to Public Funds Network—we see that they identify that that costs the authorities responsible about £44 million per annum of council tax payers' money. Some 82% of the households that are supported under those arrangements are on what is termed the exit pathway, so they are people whom the Home Office does not view as having any long-term future in the United Kingdom, and they are on their way to deportation or leaving under their own steam but have not yet left.

It seems to me that it is not justifiable to say that we have a tough and robust policy around migration, and that people who should not be here are required to leave, when in fact the consequence of our policy is that they are staying at a cost to local council tax payers. The underlying assumption is that NRPF will result in people who do not have the long-term right to be in the United Kingdom leaving. The reality is that, in many cases, that is not what happens, and families who do not have a long-term future in the United Kingdom none the less become a cost to local council tax payers.

I therefore urge consideration of this issue, not just from the perspective of compassion—I think that that is very important, and it is very much the perspective that we have heard already—but because, if we wish to develop and build confidence in our communities that, in practice, we have the robust and rigorous asylum, refugee and migration policies that we say we do, we need to demonstrate that the ambitions that are set out in policy are being fulfilled at local level. In my view, NRPF simply does not meet that test at the moment.

1.51 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), my constituency neighbour, on securing the debate. I will be brief, because I have no choice.

I have been dealing with the consequences of this policy since I was elected as the MP for Leyton and Wanstead a decade ago, and during that time the situation has become much worse than I remember in my early days. Like my right hon. Friend's constituency, Leyton and Wanstead is one of the most diverse constituencies in the country. That means that I have a very high proportion of migrant constituents. That means that I have a very high proportion of people with no recourse to public funds, and the situation will undoubtedly get worse because of the consequences of covid. I will say more about that in a minute.

Even before covid, almost half of all children with foreign-born parents living in Britain were living below the poverty line. That is 100,000 children. Again, a lot of that is because of no recourse to public funds. As the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) mentioned, councils are clearly dealing with an awful lot of the consequences—for which they are ill prepared because of the financial cutbacks over the last decade—through social services, because of course social services are not designated as a public fund. The hon. Gentleman mentioned £44 million a year. The last figure that I saw, for 2018-19, was nearer £48 million. We do not have the figures for the period with the virus, but we can guess that, after covid, the figure will be much higher than £48 million. We can only guess at the moment how much it will be. As the previous speaker said, there is a cost shunt. That does not involve any saving to the taxpayer, because the taxpayer is still paying for the consequences of what is a pretty disreputable policy.

Legally, court cases are very difficult. Court cases are now slightly easier to bring than they were. At one point—my right hon. Friend mentioned this—someone had to be actually in destitution before they could bring a court case. Now, someone can bring a court case when they are facing destitution. However, it is still pretty desperate stuff when someone is facing destitution. Only then can someone bring a court case and try to overturn the decision, but overturning the decision is very rare and very complicated, and it is very difficult to find legal specialists who can take on those sorts of cases.

I will give just two brief examples from my constituency that illustrate the effects of no recourse. The first involves a woman separated from her husband and stuck in one-bedroom accommodation with three children, one of whom is autistic. Following the break-up of her relationship, she applied to the Home Office for a change of circumstance, but the form asked for details of her legal representative. She had no legal representative, so she could not complete the form and could not change her circumstance. The second is the case of a woman threatened with homelessness because of rent arrears and unable to approach the council for emergency accommodation. She was working in a betting shop in Leyton, but of course on minimum wage and therefore very low paid. She was unable to meet the rent and fell into arrears, and children's services could not assist because she was not considered destitute. That brings me on to working conditions.

With covid, a very high proportion of migrants who face having no recourse to public funds will have been on, and in some cases still are on, zero-hours contracts, so their employers have no real incentive to furlough them. There is no real mechanism for furloughing them. From one day to the next, they go from being employed to not being employed—literally overnight. They are then in the position of having no recourse to public funds and rapidly facing destitution.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham. We live in the sixth biggest economy in the world, and the notion that we have tens of thousands of people facing destitution is disgraceful. What is also disgraceful is that the Prime Minister, apparently, is blissfully unaware of the situation out there, despite the fact that he is a London MP.

1.56 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for tabling it.

I want to make it clear that this matter is urgent for families in my constituency, and indeed across the country, as we are hearing today. It is urgent particularly for hard-working parents who are struggling to make ends meet and who, through no fault of their own, now face huge uncertainty over their homes and their futures, with their family and children being pushed into poverty.

No recourse to public funds impacts on most non-EEA national migrants with temporary permission to remain in the UK. As we have heard, the visa condition prevents them from accessing most state-funded benefits, tax credits and housing assistance. The Institute for Public Policy Research think-tank warns that the covid-19 pandemic could have particular financial and health consequences for such migrant households, with migrants more likely to be working in industries affected by the crisis, to be in temporary work or self-employed, and to be living in private rented and overcrowded accommodation.

The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants has said that the NRPF restrictions have pushed working families into abject poverty, forcing them into unsustainable debt and into homelessness or overcrowded and insecure housing. Right now, it matters more than ever, because covid-19 has made the situation much worse, particularly for those in insecure employment or on zero-hours contracts, which are at a record high of 1.05 million in this country. Many others have had their hours cut or lost their jobs completely.

A significant number of migrants are from BAME communities. We know that members of BAME communities are more likely to be in insecure employment, and they are being hit harder on two fronts. First, they are more likely to have lost income or work, and secondly, they are at a higher health risk from the virus. There are serious concerns about whether our welfare state is fit for purpose, certainly for the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Today we are looking at the facts relating to those with the status of NRPF, who are often in the toughest of conditions and who are now struggling to fend for themselves. That is why the Labour party, cross-party committees and charities have called on the Government

to suspend the “no recourse to public funds” conditions in response to the pandemic. That is also why, back in March, I raised this matter in the House of Commons. I was told that the Government were looking at a range of measures to support this group, which may include the self-employed, business owners and those who work in our public services, as well as students and many others. Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham, I then wrote to the Home Secretary to ask for advice that we could pass on to our constituents to reassure them that by staying at home in line with Government guidance, they would not be forced into extreme financial hardship. We received no reply to our letter.

Later, the Government did bring in some concessions, which have been referred to. They allowed local authorities to provide some basic safety net support. Food banks have taken up some of the challenges, and there was also the temporary extension of free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds. Quite clearly, it has not been enough.

There have been all too many occasions when all we could do was to refer people with no recourse to public funds to a local authority hub, to get the most basic of support. As family savings dry up and as people struggle to find work, the strain and stress is having an enormous impact on our fellow citizens and neighbours, who want to do nothing other than continue to support themselves, their families, their communities and, indeed, this country.

To illustrate what it has all meant, let me share just one heartbreaking story from my constituency. A constituent with three children, one of whom has special needs, has been receiving only £345 per month of income through furlough to survive on, and that is now uncertain. Her husband lost his job because of covid; they are unable to pay their rent or afford food and are now at risk of homelessness. Just think about the impact on those children. As well as having a disrupted year of education, they are worrying about where their food will come from and where their home might be in six months’ time.

Crisis has talked about marriages breaking up and the rise of rough sleeping. We cannot wait any longer. Winter is coming. Times are getting tougher, with rising cases of coronavirus and increased local lockdowns and restrictions. Casual or temporary work that has kept people going is drying up. Constituents are telling me that their other sources of income—family and friends who they may have been able to draw on in hard times—are themselves facing hard times, and that route is now not available to our constituents.

This is about fairness, compassion and humanity. It is about a Government’s responsibility. I urge the Government to suspend the “no recourse to public funds” conditions in response to the pandemic, so that families are not forced to choose between their health and food on the table, and so that they have the support they need to keep themselves and their communities safe at this incredibly difficult time.

2.3 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. It is a privilege to listen to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). I thank him for the way in which he has conducted the debate. I almost feel sorry—no, in fact I do feel sorry for the Minister. He is caught between the Scylla of the Prime Minister and

the Charybdis of the Home Secretary. In that passage, he has been absolutely smashed on to the rocks by my right hon. Friend.

I want to try to give an example that shows the inhumanity of what is happening. On 6 May this year, I received an email from a woman about her husband. She says he was a very healthy man with no underlying medical conditions. He was only 45 and had just celebrated his 45th birthday—she says he was her childhood sweetheart. She goes on, “Sadly, my husband drifted away forever while my children and I were watching him on screen and screaming and begging him not to leave us. The whole experience has left us shell shocked.”

Her husband was a construction worker who died from covid. They came to this country in 2004. They obtained a visa with limited leave to remain and no recourse to public funds and were on the discretionary 10-year path. She has been working, but has nowhere near enough income to pay the rent for their home. As I say, on 6 May, she wrote in desperation. Within 24 hours, we had acted and appealed to the Home Office to give her recourse to public funds. It did, and for that, I am incredibly grateful, but it took five weeks. For this family, with one child who is a British citizen, that meant five weeks in destitution.

That was the good outcome. I have another piece of correspondence, which relates to a gentleman who had lived here for many years with his European economic area spouse. He had always worked hard as her dependant in the UK. They have a daughter who was born here. His wife has abandoned the family and returned to her home in continental Europe and, as he is originally from Pakistan, he is now trying to establish his right to remain in the country, but he has no recourse to public funds. They first contacted me in January of this year. Without the help and support of Brent Council’s no recourse team, I do not know what would have happened to that man and his seven-year-old daughter.

It is incumbent on the Minister to answer a number of questions, some of which were asked by my right hon. Friend. The Minister needs to explain—not to us, but to the public—how he expects a single parent like my constituent to pay his rent and look after his daughter, alongside having to deal with covid, with no recourse to public funds. He needs explain how people who are now no longer in employment will be able to survive the five weeks for which, in a good situation, his Department comes back and provides.

The Minister needs to make the commitment that any change of condition to which the Home Office agrees—when we, as Members of Parliament, apply to the Home Office to change a condition, or when a council does—will be done within 48 hours. If someone is at risk of destitution, it is no good saying, “Oh, yes, it is at the bottom of a pile somewhere, and we will get to it in five weeks.” We are talking about children and vulnerable people, so speed is of the essence. I hope that the Minister will at least agree to review that so that those decisions can be taken expeditiously.

2.8 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Nokes. I congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing the debate.

[*Steve McCabe*]

It seems to me that covid has brought into sharp focus the stark reality of the inhumane nature of no recourse to public funds. Not only has it exposed the suffering to which we are subjecting people and their children, but it carries with it an in-built additional health risk. It must be obvious that those with no other source of income will continue to try to work, even while they are unwell, inevitably exposing others to the virus because of their desperate need to make ends meet. That is not only hitting them, at one level, but creating another health risk.

As we have heard, the policy applies largely to those who have not been granted indefinite leave to remain, including victims of trafficking and torture, and women fleeing abusive partners. Until recently, as my right hon. Friend said, it also barred their children from receiving free school meals. This is placing an intolerable burden on local authorities. Birmingham, like many authorities, is battling with a huge increase in homelessness and buckling under the strain. As we know, local councils do not receive any specific funding from central Government to support these people. There may be some slight dispute about the total figure, but the latest data I have seen, for 2018-19, showed that 59 councils were spending £47.5 million a year on NRPF service provision—that is before coronavirus.

As we know, the High Court recently described the system as a breach of article 3, which prohibits inhuman or degrading treatment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) indicated, the court found it particularly problematic that a person must prove they are destitute before the conditions can be lifted; it ordered that their showing they were about to become destitute should be sufficient. I am not sure how either can be proved, to be perfectly honest, but I think most reasonable people could make that judgment quite quickly and without too much investigation.

I find myself in agreement with much of what the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) said, particularly towards the end of his remarks. At its core, this is a Home Office problem; its inability to deal with outstanding immigration cases is causing much of the difficulty. To my mind, the best way to resolve the problem would be to allow those currently subject to the restriction to claim the equivalent of universal credit and charge the cost of that to the Home Office. Ministers and officials would soon be incentivised to produce a rather more efficient immigration system—one that actually sets out to resolve cases rather than leaving people in limbo for years on end.

There cannot be a Member in the Chamber who has not got a backlog of cases of people who have been trying for years to get their situation resolved. That is the problem. We are penalising these poor folk because of the Home Office's inability to do its job. If we were to give them access to the equivalent of universal credit and charge that to the Home Office, we would at a stroke address our article 3 failings—perhaps enabling this country to lift its head a bit higher—and tackle the root cause of the problem at the same time.

2.13 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I want to pursue the problem that what looks like a resolution—offering status on the basis of no recourse

to public funds—has instead created an industry of people involved in trying to help families in those circumstances, and increased the workload of the Home Office when that is the very last thing it needs.

Every Friday at my advice surgery, in my pack of papers I bring applications to remove a “no recourse to public funds” restriction on a visa. The people I meet are principally women whose children have British citizenship or women whose children were born here and are now over the age of seven. In the main, those women work. They are the carers; they do the jobs that we do not want to do, mostly on zero-hours contracts. They can manage to get by as long as their relationships stay more or less stable, but once those relationships break down and the men go, they can no longer afford their housing and to support their children; they lose the support network that allows them to be able to work antisocial hours, evening and weekends, because there is nobody to look after their children.

It is interesting that most of the MPs present represent London constituencies that have really hard-pressed children's services departments. We Members get in touch with children's social services, and then they get involved and do the assessments. They pay for the housing, support and continuing care out of the money that they get to look after children who are in the gravest need in our country, whose safety, security and health are threatened. A local authority strapped for cash, such as mine, can spend half a million pounds a year, which is dwarfed into insignificance by comparison with a Hackney, a Haringey or an Islington, or any of the councils represented in the room. That money does not go to the children who are most in need because we are supporting families who have the “no recourse to public funds” restriction on their visas, which is something that the Home Office introduced. Then, we develop another industry of voluntary sector organisations that do their best to get the restriction removed. I thank Jenny Allison and her team from Commonsense Community Development Trust, and Gillian Thicke and James Saville from Christian Care, who spend most of their time trying to get the restrictions removed.

The policy of no recourse to public funds is not cheap, because it simply shunts the spending to another public body that is unable or ill equipped to give help and support. We are also stimulating the industry that allows landlords to rent out individual rooms in houses to families, because these people cannot afford anything else. Once they are in those circumstances, it is impossible to get out of them. I can tell legions of stories about mums with three or four children living in tiny rooms. If we took a photograph of them and put them in the national papers, nobody would believe that people in our country are living in those circumstances. No matter how privileged we are—we are all privileged people—we know families who live in such circumstances. We must have all had this experience with people who work with us or do work experience with us: we show them the way that people live in our country, and they cannot believe it.

This policy is not a cheap option. I understand that there has been an increase of 600% in applications to the Home Office to have the restriction removed. It costs civil servants, it costs time and it costs crises. I would argue that we are not saving the taxpayer any money by doing this. We are humiliating people who

work hard and putting their children in circumstances that we would not wish on anybody's children. Desperate people and desperate women will do desperate things to support their families if they have no other means of doing so. We are fuelling some pretty terrible practices and some pretty terrible crimes, and we should stop doing it.

2.18 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. It is worth highlighting that we talk a lot about this issue, but quite a lot of people are affected, as others have highlighted. There are 285,000 people living in my borough of Hackney. Of that population, 31,000 are non-EEA citizens. Those are people who have never acquired British citizenship; it is not the total number of foreign-born people, which is just over 10% of the total population. A significant number of them are going through the immigration system, and of those a number will be under "no recourse to public funds" restrictions.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) highlighted, however, the Home Office does not know how many people are under the restriction of no recourse to public funds, because it either does not collect the data or does not wish to publish the data. We know there are issues with the Home Office databases, and perhaps the Minister can provide some illumination. I will try to be brief in order to allow the Minister extra time to respond, and I hope our Front-Bench spokesperson will do so as well, because we need answers to why the figures are not available.

We cannot make policy without decent data. As I will touch on later and as my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) highlighted, there are big, cost-shunting issues. If we have the numbers and can work out the cost, we can make better and—dare I dangle this in front of the Minister at this difficult time for all Departments?—cheaper policy. As Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, I spend a lot of time looking at this question.

I have served as an MP for 15 years, and no recourse to public funds was not talked about much 15 years ago. I am sure colleagues in the Chamber recognise that. We know it has been extended in the past decade. When I was first elected, people would apply for discretionary leave to remain, they would get five years, and then they would get citizenship. Then it was split into two periods of three years, so they would have to apply twice to get their five years for citizenship. Now it is two years, so it is three applications, three fees, and often at some point in that process, if they did not start out with no recourse to public funds, that is added on.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend is making such an important point. These repeated fee requirements means that families that have three, four or five children find it impossible to earn enough money to pay their rent, feed their children and pay these stupid fees.

Meg Hillier: Absolutely, and I will touch on that at the end. That is a very significant issue. We have talked a lot about children today, and we are in danger of putting a whole generation on the wrong side of everything. They were often born here, or arrived here as young people, and all they want to do is contribute.

On the face of it, it does not sound wrong. People who come to this country should pay their way; we would expect that if we went to visit other countries—but life is not as simple as that. Many of my constituents are in very low-paid work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) said, they are often in low-paid, zero-hours contract jobs. Actually, in my constituency, they are often in good, well-paid jobs. I have nurses, teachers and others who are in jobs that pay well but not enough to live in London. It is very difficult. In my constituency, and probably across the whole of the south-east of England—I do not have up-to-date figures—people cannot rent a three or four-bedroom property under the housing benefit cap. Those people are not necessarily claiming housing benefit, but the costs of renting are too high to pay for out of their wage packet.

What happens is that people live with family and friends, and I have many constituents who do that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden said, if these pictures were shown in the media, people would not believe it. People are living in one room with another family member living in the other room, because they just cannot afford the housing costs. They have no recourse to public funds, and they cannot get a penny of housing benefit to help towards that. Let us not forget that most housing benefit goes to people in work. That is another issue, but it is a systemic sign that the whole housing system is bust. That is a debate for another day—possibly the same Members might wish to contribute.

Overcrowding is a big health risk at the best of times, and we are not in the best of times. A concern of mine during the covid pandemic is that those double households are trapped. I had a very distressed grandmother come to see me at a surgery. I had been to visit the family, and they had been to see me before. She loves her daughter and granddaughter, but they cannot move out of their one-bedroom flat because they have no recourse to public funds, and mum is a nurse. The grandmother came to see me and said, "When will we get housing? How will we get housing?" She came to see me privately because she did not want to tell her daughter how hard it was for her to share her small home with her beloved family. These are small flats, and they are often very overcrowded.

As others have highlighted, councils are spending a lot of money on this. In 2018-19, 59 councils were spending £47.5 million a year on service provision to people with no recourse to public funds. That was before coronavirus, and some of those people are being affected now. I want to highlight an individual case—we all have so many. One of my constituents has two children, and her late father was British. She is working, but because she has no recourse to public funds, she cannot claim tax credits, child benefit or housing benefit. That has had a very big effect on her, and is having an impact on her children. She is not sure, and nor am I, how much longer she will be able to cope.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden highlighted the issue of cost-shunting, which the Public Accounts Committee talks about all the time. There are costs to society, the taxpayer and, of course, individuals. I want to highlight the taxpayer costs to the Minister, because that should bite if nothing else does. So much of the system is having to pay for people who cannot pay their own way because they have no recourse to

[Meg Hillier]

public funds. They are working people for the most part. They want to work, and they might just have hit a rocky time.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend made a point in passing that I want to highlight. I do not know whether it is well known, but we are talking about a large number of British-born children whose parents cannot claim child benefit for them. I do not think most people know that is the case, but it is.

Meg Hillier: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, for that intervention, because that is correct. People assume that there is a safety net there—we all assume a lot of things about other people’s lives in a general way, because people do not always live that path themselves—but many of our constituents do not have a penny coming in, even though their children are British. It is the main householder who affected. There is a really big cost and those children are growing up in increased poverty as a result.

If we want to invest in the future of our country, we must consider these young people with their driven parents—parents who came here, who are working, who want to work and want to contribute, and anyone would say that they have the right work ethic to ensure that their children will also achieve—because they are living in much more difficult circumstances than they need to. The cost of any public funding will not suddenly fund their lifestyles; it is just going to help them to keep afloat, to keep their housing and to keep playing their active role as working members of society.

I will touch on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) made about people who cannot afford the fees; we talked a bit about that. I pay tribute to my constituent, Chrisann Jarrett, and to We Belong, which is a group of young people who are taking the long route for citizenship; some are from families with no recourse to public funds, but there is a wider point that I raise here, too. These people are young, gifted and talented, and they came here as young children. They want to contribute to this society; they are not going to live anywhere else. The countries that their parents were born in are of interest to them, but usually they cannot visit them because they do not have citizenship. However, they have to pay these repeated fees. Often, they never got citizenship early on because their parents simply could not afford even to start them on that process. Then they find that they cannot go to university and they are left sitting around, kicking their heels.

In July, the Home Secretary said—very genuinely, I feel, and I say that to the Minister—when she made her latest statement on Windrush that she wanted to root out any unequal treatment in her Department, and that she wanted to see a root-and-branch review of how it treated people. I took her at her word on that; she stood there, said that, and I believed that she meant it. If she really means it, this group that I have talked about—We Belong, which I believe she has met or is about to meet—are really good advocates for this. Surely, however, if she really believes what she said, she needs to look at no recourse to public funds, because if we look at the

profile of the people who are affected by that, we see that it does not meet the equality standards that she professes to support.

In summary, I hope that the Minister will answer the detailed questions on the Home Office statistics. Does he have the statistics? If they are available, why can we not see them? If he does not have those statistics, can he tell us how he will get hold of them, so that he can make sure that he and the Home Office are making policy decisions based on proper evidence and data?

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I thank Members for allowing plenty of time for the Front-Bench spokesmen.

2.27 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Nokes. Obviously, with this debate being a home affairs-style debate, you must have your own reflections on it. I certainly reflect that all too often in the last Parliament, it was your good self who had to defend the indefensible in terms of Home Office actions. We will see whether the Minister who is here today reaches the same standard.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and I pay particular tribute to my good friend the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, which I sit on. He is chairing it with distinction. During his contribution to this debate, I remembered what was for me one of the political television moments of the year: the right hon. Gentleman having to explain to the Prime Minister what “no recourse to public funds” actually means. It was an almost “Playschool”-like exchange, as he had to explain to the Prime Minister what those words mean.

In his speech, the right hon. Gentleman also explained his extraordinary exchanges while putting parliamentary questions to the Home Office. I have to say that was very familiar. I think that it is something that we have all experienced with some of the parliamentary answers that we get back, particularly the one that says that “due to disproportionate cost”, an answer cannot be provided. I have often thought that I should perhaps table a question asking just how many answers are couched in those words: “The answer cannot be provided due to disproportionate cost”. I wonder whether the answer will indeed be that they will not be able to provide the answer, because of disproportionate cost.

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*-]

Mr Paisley, I want to give the clear view of the Scottish National party, which is that the coronavirus does not respect borders or immigration status, and that everyone in these islands, including those with no recourse to public funds, deserves help to get through the crisis without facing destitution. The SNP, like other political parties, has been clear that the policy must be suspended, so that we can support people through this unprecedented public health crisis. Both the Select Committee on Home Affairs and the Select Committee on Work and Pensions have called for it to be lifted temporarily, as has been alluded to. It was incredible to see the most recent updates from the Home Office, stating that it had no plans to change

they approach. The economic impacts of the pandemic are pushing thousands of people further into poverty and harming their employment opportunities.

In April we saw what can be possible when the political will is there, as thousands of vulnerable people in the UK were given support and shelter during the first wave of the pandemic. As the charity St Mungo's said at the time,

"People say it's not possible to end rough sleeping, but we've always maintained that it is, with the right attitude and money."

Yet six months on, homelessness is again on the rise, with a 33% increase in the number rough sleeping on London streets between April and June this year.

Our other concern is that no recourse to public funds is a racially discriminatory policy, and we believe it should be scrapped without delay. It is more likely to affect black and minority ethnic British children than white British children. It only contributes to the ongoing hostile environment that we believe the Government are intent on creating. Scrapping the policy would be a concrete step towards tackling inequality in these islands, particularly in the light of the findings of Public Health England and Scotland's independent expert reference group about the disproportionate impact that the covid pandemic has had on BAME communities. We come from the view that everyone in these islands should have the right to get access to support, which is particularly vital during the pandemic, regardless of their status. However, owing to the policy, many people have been left behind because of the lack of support, which has led them to being pushed further into hardship through no fault of their own.

We certainly come from the view that the UK Government's refusal to do the right thing and immediately lift the restrictions on those with no recourse to public funds for the duration of the public crisis is appalling. The unreasonable and heartless restriction also affects women and children fleeing domestic abuse who have had to leave their little resources and belongings, and non-EEA nationals who lost their incomes and found themselves far from their families and homes as a result of the pandemic. We received an excellent briefing from the Unity Project, based in London, and I received a similar one from the Unity centre based in Govan, in Glasgow. Who is affected? The impact is severe. The briefing tells us that 52% did not have a bed to sleep in; a third share their bedroom with their children, and 6% of single women have experienced street homelessness with their children.

Can the condition be removed, as we have heard in the debate? First, it can take too long. People suffer every day they have to wait. Organisations provide support to people to try to get restrictions lifted but they have had to wait four months for a decision. Many people do not know that they are eligible to apply for the restrictions to be lifted in the first place. It is a 20-page form and often requires hundreds of pages of evidence, which can be utility bills, evidence that has to be got from an informal landlord, or a letter from an exploitative employer, so there are real problems. The other problem, of course, is the whole system. Applicants can be unlawfully refused. In many cases support organisations have successfully challenged the decisions of the Home Office through judicial review and the national success rate for applications was 62% before the pandemic. There are real concerns about the policy under which people try to secure the lifting of a restriction.

The effects on women, children, people with disabilities, Commonwealth citizens and those who are subjected to domestic abuse are a real concern, but so is the fact that the policy has been ruled unlawful in the past. The whole operation of the policy has been brought into disrepute in court cases in 2014 and 2019 and during lockdown in 2020. In the most recent hearing, the High Court ruled that the policy was unlawful, because it did not prevent destitution and left the claimant, an eight-year-old boy, street homeless with his mother. The policy has since been adjusted, but continues to be subject to legal challenge. That is a real concern.

I have a couple of questions. Will the Minister explain specifically how single parents affected by no recourse to public funds are expected to pay rent and feed their family in scenarios in which they test positive for covid and have to self-isolate, are laid off and unable to find employment, or have health conditions that put them at particular risk from the virus?

Will the Minister also tell us if he will launch an inquiry into the impact of the "no recourse to public funds" policy? According to the Government's 2012 policy statement, the policy was introduced to "reduce burdens on the taxpayer, promote integration and tackle abuse",

within an immigration system that is

"transparent, clear, consistent and fair."

I can only say to the Minister that, since I arrived in this place in 2015, I have not regarded the immigration system to be transparent, clear, consistent or fair. What concrete evidence will the Minister provide to show that the policy is meeting those stated objectives?

We have heard some real life examples. My fellow Glaswegian, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), gave some horrific examples of the policy, and many more have been covered. I will close on the Prime Minister's response to the right hon. Member for East Ham on television. People affected by the "no recourse to public funds" policy often pay income tax, national insurance and council tax, but they face those exorbitant immigration charges that have been referred to. If they are taxpayers in need, they should be entitled to public funds. I support those who believe that the policy should be scrapped.

2.37 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Chair for this important debate, Mr Paisley.

I start, as so many others have done, by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, on not just securing this important debate and making a powerful opening contribution, but his leadership on no recourse to public funds throughout the coronavirus crisis. As he made clear, his Committee and the Home Affairs Committee, on a cross-party basis, unanimously called for the suspension of the "no recourse to public funds" restrictions for the duration of the pandemic. His questioning of the Prime Minister at the Liaison Committee gave us what we later learned to be false hope that the Prime Minister himself was in agreement that they should be lifted.

[Holly Lynch]

My right hon. Friend spoke of his extensive efforts—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee—and the difficulty of ascertaining exactly the information that we need about just how many people are affected by having no recourse to public funds. The latest figures produced by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, which others used during the debate, estimate that by the end of 2019, at least 175,000 children under the age of 18 in families were expected to have no recourse to public funds, and more than 1.4 million adults.

The Labour party has consistently asked the Government to lift NRPF as a condition on a person's migration status to ensure that no one is left behind in the public health effort against the coronavirus. Writing to the Government on 21 April, I asked them to lift the “no recourse to public funds” condition for the duration of the pandemic, stressing that thousands of people could face impossible choices between staying safe and securing an income for themselves and their families. My hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke powerfully about how the length of time it takes to determine a person's immigration status is at the heart of this debate.

The Minister will say that those with no recourse to public funds were eligible for furlough but, as we all know, not all types of work or employment conditions were eligible for the furlough scheme, which comes to an end on 31 October. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) spoke about those he represents—it is the same in my constituency—who are on zero-hours contracts and were not eligible for that support as a result.

Labour has pressed this issue throughout the passage of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, both in Committee and on Report. The tight framing of the law changes in that Bill did not allow us to table amendments that would have lifted NRPF with immediate effect, but we did make the case again for why lifting the condition for the duration of the pandemic would be the appropriate and responsible thing to do in the circumstances. The Minister might remember that we pushed that to a vote on Report, as we felt so strongly about it.

As others have commented, it has been frustrating that the Home Office has dug in on the issue. Other Departments have simply circumvented Home Office obstinance. On 26 March, Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government wrote to all councils asking them to

“utilise alternative powers and funding to assist those with no recourse to public funds who require shelter and other forms of support due to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

It seems that the Government have understood in principle that NRPF is counterproductive during the pandemic.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the cost shunting. The principle was recognised, as she said, and yet the cost was shunted to local government, with a very small pot of money to cover loads of issues in a local area. She is right to raise that issue.

Holly Lynch: My hon. Friend makes a similar point to the one made by the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) in his detailed and articulate speech. The point about cost shunting is exactly right. We have asked local councils to use “alternative powers” to do something, but they are essentially being asked to fudge it.

A lack of clarity from the Home Office means that, in practice, people now face a postcode lottery, at the discretion of their local authority, in the absence of a clear steer from the Home Office. The Local Government Association has called for NRPF to be suspended on behalf of councils, giving them the best chance of delivering on their responsibilities to protect those vulnerable people. As we are sadly now well into a second wave of infections, I urge the Government to once again consider lifting NRPF. If the Minister cannot make that commitment this afternoon, I ask him to seriously reflect on some mitigations for this cohort of people.

As the Minister knows, people are now required by law to self-isolate if they are contacted by NHS Test and Trace, and they will be offered a test and trace support payment of £500 if they are on lower incomes, cannot work from home or have lost income as a result. As the Government guidance states, just under 4 million people who are in receipt of benefits in England will be eligible for this payment. It is not clear if those with no recourse to public funds will be eligible for that payment, but I suspect, in some cases, they would be those people most in need of it. I hope the Minister will clarify the situation and confirm that they will be eligible for that payment, should it be necessary.

As we have discussed, it is possible for individuals and families to apply for NRPF conditions to be lifted if their circumstances change and they face destitution. That can be a complicated and lengthy process, with families fearing that their application will be unsuccessful unless they turn to paid immigration advice. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) shared powerful stories from his constituency about the barriers to having those restrictions lifted.

In the first quarter of 2020, 843 applications were made to the Home Office but in the second quarter, 5,565 were made. The Government's own figures show that thousands of people's circumstances have changed and that they are facing destitution. I hope the Minister will give us a clearer answer to the question of how many people have no recourse to public funds. If he does, can he give an indication of what percentage of that group these applicants represent?

The latest data published by the Home Office covers quarters 1 and 2 of this year. Can the Minister give us an early indication of what the data says for the third quarter of the year, in terms of both the numbers who are applying to have their condition lifted and the time taken to process the applications? In the latest publication, there are early signs that the time taken to arrive at a decision is starting to slide, so I hope he will give us an indication of the average time and the longest time taken to determine those applications. Others this afternoon have talked about everything from five weeks to four months.

We know that children can be denied access to public funds because of their parents' immigration status. However, an audit of families with NRPF undertaken between 2015 and 2018 found that 68% had a child or multiple children born here in the UK. These children have only

ever known the UK, but they are not protected by the safeguards we put in place to ensure children do not face the types of poverty we are seeing.

The Child Poverty Action Group published a report last April that predates the pressures of covid-19, but it has shone a harrowing light on what life is like for low-income families when there is just no safety net due to NRPF. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham told us about the eight-year-old boy who was sleeping rough due to having no recourse to public funds. The study also found that some children, who came from the most severely deprived families with NRPF simply did not eat at all during the school day. One child interviewed as part of the study said:

“Sometimes you don’t have enough energy, you cannot cope in the classroom so you have to like try and rest a bit. You just put your head on the table and you end up falling asleep in the classroom”.

Children in families with NRPF are not routinely entitled to free school meals. While the Department for Education has extended eligibility for free school meals temporarily to include some groups with NRPF, when it is compounded with the existing pressures on those families brought about by the virus, the consequences of not extending the safety net to those children is surely not something we are prepared to tolerate.

It is worth reminding ourselves, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) did, that those with NRPF pay the same taxes as every other in-work person in the UK—income tax, national insurance and council tax—in addition to ongoing immigration charges and the immigration health surcharge. Like everybody who has spoken in the debate, I have some brilliant organisations, such as St Augustine’s Centre in Halifax, WomenCentre and Halifax Opportunities Trust, which dedicate so much time to working with people in desperate positions due to having no recourse to public funds. I wish to put on the record how grateful I am for their service.

I appreciate that it was the Minister’s colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who led on the passing of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill. In Committee, our amendment asked the Government to produce an analysis of the impact of no recourse to public funds, with a particular focus on those with children, those with pre-settled status and victims of domestic abuse. Further to the points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, it would be enormously beneficial to everybody if we had that analysis. It would allow us to shape better policy and give us the information we need to ensure we are not leaving anyone behind in our efforts to protect people over the course of this crisis and beyond.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I only narrowly avoided serving under the chairmanship of Ms Nokes, one of my predecessors in this role, as several Members have mentioned this afternoon.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) and, of course, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West

(Chris Stephens) on securing this afternoon’s important debate. Everybody who has spoken has contributed with great sincerity and passion, and I have been listening carefully to everything Members have said. Where I have, occasionally, been on the phone, I have been texting officials asking various questions in follow up on points that have been raised.

I will start by laying out some of the historical context to the “no recourse to public funds” policy. It has existed since the Immigration Act 1971, and the principle that underpins it is that it would not be reasonable for people who have arrived here very recently or on a temporary basis to be able to access the full range of benefits available to somebody who is settled here or a citizen. If we look at the categories of people to whom the NRPF condition applies, it is people such as visitors, those who are here on a holiday visa, students, people who come here to study, and workers who are here for a short time or, in some cases, a longer time. There would be an inherent unfairness if, having literally just arrived, people were able to fully access public funds.

Siobhain McDonagh: Can the Minister add to his list women whose children are born and brought up here and are UK citizens, and are going nowhere?

Chris Philp: I was going to come to that point. It is a very reasonable question to raise. Let me just finish my point, and I will come on to address the point that the hon. Lady has raised, entirely understandably and rightly.

It is worth mentioning that, of course, refugees are not subject to the NRPF condition. A couple of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), talked about the time it takes to make decisions. I am not sure if he was referring to asylum decisions or another kind of decision, but I make it clear that anyone claiming asylum or anyone granted asylum is not subject to the NRPF condition, and neither are people who are granted indefinite leave to remain.

Steve McCabe: I was talking about unresolved cases. I thought I was actually quite specific in saying it was people who did not have indefinite leave to remain. If the Minister did not hear that, I hope that has made it clearer for him.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman has made it very clear. I am grateful for that clarification. As he has just alluded to, people who have indefinite leave to remain—people who are here permanently—do not have the NRPF condition applied to them. The path to getting to ILR can take five years for many people, if they are on a relevant qualifying route. Even if they are not on a relevant qualifying route, 10 years’ continuous residency gets people ILR. The majority get it after five years.

That brings us to the question that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised. I was going to address that point later, but since she raised it in an intervention, I shall turn to it now. It is the question of families. Almost every case raised this afternoon has involved children. No one can listen to stories involving children experiencing hardship without feeling extremely moved, but of course the NRPF condition, as many Members have mentioned, can be lifted where the parent is on a family route. Where there are children

[Chris Philp]

who are British citizens, that will typically be the case—it certainly should be the case. The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) gave an example where an application was made to have the condition lifted and the application was granted. In cases where there are British citizen children whose parents have the NRPF condition, people can apply and do apply to have that lifted.

Barry Gardiner: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: Let me finish the point and I will give way in a moment. The success rate for those applications is very high. The most recent figures, which I think the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) has seen, show a success rate of 89% for those applications. That has increased in the last year. It was 79% and it is now 89%, and the time taken to make those decisions on average is 30 days—not quite five weeks, but 30 days.

The hon. Member for Brent North said, “Well, these are often quite pressing circumstances. What can be done to make that decision, which is successful in 89% of cases, faster?”. That is an entirely reasonable question. One of the actions I will take away from this afternoon’s session is to probe a little further on the question of speed. Someone mentioned 48 hours. Clearly, we have to make sure that people qualify for the condition to be lifted, and I would suspect 48 hours would not afford time to do that, but I will certainly see if anything can be done to expedite it, for the reasons the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

On the topic of children, the shadow Minister talked about free school meals, and I entirely sympathise with her point. I know that the Department for Education is conducting a review into the interaction of NRPF and free school meals. I hope it will report back on the result of that review as quickly as possible, because I understand entirely the hon. Lady’s point.

I am conscious of time, so perhaps I ought to say a quick word about data. I should congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham on his terrier-like tenacity on the question of data. In relation to the total number of people who are subject to the NRPF condition, we do not hold that data, as has been explained previously. There are a couple of issues. First, in relation to visa applications made out of country, the data is not recorded.

Secondly, there is obviously a continual coming and going of people—it includes people who are here on holiday visas and so on, who come and go the whole time. Some come and go via the common travel area, or via Ireland, so we do not have an exit check. That number is a moving feast. It includes people who come here on holiday for two weeks and then go. The right hon. Gentleman said that in relation to people who had made an in-country visa application, he had received a reply saying that that data was collected and held, but he had not received any further information.

Stephen Timms: The letter from the Home Office chief statistician dated 3 July, which is on the UK Statistics Authority website, states:

“Home Office administrative data only captures information on whether visas are subject to NRPF conditions for in-country extensions.”

I have asked how many there are, but received no answer.

Chris Philp: I was about to come to that point. I heard the right hon. Gentleman make that point in his speech. He had seen evidence saying that the data was held, but it had not been provided. That is another action for me to take away from this afternoon’s proceedings. I will go and ask that question about the data relating to in-country visa applications. According to the letter that he referred to, the data is held, so I will endeavour to ferret it out. It might sit in the portfolio of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), but I will certainly make inquiries in that part of the Home Office. If I am able to ferret out the information, I will certainly get back to the right hon. Gentleman. I will take that away as an action from this afternoon as well.

Finally, quite a few comments were made about coronavirus and our response to it. Clearly, everybody has access to the health service for coronavirus-related treatment. The shadow Minister asked whether the NRPF cohort are eligible for the payment if they have to self-isolate. I believe it is £500?

Holly Lynch: Yes.

Chris Philp: I do not know the answer to that question, but I will go away and find out because it is a very reasonable question to ask. More generally, people who are subject to NRPF are eligible for things such as the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employed income support scheme, and the support given to people on zero-hours contracts, based on their previous income. Those funds are not classed as public funds. Those are available to everybody, including the cohort mentioned today.

Local authority funding has been referred to a great deal. It has been denigrated as “cost shunting” and as being a small amount, but it is £4.3 billion, which, even by the standards of public spending, is a pretty significant amount of money. It covers more than just NRPF cases—I understand that—but it is none the less a very large amount of money, much of which has found its way to supporting NRPF cases. A case mentioned by one Opposition Member ended up being helped in that way. We can debate whether it is cost shunting or whether that is the best way of administering it, but local authorities often have the best knowledge about how to help people in their local areas. We might debate the nature of that safety net, but what cannot be gainsaid is that that safety net—that £4.3 billion to local authorities—does exist. It is there and it does help people. For those with children, which applies in all of the cases we have heard about this afternoon, there is a route to lifting—

Barry Gardiner: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: I must finish to allow time for the right hon. Member for East Ham to wind up.

There is a clear route to having the conditions lifted for people with children, quite rightly. It can be done without a lawyer. Somebody suggested earlier that a lawyer is needed, but that is not the case. Somebody said people need to produce hundreds of pages of evidence, but they do not. They simply need to provide basic evidence of the risk of destitution, and I believe the service is now available online as well.

I hope I have explained the principles of NRPF, but also the safety nets and exceptions that have been set up. There are at least three points that I will take away from this afternoon's proceedings, and I will get back to the three Members concerned. I hope that I have provided an adequate response to this afternoon's queries.

2.59 pm

Stephen Timms: We have had an excellent debate. I am grateful to everyone who has contributed to it and to the Minister for listening and for the offers that he has made.

The big expansion of no recourse to public funds came in 2012. It was an integral part of the hostile environment, or the "compliant environment" as it is now called, and the families we are talking about are, as others have said, largely on a 10-year route to indefinite leave. Frequently, they have been here for years beforehand. Nobody is suggesting that they are ever going to leave. The children have British citizenship. The people are working and pay taxes, yet they have no recourse to public funds throughout those 10 years.

I am grateful to the Minister for his offer to answer my question. I tabled it this morning for the fourth time, so now he has the perfect opportunity to go away, do the job he is expected to do, fulfil his responsibilities and answer the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered No Recourse to Public Funds.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members and the entry of those participating in the next item of business, I will suspend the sitting for two minutes.

3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Mental Health Support: Frontline Staff

3.2 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered mental health support for frontline staff.

It is an honour to move the motion with you in the Chair, Mr Paisley, now that Westminster Hall is once again available for our purposes. In this unique time of pandemic, the mental health of frontline and key workers should be fully supported. I declare an interest as a former psychologist in the NHS for 20-plus years—I am showing my age—before I came to this House, and as chair of the all-party parliamentary health group and the all-party parliamentary group on psychology.

No one should underestimate the severity of the mental health crisis that engulfs us all as a direct result of the advent and ongoing havoc wreaked by covid-19 across the UK, and indeed worldwide. I thank the organisations that have been involved on the frontline, supporting mental health strategy and the delivery of services, including: the child mental health charter and, in particular, Helen Clark, a former Member of this House; the British Psychological Society; the British Medical Association; the Royal College of Psychiatrists; Mind; the Centre for Mental Health; and EveryDoctor—that is to name but a few. I thank all the other parliamentarians who have taken the time on a Thursday afternoon to speak on this vital issue.

On 5 October, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus of the World Health Organisation introduced the first global dataset on covid-19 access to mental health services. He said:

"COVID-19 has interrupted essential mental health services around the world just when they're needed most."

There were some devastating findings. Before the pandemic, countries were spending less than 2% of their national health budgets on mental health. More than 120 countries—93%—reported that mental health services had been stopped or disrupted during the pandemic, 72% said that mental health services to children and adolescents had been disrupted, and 75% had seen a disruption to mental health services in the workplace. Despite the fact that 89% of the countries surveyed said that mental health and psychosocial supports were included in their national coronavirus response plans, only a shocking 17% had full additional funding to cover the cost of those services. Together, those figures show that there is likely to be an international tsunami of mental health morbidity like no other seen in our time.

The Centre for Mental Health, a UK charity, estimates that in England alone up to 10 million people may need mental health support—including long-term support—for the foreseeable future as a result of covid-19, and that 1.5 million children may require support. Those numbers are a stark warning that the impact of the pandemic will have severe long-term repercussions for the mental health of the UK as a whole.

Those affected will need support for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health difficulties in the coming months and years. Of course, some groups are disproportionately affected, including those with disabilities, those from minority ethnic communities and those with pre-existing mental health conditions who have experienced increased morbidity

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

during the pandemic. Responding to increased mental health needs must therefore be a priority when a recovery plan is drawn up for both NHS and social care sectors for the future of our public health and in fiscal planning across Governments.

On the impact on frontline staff, the national forecast for adults is that more than 200,000 NHS workers may need treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, psychological distress and burnout. Although less data has been collected, it is likely that a similar pattern will affect those who work across social care settings such as nursing homes. Research is badly needed. Those staff must not be excluded from or let down by the data collection and resourcing that is required. I would be grateful if the Minister looked specifically at the resourcing of data on the psychological impact of covid-19 in the community, nursing and social care sectors.

The International Council of Nurses reminds us that the effects of covid-19 on the mental health of nurses and the wider health social care workforce is a ticking time bomb. Every Thursday, across the UK, we were glad to show our support for key workers on the frontline, who risk themselves daily as they confront the pandemic on our behalf, but we owe them much more than weekly applause, and Governments across the UK owe them that duty of care.

Data from previous pandemics analysed by the *British Medical Journal* shows that post pandemic, healthcare workers are at high risk of both psychological illnesses and physical outcomes. For frontline staff, decisions made during the pandemic have regularly determined who to prioritise for care, but they have also felt a lack of control, especially when patients are care home residents who are dying and no treatment has been available for them. Emotionally and physically, having to be there day in, day out for patients as well as their families, who often could not visit relatives in their time of need, has been unduly toiling. That has come alongside the use of personal protective equipment for long periods; times when PPE has not been provided to the extent that it should have been; and long periods of excess working hours, stress and exhaustion.

A study by Kisley and colleagues has identified risk factors for psychological distress for staff in the time of covid-19. Personal care and socioeconomic stressors included personal childcare needs, having an infected family member at one point during the pandemic, and having a lower household income, with fewer choices in how to cope. Trauma is triggered when trusted bodies act in a way that can harm their safety at work, such as the failure to obtain correct or sufficient PPE, or by the breakdown or absence of testing and systems. The study also identified enforced redeployment to care for covid-19 patients, a failure to screen and triage healthcare workers for mental health needs prior to the pandemic, and a reliance on crisis intervention when symptoms develop.

Prior to the pandemic, the British Medical Association set out in a 2019 NHS staff survey that 40.3% of healthcare staff reported feeling unwell due to work-related stress. With the onset of covid-19, the workload for healthcare workers has increased radically. Four in 10 psychiatrists have reported an increase in people requiring emergency healthcare, including new patients, in the aftermath of lockdown. NHS and social care jobs

obviously involve exposure to a huge range of potential stressors, including competing demands, interpersonal conflict, complex and life-changing decision making, moral injury, shift work and long hours. Added to that in the past six months is the pausing of the working time directive, the limited scope for time off or holiday periods, the increasing morbidity of patients, and losing colleagues. As someone who has worked in the NHS for many years, I have to say that the loss of colleagues is a terrible shock, and not something that people expect in their day-to-day working lives. That is something that frontline staff have had to cope with in addition to their care roles.

People join the caring professions to make a difference and make others better, but coronavirus has created an overwhelming feeling of helplessness in the midst of this trauma. It should be noted that previous coping strategies that those on the frontline utilised may play out differently if they have to cope with a second or third wave. The adrenaline with which they coped in those vital months so that they could be there to support those in need may be replaced by the dread of going through it all again and the fear of being retraumatised.

I have referred to some of the facts and figures impacting the mental health of care workers, but here are some voices from the frontline, expressed in letters sent to *The Guardian* and the nationwide EveryDoctor organisation, which has been in touch. One said: "The mental health exhaustion that comes from changing everything about the way you work on a weekly or sometimes daily basis for months is immense. All the while, you can see a light at the end of the tunnel, but then you are bracing yourself for the next disaster: a second wave or winter crisis, alongside mass staff absence."

Another said: "There is the effect of not only seeing patients die, but losing colleagues. Everyone is struggling with this pandemic, but doctors are responsible for the decision making clinically. We can see that this is not going away. There is no respite in sight."

Another said:

"I am employed on mental health wards as a support worker, helping people recover from acute problems... Covid-19 has not only affected general hospitals but has also had a huge impact on mental health facilities, which are more often run by a skeleton staff... On top of this we are also dealing with mental health patients infected with Covid-19... As we are not considered to be on the frontline, we are not equipped with proper personal protective equipment. We get a basic face mask, gloves and a flimsy apron."

It should not be forgotten that school staff are also on the frontline, as they have to deal with the effects of the pandemic on children in their care. The mental health issues incurred by lockdown in the children they teach everyday are present upon return to schools. Anxiety and stress among a large group of pupils, alongside the experience of bereavement and a lack of community adolescent mental health services for those with acute problems, has been a feature of the recent past. That is alongside reduced assessment and diagnosis possibilities, due to staff having to change their working patterns, often from face-to-face to virtual sessions, after a period during which sessions were not offered.

Innovation will be key in ensuring that we can address the needs not only in the population but among the frontline staff who desperately need support. Using technology and ensuring that there is the capacity and

technical knowledge to support the transition to other methods of care will be fundamental. Meeting the mental health needs that arise from coronavirus is a huge challenge, but it is not optional. Just as responding to the threat of the virus itself has tested our resources and resilience, so too will addressing the psychological and emotional consequences.

I am extremely grateful to the British Psychological Society, which has provided specialist guidance. I know that it has also been working with the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and with the Minister's office. It wants to see the planning of psychological support and resourcing of the psychological workforce to meet demands in the NHS and care homes and also in schools and the community. It also wants to see increased access to an in-house employee wellbeing service, which it believes will be critical, particularly if unemployment issues face the population in the coming months. It wants to see the employment of psychologists to focus specifically on staff. It tells me that it is not feasible, in the long term, to ask psychologists to work with patients in their work time and then to work with NHS staff in their spare time to meet psychological needs. The society would like to see more use of psychologists not just in supporting patients, but in a strategy to support staff over the long term.

My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) will be covering in depth the work of the Scottish Government in relation to mental health strategies during the pandemic, so I will focus on the issues that have been raised with me in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary health group and the all-party parliamentary group on psychology.

These are some of the questions that I have been asked to raise with the Minister. What steps is the Department of Health and Social Care taking to model and plan for demand for mental health support as a result of coronavirus and the consequent impact on the economy and employment? What additional funding will be made available to mental health providers to ensure that services are covid-19 safe and that they can meet increased demand for support and deliver on existing pledges in the NHS long-term plan for mental health? What resources will be made available for local initiatives that provide early mental health support in our communities, especially for those people who have been bereaved? What proportion of schoolchildren will benefit from the wellbeing for education return funding? How will children's mental health be supported moving forward?

What resources will be made available to support health and care staff in the NHS, social care and voluntary sectors who are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, high levels of psychological distress or burnout? What specialist support will be made available? What resources will be made available to ensure that research and funding are provided for those working in social care settings so that we adequately address their mental health needs alongside the NHS staff population?

What plans are being put in place to protect NHS staff from a potential onslaught of claims against them because of the pressures that they have worked under during the pandemic? That may give rise to a number of negligence suits in the future. That issue has particularly been raised by the Medical Defence Union, which is

concerned that staff have often been placed on the frontline with a lack of resources and with a lack of support medically or clinically themselves.

Now is the time when I feel that I and other hon. Members should be responding in the main Chamber to a detailed statement from the Government about their proposals for mental health directly arising from the devastating impact and ongoing effect of covid-19. Such a statement could include ways in which the Government propose to protect and sustain the mental health and wellbeing of key workers and that will be distinctly and separately resourced, rather than relying on any money from pots designed for other purposes. I look forward to the Minister's reply today. I hope, on behalf of the key workers for whom I have been given the privilege to speak, that she will tell us that the Government have set a date for the announcement of a properly and realistically resourced mental health strategy that will be both integral and central to the overall covid-19 recovery plan.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I thought I was going to be calling Jim Shannon to speak today, but he is not here, as we know, so I call Owen Thompson.

3.19 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing the debate. It is important to focus on mental health, and today we have a great opportunity to do that. I know that my hon. Friend brings a wealth of invaluable professional experience to the topic, which I cannot begin to understand.

In mental health, as with other aspects of health, time needs to be dedicated to caring for and looking after people, to reduce the chances of someone becoming seriously unwell. If we relentlessly push our bodies every day we soon pick up physical ailments, stresses and strains, and they can develop into something more serious if they are not given time to recover. Our bodies will send signals telling us to stop before we collapse, and the same goes for our minds. Downtime is not a luxury. It is essential, and we all need to be able to read the signs before reaching breaking point. The brain is an unbelievably complex organ, and is constantly processing something even more complex—human experiences and emotions. I am amazed that it does not go down, and that something does not go wrong with it, more often.

On the frontline, our carers and health staff have faced the brunt of the pandemic response. We may moan about working from home, or not being able to go to the pub or to see friends, but they see people scared, alone and in pain, gasping for breath. They see families unable to get close enough to offer their loved ones the most basic human comfort—a hug. Dealing with that every day takes its toll.

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

The World Health Organisation reported a recent review of healthcare professionals finding that one in four was suffering from depression and anxiety and one in three had insomnia during the coronavirus outbreak. There was also an appalling rise in verbal harassment and discrimination and physical violence. No wonder they are battle-scarred.

[Owen Thompson]

Switching off from work is made even harder by the fear of being a spreader, which leads to increased isolation when what we need is social comfort and community. Like all of us, frontline staff cannot access the habitual escape routes that we used to take for granted, whether that might be going out for a drink with friends, to the theatre or to live music, or experiencing the warmth and excitement of the crowd at a football match. Those things just are not possible just now. With NHS resources cut by years of austerity, staff were already working at or beyond capacity before the pandemic, so they had to find a whole new superhuman reserve of energy when the crisis struck. Sheer willpower, determination and dedication keep the staff going and I cannot thank them enough for that, but after eight months with no end in sight more and more of our critical staff are getting to breaking point, traumatised, running on empty, and mentally as well as physically exhausted.

In those serious circumstances it is essentially the responsibility of Government to make sure that there are adequate levels of professional mental health support in place. We need more than a website, an app and a few choicely worded paragraphs in a staff handbook, although all sources of information are very welcome. Any port in a storm, I suppose we could say. We need more trained psychologists and counsellors available to provide tailored support—human faces with experience and expertise in their field. We need to make sure that people are able to talk and share experiences with others, to be listened to, get a bit of breathing space, and be guided to get more help and treatment whenever they cannot cope.

I know that NHS England, like the Scottish Government, brought in helplines to help staff dealing with covid-19. I welcome those efforts. The Scottish Government also established the national wellbeing hub in May for health and social care staff, which takes a psychological first-aid approach, with resources on self-care and 1,000 hours of coaching for staff to maintain health, wellbeing and resilience. I believe that it is the first of its kind in the UK and I know from the feedback that I have had that it has been a welcome move.

I am pleased to see that the national wellbeing hub includes a section for unpaid carers, because the Carers Trust found that 68% of young adult carers in Scotland said their mental health was worse as a result of coronavirus, and 85% were worried about their own future. Those 12 to 17-year-olds, who already have responsibilities beyond their years, are living in an age of anxiety unimaginable when all of us in the Chamber were their age. I recently hosted a virtual meeting with young people in Midlothian to talk about their lockdown experiences and concerns, and it was deeply worrying to hear how many issues they raised, including those related to their mental health, and how little they felt listened to by many of those in power.

Health & Safety Matters reports that a survey

“into the mental health of frontline staff and healthcare professionals has revealed that over 90% believe there is not enough mental health support available for the general public to deal with the aftermath of the pandemic and 66% felt there is not enough workplace support for healthcare professionals and frontline staff.”

We rightly call our frontline workers heroes, and we admire their courage and dedication, but those in Government need to look after them and not just praise them.

It is good to see carers, who have insultingly been called “low-skilled” by some in the Government, getting the recognition they deserve, but most key workers do not have a choice but to keep going. They would rather not risk their mental or physical health for a care badge or a clap. They should be proud of their jobs, but pride does not pay the bills or keep them and their loved ones safe. I suggest the best thing the Government could do is to find an appropriate way of honouring those heroes in our NHS, care sector and essential services who work tirelessly day after day to defeat coronavirus and look after all the rest of us.

3.26 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is indeed a pleasure to speak for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing this extremely important debate and other hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions. I pay tribute to all staff on the frontline, far too many of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice while trying to keep us safe and well. Their unwavering courage in standing up to the virus, knowing full well the risks to themselves and their families, has been inspirational and truly deserving of the gratitude of Members across the House.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, health and care staff have made immense sacrifices. When we were asked to stay home to avoid the virus, they were going to work and facing it head-on anyway. They were sadly left unprepared, with PPE problems and no access to testing that lasted for months. Ahead of World Mental Health Day on Saturday, this is a fitting time to acknowledge that frontline staff have a unique need. Everyone across the country has had their life disrupted, but our frontline health and care staff have had to deal with patients, colleagues and friends dying on their watch. As the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow said, nothing prepares you for losing a colleague, particularly when you think it could have been avoided. Frontline staff are trained to deal with high-pressure scenarios, but even then, they were not trained to tell people that their loved ones had died via phone calls. Covid-19 has stripped the humanity out of grieving.

The additional pressure has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the emotional wellbeing of frontline health and care staff. They have had no break, no support and no relief from the Government. Fatigue and burn-out are setting in on an already exhausted workforce, who are in desperate need of respite. We need only look at the latest NHS staff absence figures to grasp the true magnitude of the hidden crisis. Over half a million sick days were taken by NHS staff in England because of mental ill health in May alone—one month. Half a million days in just one month.

For context, those absences account for almost a third of all NHS absences for the month of May. In comparison, 200,000 fewer sick days were taken for covid-related illness during the same time period. Let us remember that it was around that time that the virus was causing the most damage to our country, when hospital admissions were still high and transmission

was rampant. Even then, for NHS staff, mental ill health still accounted for more time away from the frontline than any other reason. A survey conducted by NHS Providers of its membership at the tail end of June showed that 92% of NHS trusts were concerned about staff wellbeing, stress and burn-out following the pandemic.

The evidence is clear. If we are to expect NHS and care staff to deal effectively with an impending second spike in addition to the care backlog while approaching winter flu season, they must receive mental health support. They need it tailored for them. All health and care staff have given their all. Many have been redeployed, have been working in fear without adequate PPE, have lost colleagues or members of their own family, and have never been trained for something like this. The Government need to act. They cannot simply cherry-pick who they are going to support.

Just as Ministers have an obligation to protect the physical wellbeing of frontline staff by providing them with PPE and ensuring that their work environments are as safe as possible, they also have an obligation to protect the mental wellbeing of frontline staff, guaranteeing them access to psychological therapy if and when they need it, and need it they certainly do. It should be a moral imperative for this Government to ensure health and care staff have the practical and emotional support they need to do their jobs. Based on what little support they have been offered so far, it does not seem like it is.

It is not as if the Government have not had ample opportunities to address the growing need. Labour recognise it and we have put forward our own plans to support the mental health of the entire health and care workforce. Our care for carers package, which we launched in June, would have guaranteed access to counselling and psychotherapy to all 3.1 million health and social care workers. It would be offered nationally and completely confidentially. Currently, that is not available to the majority of the workforce. The package was designed in consultation with those on the ground—nurses, paramedics and porters—who are leading the fight against coronavirus. The Labour party has said that not a single frontline worker in our NHS or care workforce will be left behind. Everybody is equally valuable.

I want to share a couple of testimonies. During our consultation, an ambulance worker and member of the GMB trade union said:

“My team of ambulance staff have lost a close colleague to Covid, as many have in the nursing and care sectors. Every death is tragic. The stress on the team, the issues of grief and loss, the fact that it could have been them, for some survivors guilt, it has had a big mental health impact...I worry about my colleagues and future patient care.”

Care home workers were just as fraught. One told me:

“It has been really emotionally hard supporting residents when they are dying without their loved ones close by. Then we have had to support and reassure their family members and provide information about their last moments. There’s a lot of questioning going on—could I have done more, could anyone have done more, were the residents’ lives valued in the way we would want them to be?”

She continues:

“I am a really strong positive person and I have been a carer for over 15 years. But at the moment I really don’t think I could mentally carry on if there is another wave of Covid, I just don’t think I would have the strength to go through it again. There is definitely going to be a mental health crisis in the care sector.”

Those types of testimonies are sadly far too common. Staff are desperate for help, yet nothing has been forthcoming from this Government. Care for carers would have given the workforce the support they need, yet in June, when I requested a meeting to discuss the proposal, the Health Secretary and the Minister responding today refused to meet me. Given the sheer scale of the problem, I ask the Minister whether she will meet me to discuss the care for carers package, so that together, with a cross-party, conciliatory approach, we can give our frontline care and NHS workers the mental health support that they need. I hope she will reconsider the offer.

Ahead of winter and a second spike, the Government must learn the lessons of the spring. We must fight for the mental health of those who have supported us so courageously during this crisis. Just last week, the Centre for Mental Health predicted that 10 million people across the UK will need mental health support as a consequence of covid—8.5 million adults and 1.5 million children. If we are ever going to be in a position to match that need, we need to first protect the mental wellbeing of our healthcare workers. Only then, if we do that thoroughly and fairly, can we expect them to protect the physical and mental health of the nation. I hope the Minister agrees that without the proper resources being made available to our frontline staff, we risk further damaging the health of our country.

3.34 pm

The Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (Ms Nadine Dorries): I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan): it is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing the debate. I have heard her speak many times in Westminster Hall, including when I have been in the Chair. She always speaks with passion, particularly on this subject, and she always bring her experience as a consultant psychologist. We are the better and the richer for it.

The onset of the covid-19 pandemic in March was the beginning of a hugely challenging time for all our frontline staff, who have so brilliantly supported our essential frontline workers. I echo everything that has been said in praise of our frontline workers. They have been beyond exceptional—beyond words. I spoke to some of them this week. When they were going into work in March and April, every day it got a bit worse. Every day they had no idea what they would face that day, but they did it, sometimes working 12 hours without a break. Those staff in ICU went on a hugely emotional journey with their patients. As we know, the pathology of covid once someone is in ICU changes very rapidly. That took some getting used to for the staff who were nursing those patients—one moment they thought they were doing fine, and the next their condition fell off a cliff. That was hugely challenging emotionally for the staff who were nursing those patients.

I endorse everything that has been said in the debate, and I give my thanks and praise to staff. They worked long hours doing emotional and draining work, which is why it was important to ensure that support was put in place. We know that staff resilience has been tested to the nth degree, and the Government recognised early on that this would be a difficult situation and that we had

[*Ms Nadine Dorries*]

to prioritise the mental health of the staff who were working in those very challenging conditions—not just staff in ICU and in hospitals, but staff who were working in care homes and social workers, too. That is why, at the beginning of covid-19, we commissioned NHS England and NHS Improvement to develop a comprehensive package of emotional, psychological and practical support for NHS workers. We ensured that the same offer was in place for all social care staff and their colleagues in the NHS, wherever possible.

Throughout the pandemic, NHS and social care workers have been able to access a dedicated and confidential staff support line operated by Samaritans, which is open from 7 am to 11 pm. It is there for people if they have had a tough day, if they feel worried or overwhelmed about what they are facing at work, or if they have a lot on their mind that they need to talk through. Trained advisers are available and can help with signposting to further services, or they can simply listen in confidence. A text helpline runs parallel to the phonenumber and is open 24/7 to all NHS workers, social workers and care staff. A separate bereavement helpline has also been established by Hospice UK; it is manned by a team of fully qualified and trained bereavement specialists. So we had one-to-one care, the helpline, the text service and the Hospice UK bereavement line available for frontline staff.

Alongside the helplines, workers were given free access to a range of mental health and wellbeing apps, including Daylight, Sleepio and SilverCloud, and there have been over 150,000 downloads of these apps by key workers. For NHS workers, virtual staff common rooms have been established in partnership with NHS Practitioner Health. It has given staff the opportunity to reflect, share experiences and find ways to cope with how covid-19 is affecting their life at home and at work. Line managers have also been given the tools that they need to effectively support their teams through covid-19. For example, mental health conversation training has helped to equip NHS managers, supervisors and those with caring responsibilities for NHS staff to confidentially hold local, supportive and compassionate mental health and wellbeing conversations.

In addition to everything we have done through the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care to provide a complete safety net and blanket of support around our NHS staff, the trusts went further. There are amazing stories of what some trust managers put in place straight away for their staff, including making space in the hospital where staff could go and download, and talk about their day; putting in place a practice of buddying up with another NHS worker; and putting into practice the process of staff not just finishing shifts and giving a handover report, as they used to, but then having a coffee session afterwards to debrief and go through what had happened that day. NHS trust managers also need to be praised for the huge package of care that they put in place for their staff, going over and above what the NHS supplied. NHS England and NHS Improvement also launched a new framework that enables employers to buy in additional occupational health and support for their staff.

Additionally, in partnership with the trusts, chief social workers published guidance for social workers and social care professionals, which can be accessed via

Skills for Care. It explains the need to support the emotional wellbeing of employees during and after the pandemic, what managers can do to support that and what social care professionals should do to support themselves. To support our frontline workers more widely, NHS mental health services have remained open for business throughout the pandemic; no mental health services closed or ceased to look after patients during the pandemic.

In fact, during the pandemic we were able to accelerate parts of the long-term plan. For instance, 24-hour mental health crisis helplines opened across our trusts throughout the pandemic. Every one has been established and every one is now open. They have not been open long enough for us to gather data on how many people have used them and how they have been accessed, but I have heard anecdotally from ambulance support services, who are aware that the helplines are being used, that they know the helplines are working because there are fewer call-outs for mental health crisis.

To increase support throughout the covid-19 pandemic, we provided £5 million to national and local mental health charities, through MIND and the mental health consortia. On 22 May, the Chancellor announced a further £4.2 million for mental health charities as part of the Government's UK-wide £750 million package of support for the voluntary sector. These additional moneys for mental health charities will support adults and children, including frontline and key workers. However, we still have to go further. We continue to learn from our experience during covid-19.

On 18 September, we published, "Adult Social Care—our COVID-19 Winter Plan 2020/21", for adult social care settings outside the range of support we are making available, to ensure we support the workforce throughout the winter. A tough winter is coming, so as well as everything we have put in place, we need to go further to ensure that those services continue to be provided throughout the winter and that we have well-established support for our frontline workers.

As part of what we are doing throughout the winter, the NHS is in the process of setting up a first wave of staff mental health hubs, which will provide proactive outreach and engagement; overcome barriers to seeking help for frontline staff; build capacity in local employer organisations or teams; provide rapid clinical assessment; and provide care co-ordination and supported onward referral to deliver rapid access to mental health treatment. These hubs will be particularly useful and successful because we can focus mental health services into the infrastructure of the hubs. That will be of huge additional benefit, along with everything else that we have been providing to frontline staff. We are committed to providing essential mental health support to our frontline workers as they continue their work in response to the covid-19 pandemic. Ensuring that the health and adult social care sectors are well staffed with colleagues, to look after patients and prevent the pressures from becoming too great, is an absolute top priority for the Government.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow asked a question about clinical negligence claims against staff. There is a clinical negligence scheme for trusts that provides indemnity cover for all staff. I knew that was in place, because I signed it off at the beginning of the pandemic; I just could not remember what it was called. No staff member or frontline worker

needs to worry. This is, I believe—I will be corrected if I am wrong—aside from what is provided by the Medical Defence Union and what normally applies. This package, which I believe came about as part of the emergency coronavirus regulations, is available to all staff, and all staff are covered.

We are committed to continuing to provide services to staff. If I went through every trust and listed every measure and initiative that has been put in place to support staff, I would be here for quite a long time. As well as the helplines, the apps, the one-to-one psychological care sessions provided to frontline staff, the trust support, the download rooms, the buddying up and the coffee debriefs, additional trust-by-trust measures have been put in place. As we know, staff were also provided with free meals. A huge package went in, and rightly so. This was not just a job during the recent pandemic, and it will not be in the future.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder. We are going into a difficult winter, so I made inquiries this week as to what evidence we have about the rise in mental health issues that she spoke about, and other things. At the moment, we are seeing that the pandemic has had an impact on those with pre-existing mental health issues, as we would expect. Somebody who already suffers from bipolar, schizophrenia or a medically diagnosed mental illness will have found the pandemic challenging, and they will still find it challenging. The same is true for people with eating disorders—I think the hon. Lady has spoken about this—which I regard as the most serious of all mental health issues, because they are linked with morbidity. One in five people with eating disorders dies, and that is the highest morbidity rate of all mental illnesses. There is support here. That is why we have provided funding to increase the capacity to deal with those who have eating disorders and who need quick access to someone they can talk to.

We know that those with pre-existing mental health conditions are going to suffer. It is really important that we unpack wellbeing from mental health. There is some very unhelpful dialogue taking place that does not help people at all. We may see in the newspapers or hear people saying that suicide rates are going up, but they are not. We have no evidence of that; in fact, the recorded suicide rate from April to June was down. That could be for a variety of reasons, and we will not know what the true rate is until next year. However, we know that writing and talking in such a way has an impact out there, and that is why we ask the media to be careful about how they discuss suicides. We all need to be careful about how we talk about mental health. As for whether there is going to be a tsunami of mental health problems, I asked the clinical lead director of NHS England about that yesterday, and there is no evidence of that either.

We know that the other group of people who will be impacted are the frontline workers who have gone through the pandemic. As we know, post-traumatic stress disorder takes a long time to manifest, so those people may not even be presenting. We are expecting a problem, but it has not manifested itself yet. I do not have to tell a clinical psychologist how long it can take for the impact to fall out, but apparently it can be some time. We have prepared for that and we expect to see it in the future, but it has not happened yet.

I say that we should unpack wellbeing and mental health because a lot of what people are experiencing now—anxiety, apprehension, fear of the unknown and fear of covid—is a wellbeing issue, and it is normal to feel like that. Nobody ever goes into an adverse situation without experiencing such emotions. It is okay, and very normal, to feel anxious and fearful in an adverse and quite frightening situation, and people will develop their resilience. We want people—particularly frontline workers and students—to reach out and talk to their friends and their family, and to use the support networks that they would normally use to get through a difficult situation.

The problem arises if those feelings persist over a long period, and if that happens, we then urge people to seek help. However, we are not at that point, and we are not seeing that manifest yet in referrals or people seeking help. What we know is that people are going through a phase of anxiety. We therefore launched Every Mind Matters, because we need to provide people with the tools to get themselves through a difficult situation of anxiety and fear. Every Mind Matters launched for adults and, on 8 September, for children. It is now launching for students, too, alongside Student Minds.

Interestingly, when we talk about mental health, there is almost no such illness that cannot be helped in some way, and no experience of wellbeing that cannot be assisted, but people need the tools. They need improving access to psychological therapies services, 70% of which are available online, and tools to get them through such difficult situations. Those tools are available on Every Mind Matters, which I believe has had 2 million downloads for adults. They are there to help people get through. It is amazing that people do not know what they should do—I did not, until I looked into this—and how they should help themselves to get through a difficult situation now.

I caution everyone that we need to be careful about the language we use, such as “falling off a cliff edge”, or the “tsunami” of mental health issues. According to the clinical lead at the NHS yesterday, there is no evidence to support any of that yet. Hundreds of surveys are going on, some of which are showing that some people’s mental health has been improved—some people are enjoying working from home and do not ever want to go back to doing the commute, which they now realise was making them feel pretty miserable. They are welcoming the social change that has occurred. It is not at all a case of one size fits all, and that is why we need to be careful.

Hopefully, we are prepared, particularly when it comes to frontline workers. The services that they require have been put in place, after consultation with frontline workers, and we will have even more ready as we move forward into the winter.

3.52 pm

Dr Cameron: Thank you, Ms McDonagh, and I thank everyone who has spoken. It is vital that we continue to raise awareness of mental health, particularly for frontline workers. Saturday is World Mental Health Day, so it is apt that we have spoken about the issues today. The fact that 2 million people have downloaded the Every Mind Matters app shows that the population are reaching out for mental health support, that mental health is at the front of their minds and that they want support to build their resilience.

[*Dr Cameron*]

It is absolutely correct to view mental health as a continuum, but something such as a pandemic can push people who were perhaps coping well previously towards the end of the continuum where they need additional support. Those supports have to be stepped and matched to their clinical needs. Some will have acute clinical needs, and others will be able to cope with the support of family and friends or colleagues, and in different ways. Support needs to be matched. We need to ensure, right across the UK, that best practice is shared; that people work together so that when something is rolled out, it works extremely well; and that there is dialogue and sharing for all staff in the NHS of the four nations.

Before I finish, I want to mention that next year—when we have events back, which I hope will be towards the summer—the all-party parliamentary health group will host awards for staff who have shown themselves to have supported others, whether patients or their communities. I would be so pleased if the Minister and the shadow Minister were able to attend. I can let them know about it well in advance.

I also want to bring up something that I wrote to the Prime Minister about, which I hope to hear about at some point in the near future and which can perhaps gain cross-party support. That is to have a national memorial for those who served on the frontline and lost their lives during this pandemic. I hope that is another discussion that can be taken forward from today.

I thank everyone who took part. I know it is late afternoon on a Thursday, but it is so vital to pay tribute to all those on the frontline who have been there to support our needs in this time of crisis. We must always be mindful of supporting their needs, too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered mental health support for frontline staff.

3.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 8 October 2020

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period. The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice. The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. Third quarter TRG meetings took place on 8, 23 and 25 September 2020.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 August 2020)	5
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 August 2020)	5
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	0

The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during the reporting period) 3

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. Third quarter TRG meetings took place on 8, 23 and 25 September 2020.

[HCWS497]

CABINET OFFICE

GB-EU Border Operating Model

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Today, the Government will publish an updated border operating model, to provide further clarity and certainty for businesses. The model—the first version of which was published on 13 July—has been updated to reflect feedback from stakeholders and to include additional detail on policies and processes. We would like to thank the devolved Administrations for their engagement with this.

This detail will help businesses which trade with the EU to understand the new arrangements and take action. We are encouraging businesses to go to gov.uk/transition to use the transition checker which will help them understand not just new border requirements but all of the steps they need to take to be ready for the end of the transition.

A copy of the updated border operating model has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-10-08/HCWS498>.

[HCWS498]

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