

**Thursday  
5 November 2020**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 5 November 2020**

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# House of Commons

Thursday 5 November 2020

*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

### DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Tourism Sector: Covid-19 Support

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the tourism sector during the covid-19 outbreak. [908249]

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the tourism sector during the covid-19 outbreak. [908254]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston)**: Covid-19 has had a severe impact on tourism, which is why we have provided a range of targeted measures to see the sector through this period. On top of the Government's wider economic support package, we have provided business rates relief and grants for many in the sector, as well as a cut in VAT for tourism and hospitality activities until the end of March. We are continuing to engage with stakeholders to assess how we can most effectively support tourism's recovery across the UK.

**Andrew Jones**: Harrogate and Knaresborough is in the top 10% of UK constituencies for hospitality employment. That includes a significant number of teams at B&Bs and guest houses, which are suffering from a lack of international visitors and the closure of the exhibition sector. There is a market that could be developed further to help, and that is domestic tourism. As we emerge from the pandemic and lockdown finishes, what will the Government do to promote domestic tourism?

**Nigel Huddleston**: I know my hon. Friend's passion for tourism and representing his fantastic constituency. As he knows, we currently need people to stay at home to reduce transmission and to ease the pressure on our NHS, but when holidays are permitted again, we will work with VisitBritain, VisitEngland and local partners, including destination management organisations, to champion the UK's diverse tourism offer, as we did with the Enjoy Summer Safely and Escape the Everyday campaigns. We will continue to work with the industry to provide guidance and assurance about when people can safely go on holiday, as demonstrated through initiatives such as the "We're good to go" industry standard mark.

**Selaine Saxby** [V]: With the announcement of new restrictions until 2 December, will the Minister outline the support that will be available to my North Devon tourism and hospitality businesses that are understandably worried about the months ahead?

**Nigel Huddleston**: I appreciate that my hon. Friend is a great advocate for tourism, particularly in her constituency. I am fully aware of how tough the new measures will be for the tourism sector, with businesses having already faced many months of reduced trade. There are significant packages of financial support in place, as the furlough scheme and self-employed support have been extended for the period of lockdown. Many businesses in the hospitality and tourism sector will also receive grants worth up to £3,000 per month under the local restrictions support grant scheme. An additional £1.1 billion is being given to local authorities to help businesses more broadly, such as those severely impacted by restrictions but not actually forced to close.

#### Loneliness: Winter 2020-21

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle loneliness in winter 2020-21. [908251]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman)**: As winter approaches, loneliness will be a concern for many people. That is why the Government, as part of our £750-million charity funding package, have put £18 million into charities that tackle loneliness and provide much-needed support, including through online social groups, virtual buddying, telephone helplines and other activities. That is on top of £44 million going towards mental health as part of the same package.

**Navendu Mishra**: As we enter the latest lockdown, many people will be isolated in their homes. Age UK estimates that 2 million over-75s live alone. Research by the Library has revealed that more than 3,000 households in my constituency may lose access to their free TV licence. What impact assessment has the Minister made of removing funding for the free over-75s TV licence?

**Matt Warman**: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of the over-75s TV licence. The Government remain deeply disappointed with the BBC's decision to restrict the over-75s licence fee concession. We recognise the value of free TV licences for over-75s.

#### National League Football: Covid-19 Support

**Shaun Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support national league football. [908252]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden)**: Our football clubs are the bedrock of their local communities, and it is vital that they are protected from covid-19. Many have benefited from the unprecedented multibillion-pound package of support that we have provided to all businesses across the United Kingdom. In addition, we have brokered a unique £10-million deal with the national lottery so that 66 clubs in the top two levels of the national league can continue to play behind closed doors.

**Shaun Bailey:** Of course, this is not just about the national league. I am proud to represent two fantastic football clubs, Tipton Town and Tividale, which are at real risk of closure as a result of covid-19. Can my right hon. Friend reassure my clubs that the Government will do whatever they can to support them? Perhaps once he can, he might even come and meet the clubs to see the fantastic work that they do in the community.

**Oliver Dowden:** I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend's constituency when that is permitted. Of course, I am immensely disappointed by the current situation and the position that we are in, but I know that football clubs large and small make a huge contribution to their community on and off the pitch, and I can assure my hon. Friend that they will not be forgotten. As soon as we are in a position to start lifting restrictions, grassroots sports will be among the first to return, but until then, we have made sure that families can keep exercising throughout this lockdown, and I urge people to get out and get fit.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us hear from the Chair of the Select Committee. I call Julian Knight.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Today, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has called before it the English Football League, the Premier League and the Football Association. We want to hear what they are doing in terms of community sport and, crucially, to see whether they can sort out the situation for 10, 12 or 15-year EFL football clubs that are potentially going under and ripping the heart out of our communities, as happened in Bury last year. Will the Minister join me in urging the football bodies to follow the example of other sports and finally put the squabbling aside and come to a proper deal for the good of the game?

**Oliver Dowden:** I agree with my hon. Friend 100%. I am very disappointed by the current situation and the inability of football to reach that agreement. There is already £50 million on the table for league 1 and league 2 clubs to stop them falling into financial difficulty, which is a good start, and further discussions are taking place. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), met the Premier League and the EFL again this week to reiterate the need to reach an agreement in the interests of all fans.

#### Swimming Pools and Gyms: Covid-19 Closure

**Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the effect on health and wellbeing of the closure of (a) swimming pools and (b) gyms during the covid-19 outbreak. [908256]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** Sport and physical activity are incredibly important for our physical and mental health, as well as a vital weapon against coronavirus. That is why we made sure that people could exercise even during the height of the previous lockdown, and we opened up grassroots sport and leisure facilities as soon as it was safe to do so. From today, there are significant restrictions on some sectors of the economy, including the closure of indoor and

outdoor leisure. Exercise outdoors, however, will be allowed with our own households, on our own or with one person from another household, which is different from last time. Of course, no Government or Minister wants to see these kinds of restrictions in place, but we believe they are necessary to help to get the R number down and to get the virus under control.

**Cat Smith:** Initiatives such as "Healthier Fleetwood" show that people in the town I represent take seriously the poorer health outcomes that we have in the town and are serious about making a difference, but our swimming pool has been closed since the beginning of the first lockdown and was not reopened when restrictions allowed it to be. Wyre Borough Council and the YMCA, who run it, keep telling me that they are concerned about the level of footfall not making it financially viable to reopen the pool. What conversations has the Minister had with Treasury colleagues about financial support for swimming pools in areas of deprivation?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I completely understand the challenges facing many leisure facilities right across the country. Some of them have been able to open, but some have not. Some are open, but we are aware that they are in a precarious financial state. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is working closely with Sport England and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on the design of a £100 million scheme to help leisure centres and leisure facilities. Further details of this will be released shortly, and once the fund is open, we urge leisure centres to bid for the money and urge people to make the most of these precious facilities.

**Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab):** I want to ask the Minister about the broader issue. Many people in this country wanted the lockdown to come sooner than it has, and perhaps the most compelling cases I have heard come from those who work in the NHS, but those same people know that the NHS cannot by itself make our country fully well. That requires us all to live healthier lives. So while we live through the frustration of closed gyms and swimming pools that have been shut since March, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) has described, will the Minister explain what exactly he has done to write a plan for our country's wellbeing, starting with explaining, now, precisely what is going to happen on 2 December?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Of course, through Sport England and other bodies, we have provided financial support to the tune of more than £200 million to help facilities during the coronavirus crisis, as well as having a clear plan to open both elite level sport and grassroots sport. Our intention is very much to get back to opening as many sports facilities as possible, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State outlined a few moments ago. None of us wants these measures in place, but we have pressed the pause button. Everybody can make an individual case for a particular sport, but the problem is that if we take individual parts away, the whole thing falls down. We are asking everybody, unfortunately, for this temporary period to make sacrifices and not do some of the things they would love to do, to help to get the virus under control.

### Charity Sector: Covid-19 Support

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): How many charities his Department has allocated funding to as part of the Government's £750 million package of support for the charity sector during the covid-19 outbreak. [908257]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman)**: Nobody works harder for their constituency than my hon. Friend, and I know she welcomes the fact that the Government have funded 13,000 charities, social enterprises and other community organisations, including St John Ambulance, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, FareShare and a host of others. That includes £45,000 going to charities in the Hyndburn constituency.

**Sara Britcliffe**: Despite the suffering caused by the coronavirus, it remains the case that funds are lying unused in dormant accounts. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the continued funding his Department has secured from identifying and putting to good use the money left in dormant accounts?

**Matt Warman**: The dormant assets scheme is a great success; it has unlocked more than £745 million for social and environmental causes in the UK to date, including £150 million released in May to support charities, communities and individuals affected by the pandemic. Work is also under way to expand the scheme to a wider range of assets and enable hundreds of millions of pounds more of forgotten money to be put to good use.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On Monday, the Prime Minister said he would be

“doing much more over the winter to support the voluntary sector”.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 41.]

The sector provides vital support and services to people across our communities. It already has an accumulation of a £10 billion deficit over just six months, because of the loss of fundraising, and 10% of organisations are due to fold, so can the Minister say exactly how he and the Prime Minister are going to rescue our charities and address that deficit, and what further money will be forthcoming, as charities are never more needed and never more in need?

**Matt Warman**: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that charities have performed an immensely valuable role, and they will continue to be more important than ever. I would point her to the £750 million package, and she will know that the Chancellor will be making a statement later on, which I am sure will not be the last one he will be making over the course of this pandemic.

### Superfast Broadband

**Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that superfast broadband is available throughout the UK. [908258]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman)**: This Government are aiming as high as we can on the delivery of better broadband across this country. We have spent £1.9 billion on the superfast programme, taking more than 96% of UK premises to superfast connectivity. As part of our

plans for nationwide coverage, we are also committed to investing £5 billion to delivering gigabit-capable broadband to those in the hardest-to-reach areas.

**Mark Jenkinson**: I thank the Minister for that answer. In my constituency, rural constituents seeking to use the universal service obligation to obtain better broadband speeds are increasingly flabbergasted at the costs coming from BT, which seeks to offer fibre to the premises when fibre to the cabinet is sufficient to meet legislative requirements. Will he use his position to stress to BT that it should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good?

**Matt Warman**: As I say, this Government will always aim for the gold standard on connecting people, but because my hon. Friend understands the value of connectivity to his constituents, he is absolutely right; on the USO, we need not only to wait for the outcome of Ofcom's investigation of BT's current approach, but to make sure that the perfect is not the enemy of the good.

### Entertainment Venues: Covid-19 Support

**Anne Marie Morris** (Newton Abbot) (Con): What steps he is taking to support entertainment venues that are unable to operate as a result of local covid-19 restrictions. [908259]

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage)**: We are continually engaging with the entertainment sector about the ongoing challenges to venues up and down the country. Our unprecedented £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund is helping to preserve the cultural fabric of the country, from museums to music venues, from cinemas to theatres.

**Anne Marie Morris** [V]: Pavilions, a performing arts venue in Teignmouth, in my constituency, did not apply for the original round of funding from the cultural recovery fund, as at that time it was in an acceptable financial position, and that was very responsible of it. Unfortunately, a huge decline in business is now affecting it, so will the Minister consider a new round of funding for the arts and entertainment industry that Pavilions might apply for?

**Caroline Dinenage**: My hon. Friend is right to bring this issue to our attention. We understand that this remains a challenging period for many organisations in the arts and entertainments sector. Some £258 million of the cultural recovery fund has been held back with a view to offering further support based on evidenced need later in the financial year. Meanwhile, organisations can, of course, take advantage of the financial support measures that were made available by the Government and recently extended, including the various business grant and loan schemes, and the furlough scheme.

### Public Singing: Covid-19

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the criteria for allowing singing in public during the covid-19 outbreak. [908260]

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage)**: The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has engaged extensively with Public Health England to



provide clear guidance on singing. The development of the guidance enabled both professional and non-professional activity to take place in a covid-secure manner in a range of settings and contexts over recent months. However, in line with new restrictions coming into force today, amateur activity can no longer take place.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** I am glad that my hon. Friend has confirmed that at least professionals can continue to rehearse and perform. When will the rest of us be allowed to sing again without some marshal or other agent of her totalitarian state seeking to prevent us?

**Caroline Dinagen:** I am sure that, like me, Mr Speaker, you are holding your breath until the day that we can both enjoy my right hon. Friend's impressive falsetto once again, but in the meantime I am pleased to confirm that performing arts professionals may continue to rehearse, train and perform for broadcast, recording or livestream purposes. Of course, the intention after this four-week period is for an easing of restrictions back into the tiered system that previously operated throughout the country, in which case my right hon. Friend will be able to be in fine tune, to all our great delight, once more.

#### **Creative Freelancers: Income Support Scheme**

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What plans his Department has to support creative freelancers who are not eligible for the self-employment income support scheme. [908261]

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What plans his Department has to support creative freelancers who are not eligible for the self-employment income support scheme. [908262]

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What plans his Department has to support creative freelancers who are not eligible for the self-employment income support scheme. [908272]

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinagen):** Our world-beating cultural and creative industries are absolutely nothing without the people who work in them. We are working hard to help freelancers in those sectors to access support, particularly if they do not qualify for the self-employment income support scheme. Arts Council England has made available £119 million to individuals, of which £23 million has already been distributed. Around £96 million is currently still available to apply for.

**Catherine West:** Many of the staff who work in creative venues are very low paid. What provisions will the Government make if venues remain closed after the beginning of December, which is very likely?

**Caroline Dinagen:** The hon. Lady will know that the £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund will benefit freelancers because it enables the assisting of organisations to reopen and restart performances, perhaps in a digital or livestream capacity. It will help many organisations to put on cultural activity in this financial year, which they would not otherwise have been able to do. I am sure the hon. Lady will be delighted that in her own constituency

of Hornsey and Wood Green, for example, the recovery funding has enabled the sharing out of more than £571,000 between six organisations. I am sure it will be a lifeline for many of them.

**Ruth Cadbury:** I thank the Minister for her answer, but the reality is that the number of performances will be a fraction of what it would normally be. I have been contacted by constituents who are performers, make-up artists, instrumentalists and other freelancers in the creative sector who work in the west end; they have been excluded from all Government support. In west London, universal credit barely covers or fails to cover even the cost of rents, meaning that people now face going through lockdown with no additional support, adding to the queues at food banks. What will the Minister do to help them?

**Caroline Dinagen:** The hon. Lady is right to highlight the plight of freelancers, without whom, of course, our cultural institutions are simply bricks and mortar. We know that what they want to do more than anything is get back to doing what they love, which is why I am so delighted that nearly 1,400 of the successful culture recovery fund recipients announced on 12 October set out in their applications how the support would enable them to deliver more than £150 million-worth of cultural activity before the end of March 2021, which they would not otherwise have been able to do. As the hon. Lady will know, well over half a million pounds of that money is being spent in her constituency.

**Chris Elmore:** No one is disagreeing with the Minister that additional money has been put into the arts and culture sector. That amount of money is always welcome, but the Minister must understand that the reality is that there are growing numbers of freelancers, musicians and performance artists who are excluded from getting any support from Government and are not benefiting from the individual grants to cultural centres in any part of the UK. There are growing numbers of organisations calling for more support specifically for musicians, whether it is ExcludedUK, the Incorporated Society of Musicians or the Musicians' Movement. What is the Minister or, indeed, the Secretary of State doing to lobby Treasury Ministers to ask them to change their mind to ensure that these freelancers get support so that we have some sort of cultural society left after the pandemic is over?

**Caroline Dinagen:** As I have already articulated, there is £119 million of Arts Council England funding for which freelancers can bid, and I am sure that the Welsh Government are doing something similar with their share of the cultural recovery fund. It is also all about protecting opportunities for freelancers. Even in the latest restrictions that come into force today, we have ensured that there are exemptions for professional music, recording studios, film and TV production and live stream and digital performances. It is all about enabling those opportunities for people to keep doing the jobs that they love and that they are so brilliant at.

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: The hard-hit creative industries face not only the challenge of covid, but the looming threat of Brexit. The live music industry contributes more than £1 billion annually to the economy. EU nationals, are, of course, a

vital part of this picture, with 750,000 music tourists visiting the UK. Barriers to travel—inevitable after Brexit—could lead to many of them going elsewhere in Europe. Brexit is not only a problem for those attending festivals from the EU, but a threat to those who perform at or work for festivals. There is endless red tape in the form of ATA carnets and the necessity for individual work visas. The Government are yet to come up with a viable solution to any of these problems. Given that, does the Minister accept that disruption to the ability of essential EU industry professionals and European visitors to come to the UK will harm this sector and damage the economy at a time when its success could not be more important?

**Caroline Dinenage:** No, I do not accept that. My Department has been regularly engaging with a range of creative industries, including the live music and cultural sectors, to make sure that the support is put in place for businesses, freelancers, visitors and the creative and artistic economy as we move towards the transition period.

#### **Rugby League Clubs: Financial Support**

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on financial support for rugby league clubs. [908264]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden):** I know just how precious rugby league clubs are to their local communities—and, indeed, to you, Mr Speaker, as you never tire of reminding me, quite rightly—and to Hull, which is blessed with two Super League clubs and will be hosting next year's Rugby League world cup. That is why rugby league was the first to benefit from Government support with a £16 million emergency loan. That money is going out the door now, and I continue to work with the Treasury on what can be done to provide further support to the sports sector.

**Mr Speaker:** I think the message is that there might be more coming.

**Karl Turner [V]:** May I offer you, Mr Speaker, belated congratulations on having been elected Speaker one year ago yesterday? I pay tribute to you for the work that you have always done to promote rugby league at all levels.

I am very grateful to the Sports Minister for his helpful engagement with me about rugby league, but it is very unlikely that fans will be back in stadiums for some time, so can the Secretary of State offer more financial support to ensure that we do not lose clubs, such as Hull Kingston Rovers and Hull FC, both of which are incredibly important to our city?

**Oliver Dowden:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis, which is why the Sports Minister and I are working tirelessly with the Treasury. We wanted to get fans back in stadiums from 1 October. No one wanted that more than the Prime Minister, myself and the Sports Minister, but it was not possible. We know that we need to provide support to those sports that were looking to rely upon fans and we are engaging very closely with the Treasury on that.

#### **Advertising Ban: Fat, Sugar and Salt**

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effectiveness of the proposal to ban the advertisement of products high in fat, sugar and salt online and on television. [908265]

**The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):** The Government published an impact assessment alongside the 2019 consultation on HFSS advertising that considered both the health benefits and the costs. We will publish the Government's response to that consultation by the end of this year, and hold a short consultation as soon as possible on a total ban for advertising online.

**Alun Cairns:** No one would question the Government's wish to reduce childhood obesity, but influencing this is a hugely complicated task that the Government should take time over. The proposal to restrict advertising products that are high in fat, salt and sugar brings the risk of displacement. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that any ban will not come into force until all factors have been properly considered, and that any strategy regime will hold online platforms to the same restrictions as broadcasters, along with similar sanctions?

**Mr Whittingdale:** My right hon. Friend himself is an advertisement for the benefits of healthy living, and he is absolutely right to draw attention to the risk that, by imposing measures in one area, one may simply displace advertising into another. That is why the Government have been absolutely plain that restrictions on post-watershed advertising on broadcasting will come into effect at the same time as a ban on HFSS advertising online.

#### **Topical Questions**

[908209] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden):** I know that the restrictions introduced in England from today are causing huge anxiety for many sectors covered by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which continue to be some of the hardest hit by covid. Of course, these restrictions will not continue a day longer than is necessary, and we have worked closely to ensure that covid-secure venues are able to remain open where work is taking place. Unlike in March, elite sport including football, as well as theatres, and film and TV production, will all continue behind closed doors. I also know, though, that the new restrictions will badly affect jobs and businesses, which is why we have extended our multi-billion pound furlough scheme and increased support for the self-employed. In addition, over £500 million has already been allocated from the cultural recovery fund, and we are working to finalise the sports package with the Treasury.

**Mohammad Yasin:** Without the safety net of league-wide sponsorship and TV broadcast deals to fall back on, second-tier rugby clubs will not make it through the pandemic without financial assistance. Will the Secretary of State commit to a £1 million support package to ensure that Bedford Blues—a cherished and viable small and medium-sized enterprise with an attached charity at the heart of our community—survive the season?

**Oliver Dowden:** I know the challenges that all sports are facing. That is why we have prioritised sports behind closed doors, which will continue through the lockdown. In addition, we are working with the Treasury on what further support may be necessary.

[908212] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Wicksteed Park is a much-loved leisure and heritage park in Kettering that has been badly hit by the pandemic. Will the Secretary of State do all he can to help Wicksteed Park weather the storm, with a view to a full reopening in its centenary year, next year?

**Oliver Dowden:** I share my hon. Friend's desire for that to happen, and I know what a champion of Wicksteed Park he is. As he will know, the park received almost £250,000 from the heritage emergency fund in June and almost £250,000 from the culture recovery fund in October; that was on top of other awards totalling £2.7 million over the past couple of years.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State have a plan for live music and other live performances reopening fully—stage 5 of the route map after 2 December? Will he give an indicative date to allow businesses to plan ahead and take the decisions they need to in order to allow our world-class creative professionals to get back to what they do best?

**Oliver Dowden:** The hon. Lady raises a very important point. There are three main elements to it. First, I very much hope that socially distanced performances will be able to return once we are through this lockdown period. Secondly, we are providing support throughout the covid crisis through the culture recovery fund, and hundreds of millions of pounds have gone to that sector. Thirdly, I very much want to give that date for return. At the moment, I hope that the hon. Lady will appreciate that it is very difficult to give an accurate date, given the wider context. I want to be able to do that as soon as we can.

**Jo Stevens:** The Government knew on 21 September—nearly seven weeks ago—that a national lockdown was necessary to slow the spread of the virus, so why did the Secretary of State encourage cinemas, theatres, venues and other organisations to spend large sums of money on preparing, resourcing and marketing loss-making, reduced-capacity productions, knowing that almost all of them would have to close for an extended period of time?

**Oliver Dowden:** As the hon. Lady will know, we sought to have a regionally based approach, and that was working. Ultimately, though, we could not sustain it, so we had to have this period of lockdown. I am hopeful and confident that once that lockdown ends, those productions will be able to continue. I note that we have ensured that rehearsals for them can continue behind closed doors during this lockdown period, which was not the case previously.

[908214] **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): Mobile and broadband coverage are going to be important during this winter lockdown, especially for those working at home. What steps has the Department taken to improve mobile coverage in rural areas where it is poor, such as Rowlands Castle, Hambledon and Cheriton in my constituency?

**Oliver Dowden:** I know that all those areas in my hon. Friend's constituency struggle with coverage. That is why we agreed a £1 billion shared rural network deal with operators that will see them collectively increase mobile coverage throughout the United Kingdom to 95% by 2025. I am confident that her constituency will be a beneficiary of that.

[908217] **Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): [R] The impact of the pandemic on museums across the country will not be wholly understood until funding decisions and budgets are set for the next financial year, whether a museum is funded by a local authority, by a university or directly by central Government. What steps will be taken to ensure link-up and cross-departmental working between Government Departments that directly or indirectly fund museums to ensure that no museum at risk misses out or falls through the cracks? We have one of the Ministers coming to address the newly formed all-party parliamentary group on museums next week, but may I extend an invitation to the Secretary of State also to come to the all-party group shortly?

**Oliver Dowden:** I would be delighted to attend my right hon. Friend's all-party group. Heritage is often an overlooked part of our cultural sector. That is why I am delighted that we have been able to support over 150 museums up and down the country as part of the culture recovery fund. That includes, in his own area, Bristol's iconic SS Great Britain getting £900,000, and more than £500,000 for the aerospace museum in Filton.

[908223] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Freelancers in my constituency and across the UK are the backbone of the culture and arts industries, but many have suffered badly through their exclusion from the furlough and self-employed support schemes. Has the Secretary of State persuaded the Chancellor to include them in these, or parallel, schemes while restrictions continue in the months ahead?

**Oliver Dowden:** I understand the many challenges faced by freelancers and I hear about this every day in my capacity as Culture Secretary. Across the economy, 66% of freelancers can benefit from the Treasury scheme, which has been increased again by the Chancellor. In addition, as the hon. Gentleman knows, as a result of Barnett consequential and the culture recovery fund, there are opportunities for almost £100 million to be spent on this by the Scottish Government.

[908218] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con) [V]: Over the past few days, I have had many requests from constituents in Aylesbury to keep gyms, swimming pools and golf courses open to enable people to maintain both their physical and their mental health under the new coronavirus restrictions. What can my right hon. Friend do to convince the Cabinet Office to consider this?

**Oliver Dowden:** As my hon. Friend will know, it is a cause of great regret to me, and indeed to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, that these restrictions had to be imposed. Put simply, they are necessary to help to control the virus, which thrives on social interaction. However, I can assure him



that I am working closely with other Ministers across Government to ensure that those places will be at the front of the queue to return when the restrictions expire.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Brexit and covid are proving to be a devastating double whammy for the creative sector, including iconic events like the Edinburgh Festival and Celtic Connections, and the artists in my constituency who perform in them. They are crying out for certainty and support. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with organisations like the Musicians Union about their proposals for a creative passport for post-Brexit travel that would help to provide some of that certainty?

**Oliver Dowden:** As we leave the European Union and leave the transition period, we are looking at what we can do with replacement funds from EU funding to ensure they benefit the whole of the United Kingdom, and those discussions are going on with the Treasury. In addition, we are having the festival of the United Kingdom in 2022. That is £120 million, more than £10 million of which will go to Scotland.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): I recently met Luton's Unite retired members, who expressed their deep concern over the Government's removal of the TV licence concession for the over-75s. The covid pandemic has shown how important TV can be for the elderly, not just as a source of news and entertainment, but also companionship, especially for the 40% of over-75s who live alone. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with the Department of Health and Social Care regarding the impact of the removal of the TV licence on the mental health of the over-75s?

**Oliver Dowden:** As the Minister for Media and Data, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), and I have made repeatedly clear from the Dispatch Box, we did not want the BBC to do this. I welcome the fact that at least the most vulnerable are covered and will continue to get support.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** We cannot have a point of order in the middle of questions.

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

*The Attorney General was asked—*

### Legal Profession: Government Criticism

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on the video published by the Home Office that referred to activist lawyers. [908169]

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on recent public criticism of the legal profession by the Government. [908171]

**The Attorney General (Suella Braverman):** I speak regularly with Cabinet colleagues, including the Home Secretary, and I am in no doubt whatever that this

Government are rightly proud of the UK's legal tradition and our legal profession. We benefit enormously from the contribution of our excellent and hard-working lawyers, and I will always champion our profession and lawyers of all stripes, whichever side they represent, but sadly from time to time there are those who take advantage of their position and abuse the court process. In those instances, to pretend that lawyers are somehow beyond criticism is not only naive, but does the public a great disservice.

**Matt Western:** I listened to that answer, but does the Attorney General agree that she has to speak out and say that she does not condone these attacks? Will she explain what steps she has taken to address the matter with Cabinet members? Can she give me and the House assurances that these attacks, which are corrosive and are undermining the legal profession, will cease immediately?

**The Attorney General:** I am proud of the profession, and in my role as head of the Bar, I will not hesitate to champion the interests of our lawyers. Indeed, given that it is Pro Bono Week, I take this opportunity to thank the thousands of lawyers out there who regularly give their time and their services free of charge on a pro bono basis, helping some of the most vulnerable in our society. I was pleased earlier this year to acknowledge the winners of the LawWorks and Attorney General's student pro bono awards, and I know that the Solicitor General himself has recently met with members of the community. That is a real mark of a compassionate profession.

**Andy Slaughter:** At the Conservative party conference, the Prime Minister said he would prevent the whole criminal justice system from being hamstrung by what the Home Secretary would doubtlessly like to call lefty human rights lawyers and other do-gooders. On 9 October, the chair of the Bar wrote a letter to the Prime Minister, copied to the Attorney General, asking the Prime Minister to withdraw those comments. Will she at least see that the chair of the Bar gets a reply to that letter sent a month ago? Those comments are leading to attacks—not just verbal, but often physical—on lawyers.

**The Attorney General:** Lawyers play a vital role in our justice system and in upholding our democratic society. However, I find the words of the Lord Chief Justice very useful. He recently took the opportunity in the Court of Appeal to make the general point that

“it is a matter of regret that a minority of lawyers have lent their professional weight and support to vexatious representations and abusive late legal challenges.”

I find his words prescient and very relevant to this debate. As a friend and ally of the profession, I know the vast majority of our profession uphold the highest standards, but we cannot deny that there is a minority who do not.

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the tone of the Attorney General's remarks. Does she recognise that it lies in the hands of parliamentarians and legislators to correct faults in the system that are abused? At the same time, will she confirm that the Government are firmly committed to the robustness and public value of an independent legal profession and judiciary and to enhancing that by ramping up the work that we do in public legal education, so that

people are generally more aware and better informed of the valuable work that the profession and the judiciary do for us all?

**The Attorney General:** My hon. Friend and I are in total agreement on this. I know that during his years of practice at the Bar, he will have been part of a profession that upheld the highest standards. Generally, the profession is very well policed. We have a robust code of conduct. We have regulatory authorities that call out and discipline those lawyers who fall short of the standards. He is absolutely right that we need an independent and robust profession as part of a fair society, and his role has been critical, not only in public legal education but as a champion for justice as Chairman of the Justice Committee. As he was Master of the Bench of Middle Temple at my own Inn, I can definitely vouch for his overall fabulousness.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Lawyers, like all of us, have the right to work without fear or intimidation. Early in the pandemic, lawyers were rightly identified by this Government as key workers, yet the language used by the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister was not only wrong but reckless and does a huge disservice to an entire profession. I am certainly proud of the legal profession. The Attorney General says that she is too, so will she today condemn the references to criminal defence lawyers and immigration lawyers as “activists” and “do-gooders”?

**The Attorney General:** Yes, I know that the hon. Lady had an esteemed career as a lawyer, and we share a common interest in upholding the position of lawyers in our society. Any violence—I must make this clear—is utterly deplorable against any lawyer or anyone going about their work. But we have to be clear that, more broadly, there are lawyers who have gone on the record to make it clear that they are pursuing politics through the courts. There are judges who have felt compelled in their decisions to remind counsel that judicial review is not and should not be regarded as politics by another means. Everyone in the profession needs to heed those observations in making their professional decisions.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I think many in the legal profession will be horrified by the approach that the Attorney General is taking today. She must, like the Lord Chancellor, accept that the comments from the Home Office and the Prime Minister went way beyond legitimate criticism, devaluing the values of lawyers and questioning their motivation. Will she join the criticism of the remarks that were made? Will she also investigate whether sources in the Government and Whitehall have been responsible for identifying individual law firms and lawyers when anonymously briefing newspapers about activities that the Home Secretary and No. 10 are angered by?

**The Attorney General:** The hon. Gentleman refers to law firms and, by implication, the incident, which was very serious and, as I say, deplorable. It is not something to trivialise or politicise, and we should be careful not to draw conclusions about any incident that is under investigation. I know that he specialised in immigration law. I defended the Home Office for many years in the same field of law. We know that the vast majority of lawyers who specialise in immigration law are upholding

the highest standards, are devoted to their clients and are working to secure justice. But we only have to look at the records of the Bar Standards Board or the Solicitors Regulation Authority to see that there are those who fall short of those high standards, and it is right that action should be taken to stop that sub-optimal delivery of service.

#### Serious Fraud Office: Proceeds of Crime

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Serious Fraud Office in recovering the proceeds of crime. [908170]

**The Attorney General (Suella Braverman):** In 2019-20, the Serious Fraud Office secured more than £13 million in new financial orders against criminals it investigated, with payments received against previous orders totalling more than £7 million. That strong performance has continued this year. In July, the SFO secured confiscation orders totalling £5.45 million against former Afren employees, and in September, the SFO used for the first time a listed asset recovery order to recover £500,000-worth of jewellery in a long-running mortgage fraud case.

**Andrew Jones:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that answer, and it is very encouraging to see the efforts being taken to make sure that crime does not pay. What has been the impact of covid-19 on the SFO's capacity to recover crime proceeds?

**The Attorney General:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. While covid-19 has obviously had an impact on the court system and caused some delays in obtaining and enforcing court orders, the SFO has continued to progress its proceeds of crime work, successfully obtaining confiscation orders and using new asset recovery powers to recover money in a long-running fraud case. Its ability to maintain operational effectiveness in the face of the challenges posed by covid-19 was recognised in the report by the inspectorate on the SFO's response to the pandemic.

#### Rape and Sexual Assault: Prosecutions and Conviction Rates

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps she has taken to increase the number of prosecutions relating to rape and sexual assault. [908172]

**Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve conviction rates in rape cases. [908182]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis):** We and the Crown Prosecution Service are working tirelessly with criminal justice partners to improve the handling of these sensitive cases. Over the last four quarters, we have seen the charging and conviction rates in rape cases continue to increase. This year, the CPS published its own rape strategy, updated rape legal guidance and training, is actively engaging in the Government rape review and will shortly be publishing a joint action plan on rape with the police.

**Cat Smith:** The Solicitor General will know that rape prosecutions in England and Wales are now at the lowest ever levels. I suspect he shares the lack of surprise I felt when I learned that just one in seven rape survivors

will ever see the justice system deliver justice for them. Can he confirm when the end-to-end rape review will be published by his Government?

**The Solicitor General:** I am very grateful for the hon. Member's question because it highlights what we know and accept around the House is an important issue. Driving up rape prosecutions continues to be a major focus for the Attorney General's Office and the Crown Prosecution Service, as work progresses to reverse this negative trend. We have actually seen the proportion of suspects charged with rape slowly increasing and we have also seen a continued increase in the volume of suspects charged, but I accept the thrust of her point, which is that there is more work to do. More work is being done, and as soon as these reports are ready, they will be published.

**Laura Farris [V]:** I welcome the recent announcements from the CPS and the guidance it has published to improve rape prosecution rates, particularly in relation to modern dating apps and selfies. However, the rape review published by the Victims' Commissioner revealed that a large number of women are still reluctant to report rape in the first instance, because of an enduring concern that they will not be believed by the police when they do so. Can my right hon. and learned Friend confirm what steps he is taking to ensure that the support and the structures exist so that women who come forward can have confidence that there is a reasonable prospect of securing a conviction?

**The Solicitor General:** The Crown Prosecution Service and the Government are determined to restore faith and build more faith in the criminal justice system, and to give victims of rape—this horrific offence—the confidence that everything will be done to bring offenders to justice. That is why the Government are reviewing the end-to-end response to this awful crime, in consultation with survivors groups as well as the Victims' Commissioner, while recruiting more police and putting more money into the Crown Prosecution Service. This is a priority: it is a priority for me and for the Attorney General, for the Crown Prosecution Service and for this Government. I thank my hon. Friend for her support in this matter.

**Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab):** I have listened to what the Solicitor General has had to say, but the reality is that rape prosecutions are at their lowest level on record, and according to the Victims' Commissioner, only one in seven rape victims has faith in the justice system. Last week, we discovered that an under-resourced CPS is not even getting the basics right, with almost half of letters to victims lacking empathy. It is clear that this Government are letting down victims of rape on every front. I have heard about the consultations and the reviews, but what urgent action are the Government taking to reverse this trend and ensure that victims have faith in the criminal justice system when they need it most?

**The Solicitor General:** It is very important that victims have faith, and we ask everyone involved in the criminal justice system to support that system in giving victims faith. Dealing with this awful crime is a high priority for the Crown Prosecution Service, and for the Government, and driving up rape prosecutions continues to be a major focus. The overall trend over the past quarter shows

that the volume and the proportion of suspects charged are slowly increasing, but I accept that there is more work to do in this complex and multifaceted area. We are working with a number of bodies, including the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, to facilitate improvements, so that people can, as they should, have the fullest confidence in our criminal justice system.

**Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** It has been a year and a half since the publication of the Gillen review into serious sexual offences and how they are prosecuted through the courts in Northern Ireland, and the Solicitor General's office has taken a considerable interest in that, until the re-establishment of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. It will now be another year before legislative changes are tabled in the Northern Ireland Assembly to deal with that review, which quite frankly is not acceptable. What can be done in this place to expedite those necessary changes and ensure that victims get fairness and equal British justice across all the United Kingdom?

**The Solicitor General:** As usual, the hon. Gentleman stands up for the people of Northern Ireland, and he is right to focus on that issue. I will make inquiries with the Northern Ireland Office and see how that matter is progressing, but he will acknowledge that there are no doubt legislative pressures, and that these things do take time. I assure him, however, that every effort will be made to liaise, and where possible to assist, in the furtherance of this matter.

#### Hate Crime Sentences

**Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in securing sentence uplifts in hate crime cases. [908173]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis):** I recognise the devastating impact that hate crimes have on victims and communities, and the CPS is committed to bringing offenders to justice. Training for prosecutors draws on input from key community groups, helping to improve the prosecution response to hate crime. In the 12 months to the end of June this year, the proportion of convictions for hate crime with a recorded sentence uplift increased to 78.4%, which is the highest rate yet.

**Nicola Richards:** I heard directly from victims of hate crime in the west midlands during a virtual session hosted by our candidate for police and crime commissioner, Jay Singh-Sohal. It is obvious that we need to do more to support victims of that appalling type of crime, through all stages of the judicial process. Will my right hon. and learned Friend commit to working with the CPS, and police across the country, to ensure that hate crime victims feel able to come forward and report incidents in the first place?

**The Solicitor General:** I thank my hon. Friend for her work with the Holocaust Educational Trust and on tackling antisemitism. I visited CPS East of England yesterday, and heard about its great work on tackling hate crime. The CPS works closely around the country with members of the community, to ensure that the approach to hate crime prosecutions is sensitive and provides sufficient support to victims. For example, the CPS recently met key groups that represent the Jewish community, including the Community Security Trust,



to discuss work on antisemitism. It also recently delivered a webinar on its approach to hate crime to an audience invited by the Chinese Welfare Trust and the Covid-19 anti-racism group, both of which support the Chinese and south-east Asian communities.

**International Law: Government Compliance**

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of her Department in ensuring Government legislation complies with international law. [908174]

**The Attorney General (Suella Braverman):** I work frequently with Departments on legislation, including on issues that relate to compliance with international law. The UK is committed to the rules-based international system. We were the architects of the post-war international legal order, including the UN Charter, NATO, and the European convention on human rights—a history of which I am very proud. The principle of discharging our treaty obligations in good faith is, and will remain, the key principle in forming the UK's approach to international relations.

**Geraint Davies [V]:** The United Kingdom Internal Market Bill breaks international law by reneging on the EU withdrawal agreement. The Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill contravenes the right to life and the prohibition of torture under international

conventions. The Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill means the UK will be unable to prosecute war crimes after five years, so we will end up at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The Attorney General's job is to ensure that we deliver the rule of law nationally and internationally. She has failed in her duty. Will she now resign?

**The Attorney General:** The hon. Gentleman raises some interesting points, but it seems that he has missed the fundamental principle underlying our constitution and the UK's relationship with international law. It is not right to say that our constitution requires a blind and automatic adherence to international law. Domestic law is on a different plane from international law. It is entirely proper and constitutional, and in line with the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, that the Queen in Parliament may legislate in a manner inconsistent with international law. That is an age-old principle underpinning our constitution.

**Mr Speaker:** That is the end of questions. 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.*



## Coronavirus Regulations: Assisted Deaths Abroad

10.34 am

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the impact of new coronavirus regulations on the ability of terminally ill adults to travel abroad for an assisted death.

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock)**: Issues of life and death are some of the most difficult subjects that come before us in this House, and the question of how we best support people in their choices at the end of their life is a complex moral issue that, when considered, weighs heavily upon us all. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) has asked an important question and I want to set out the precise position. Under the current law, based on the Suicide Act 1961, it is an offence to encourage or assist the death of another person. However, it is legal to travel abroad for the purpose of assisted dying where it is allowed in that jurisdiction. The new coronavirus regulations, which come into force today, place restrictions on leaving the home without a reasonable excuse; travelling abroad for the purpose of assisted dying is a reasonable excuse, so anyone doing so would not be breaking the law. These coronavirus regulations do not change the existing legal position on assisted dying.

As this is a matter of conscience, the Government do not take a position. It is instead a matter for each and every Member of Parliament to speak on and vote according to their sincerely held beliefs, and it is for the will of the House to decide whether the law should change. The global devastation of the coronavirus pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of high-quality palliative care, just as it has shone a spotlight on so many issues and, difficult as it may be, I welcome this opportunity to have this conversation about assisted dying, as it is one of the most sensitive elements of end-of-life care.

I have the greatest sympathy for anyone who has suffered pain in dying or suffered the pain of watching a loved one battle a terminal degenerative condition, and I have a deep respect for friends and colleagues in all parts of the House who share and hold strong views. I am pleased that the House has been given this opportunity to discuss the impact of the pandemic on one of the most difficult ethical questions that we face.

**Mr Mitchell**: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question, and I thank my right hon. Friend for responding himself.

This is an issue of conscience for us as Members of the House. I respect those who take a different view from me, not least because theirs was previously my view. Colleagues may have seen, over the weekend, the news reports about a woman who this week travelled to Switzerland to end her life in order to avoid travel restrictions. As a frontline NHS worker with terminal breast cancer, she did not want to run the risk of dying in great pain and without dignity. The new regulations that have come into force today could deter anyone else from travelling to Switzerland for an assisted death.

That will undoubtedly cause many more Britons to suffer as they die, due to a lack of a safeguarded law here in the UK, although I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for clarifying the precise legal circumstances.

In the light of the radical shift of the views of the medical profession two weeks ago, the recent legislative change in New Zealand this week and groundbreaking progress in southern Ireland, along with the continuing and massive support for law reform from the British public, will the Government, from their position of neutrality, enable all of us to understand three things—first, the extent of suffering that the blanket ban on assisted dying is causing dying people and their families; secondly, the challenges that the current law is creating for healthcare professionals, police officers and other public servants; and thirdly, what the UK can learn from international evidence on the operation of assisted dying laws, and their safeguards, in the United States, Australia and Canada?

I am supporting a very tight reform that would allow someone who is terminally ill, within six months of the end of their life, and who has themselves decided that this is the end of life they want, independently certified by two doctors and confirmed as their independent decision by a High Court judge, to end their life, as is their choice.

**Matt Hancock**: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the way in which he puts his case. Of course, we acknowledge the changing views of many, including many in the medical profession, and, of course, we observe the changes in the international debate. I think it is absolutely reasonable for this House to have a conversation and discussion on what is an important topic, and it is right that we locate that question within a broader discussion of how we care for people at the end of their lives, which, because of the coronavirus pandemic, has sadly become a central issue of public debate in this country.

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for the way in which he has put his questions, and the Secretary of State for the sensitive way in which he has responded and for the clarification he has offered to the House. I suspect there will come a point at which the Parliament will have to confront the it. I note that the Secretary of State has said that issue should be located within a broader discussion about end-of-life care, a perfectly reasonable position which I endorse, but can he reassure me that, as part of the broader discussion, there will always be thorough and transparent consultation with the public and with faith groups, and that physicians and healthcare professionals will always be fully involved?

Members across the House will have sincerely held views, and whatever one's views on the principle, the House should be aware that before the pandemic a person from Britain travelled abroad to Dignitas every eight days and that charities have warned that since the March lockdown some terminally ill people are ending their lives in the most traumatic circumstances because of a lack of clarity about the law—the Secretary of State has given clarity today, but until that point there was a lack of it. We know that a second lockdown will take a heavy toll on people's mental health, especially over the winter, so can he tell us what mental health

[Jonathan Ashworth]

support will be made available to people facing this most awful of choices and what mental health support is available to people more broadly?

People deserve dignity in dying and palliative care needs to be improved at the best of times, but lockdown means that palliative care is particularly under pressure. Can the Secretary of State assure us that hospices will have full support throughout the lockdown, that hospice staff will have regular access to regular testing and that we have a supply of enough of the vital drugs which palliative care relies on for the lockdown period?

This is an immensely sensitive topic. I repeat that I appreciate the way in which the Secretary of State has dealt with it this morning, but many people will be deeply concerned. We look forward to working with the Government on this important issue.

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Gentleman is quite right that this is not an issue in which there is any party politics, and there is rightly no Government position. On the specific question of assisted dying, I am glad to have been given the opportunity to clarify the impact of the coronavirus regulations on that law, but he also asked the wider question about palliative care. It is important that we support palliative care, and that we locate this question in a wider question about how people can have choice. After all, patient choice has been a growing feature within healthcare—in my view, rightly so—over the last generation. This is one area where that choice is constrained in law.

It is important that we invest in high-quality palliative care. We have put further funding into palliative care and hospices because of the pressures caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Making sure that we have high-quality palliative care services and a hospice service that we can all support fully is obviously very close to my heart.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about mental health support. There has been increased investment in that to ensure that people get the support they need in what are inevitably difficult times.

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): At this time, when the whole country is making huge sacrifices to protect life, at a time of exceptionally high levels of physical and mental stress, and when many people may feel very vulnerable, does the Minister understand and accept the views of many, including in this House, that it would be completely inappropriate—indeed, insensitive—of Parliament to go anywhere near considering making access to any form of suicide easier?

**Matt Hancock:** I respect my hon. Friend's views, which are deeply and sincerely held, and I respect the fact that the House will debate all views. It is right that that debate is taken forward and led by Parliament, rather than by Government, as my hon. Friend has just demonstrated.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): I congratulate my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on choice at the end of life, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), on securing this urgent question, and I thank you for granting it, Mr Speaker. I have sought to change the law since entering the House. In

the last five years, I have learned that many colleagues are worried about safeguards. There is an assumption that the law is currently safe, but it is not. In June, here in London, a man threw himself in front of a heavy goods vehicle on the North Circular. He was suffering from throat cancer and knew his tumour would continue to strangle him. He could not bear it. He took his own life because this country denied him the option of choosing the timing and manner of his death. I appreciate that this is a sensitive and difficult issue, but is it not time we recognised that the law is not compassionate or safe, and leaves behind bereaved families and members of the public because of the absence of a safeguarded choice at the end of life?

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady draws a distinction between the issue of those who have a terminal illness and the broader issue of suicide, which is an important part of this debate. I respect her sincerely held views. The exchange between my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Lady exemplifies why it is right that Parliament debates and decides on these matters.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Is my right hon. Friend aware that a British Medical Association survey of its members on assisted suicide and euthanasia found that 83% of those involved in providing palliative care—those who have the most experience of dealing with people at the end of their lives—would oppose any legalisation of euthanasia, and that 84% declared that they would be unwilling to participate in any such activity? Surely we should be guided, in many ways, by the professionals in this regard.

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend makes another important contribution to this debate. There is inevitably a discussion within the medical profession about this important question. That should be taken into account, alongside the views, as the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) said, of faith leaders, the public and those who face terminal disease, as Parliament debates this subject.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Terminally ill people are travelling prematurely and alone to end their lives abroad for a number of reasons, including covid. Another is that they wish to save relatives from the risk of prosecution. Will the Secretary of State liaise with his Home Office colleagues and the police, who themselves find these cases difficult, to ensure that any response is sensitive and proportionate?

**Matt Hancock:** That incredibly important and sensitive matter needs to be considered as part of the overall approach. These questions should all be brought out in a debate on this subject. That is Parliament's role, given that this is an area of conscience on which the Government do not take a view.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): It is very sad that anyone has to go abroad to end their life when they have a terminal illness—I find that dreadfully sad. I ask my right hon. Friend, because I am unsure of this: how many people on average go abroad to end their lives every year?

**Matt Hancock:** The Government do not collect data on the number of people who travel abroad for an assisted death. We would consider collecting data on assisted dying if it was felt that that would improve and contribute to a sensitive debate in Parliament on this subject.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: We have seen that there is widespread support in this House, and the research tells us that there is widespread support in the country, for a review of the law, so will the Government look at what has happened in other countries such as New Zealand and promise that there will be a review, with a view to decriminalising the situation and bringing some compassion into the law?

**Matt Hancock:** As I said, the Government are neutral on this matter. It is a question for Parliament. There are many ways in which such a review could be brought forward, but the Government's position of neutrality is important, because this is a matter of conscience on which there are deeply held and very sincere views on all sides. I think it should rest that this is a matter for Parliament, rather than Government.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): In the past two years, we have seen a significant shift in the views of the medical profession, with the Royal College of Physicians neutral on assisted dying and the British Medical Association poised to drop its opposition. Does the Secretary of State recognise that where there was widespread opposition to changing the law, there is now support for a full review of how the prohibition of assisted dying affects healthcare professionals and patients?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. I think it is clear that there are changing views on this subject and that there is a very strong view that any change should be dealt with carefully and sensitively. In fact, the tone of this debate and discussion today reflects the seriousness and sensitivity of this topic and the need to make sure that all the issues are very carefully considered.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who are terminally ill deserve the very best palliative care available, and that rather than facilitating overseas travel for those terminally ill patients, the Government should ensure that they receive world-class palliative care here in the UK?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, I think this is a really important point, because high-quality palliative care and the question directly of assisted dying that is before the House today are not separate questions. They are intimately tied together and whatever view the House takes on assisted dying—and it is for the House—it is the Government's intention to support and strengthen palliative care to make sure that we give the very best support for people towards the end of their life.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's clarification today to support people's choice and their dignity in dying. He has spoken about palliative care at length, and I understand that there is further funding for hospices, but charities, such as cancer charities that support people with those choices, have had to make drastic cuts to their staffing and funding as a

result of covid. What conversations has the Secretary of State been having with the Treasury, and what commitment will they make in the November spending review?

**Matt Hancock:** Obviously the hospice sector, which often relies on charity shops to fund its services, has had a very difficult year. We therefore have put funding support in and we always keep that under review. I applaud the fact that our hospices are funded both by taxpayers and through a huge amount of philanthropy. It leads to a stronger sector that is rooted in the communities that it serves. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that that has led to some significant challenges this year. We have put more funding in and will, of course, always keep that open to review.

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): It is very difficult to tell somebody who is in pain and suffering and who wants to die that the state is going to prevent them from doing that. As a Roman Catholic, I recently changed my mind on the issue because of my constituent Mr Noel Conway, who lives in Garmston near Shrewsbury. I said to him, "Why don't you go to Switzerland?" and his answer will stay with me forever: "No, I'm an Englishman. I want to die in England." It is extremely important that our citizens have that right. Will the Secretary of State do me the courtesy of agreeing to a short Zoom call with my constituent Mr Noel Conway, who is getting a national reputation as a leading campaigner on the issue?

**Matt Hancock:** I would be happy to have that meeting with Mr Conway. I have spoken to others in the same circumstances who have made the case strongly. The compassion of the case cannot be overstated. I also respect the fact that many hon. Members, as has been reflected today, have deeply held views. We should make sure that the conversation happens; that there is, rightly, a debate about the topic, as there is in many other countries right now; and that it is conducted in an evidence-based, sensible and compassionate way.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Clearly, we are debating the most sensitive of issues, and we need more investment in the research and practice of palliative care. I ask the Health Secretary what additional resources will come forward, because at the end of October the grant funding for covid-19 and hospices came to an end. Of course, we are entering a further period of lockdown in which charity shops will be shut and fundraising opportunities will come to an end. Hospices need resourcing now, so what additional support will he bring forward?

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that issue. We provided more than £150 million of extra funding to hospices during the first peak. Locally, many clinical commissioning groups fund their local hospice and contribute to that support, but we always keep it under review, because hospices are such an important part of the provision of end-of-life care.

**Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): I am concerned that in this discussion there is a danger of focusing too narrowly on the specific option of assisted suicide. Modern medicine can palliate the pain of dying in almost all cases, but it can also extend life, in many cases artificially, beyond what most people would consider its natural span. Before we enter into a parliamentary



[Danny Kruger]

review, Government review or Select Committee review of the precise options around assisted suicide, should we not have a much broader conversation about how we manage death and dying in this country?

**Matt Hancock:** I agree with my hon. Friend that the question should be located within that broader debate. I understand the yearning from people not to shorten life, but to shorten a painful death. Of course, no specific proposal has been put forward; that would be for Parliament to develop rather than the Government.

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that at the heart of the issue is properly established personal autonomy over the time and manner of someone's death when they are terminally ill? The safeguards around that have been operating for more than two decades in other parts of the world, as I saw on a visit to Oregon 20 years ago. He is right that this must be led by Parliament, but the evidence is developing all the time and the Government will have to make time for the debates and opportunities to assess that evidence. Parliamentarians should proceed on the basis of the evidence available to them, because if they choose to impose faith-based views on others, it can result in the most terrible cruelty.

**Matt Hancock:** We would consider collecting more data on these questions, because it is important that any debate is based on the evidence, but it is also important that the debate takes into account all views that are sincerely held and very reasonable.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Is the Secretary of State aware that research indicates that individuals go through a number of psychological stages—such as shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and then acceptance—after they have been given a diagnosis of terminal illness? We are failing so many people right across the United Kingdom by not giving them access to adequate psychological support to enable them to reach that stage of acceptance, in themselves and for their families, and then not providing the therapeutic support that they need alongside the palliative care already mentioned by colleagues.

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady makes an important contribution to the debate in respect of how we should consider these issues.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I respect the views, which are all earnestly held, on either side of this issue. As my right hon. Friend has said, this is a matter of conscience. I am happy to put on the record that I am with the 80% of British people who think that to bring forward assisted dying with the proper checks and balances is the right thing to do. What are my right hon. Friend's personal views on this issue, as the Member for West Suffolk?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I will be quite honest: I do not want to enter into personal arguments. I am not giving my view, and I do not think it is right to put the Secretary of State on the spot in that way.

**Mr Mitchell:** Unless he wants to.

**Mr Speaker:** No, I think I will make the decision, Mr Mitchell. You have had a good day. The Secretary of State is not here to be responsible for his personal view; he is responsible as the Secretary of State answering questions. Please, let us not try to take advantage of the Chair.

Right, let us go up to Manchester with Sir Andrew Gwynne—sorry, just Andrew Gwynne.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: Thank you for the promotion, Mr Speaker.

I have always been internally torn on this issue. Setting aside my own personal beliefs and the fact that my constituency is still dealing with the very real legacy of Harold Shipman, I will always be haunted by my mum's painful end of life in hospital, where final decisions were in effect given to me, aged 19, and to my dad, aged 48. The reconciliation of all these things is incredibly difficult, but what I do know is that the current system is too often pretty inhumane. I agree with the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) that we need a review to consider how we deliver better end-of-life care and support in England. Is that a way forward?

**Matt Hancock:** I do think it important that we consider the question of end-of-life care, and support for palliative care is important. The coronavirus epidemic has shone a light on palliative and end-of-life care in the wider public debate, and that is right and good. That is a matter for the Government, but the specific question of assisted dying is, of course, a question for this House, and we need, together, to find a way to ensure that we all serve our constituents as best we can, taking into account the best possible evidence and all the sincerely held views on this sensitive subject.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Thank you for allowing me in, Mr Speaker.

On the piano in my home in Lincolnshire, I have a lovely photograph of Pope Francis embracing a very old and very sick woman. At the bottom it says, "Cherish life, but accept death." I was struck by what the Secretary of State said earlier—that we do not need to extend death or suffering; we can help people through this extraordinarily difficult time. I think we do need a review. Many people are helped into death. I remember my best friend, Piers Merchant, a former colleague here. I was at his side, and as he died, morphine was being pumped into him. No doubt he was killed by the morphine, but that was a humane and right thing to do. We need to have a review on the basis of cherishing life but accepting death, and not necessarily pounding very old and sick people with more and more operations and pain.

**Matt Hancock:** As a highly respected and very significant voice among Catholics in this country, my right hon. Friend speaks powerfully, from both a position of his faith and a compassionate position of respect for what the current rules mean in practice. The whole House, and indeed the country, will have heard his contribution and it leaves us all to ponder this question.

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

11.5 am

*Sitting suspended.*



## Business of the House

11.8 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 the week commencing 9 November will include:

MONDAY 9 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Financial Services Bill.

TUESDAY 10 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Forensic Science Regulator and Biometrics Strategy Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Ship Recycling (Facilities and Requirements for Hazardous Materials on Ships) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, followed by a motion to approve the draft Food and Feed Hygiene and Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, followed by a motion relating to the appointment of a lay member to the Committee on Standards.

WEDNESDAY 11 NOVEMBER—A general debate on remembrance, UK armed forces and society, followed by a general debate on covid-19.

THURSDAY 12 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on refugee communities, followed by a debate on a motion on achieving the ambition for a smoke-free England by 2030, in the light of the covid-19 pandemic and public health reorganisation. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 13 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 16 November will include:

MONDAY 16 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Pension Schemes Bill [*Lords*].

**Valerie Vaz**: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. I should like to start by thanking Parliament's Education and Engagement team for all the excellent work they have done to support UK Parliament Week. They have enabled all our constituents to understand what it is to participate in a democracy so that we know that every vote counts and that they will all be counted equally.

Will the Leader of the House please tell us when this parliamentary Session is going to end? They usually last about 12 months, and it would be useful to know because we would quite like another Opposition day and, as he knows, we get them pro rata. The private Members' Bills have now been moved to next year. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has asked whether the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill could be looked at by the Government so that it can be taken forward earlier, rather than waiting until next year.

I am pleased that the Leader of the House has realised that voting in the way we vote at the moment is unsafe and that he has extended proxy voting, but I want to remind him that the Procedure Committee said in its fourth report that

“the system of remote voting used in May was a more effective means of handling divisions in the House under conditions where the division lobbies could not be used in the traditional way”.

I do not know whether he has seen the record, but even those hon. Members who are on the estate have a small “p” next to their name to indicate that they have cast their vote by proxy. This will give the impression that some hon. Members are not here when in fact they are, so we need to look at that.

I wonder whether the Leader of the House could explain how he thinks democracy works, when some hon. Members can take part only in urgent questions and statements, and Members who are being careful and responsible but cannot be here cannot take part in debates. Debates are the very stuff of what we do, ergo this is not a democratic process. I know that he will be aware that “Parliament” comes from the old French word “parlement”, which means “a place to speak”.

I do not know what it is about this Government, but they are obsessed with tiers, and we now have two tiers of hon. Members—we could say two classes of hon. Members—which is not right and not fair. I want to remind the Leader of the House what he said on Monday:

“We have to ensure that these new coronavirus regulations...are properly debated and that the Government are held to account.”— [*Official Report*, 2 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 62.]

I should point out that although the time was extended to three hours, it was not sufficient to hold the Government to account because hon. Friends were unable to take part if they could not be here. They could not do so remotely. That is why this has to change.

Those hon. Members cannot hold the Government to account, but we need to find ways to hold the Government to account because they seem to be bypassing the normal procurement process and helping the VIPs to win lucrative Government contracts for personal protective equipment. How do we hold PPE Medpro to account? It was incorporated in May this year with share capital of just £100, yet it was awarded contracts of £200 million. It was set up by a former business associate of a Conservative peer. How do we hold SG Recruitment to account? It is a staffing agency, and it won two PPE contracts worth over £50 million, despite auditors raising concerns about its solvency. A Tory peer sits on the board of its parent company. How do we hold to account P14 Medical Ltd, which is controlled by a former Conservative councillor and has been awarded three contracts worth £276 million, despite having negative assets?

Parliament is giving the Government unprecedented powers, so could the Government prove to us that they are not misusing public money? Decisions so far have been characterised by cronyism and incompetence—and I have not even got on to Radox yet. I ask again, could we have a list of all the contracts that have been awarded under the coronavirus regulations and any declarations of interests? The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has asked for an inquiry. It would be very simple to publish every single contract.

We need an urgent ministerial statement on what the head of the Vaccine Taskforce has said. If it is an official, sensitive Government document, why was it disclosed to people who spent \$200 to hear that inside

[Valerie Vaz]

information? If it is not, why do we not all know about it? Could we have an urgent statement on who the head of the Vaccine Taskforce is accountable to?

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting an urgent question to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on Nazanin. That was the sixth urgent question about her. The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa said nothing about Anousheh, although he accepted that the debt is 40 years old—that is older than Nazanin. We also have to remember Kylie and Luke Symons. I look forward to receiving the letter from the Foreign Secretary that the Leader of the House has kindly facilitated.

Finally, Sergeant Matt Ratana's funeral was held yesterday. We remember all those police officers and frontline staff who have given their lives in the line of duty. I know that Remembrance Sunday will be slightly different this year, but nevertheless, we will remember everyone in the same way. It will be more poignant because of those who have given their lives to save us. I think the Kohima epitaph will apply to everyone. It says:

“When you go home  
Tell them of us and say  
For your tomorrow  
We gave our today.”

We will remember them. We will remember them.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The right hon. Lady is so right and puts it so well. We will remember them. I am very glad that there will be a chance on 11 November for a debate in the House where remembrance may take place properly, in a year when the full remembrance that we normally have will be curtailed. I am pleased that we are able to have time for that debate.

I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for once again raising the case of Nazanin, Kylie, Anousheh and Luke. As always, the proper processes of this House are being used, and the Government are being held to account with urgent questions. I will say one thing: it is very important not to conflate any question of money with the proper treatment of people who are held improperly. The British Government have a very clear policy of not connecting the two, and it would be open season on British citizens if we were ever to be in a position of paying for people's releases. It is fundamental that those two are not conflated.

May I echo the right hon. Lady's comments on UK Parliament Week? It is a fantastic week, and we would have done much more had we been able to go out and about. Mr Speaker and I would have been up and down the country making speeches and receiving plaudits for Parliament and all the work it does.

**Valerie Vaz:** And me!

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** And the shadow Leader of the House too. We would have shared a charabanc as we went around the country praising Parliament. It is none the less a very important week, and we should be really proud of our democracy and proud that Parliament is here doing its duty. That, I am afraid, is where the right hon. Lady and I fall into a level of disagreement. It is so important that we are here to do our job—that we are here to debate and to challenge. She says that some Members cannot be here for debates. I recognise that,

and I sympathise with them, but they are debates; that is the point. We have seen how many times somebody comes on to complain that they cannot come here, and the connection goes down. We have seen in the House of Lords remote voting fail, so business does not happen.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** Once!

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Once and we lose a day's business and have to do it all again, whereas we have a system that is tried and tested, works and means that we are leading by example. We expect teachers to be teaching; we expect MPs to be voting. We expect people to do their job at their place of work when they cannot do it from home, and we cannot be a proper scrutinising legislature without being here in person; that is of fundamental importance.

I note the right hon. Lady's appeal on the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill. It is on the list for private Members' Bills. It is very difficult to find extra time. There was a suggestion that the sitting Fridays be moved, which the Government listened to and accepted. That is the situation that we are in. Changing the PMB Fridays does allow a few more people to work from home one day a week, which slightly helps with the overall balance of risk. I therefore think that we will have to come back to all private Members' Bills in the new year.

The right hon. Lady asked a question on procurement that is important and a crucial act of parliamentary scrutiny, but which is also misplaced. The two positions are not contradictory. It is the job of this House—and has been for centuries—to ensure that public money is well spent. That is why the Public Accounts Committee is so highly respected. In defence of what the Government have done, when we go from a standing start to try to ensure that the country deals with a pandemic, we have to act quickly. Our usual processes for procurement assume that there is plenty of time. In this instance, there was not.

Let me give the House some of the facts. There is now capacity for 519,000 tests a day. We have delivered over 10 million testing kits to 14 million care homes. This type of work has had to be done extraordinarily quickly. On vaccines, we have secured early access to over 350 million vaccine doses through a portfolio of promising new vaccines, to ensure that we are best placed to get the vaccine when one is tested and turns out to be workable. The increase in personal protective equipment delivery has been phenomenal. To do this, things have had to be done quickly. Yes, of course, they must be scrutinised—that is absolutely right—and when they are scrutinised, the Government will have turned out to have behaved with impeccable propriety.

**Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con):** Throughout the pandemic, places of worship have helped to maintain social cohesion. They have mitigated the impact on the mental health of worshippers, and, more importantly, have been a sign of hope. Churches, Islamic centres and synagogues across Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich have gone above and beyond to become covid-safe environments. Will my right hon. Friend, as a man of faith himself, join me in commending their efforts to protect the health and wellbeing of worshippers, and will he look to undertake an urgent review of places of worship so that they can continue to provide these most vital of services during these difficult times?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The relationship between Church and state is one that sometimes proves rather difficult. Who can forget 29 December 1170, when Thomas à Becket was murdered in his own cathedral by the agents of the state sent by Henry II? The relationship between Church and state has not always been smooth. It was a great matter for discussion by medieval scholars, who concentrated on Luke 22:38: “there are two swords”. The question is which sword is superior—the spiritual sword or the temporal sword. The temporal authorities often think that the temporal sword is the superior sword. The ecclesiastical authorities were very happy to argue with that, and Pope Boniface VIII put it at its highest level in his 1302 papal bull “Unam Sanctam”, which claimed that all secular authorities were secondary to the spiritual authorities. We have seen this argument rage over the centuries, with greater powers taken by the state and then freedom of religion reasserting itself. My hon. Friend raises a point of fundamental importance, but the hope that we may all take—the reassurance that those of us who have faith may be certain of—is that the highest authority is unquestionably immortal, invisible and only wise, and even outside the control of the House of Commons.

**Mr Speaker:** And I always thought that the Templars were too powerful, and that is why their power was taken away.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: It has been five days since the Prime Minister announced an England-wide lockdown and the major U-turn regarding the furlough scheme, and all week we have been trying to clarify whether furlough support will be in place just when England is locked down, or whether it will be available beyond 2 December if devolved Administrations are required to take similar action. On Monday, the Prime Minister suggested that it would be available to devolved national Governments, only to have a series of Ministers deny this as the week progressed. It is bizarre that such a simple question still does not have a clear answer. Can the Leader of the House confirm whether the Chancellor’s statement that will follow will clear up the ambiguity? In either event, can we have a debate on how to improve the capacity of devolved Administrations to deal with the covid pandemic and prepare for recovery, including through their relationship with the UK Treasury?

Following the rather shambolic way in which the lockdown in England was leaked last weekend, the Government have much to learn about how they communicate. Can I raise the specific matter of how they communicate with Members of Parliament? There is an increasing tendency for Ministers to provide online briefings to Members, and this is welcome, but often the notice of such briefings is insufficient to allow Members to participate. Will the Leader of the House ensure that Ministers improve their communication with Members, including using Parliamentary Private Secretaries to reach out to their Opposition counterparts?

Finally, I return again to the question of remote voting. The latest changes to proxy voting are welcome, and they can only have come about because the Government accept the logic of not requiring Members to queue up physically to vote. If that is the case, why not complete the circle and simply switch the remote voting system

back on? That way, MPs can exercise their own discretion on behalf of their constituents, rather than having to delegate their vote to others.

**Mr Speaker:** I do apologise for the fact that no picture was put up of the SNP spokesperson when the line went down—the sound quality was good, although the screen is just a blank at the moment—but I will ask the Leader of the House to respond.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It is a great pity that we could not see the hon. Gentleman’s cheerful countenance, cheering us all up and bringing sweetness and light to this Chamber, as he does on a weekly basis.

The point the hon. Gentleman raises on the furlough scheme has been responded to by the Prime Minister any number of times with considerable clarity—that it is a UK-wide scheme. That is how it is operating and has operated. It continued until 31 October, and was then renewed. It remains a UK-wide scheme, and that is as it should be. I have pointed out to the hon. Gentleman before, but it bears repetition, that the UK taxpayer has provided £7.2 billion of funding to Scotland and saved 779,500 jobs under the furlough scheme, in addition to the £770 million for the self-employment scheme. The United Kingdom, as a single entity, has protected the interests of Scotland, and will continue to do so.

On communication, I think the hon. Gentleman is advocating a counsel of perfection. Of course it is important to try to give notice, but it is also important to try to ensure that briefings are provided quickly, and getting that balance right is something the Government strive to do. I think, by and large, that right hon. and hon. Members appreciate the opportunity to have briefings, and that we should not delay briefings because of the risk of some people missing the relevant notification.

As regards voting in person, people need to be here—they need to be here to speak in debates, they need to be here for legislative procedures—and people are still free to go through the Division Lobbies. They have the opportunity to use a proxy if that is what they choose to do. We are a party that believes in choice, liberty and freedom.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: The Leader of the House may have seen the sad news this morning that hundreds of Argos stores will close, including the one in Alfreton in my constituency, which is a terrible blow for the employees and for the high street. Could he find time for a debate on how we can reinvigorate our high streets once this covid crisis is over?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes, I had indeed heard that sad news. It is a real problem, and high streets are facing enormous challenges, mainly from developments that were taking place before the coronavirus, but exacerbated and made faster because of the coronavirus. The Government have of course got the £3.6 billion towns fund that is helping high streets, and I think there is more work to be done on that. As regards a debate, I think that is a question for the Backbench Business Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us head up to Gateshead and the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, Ian Mearns.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: Of course, the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) is a member of the Backbench Business Committee, so he would be asking himself for a debate.



[*Ian Mearns*]

I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench business for next Thursday. The first debate will be on a motion on the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on refugee communities, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). The second debate will be on achieving the ambition of a smoke-free England by 2030, in light of the covid-19 pandemic and public health reorganisation, led by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy).

The Home Office had a huge backlog of cases and from applications to process refugees and asylum seekers prior to the pandemic. The Home Office has now contacted my office to ask my staff whether they would accept verbal updates on individual cases, as it says it does not have the capacity to do it in writing. That would mean we would have to take note of what was being said and relate that to the constituent concerned, which is most unsatisfactory. The system was a mess before the pandemic and it is now a mess that is getting worse, leaving constituents completely in a void. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary about what is happening in the Home Office and its immigration management system?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** First, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the work he does as Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee and for bringing forward important debates that have support across the House. The point he mentions is clearly not one that Members must feel under any obligation to go along with. We expect responses from Departments to be proper responses. It is not for us to take notes of conversations and pass them on, because that is likely to lead to misunderstanding, error and imprecision. I will certainly take this up with the Home Office afterwards, but I would make the general point that the Government have been absolutely clear in all their guidance that people should work from home if they can do their job at home. If there are people in any sector who cannot do their job at home, and are therefore failing to answer MPs' correspondence because they are all working remotely, they ought in fact to be going into work. That is what the guidance says.

**Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con):** For over 50 years, the Mottram bypass has been endlessly promised, delayed, cancelled, argued over and consulted on. I am delighted that the Government have finally committed to build the bypass, but, today, yet another formal and legally required consultation has been launched. After that is completed there has to be a development consent order, a process that lasts a minimum of a further 17 months. May we have a debate on the process around how we build key infrastructure projects, and how we can make it more efficient and faster? The people of Glossop and Hadfield have waited long enough.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend makes such a powerful point. It is deeply unsatisfactory that it has taken 50 years to deal with this issue and that there will be further delays. The Government do have plans to improve the planning system and to speed up infrastructure projects. Let us hope he does not find any newts, because they are often an absolute nuisance—a newtsance, one might even say, Mr Speaker—when it comes to building projects.

I will pass on my hon. Friend's comments to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, who will be answering questions in a month's time, on 3 December.

**Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]:** The new Government guidance on care home visits requires them to take place outside, at a window, or with a floor-to-ceiling Perspex screen separating people. For many of the cases I have had raised with me, that is not a solution as their loved ones have dementia or are bed-bound, or the care home lacks the resources to make the adaptations required. I would like to apply for an Adjournment debate to raise those cases with the relevant Minister, but because I am participating virtually I cannot do so, even though the Chamber is already set up for virtual participation and, as we know, Adjournment debates are primarily for the hon. Member and the Minister. Will the Leader of the House consider changing Standing Orders so that Members can apply for and lead an Adjournment debate virtually, and enable them to do their jobs?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Lady is proving that she can do her job by raising this important issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has made regular statements where he can be questioned. Adjournment debates do allow other hon. Members to intervene. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is sitting in his usual place, regularly intervenes very helpfully in those. It is important that the debates in this House are with people who are physically here, but the hon. Lady has proved that she can raise her point in these interrogative sessions.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]:** Mr Speaker, you quite rightly have held the Government to account for releasing statements to the media before they have been announced to this House. Last weekend, when the funding deal to bail out Transport for London was negotiated and embargoed until Monday, I was outraged and horrified that the Mayor of London broke the embargo and released a press release on Sunday, setting out the details, incorrectly, of that press release. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport to the House on exactly the terms of the bail-out for Transport for London, so that we MPs can hold him to account and ensure that the record is set straight in terms of what the deal is?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The record is something that we must set very straight, which is that the Mayor of London is incompetent and that he has run Transport for London hopelessly. That is what we get when we have socialists in government. The London transport network has been run very poorly and its finances are in a bad state because of a political refusal to increase any ticket fees over four years. Anyone who thinks that TfL is any good needs look only at Hammersmith bridge, which remains unrepaired, inconveniencing tens of thousands of people and causing great inconvenience without Transport for London managing to lift a finger and saying, I think, that it will do 7 feet a month and that it will take it so long to do it. Moreover, Crossrail continues to be delayed. It is an extraordinary record of failure, and it is a record of failure that should be put straight. We should have a Conservative Mayor next year and then it will be broad sunlit uplands.



**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Hull Trains, the open access providers of direct rail services between east Yorkshire and London for the past 20 years, today ceases its services in this second lockdown. Open access has been one of the most successful aspects of the 1990s rail industry reforms and the Transport Secretary claims to be as keen as mustard on open access, so, given the Government's support to the rail industry and Transport for London, I am perplexed as to why Hull Trains has not been given the relatively modest Government support, beyond just the furlough scheme, that would secure its future post covid. Can we please have a statement about how we can ensure a post-covid recovery for all rail operators, including open access?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. The Government have taken huge steps to support as many industries as possible, while recognising that not everything can be supported. I will certainly take up her point with the Secretary of State because, as she rightly says, open access has been one of the real advantages of railway privatisation.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Ind): As the University of Oxford is regularly rated the finest in the world, may we have a statement from the Government ensuring that what passes for statistical analysis by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies should in future be checked and confirmed by the Oxford Centre for Evidence Based Medicine before it is inflicted on our sceptical and suffering constituents?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I fear that I should declare an interest, because some years ago I was at that university.

**Dr Lewis:** As indeed was I.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes, I thought that the right hon. Gentleman might have been, too, though he is a much greater scholar than I am, if I may place that firmly on the record. It is only right that all statistics provided by the Government and by their advisers are challenged. That is one of the reasons for this place's existence and for the ability to hold the Government to account. I am sure that he will use the resources that are available to him to challenge all statistics. We remember what Disraeli supposedly said about statistics when discussing this matter, don't we, Mr Speaker?

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): Many constituents have contacted me concerned that Scotland's high teaching standards will be diluted as a result of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, with the potential for creating a UK-wide bureau of teaching standards, as the Bill, as currently set out, seeks to do. That risks imposing lower standards in Scotland that threaten the very fabric of Scotland's separate and independent education system, which, as the Leader of the House will know, was provided for in the 1707 Act of Union. Teachers regularly come and teach in Scotland from other jurisdictions and are highly valued, but in every case their professional standards under the requirements of the General Teaching Council for Scotland must be met. Can we have a debate in Government time regarding the need to protect the Scottish education system from the UK Internal Market Bill?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman knows that the UK Internal Market Bill involves a great many powers—I think 70—that were with Europe now coming back to the United Kingdom and going to the devolved authorities. If we were to have a debate on standards in Scottish education, it would be about why the SNP has been running them into the ground in its period of running the Scottish Government, because the record of the SNP is absolutely appalling, as the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends know only too well. Scotland, as he rightly says, used to have one of the best records, and it is the SNP that has undermined that while it has been in government.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Back on Boxing day 2015, my constituency was terribly affected by flooding. Since that time, the same homes and streets have repeatedly suffered from flooding, which once again reared its ugly head earlier this week. It is bad enough that the same people are repeatedly flooded, but the trauma for those people is worse. Every time it rains heavily, fearing the worst is a torture that is hard to imagine. Will my right hon. Friend therefore ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to come to the House to make a statement to let my constituents know when he will implement the flood prevention measures for my constituency proposed by the Environment Agency?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The difficulties families face when they are flooded and the worry that they must have when the rain beats down again are something with which every Member of this House would have sympathy. A great deal of taxpayers' money is being spent, and Yorkshire is receiving more than any other region—£496 million has been spent since 2015, protecting 66,000 properties. Across England as a whole, £2.6 billion is being spent on flood and coastal defences between 2015 and 2021. In March, there was a commitment of £5.2 billion to build 2,000 new flood and coastal defence schemes across England by 2027. I appreciate that that does not necessarily give my hon. Friend's constituents the comfort that they desire, but he will have the opportunity to raise the matter with the Secretary of State on 26 November. I will also take it up on his behalf and try to get him a detailed answer on when the programme will actually start.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Last week, the Home Secretary ended the exemption in relation to the number of people who can take part in a protest, meaning that for the duration of lockdown the maximum number of people who will be able to demonstrate is now two. Why did the Leader of the House allow that to happen without the Home Secretary coming to this House to explain why? Why was there not a statement as to why this most egregious and draconian restriction on our liberties would be necessary?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The Prime Minister himself came and made a statement, and the Prime Minister himself opened yesterday's debate on the new regulations. He is senior to the Home Secretary, so it was done at the highest level. A large number of restrictions are being imposed which nobody wishes to impose. Nobody wishes to restrict the freedoms of the British people. It is being done, with the support of Opposition Members, in response to the coronavirus crisis. The person to whom

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the Home Secretary reports came to make the statement. As the Queen is not allowed to come into this House, there is no more senior authority who could have come.

**Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): Despite the various national restrictions, can the Leader of the House confirm that this House, and indeed the other place, will continue operating whatever the situation, so that Parliament can continue to hold the Government to account for decisions being made in this global coronavirus pandemic?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes. I actually think this follows on from the question by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), because the House is ensuring that the Government are held to account when other means of doing it have been curtailed. People cannot protest, but we can be here—and we must be here, because if we are not, how are we going to check that the rules that are being introduced are debated, are considered; that anomalies within them are sought out; that people make representations about people in care homes or complain about the limitation of protest? We must be here; it is our duty to be here. We have a legislative programme to get through; we have to ensure that that happens. We have to hold the Government to account and seek redress of grievance; it is our historic duty. We do it in this Chamber, we do it in Westminster Hall and we do it in Committees, and that must carry on.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Concerns have been raised about the accuracy and efficiency of some of the new tests being used to increase testing capacity. Mass testing is essential if we are to control the virus, and the Liverpool mass testing pilot must be a success. So may we have a debate to enable us to scrutinise the effectiveness and accuracy of the new tests being proposed?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Next week, on Wednesday 11 November, there will be a general debate on covid, when it would be right to raise this issue. Testing is increasing enormously and has now reached 500,000, and 9.6 million people have been tested at least once, but obviously those tests must be accurate; otherwise, they serve no useful purpose, so to question that is a reasonable thing to do. But of course that is being done within the process anyway, to ensure that it is reliable and robust. However, there will be an opportunity to debate it on Wednesday.

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): I am sure that the Leader of the House will be as disappointed as I am that services of remembrance in Warrington and across the UK will not be happening this year because of the restrictions that we introduced yesterday. Those restrictions also mean that poppy sellers—many themselves veterans—will not be able to stand on the streets and raise funds for the Royal British Legion. I want him to join me in encouraging everyone to log on to the Royal British Legion website, download a poppy and donate, so that the work of the Royal British Legion may continue to support veterans and their families.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend should tell his local authority that it can organise a remembrance service, provided that it is outside and that social distancing can

be maintained. I would encourage him to have a word with Warrington Borough Council and ask it to crack on with it, because there is not a lot of time left.

Poppy sellers are such a wonderful part of the fabric of our nation—they are such a varied group of people, who have such commitment to remembering those who gave their lives to ensure that we could live in freedom. Therefore my hon. Friend is right to say that people should go to the website and donate that way, if they cannot do what they would usually do and allow some coins, or preferably notes, to clink—although notes obviously do not clink—into a poppy collector's tin; it is not a tin but a plastic container, but I think everyone in the House knows what I mean.

**Mr Speaker:** Well recovered.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: While foster care is a devolved matter, employment law is not. Foster carers do not set their own working hours or rates of pay, cannot subcontract their work and are highly supervised, with regular performance reviews and training, and they are limited to working exclusively for one local authority or agency at a time. It is clearly employment in all but name. May we have a debate in Government time to address their lack of employment status?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman raises a point that has been considered and debated, and I think has even been taken to a tribunal. It is obviously a matter that he feels strongly about, and I think in the first instance a letter to you, Mr Speaker, asking for an Adjournment debate may well be in order.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): Unfortunately, there are many vulnerable young people within Don Valley who are likely to fall victim to county lines drug gangs. Usually, grassroots sports clubs are a fantastic way to keep children off the street while ensuring that they are fit and healthy. As a result of the renewed lockdown, however, that will no longer be the case. As a firm believer that the devil makes work for idle hands, will my right hon. Friend inform the House whether the Government will allow grassroots sports clubs to reopen as soon as possible, so that children can remain on the right path, keep healthy and achieve their goals?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. The devastation that drugs cause is shocking and saddening, both to individual lives and to communities. Keeping young people active is important. People may have limitless outdoor activity and recreation, as long as it takes place alone, with a household or with one other person socially distanced. Children under school age may join a parent, a carer or a nanny even when seeing one other child of under school age with one other person, and they are allowed then to exercise. I appreciate that that is not fully the answer that he would want, so let me suggest that children may enjoy telmatopedesis, a word provided to me by *The Times*.

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Fertility treatment on the NHS is subject to age restrictions and people are losing out because of coronavirus delays. I asked in a parliamentary question 30 days ago whether the Department would stop the clock. It is not ready to respond yet, but more people are losing out while we

wait. Could the Leader of the House arrange a clear answer, a statement or perhaps even a leak so that we do not unnecessarily create another group of covid victims?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It is always important that Departments respond punctually to letters and queries raised by Members of this House. I have said a number of times from this Dispatch Box that if Members are not receiving replies, my office will do everything it can to facilitate a swift reply.

**Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con):** As an ex-coal miner, I am very proud of my mining roots in Ashfield and believe we should do everything we can to remind ourselves of our industrial past. I am currently working with ex-Silverhill colliery miner Alan Batterham and Craig Gould at Make Consulting to get the old headstock wheels renovated and sited around the old colliery. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate on our industrial heritage, and will he say a big thank you to Alan Batterham, Craig Gould and all the ex-Silverhill colliery miners for working on this project?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend knows my weakness: debating our heritage is something I am always tempted to agree to. However, the Chief Whip might think I had gone slightly rogue if I did that in the midst of a session. I would like to thank Alan Batterham and Craig Gould, and I recognise that Ashfield is an important area for both our industrial and our cultural heritage. Silverhill colliery, which sits above Ashfield, is now a monument to Britain's industrial revolution and mining past. On top of that hill stands an evocative statue of a miner testing for gas, commemorating the miners of Nottinghamshire, who worked the coalfields for nearly 200 years. My hon. Friend makes the right tribute, and I sympathise with it because mining plays an important role in my constituency's history and heritage, with the town of Radstock boasting a long mining history and a wonderful local museum. Although I know that many Members would enjoy a debate on this, I do not think I can promise it in Government time. With a bit of luck, the Backbench Business Committee will look favourably upon a request.

**Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab):** Does the Leader of the House think it reasonable that named day questions asked of Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care six weeks ago are not answered even when the Department clearly has the information sought, or that letters written to that Department in May are replied to by civil servants, not Ministers, in October—and in at least one case, after five months, the answer was to refer it to another Department? We know that that Department is under particular stress, but this is an abuse of the rights of Members. Will the Leader of the House interrogate his colleagues and try to get better response rates than that?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Although it is 5 November, I think interrogation may be a little beyond the powers currently given to the Lord President of the Council. However, what the hon. Gentleman says is of the utmost seriousness. Named day questions must be answered within the named day period. I had a great deal of sympathy, particularly with the Department of Health and Social Care, early in the pandemic, but we are now in November and questions should be being dealt with in timely fashion. I would say to any hon. or right hon. Member

who receives a letter from officials that they should send it back. That is what I have been doing when I get letters from officials. We are not answerable to officials. We are answerable to Ministers, and every Minister knows that. In April, May and June, it was forgivable, but in November, it is just not a proper treatment of the rights of Members. I will do whatever I can, short of an interrogation. As I say, the Tower of London may be closed under current circumstances.

**Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con):** I am sure my right hon. Friend will be fully aware of the parlous state of the UK inbound tourist industry, which is losing circa £557 million a week due to the drop in international visitors to the United Kingdom. He has been to my constituency, albeit briefly last year, to see Her Majesty at Balmoral, so he is aware of the importance of tourism to my constituency, because it has some of the most visited locations in Scotland. Will he consider a debate in Government time on the importance of the industry to Scotland? Will he consider commending to his colleagues in Government the fantastic report published by UKinbound this week on how we might support this industry, which is very important to vast areas of our country?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The tourism industry is indeed fundamental to our national economy, and I had two trips to Aberdeenshire last year. The first was campaigning for my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) to become leader of the Conservative party. The second was, as my hon. Friend quite rightly says, for a Privy Council to be holden at Her Majesty's castle of Balmoral, which was a very interesting occasion about which, fortunately, I am sworn to secrecy under the Privy Counsellor's oath.

My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the Government are supporting our tourism industry throughout the pandemic with a range of measures, including £10 million of grants to small businesses in the tourism sector, as well as £50 million delivered this autumn to support infrastructure projects, which will boost visitor numbers and help access to tourist destinations as we recover. Tourism is a fundamentally important industry and it has to be said that Aberdeenshire is an extraordinarily beautiful part of our United Kingdom.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** All of us, from across the House, will appreciate the importance of children being back at school and learning, especially those from more disadvantaged or poorer sections of our community, since it is they who would otherwise be most detrimentally impacted and fall further behind. However, despite ministerial statements that transmission in schools is very low, hundreds of individuals in my constituency have contacted me or signed a petition to request that they be given the right to withdraw their children from school, if they so wish, in the midst of a pandemic. Given that I have thus far not been able to acquire that data, will the Leader of the House please arrange to furnish me with constituency data, so that I can forward that to my constituents to help allay their concerns?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman makes such an important point when he says that education is of the greatest importance to those from the most deprived backgrounds. That is why it is so fundamental that



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schools remain open. The figures on transmission by children seem to be extraordinarily good. There was a report in the newspaper only yesterday. I am not in a position to promise him constituency-level data—I do not know that they exist—but I will certainly look into that, because it is important to reassure parents that is not only important for their children to go to school, but safe, and I am very grateful to him for his question.

**David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): In recent months, I have had a number of constituents contact me because they have been waiting significant periods for responses from agencies such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and, in particular, the probate office. Those delays are attributed to covid, and we understand the challenges that presents, but emails and calls are going unanswered for weeks and months, and that is very distressing for my constituents. Can we have a debate on how those agencies can maintain an acceptable standard of service at this time?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes. It is of fundamental importance that our constituents can access the Government services they need, particularly during a pandemic. Government agencies, as I mentioned earlier, are covered by the “work from home if possible” instruction and ought to be continuing with their routine work. If they cannot do it from home, they ought to be going into work to do it. There are some areas where that is not possible because of social distancing—for example, driving tests are problematic—but the service delivery by Government agencies ought to be continuing in most cases. I cannot promise my hon. Friend a debate in Government time, but he has raised the issue and if there are any specific agencies he wants me to follow up with, I will be more than happy to do so.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: The Leader of the House expressed enthusiasm for our heritage. As well as being the anniversary of the gunpowder plot, yesterday was also the anniversary of the Newport rising. That took place in 1839, and 22 protesters were shot dead by troops because they were campaigning simply for the right to vote. With the current spectacle of mobs being organised by the so-called leader of the free world to try to stop votes being counted in the United States, would this be a timely moment for us to debate the history of people’s struggle to achieve the vote, and to consider how we can protect our democracy from that kind of toxic politics in the future?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It would be a great pleasure to debate the way that the glorious American constitution grew out of our wonderful constitution, and how we have two of the most beautifully formed constitutions in the world—two really beautiful constitutions that work enormously effectively and protect democracy. That has worked effectively both in their country and in ours, and all I can say is: God bless America, but the United Kingdom first.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I follow up the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) about help for local high streets, because I think we need a debate about that? The Leader of the House spoke about the Towns Fund,

which is doing great work, but it does not cover every local high street. We perhaps need a return to the grants that were available during the first lockdown, because small businesses on our local high streets that were just getting back on their feet before this lockdown are now being hit once again. We need time in the House to debate the future of our local high streets.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** There is a great deal of discussion about local high streets, and it is worth reiterating what the Government have done in terms of economic support that has helped large and small businesses. That support adds up to about £200 billion, including £40 billion on the furlough scheme that supported 9.6 million jobs, many of which will have been high street jobs. Three million self-employed individuals have been supported to a value of over £13.5 billion, and £21 billion has gone to coronavirus business interruption loans for small and medium-sized enterprises and large businesses. Some £40 billion has gone to over 1.3 million bounce back loans, £11 billion in business grants, and £10 billion in business rates relief, which will particularly have helped smaller businesses. There has been £27 billion in VAT deferrals—again, helping high streets and nearly 500,000 businesses—and nearly £33 billion in the summer economic update. That important support is helping high streets and businesses across the country, and the Towns Fund on top of that will help high streets to be rejuvenated once the pandemic has ended.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for his previous answer. Owners and directors of SMEs, and freelancers, are a group of voters that the Conservative Government have tried to attract in the past, yet those are the people who are being let down and excluded from the Chancellor’s support measures. Now is not the time to leave hard-working people behind, or to leave those with a get-up-and-go spirit excluded from support. This is a matter of great concern for the House and for our constituents, so will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on that crucial issue as a matter of urgency?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I agree that this is a crucial issue, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be making a statement and answering questions immediately after the business statement.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Last weekend the details of the national lockdown were leaked to the media, and instead of the Prime Minister being able to announce it first in the House of Commons, it was announced in newspapers. I know the Prime Minister was furious about that, and has started a leak inquiry. May we have a statement next week about how that inquiry is progressing, who is in charge of it, and whether the mobile phones of the people at the meetings have been checked? Or is this leak inquiry like the one in “Yes Minister”, where there is no intention of finding out who leaked the information?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** This is a leak inquiry that wants to find out what happened, and I know that the Prime Minister was far from grunted over what happened last week. He had intended that the announcement should be made in the House first, and it needs to be looked into thoroughly. I would say there is something deeply



distasteful about this culture of leaking. We want the House to hear first, we want a proper process and that is what was intended. It then came to the House and we had a vote yesterday, I would say that is also important: the commitment to have votes on important issues of national significance has been maintained and the rights of the House are therefore being protected.

**Mr Speaker:** I did ask for the House to be updated as well.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: Please can we have an update on when the Government will respond to the review of access to benefits for the terminally ill? I know the Minister at the DWP has been receptive to the issues raised by the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Marie Curie and others, but we need action to change this unfair system as soon as possible.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** That is an important issue with which the House will have every sympathy. I will take it up with the Department and get an answer to the hon. Lady.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I recently met a Harlow beauty salon owner who was in real distress because of the devastation of her business due to covid, even with the Government grants. Small businesses in Harlow such as beauty salons and gyms are really struggling because of the coronavirus lockdown and despite being covid-secure, particularly gyms, they are not allowed to open, yet estate agents are. Although I reluctantly accept the new need for the lockdown because of the rise in covid, may we have an urgent statement to address these anomalies and do everything possible to ensure that these small businesses in Harlow survive and thrive?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I certainly understand the frustration of my hon. Friend and the disappointment for all business owners affected by the re-imposition of restrictions. I would like to quote the Prime Minister himself, who said:

“I am truly sorry for the anguish these measures will impose, particularly for businesses that had just got back on their feet—businesses across the country that have gone to such trouble to make themselves covid-secure, to install Perspex screens and to do the right thing.”—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 25.]

No one wants to impose these kinds of measures, but we cannot ignore the evidence in front of us of rising hospitalisations from covid, which is why the decisions have been taken. They are decisive but temporary and they should reduce the spread of the virus. The Government will continue to do everything possible to support jobs and livelihoods for the next four weeks. May I thank the people in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country who run beauty salons, gyms and other outlets that are being closed for their perseverance in the face of adversity?

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): May I raise with the Leader of the House the question of access to pension credit and the fact that more than 1 million older people who are entitled to it do not take it up, for many different reasons? It would lift 400,000 pensioners out of poverty, meaning that we would have the lowest levels of pensioner poverty in this country ever. Will he request that DWP Ministers make a statement on how they intend to advertise pension credit take-up or, indeed,

grant a debate on access to pension credit so that pensioners can get the credit that they are allowed and deserve, and that they should feel no shame in taking up?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The Government always make efforts to ensure that people have access to the benefits to which they are entitled. They are there for people to claim and not to be hidden away. I would say that we all have a role in that. We have a role as constituency MPs to highlight them to pensioners who get in touch with us when they are facing difficulties, or to use the newspaper columns that most of us have to remind people of what is available. I must confess that the hon. Gentleman has in fact given me the topic for my next article for the *Somerset Guardian*, because I think that particularly in winter it is really important to emphasise to people that there is help available, that it is there for them and that it is not anything to be ashamed about.

**Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): May I thank the shadow Leader of the House for mentioning my private Member's Bill a little earlier? I would like to re-emphasise, if I may, to the Leader of the House that it is a Bill of great importance to me. However, as we have gone through Second Reading, we are in Committee, and the lockdown should not delay the Bill unless there are further restrictions at the Government's behest. I hope that the Committee stage can continue and that the Leader of the House will support that. May I briefly say as well that yesterday in this House we had one of the most difficult votes that we have had to take? I am very grateful to the Leader of the House for extending the debate to three hours, but I hope if there are further such debates on matters of national significance, we may be afforded a longer debate still.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Mr Speaker, is it indiscreet of me to say that it was your lobbying that got the debate extended to three hours? If it is indiscreet, it is too late now, but thank you very much. It is always important that proper time is provided, but one of the great difficulties of organising Government business is that there are so many pressures on time, including for my hon. Friend's important private Member's Bill, which I think is popular across the House.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Early on the morning of 30 October 2020, Cuban authorities in the city of Santiago de Cuba demolished an Assemblies of God church. The pastor of the church, Pastor Palomo Cabrera, was taken away by Government authorities, and it was reported that he was put under pressure to sign a document saying that the church demolition was legal. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, that church has been in the crosshairs of the Cuban Government since 2015. Its arbitrary destruction is a serious violation of freedom of religion or belief. Will the Leader of the House make a statement or agree to a debate on this matter?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The UK remains deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of freedom of religion or belief in many parts of the world. We are committed to defending these freedoms for all and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. Once again, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman. He is one of the House's most diligent campaigners for the rights of Christians suffering persecution around the world. The Government regularly communicate with the Cuban Government about a

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range of human rights issues, in both London and Havana, and also address these issues through multilateral human rights forums, including the UN universal periodic review. While we welcome the new protections that underpin freedom of religion or belief in the 2019 constitution, we call on the Cuban authorities to confer in practice those rights that the constitution enshrines. As regards a debate, I think an Adjournment debate or Backbench Business debate would be suitable. We had a debate in Government time earlier in the year.

**Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con):** Many gyms, fitness spaces and leisure centres in Redcar and Cleveland have gone above and beyond to become covid-secure and prevent transmission of the virus. We know the benefits of exercise for both mental and physical health, but in winter it is difficult for many to exercise outside in the dark, cold and wet. May we have a statement from the Government on the importance of indoor exercise facilities in society, and will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will not keep gyms closed beyond 2 December? This is a public health emergency, and gyms are essential to public health.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes, but I caveat that by saying so long as I do not have to do it myself. I gave up exercise as a schoolboy and always tried to avoid it even then, but I absolutely accept my hon. Friend's point that exercise is important for some people's mental health, and obviously for dealing with obesity and things like that. Endless outdoor activity is allowed—he is right that the weather is obviously not as nice as it was in the first lockdown—but it has to take place alone, with a member of the household or with one other person, socially distanced. It is obviously the plan that these restrictions end on 2 December; that is what was voted for yesterday. At that point, things will reopen.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) [V]:** My constituent's savings are invested in buy-to-let mortgages in flatted properties. The block height is less than 18 metres, so post-Grenfell regulations on cladding inspection and local authority certification do not apply. Despite that, surveyors are zero-valuing the properties, lawyers will not handle sales and replacement mortgages are impossible, so properties in that specific height range are currently worthless. May I request a Government statement on how they will address this issue?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes. The issue of cladding and its effect on people trying to sell properties has been problematic. The Government have been spending a great deal of taxpayers' money to remove unsafe cladding on bigger buildings, but I accept that for buildings of a lower height the problem may not always have been addressed, or they may not be in a programme to be addressed. I think it will be best if I take this up with the relevant Secretary of State and get a fuller answer for the hon. Gentleman.

**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.

12.14 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Economy Update

12.18 pm

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):** On Monday, the Prime Minister set out the action we need to take between now and the start of December to control the spread of coronavirus. In response, we are providing significant extra support to protect jobs and livelihoods in every region and nation of the United Kingdom: an extension to the coronavirus job retention scheme; more generous support to the self-employed and paying that support more quickly; cash grants of up to £3,000 per month for businesses that are closed, worth over a billion pounds every month; £1.6 billion for English councils to support their local economy and local healthcare response; longer to apply for our loan schemes and the future fund; the chance to top up bounce back loans; and an extension to mortgage payment holidays. That is all on top of more than £200 billion of fiscal support since March.

This statement follows the Bank of England's monetary policy decisions earlier today, meaning all economic and monetary institutions are playing their part. As the House would expect, the Governor and I are in constant communication as the situation evolves. Our responses are carefully designed to complement each other and provide certainty and support to people and businesses across the UK. The Bank's forecast this morning shows that economic activity is supported by our substantial fiscal and monetary policy action. Just last week, the International Monetary Fund described the UK's economic plan as "aggressive", "unprecedented", successful in "holding down unemployment" and business failures, and

"one of the best examples of coordinated action globally".

Our highest priority remains the same: to protect jobs and livelihoods. That is why we have already decided to extend the job retention scheme to December. But people and businesses will want to know what comes next, how long we plan to keep the scheme open, and on what terms. They want certainty. The Government's intention is for the new health restrictions to remain only until the start of December, but, as we saw from the first lockdown, the economic effects are much longer lasting for businesses and areas than the duration of any restrictions. As the Bank of England said this morning, the economic recovery has slowed and the economic risks are "skewed to the downside."

Given this significant uncertainty, a worsening economic backdrop and the need to give people and businesses security through the winter, I believe it is right to go further, so we can announce today that the furlough scheme will not be extended for one month; it will be extended until the end of March. The Government will continue to help to pay people's wages up to 80% of the normal amount; all that employers will have to pay for hours not worked is the cost of employer national insurance contributions and pension contributions. We will review the policy in January to decide whether economic circumstances are improving enough to ask employers to contribute more.

Of course, as the furlough itself is now being extended to the end of March, the original purpose of the job retention bonus to incentivise employers to keep people in work until the end of January obviously falls away. Instead, we will redeploy a retention incentive at the

appropriate time. For self-employed people, I can confirm that the next income support grant, which covers the period November to January, will now increase to 80% of average profits, up to £7,500.

I also want to reassure the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The furlough scheme was designed and delivered by the Government of the United Kingdom, on behalf of all the people of the United Kingdom, wherever they live. That has been the case since March, it is the case now and it will remain the case until next March. It is a demonstration of the strength of the Union and an undeniable truth of this crisis that we have been able to provide this level of economic support only because we are a United Kingdom. I can announce today that the up-front guaranteed funding for the devolved Administrations is increasing from £14 billion to £16 billion. This Treasury is, has been and will always be the Treasury for the whole of the United Kingdom.

I know that people watching at home will have been frustrated by the changes that the Government have brought in during the past few weeks. I have had to make rapid adjustments to our economic plans as the spread of the virus has accelerated. I would like to take this opportunity to explain how and why this has happened. During the summer, as we began slowly unlocking, it was our hope that the country would continue to be economically open, albeit with local restrictions being put in place as and when needed. We knew that there would likely be a resurgence in the spread of the virus, but with increased NHS capacity and test and trace, our belief was that we would be able to stay ahead of the virus. On that basis, we designed an economic approach that continued to provide wage support to people, incentivised businesses to retain staff beyond the end of the furlough scheme, and created new job-creation and training schemes such as kickstart, all built to support an economy that was broadly open but operating with restrictions and overall lower demand. At the time, this approach was not that of Government acting alone. Our proposals secured wide-ranging support, from the TUC to the CBI. It was their hope, as it was ours, that the public health situation would allow us to keep businesses and workplaces open.

The virus, however, continued to spread. Localised restrictions were having an impact, so we intensified that approach and added further areas. As these restrictions intensified, the economic impact, particularly on industries such as the hospitality sector, was significant, so in response we altered our approach to wage support, making it much more generous to employers and in turn protecting jobs. We also introduced a range of grants to businesses, whether open or closed, to help them meet their fixed costs, and additional funding for local authorities to respond to specific local economic challenges.

But again, the virus continued to spread, but more quickly, and so we arrive at last week, when the Government's scientific and medical advisers presented data which showed that R is greater than 1 in all parts of the country, that the NHS was at risk of being overwhelmed in a matter of weeks, and the likely resultant loss of life that would accompany such an event. The only viable solution left to protect our NHS was the reimposition of temporary significant enhanced restrictions in England, in addition to those in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. So given these changed public

health restrictions and the economic trauma they would cause in job losses and business closures, I felt it best to extend the furlough scheme rather than transition at that precise moment to the new job support scheme.

Political opponents have chosen to attack the Government for trying to keep the economy functioning and to make sure the support we provide encourages people to keep working. They will now no doubt criticise the Government on the basis that we have had to change our approach, but for anyone in the real world that is just the thing you have to do when the circumstances change. We all hope for the best but make sure we plan for any eventuality. We can reintroduce the furlough now only because we kept the system on which it is based operational, because there was always the possibility that we would be back in this situation.

I will leave it to the people of this country to decide whether they believe the Government are trying our best to support people through an unprecedented crisis, to decide whether it is a good or bad thing to alter our economic plans as the health restrictions we face change. What I know is that the support we are providing will protect millions of jobs. What I know is that it is never wrong to convey confidence in this country and our economy through our words and action. And what I know is that today's announcement will give people and businesses up and down our country immense comfort over what will be a difficult winter. I commend this statement to the House.

12.28 pm

**Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Businesses and workers have been pleading for certainty from this Government, but the Chancellor keeps ignoring them until the last possible moment, after jobs have been lost and businesses have gone bust. The national lockdown was announced on Saturday, many weeks after both SAGE and Labour called for a circuit breaker. The Chancellor ridiculed those proposals for a shorter, more effective circuit breaker as a "blunt instrument". Just a moment ago, he argued that it was only last week that the Government's scientific and medical advisers presented data showing that the NHS was at risk of being overwhelmed. SAGE presented that evidence on 21 September, so I will give him the chance now to correct the record and state that actually, the Government knew about that evidence many weeks ago, rather than last week—he can intervene on me if he wishes to correct the record. No, he has not done that. That delay in implementing those measures, we know, has cost livelihoods and lives.

When the lockdown was announced, the Prime Minister said that furlough would be extended for a month, five hours before that scheme was due to end. Two days later, when it realised that the self-employed had been forgotten, there was a last-minute change to the self-employment scheme. Now there are further changes—the Chancellor's fourth version of his winter economy plan in just six weeks. The Chancellor can change his mind at the last minute, but businesses cannot. We need a Chancellor who is in front of the problems we face, not one who is always a step behind.

Until last Saturday, hospitality workers in the north had to plan on the basis that they would receive two thirds of their previous income—not 80% or 93%, as I think the Prime Minister said, but two thirds for huge numbers of them, because of this Government's failure



[Anneliese Dodds]

to fix flaws in the social security system. The Chancellor said no to those hospitality workers, only to accept their demands today. Ahead of announcing a firebreak, the First Minister of Wales made workable requests that could have offered support for Welsh workers. Again, the Chancellor said no, only to U-turn now.

Labour argued that Scotland should have access to the furlough scheme should there need to be a national lockdown north of the border. Once again, the Chancellor said no, then the Prime Minister said yes—cue another undignified scramble to accept that demand today. How many jobs could have been saved if this Government had recognised reality and let businesses plan for the future? Will the Chancellor apologise to those who have already been made redundant because of this last-minute approach?

Earlier this week, I called on the Chancellor to use the moment of the national lockdown to set out a proper plan for the next six months. Finally, today, he has indicated that furlough will remain for lockdown areas until March, as Labour had called for. Of course that is welcome, but many other questions remain. When will he deliver any information about the retention incentive, which Labour has been warning for months is poorly targeted?

By the time we get to March, it will be a whole year since the first economic support package, but there was still nothing in the Chancellor's remarks for those people who have been excluded from Government schemes until now. What does the Chancellor say to those groups? Will we face another scramble before the end of March? Can he guarantee that we will avoid such uncertainty then—depending, of course, on the health circumstances? Other countries seem to be able to plan for the future. Why cannot this one?

What is the future of the phantom funding formula, providing a seemingly arbitrary £20 a head to local areas under tiered restrictions for business support? How long will that support last? What happens when it runs out? When will the Chancellor fix social security, so that it stops penalising the self-employed, homeowners and huge numbers of other workers facing hardship because of problems that could be fixed quickly? What are his Government doing to rectify the problems with the £500 self-isolation payment, so that workers receive it when they need it and are not pushed into debt for doing the right thing?

Above all, when will this Government enable all local areas to deliver the test, trace and isolate system, which we know is more effective than the enormously expensive outsourced national system? The Chancellor needs to stop blaming our NHS, as he appeared to do a moment ago, when it is his Government who are still blocking local areas in lower tiers from delivering a more effective service. Our economy is struggling much more than many other countries', because this Government simply will not acknowledge that, until they get a grip on the health crisis, they will not be able to deal with our economic crisis. Confidence is indeed key, and that is what this Government need to start delivering.

**Mr Speaker:** We do not have interventions in statements, so if Members are wondering why the Chancellor did not intervene, that is why. It is no problem at all; I am just trying to be helpful.

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. The claim that our action was too late is, in the words of the Government's own medical advisers, a misapprehension, because there is no perfect moment at which to enact measures that have far-reaching and damaging consequences for the people and businesses of our country. We should only enact such measures when it becomes truly unavoidable. It is also entirely false of Labour Members to claim that things would somehow be different if only we did what they suggested, because they could not actually explain what their position was. At first, it was a circuit breaker for two weeks. Then it was an intervention that might last longer—I think yesterday we heard three weeks—and then it was something that would need to be reimposed again and again and again. That is not a plan that would support the businesses and people of this country.

The hon. Lady asked about the NHS. We have provided the NHS with tens of billions of pounds to ensure that they can do the very valuable job that they are doing, and they will have our full support over this difficult winter period. She asked about support for local authorities. We have provided just over £1 billion to give local authorities the ability to support their local businesses and economies through the winter period, on top of the direct support that those closed businesses will receive. She also asked about supporting local track and trace efforts. I agree that that is important, which is why we have provided, on a transparent funding formula, almost half a billion pounds to local authorities to ensure that they can carry out enforcement, compliance and local contact tracing at the level that they need.

The hon. Lady called for a six-month plan, yet she and her party have not put forward a six-month plan of their own, and I understand why. It is because they know—as most Members of this House, and most people and businesses in the country, know—that we are dealing with a once-in-a-century event. They know—as most Members of this House, and people and businesses up and down the country, know—that in the face of such an unprecedented crisis, the Government must be flexible in respond to to ever-changing circumstances. It is not a weakness to be agile and fast moving in the face of a crisis, but rather a strength; and that will not change.

**Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) [V]:** I agree with my right hon. Friend that taking an iterative approach to these problems as circumstances change is a strength rather than a weakness, but may I just focus for a moment on the lockdown itself? As my right hon. Friend will know, the minutes of the SAGE meeting held on 21 September stated:

“Policy makers will need to consider analysis of economic impacts and the associated harms alongside this epidemiological assessment. This work is underway under the auspices of the Chief Economist.”

My right hon. Friend knows that I wrote to him asking that the analysis referred to in those minutes be provided prior to the vote on lockdown that was held in the House yesterday, as this would have helped to inform that debate. The reply that I received did not provide the information requested, so will he confirm that the SAGE minutes are accurate when they state that the Treasury has worked on this analysis under the auspices of its chief economist? If they are accurate, will he confirm that the Treasury will release this analysis without delay?

**Rishi Sunak:** My right hon. Friend will know that I replied to him and his Committee with the answers to his question. There does not exist a specific prediction or forecast, which I think is what he is asking, but what we did provide—and the economic evidence that we considered—was the context for the lockdown being imposed and the impact that the initial lockdown has already had so one could make one's own assumptions about what would happen thereafter.

My right hon. Friend will know as well as I do that the Office for Budget Responsibility is one of our pre-eminent forecasters, and it is already forecasting that the economy will fall by about 10% this year, that unemployment will reach 12%—an increase of 2.5 million people—and that in the medium term our economy will suffer scarring of about 3%, which represents tens of billions of pounds less economic output. He will, of course, also know the impact that this is having on our public finances. That is the situation as it exists today, before we enter the new set of restrictions, which will obviously cause additional stress on all the numbers that I have outlined to him, and he will have seen the Bank of England's comments this morning that the duration of further restrictions will increase their impact of long-term scarring on the economy.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: I am tempted to read out the comments I made on Tuesday, or indeed any of the contributions I have made in the past six months, because it feels like I have been arguing for exactly the same things from the UK Government all this time. The reality is that Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the north of England have been dinged by this Chancellor until he was forced to lock down in England. I am glad that furlough and the self-employment support scheme has been extended to March, but we should be clear that that kind of support is not unique to the UK. Countries of all sizes have been supporting their people, and many of them have done it more competently and more generously than the UK. Can he confirm that the furlough scheme is not tied to any particular tier and it will be available to all who need it at 80%? Will he refrain from cutting it back to 60%, as before, because that cost many businesses and many employees dearly? Many businesses are as good as closed, especially in hospitality, tourism, travel, events and culture, and they need ongoing support.

I return to the issue of those excluded from the support schemes. It is disgraceful and unacceptable that there is still nothing in the statement for them after eight months. Can the Chancellor tell me why he is still choosing to ignore 3 million people across these islands? Many sectors of the economy in which they work are not going back to normal any time soon. I spoke to Scottish hospitality reps this morning and they are deeply worried about the winter months ahead. They are increasingly indebted, and 70,000 to 100,000 jobs are at risk. It would help them immensely if the VAT cuts that the Chancellor previously announced could be made permanent. I welcome the additional £2 billion for Scotland, because Scotland has been able to provide hospitality businesses with rates relief, but we need clarity on the future longer-term funding to plan ahead.

A growing number of businesses cannot afford to pay for redundancies should they go bust, so what provision is the Chancellor making for supporting those who may yet lose their jobs as businesses go to the wall? Will he

extend the £20 uprating of universal credit into the year ahead as well? Will he expand it to legacy benefits, because those on legacy benefits are really struggling? Will he enhance statutory sick pay? Will he listen to Maternity Action and Pregnant Then Screwed on their demands for women to be kept safe and their incomes protected?

This has been a complete bürach, but it does not need to be. Will the Chancellor work with all parties and the devolved institutions? At the very least, could he give the Cabinet Secretary for Finance in Scotland, Kate Forbes, the courtesy of a phone call?

**Rishi Sunak:** I am glad the hon. Lady welcomed the extension of job support through to next year. With regard to Scotland, it is clear, as even the First Minister has conceded, that the generous support currently available in Scotland is only possible and affordable because we have a Treasury that represents the whole of the United Kingdom. I can, of course, confirm that the coronavirus job retention scheme is a UK-wide scheme. We will continue to apply the furlough to each part of the UK equally, treating every citizen, no matter which region of the nation they live in, the same.

The hon. Lady also asked some specific questions and I am happy to provide her with the answers. Scotland will receive an up-front guarantee today worth £8 billion. That is an increase of £1 billion on the previously agreed up-front guarantee. That funding is for the Scottish Government to use as they see fit. The hon. Lady asked many questions about supporting businesses and people. It is, of course, up to the Scottish Government to make those choices on what to do with their extra £1 billion. We look forward to hearing what they plan to do with that additional funding. It is also worth bearing in mind, as we hear from the hon. Lady about the future Scottish budget, that the Scottish Government have the ability to raise taxes. The Scottish Government have the ability to raise the funds they need to fund the various projects they would like to fund. If those things are important, then of course the Scottish Government will be able to make those decisions on behalf of their people and be held accountable for them.

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for demonstrating the strength of the Union and showing that, with the best will in the world, the Scottish Government would not have the ability to have the resources to protect Scottish jobs in this way. Is it not now more important than ever that, across the whole of the United Kingdom, we stimulate wealth creation, creating new goods and services using the natural creativity and innovation of all the people of the United Kingdom? Can we look forward to my right hon. Friend using his considerable energy to bring forward proposals in this area based on sound, financially prudent Conservative principles?

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and I absolutely agree. He knows better than most the power of the Union and has seen it demonstrated countless times over the years of his service. He is also right about the power of free enterprise to drive our recovery. I can give him every reassurance that those sound free enterprise principles will be at the heart of everything we do, and ensure that we have a swift and generous recovery that will benefit citizens wherever they live.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: The Chancellor's U-turn on furlough comes after intense lobbying by the TUC, the CBI, Labour and leaders in the Liverpool city region. Can the Chancellor explain why workers in the north were expected to get by on 67% of their pre-crisis wages when tier 3 restrictions were put in place, but that has now changed to 80% once areas in the south of the country are being locked down? Will he give a cast-iron guarantee to the people of Wirral West that workers in the north will never again be treated as second-class citizens?

**Rishi Sunak:** It is simply not the case that the wage support schemes we have put in place differentiate between people on the basis of where they live. All the schemes, whether the furlough scheme or the job support scheme, treat people equally wherever they live in every region or nation of the UK. To suggest otherwise is simply wrong and, quite frankly, a misrepresentation of what the hon. Lady knows to be the case. She mentions the TUC. The TUC welcomes the introduction of the job support scheme, and I am grateful for its help in designing it.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Last week, the IMF singled out for praise the UK's economic response to the coronavirus, citing the timeliness, the speed of response, the generosity and the flexibility of the approach. The managing director said:

"We welcome the continuing efforts the government has made to refine its support measures".

Does my right hon. Friend also agree with the second part of what the IMF said last week, which is that over the medium to long term, we need to put the UK public finances back on a sustainable footing?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she will of course know this well from her own experience. We welcome the independent scrutiny of institutions such as the IMF—they are helpful in providing accountability for the Government in our economic response—and I am delighted that it was so positive about what we have done. She is also right that it said, correctly, that over the medium term, we must restore public finances to a sustainable position. Now is the time to provide fiscal support through a very weak period, but we want to build resilience for future crises so that when the next one of these comes along, we can respond in the same strong and generous way that we have been able to do this time.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: I am pleased to see the Chancellor finally in his place today, but for my constituents in Pontypridd and for everyone across Wales, his words are a case of too little, too late. I am aware that the UK Government have confirmed that devolved Administrations will receive Barnett consequentials in respect of new funding. However, I know from experience that people in Wales cannot and should not rely on yet another promise from this UK Government. The Chancellor will be aware that this is not the first time funding has been promised to the people of Pontypridd. I would like to take this opportunity to remind him of the devastating flooding that decimated communities across Rhondda Cynon Taf earlier this year, and it would be most irresponsible of this Government and utterly unfair for people in Wales if they are left behind once again. This Government have already blocked

the Welsh Government from using both the coronavirus job retention scheme and the job support scheme, and businesses in Wales are suffering now. Will the Chancellor therefore finally commit to fair funding for people in Wales, and will he agree to meet me and fellow MPs who represent Rhondda Cynon Taf to allow our constituents the best possible chance as we move through the coronavirus pandemic?

**Rishi Sunak:** I am glad that over 10,000 of the hon. Lady's constituents have had their jobs supported by the furlough scheme that the UK Government have provided. I am also glad that the Welsh Government will now have received £5 billion in up-front funding guarantees for Barnett funding—£600 million more as a result of announcements today—and I am sure she can talk to the Welsh Government about how they plan to use that money to support her constituents.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on measures that will both protect jobs and livelihoods through this lockdown and give businesses, as they plan for 2021 and beyond, real hope and confidence that there are better days ahead. With that in mind, does he agree with me and the Bank of England, with its forecasts this morning showing that economic activity in the UK is being supported by our substantial fiscal and monetary policy action, and its assessment that the extended coronavirus job retention scheme will mitigate significantly the impact of weaker economic activity in the labour market?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important for monetary and fiscal policy to be co-ordinated well, as he says, and I am glad that we are achieving that. It is also good to see the Bank of England recognising, as the IMF and the Office for Budget Responsibility have also highlighted, that our interventions in the labour market—our furlough scheme and other measures—have succeeded in suppressing the rise of unemployment. That will remain a single overriding goal: to keep people in work.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: The Chancellor told us in his statement that people and businesses want to know what comes next and how long we plan to keep the scheme open and on what terms. He said that they want certainty. They certainly do, and that is why businesses and individuals in my constituency and across this country are so tired of this constant chop and change. Will the Chancellor admit that he has to extend the furlough scheme through to the summer, to June 2021, to give those businesses the certainty they need to plan?

**Rishi Sunak:** We have provided that certainty through to the end of the spring, at the same time as saying that we will review the scheme in January to ensure that it is operating well and at that point review the employer contribution. Combined with all the other interventions we have made, I think that that provides the medium-term certainty that businesses need to plan through the winter and beyond.

**Katherine Fletcher** (South Ribble) (Con): I am pretty awed, to be honest, by the incredible scale of the support that this Government are putting in place for the people of South Ribble and beyond. We have a massive recovery to undertake in jobs and employment, and this is absolutely



vital. There is 2 billion quid being invested in kickstart to create opportunities for people leaving education. Does my right hon. Friend agree that prioritising help for those young workers, such as those leaving Runshaw College in Leyland, is the right thing to do and a key part of how we are going to recover?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is young people who are most impacted economically by the crisis we are experiencing, and she is absolutely right that they should be at the heart of our thinking about the recovery. The kickstart scheme is at the centre of that, providing fully funded job placements for at-risk young people. Tens of thousands are starting their jobs in the coming days and weeks, and we look forward to those young people having a new springboard into a bright career in her constituency and elsewhere.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chancellor for what he has said today. The equality for all the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is good news. Whether we are in Edinburgh, Cardiff, London or Belfast, we are treated equally. In relation to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which has been in a circuit breaker for the past two weeks, the Chancellor has said that the help will go right through until March, but should it be needed beyond that, it will be important to have that in place. Can the Chancellor specifically tell me what support will be given to businesses that have recently been set up but are excluded from the financial support schemes and are under extreme pressure for their very survival? It is good to hear that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is being treated equally, but it is also good to have something for those small companies that have just been set up.

**Rishi Sunak:** I can confirm that all our job schemes work on a UK-wide basis, treating everyone equally wherever they live, and that will continue always to be the case. I am also pleased to confirm today a £400 million increase in the up-front funding guarantee for Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland, bringing the total to £2.8 billion, and I am sure that the Northern Ireland Executive can use that funding to support businesses in the way that the hon. Member describes.

**Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the support that we have received. In Aberconwy, 8,800 jobs have been protected through the job retention scheme. Across Wales, 82,000 self-employed people have also been supported. Indeed, across Scotland, Northern Ireland and the whole of Wales, there have been unprecedented levels of support through schemes, through Barnett consequentials and more throughout this pandemic. Will he confirm again that this House stands for the whole United Kingdom, that it is our shared markets and strong economy that make this level of support possible and that all parts of our Union will continue to receive the attention and support of our Government?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well. This is a crisis that has engulfed our entire United Kingdom, and we will get through it together as one United Kingdom. This Government will continue to support businesses and people, wherever they live.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab [V]): Although I am disappointed that there was no mention of those who have been excluded so far, I welcome much of what the Chancellor has said, particularly in relation to the devolved nations. However, when I asked just two weeks ago for greater flexibility for the Welsh Government to support jobs during their firebreak break, that support was not forthcoming. Greater Manchester and other parts of the north of England received a similar response. I ask the Chancellor whether he and the Government realise that pitting areas of the UK against each other serves only to damage the integrity of the United Kingdom, and I urge him to recognise the need for equity across the Union.

**Rishi Sunak:** There is equity across the Union. I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the measures, but there is equity because everyone is treated exactly the same under these nationwide schemes. With regard to support in Wales, as I have said, £600 million more was announced today for the Welsh Government, bringing the total up to £5 billion of funding. Again, I am sure that the Welsh Government can use that money in the way that he suggests, which is to support businesses, if that is indeed what they want to do.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): May I add my name to the long list of people who, once again, are thanking my right hon. Friend for his unprecedented support, which will be a great source of comfort to the residents of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke? May I raise the fact that there is not just a financial incentive through the kickstart scheme for the under-25s, but a financial incentive now for the over-25s in the form of apprenticeships, which will be a huge boost to the jobs and economic recovery of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this type of scheme is exactly the way forward and that employers should be taking it up to ensure that we can reskill and retrain a workforce, who, in Stoke-on-Trent, are sadly largely low-skilled and therefore stuck, in some cases, in low-wage jobs?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For almost the first time, there is now a cash incentive for businesses to take on older apprentices, given the particular nature of the crisis that we face. I am glad that that will help to train and reskill people in his constituency. I hope that many of them will find their way to the world-beating ceramics industry that he champions so well, which I know will also be heartened by the extension of the furlough scheme today.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor is right that the strength of our Union comes when we are working together, yet the reality of the delay in announcing the extended support for Wales meant that jobs were lost when all the Welsh Government were doing was following the evidence. The Chancellor had said that it was a strength to act in an agile and fast-moving way, and that is exactly what they were doing. He also described the extended restrictions as “the only viable option”. Will he now do the right thing, in the interests of the Union, in the interests of fairness and in the interests of equity, and backdate the extended support to 23 October and allow those who lost their jobs potentially to be rehired and then furloughed?

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. What I can tell him is that the new CJRS date for eligibility will be 30 October, which means that those who were notified to HMRC at any point up to that time will be eligible to be furloughed under the new scheme and, indeed, those who were let go before the announcement of the plans in September can also be rehired and put back on the scheme. The details of that are in the guidance, which will be published imminently.

**Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend on behalf of the 1,900 self-employed people of Darlington who have benefited from the self-employment income support scheme and who will welcome his announcement today, but may I urge him to ensure that this money gets out of the door as quickly as possible, particularly with Christmas just around the corner?

**Rishi Sunak:** I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Those are three-month grants for the self-employed. The system will open in November so that grants can be paid in December, in time for Christmas, as he says. As he knows, that builds on our significant support for the self-employed. More than 3 million people are eligible for that support, which is now worth more than £14 billion. Today's announcement will mean an additional £7 billion of support to those people over the Christmas period.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP) [V]: My constituent Douglas McCarthy has been running the bespoke travel business Travelyard for many years and has seen his livelihood completely evaporate. Despite the fact that he has been bringing folk home and providing a vital service in the community, he feels that his industry has been virtually ignored by the UK Government and the insurance sector, which is failing to pay out on his business interruption insurance. In addition to the uncertainty over UK Government support, my constituent has had to deliver full refunds out of his own pocket with very little support. Will the Chancellor, or someone from his team, meet my constituent and me to hear the specific concerns about what can be done to support him and travel agents like him?

**Rishi Sunak:** Travel agents' businesses, coming under the retail category, will benefit from business grants in England, and that money has been Barnetted to Scotland, so the Scottish Government can choose to do something similar to support their travel agents. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary has previously worked with the insurance industry and the Financial Conduct Authority to provide clarified and updated guidance on business interruption insurance.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Chancellor now admit that his premature wind-down of furlough, which he had scheduled to finish last weekend, in the middle of what many people expected to be a second wave, was actually a mistake? Will he admit that the virus does not conform to Treasury models or his own timetable for it to disappear? Will he continue to show flexibility? Will he confirm, for the avoidance of doubt, that if the current lockdown ends on 2 December, the furlough scheme will still be available to all those across the country, whatever tier of restrictions they are put back into?

**Rishi Sunak:** I can give the hon. Lady that assurance. The CJRS has been extended to the end of March for all people in the United Kingdom, not dependent on the tiers. We will review in January whether it is appropriate at that point to ask employers to start making a contribution as the economy recovers. We will make that decision in January.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: I thank the Chancellor for coming to the House again to update us on the current situation, and congratulate him on the enormous amount of help that has been given to the British people throughout this pandemic, but could he tell us how the country is going to pay for that support?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. In the short term, we are paying for this through extensive borrowing. He will see that this year our debt-to-GDP ratio will rise to roughly 100%. We are also carrying a significant ongoing borrowing requirement, as is evident in the forecasts that have been seen. That is not a sustainable situation, so as we continue to recover and grow, we will have to make sure that we reduce our structural deficit over time, in line with the recommendations from the IMF, to stabilise it. In the first instance, that will come through growth, but we also need to make sure that our public finances are balanced appropriately so that we can pass a strong economy on to the next generation.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: In reply to a question I asked the Chancellor back in September, he said that those excluded from the self-employed scheme earned more than £50,000 and were in the top 5% of all earners. I would like him to admit today that that is not a fair picture of those who have been left out. Millions have been excluded who are not and never have been in the top 5% of all earners. Will he explain why he has deliberately left out so many people again when announcing this latest version of the self-employed scheme, and will he today finally commit to delivering justice for the self-employed?

**Rishi Sunak:** The hon. Lady talks about justice. We have spent over £14 billion to protect and support the self-employed, over 3 million of whom have been eligible for support. That is more substantial, comprehensive and generous than essentially any other country anywhere in the world. Today we have announced that that support is being made more generous and lasting longer, with an additional £7 billion, potentially, being paid out in December. I stand by what I said. One of the criteria for qualifying for the self-employment grant was that earnings were less than £50,000. Because we have less information about the self-employed, it was right to target that support at those who need it most. Of all the people who are majority self-employed, 95% earn under £50,000, and the average income of those over the £50,000 limit is about £200,000. I think that is a reasonable and fair way to make sure that we help the most needy in our society.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): I commend the Chancellor on his statement. The incredible £200 billion-worth of support this Government have already provided has protected thousands of jobs in Blackpool South, and I know that those businesses will warmly welcome the extension of the furlough scheme through to March. However, the reliance of coastal communities such as my own on tourism in the years

ahead will present particular challenges, so will he meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) to discuss that, in order to make sure that we continue to keep the Government's core ambition of levelling up on track in coastal communities?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for his local area and his local small businesses. I know how important tourism and hospitality is to his local economy. He will know that I am also a champion of that industry, and I would be delighted to meet him and other colleagues.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: Only a week ago, the Government told West Yorkshire to go into tier 3, with pub and bar staff in my constituency told that their jobs were being completely stopped—it was to be the same for them as under national lockdown. When we asked the Government to give them the full furlough scheme because their jobs were being stopped, the Chancellor said no. The facts show that when the jobs being stopped by covid restrictions were just in the north, he decided that they were worth only 67% and he treated them as second class. We need a guarantee that he will not do the same again. We have heard his defensive explanation that he got all the decisions right all along the way up to now, so can he explain why one week ago jobs being stopped in my constituency were worth 13% less?

**Rishi Sunak:** I say to the right hon. Lady, as I have said before, that all the interventions we have made apply on a UK-wide basis; they treat people the same, equally and fairly, wherever they happen to live. That was the case, is the case and always will be the case, and I can give her that assurance.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Like others, I am hugely grateful for this massive programme of support for jobs and livelihoods, which is helping so many people, including in my constituency, but it will all have to be paid for in the end, so will the Chancellor set out a plan to deal with the deficit and return the public finances to a sustainable footing for future generations?

**Rishi Sunak:** My right hon. Friend is right, and there will be a time when it is appropriate to do exactly as she suggests. Given the uncertainty at the moment, particularly with the economic forecasts, it is difficult to do that with precision and I think it would be inappropriate. However, in a few weeks' time we will have an updated set of forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility. They will illustrate the future direction of the deficit and the public finances, which will give us a sense of the task ahead of us and allow us to have a conversation about how, over time, to return the public finances to the sustainable position to which she rightly says they should be returned.

**Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab) [V]: Businesses in Blackburn have been under additional restrictions since July and entered tier 3 almost three weeks ago. Despite agreeing to give Lancashire local authorities £30 million in business support, which is equivalent to about £20 per head, the Government are yet to provide a penny. Now that the country is going into lockdown, other areas are

entitled to the same amount of support. It does not seem fair that businesses in Lancashire, Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire and Liverpool are entitled to the same amount as areas that were not under additional restrictions. Will the Chancellor explain the formula used to calculate the £20 per head business support grant, how long this funding is supposed to last and whether areas that were previously in tier 3, or may be returned to tier 3 after the current lockdown, can expect adjustments in the level of grant to reflect the greater economic impact that they are experiencing?

**Rishi Sunak:** I am pleased to tell the hon. Lady that the business grants schemes that were outlined—up to £3,000 a month for closed businesses and 70% of that for open businesses—have been backdated for those areas that were experiencing heightened restrictions for some weeks and months before the tiering system was introduced. That funding will be backdated, and I believe it will be paid in cash to local authorities next week, with the allocations given this week.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): May I again thank the Chancellor for his willingness to be flexible to respond to the changing needs of our economy during this crisis, and for the grants that will be made available to businesses that are forced to close? He will know that there will be many businesses in supply chains that will not be forced to close but whose revenues will be affected. Will he confirm that the money available to local authorities—I believe more than £5 million is coming to Cornwall Council—is specifically to support such businesses, and that local authorities will be able to use their discretion to apply those funds specifically to meet the needs of the local economy?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is right that, in aggregate, the sum is more than £1 billion for the country, with Barnett funding for the devolved Administrations. That can be used at the discretion of local authorities to support their local businesses and local economy over the winter period in a way that they see meets their exact circumstances.

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: We welcome the news that the Chancellor will keep the £20 universal credit uplift beyond next April, but is he aware that that will still leave people seeking work £1,000 per year worse off than they were 10 years ago?

**Rishi Sunak:** I am not sure that I entirely understood the question. The uplift in universal credit is temporary, but it is in place until next spring. More generally, to protect the most vulnerable in our society, I point the hon. Gentleman to the data released over the summer that shows that the suite of Government interventions means that the incomes of the lowest income households have been protected the most. That is a compassionate Conservative Government looking after everyone in our society.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): May I thank the Chancellor for extending the furlough scheme to March and for the cash grants for hospitality and other businesses that have had to close across my constituency? Will he continue to look at what support he can give to freelancers, including musicians, and company directors? Will he consider a beer duty cut to support my local microbreweries?



**Rishi Sunak:** I know my hon. Friend is a champion for his local brewing industry. The future of tax policy will be for Budgets. With regard to the self-employed, many of the people he mentioned will benefit from the increased generosity and timeliness of the self-employment support grants that we have announced today and before. They will be paid out before the end of the year, up to the value of £7,500 per person.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): The livelihoods of many self-employed Glasgow taxi drivers have been devastated in recent months. I note that on page 9 of the Chancellor's statement that he says that the income support grant for self-employed people will go through until January. Why will it not continue until March, in line with the furlough scheme?

**Rishi Sunak:** It will; the grant will be there for a second period. It has already been announced that there will be a fourth grant payable in the spring. The exact value of that will be determined in January at the same time as we decide on the future furlough employer contribution, because those things generally align with each other. There will be a fourth grant, as has already been confirmed.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the extension of the furlough scheme, but the Government have had since March to fix the gaps in the CJRS and the self-employment income support scheme, which have excluded more than 3 million individuals from support. That has caused huge damage to businesses and families. As we enter the second lockdown, the Chancellor could still amend that and fix the gaps that have been outlined extensively in the House. Will he commit to doing that? What is his message today to those 3 million excluded? What support will they be getting?

**Rishi Sunak:** The hon. Lady refers to gaps, but, as I have explained in previous answers, some of those are deliberate policy decisions to target support at those who need it most, which is the right and principled thing to do. I have also said clearly that, when it comes to the self-employed, I appreciate we have not been able to help everyone in exactly the way that they would have liked, but I hope that across the suite of different things we have done, whether business rates holidays, tax deferrals, bounce back loans, improvements to our welfare system or the housing allowance, there is something that can benefit the vast majority of the British people.

**Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: I welcome the statement that my right hon. Friend has made today and all that he has done to help businesses during this pandemic. Does he agree that today's increase of the third self-employed grant from 55% to 80%, on top of the £13.7 billion of support already provided, means that the package of support for the self-employed is one of the most comprehensive anywhere in the world? I believe that the self-employed in my constituency will welcome the further assistance that my right hon. Friend has announced today.

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right: we should be very proud that we have been able to step in and support more than 3 million of those who are self-employed

with comprehensive and generous support. That was the case at the beginning of this crisis and will remain the case all the way through to next year.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): This morning, I received a phone call from my constituent Hannah, who has a stall on the Lancaster charter market, which is an outdoor market. She and her business partner Hettie have been trading for just over a year and this is the second time that their business has had to close in that short period. She would like to ask the Chancellor whether traders who trade on outdoor markets should be considered differently from other traders, in order that such small, independent businesses might have a chance to thrive.

**Rishi Sunak:** What I say to Hannah and Hettie is that if they are registered for business rates themselves, they will be eligible directly for one of the business grants of up to £3,000 for every month that they are closed. We found that many traders in covered markets were not registered for business rates, which is why previously we provided discretionary funding to local councils specifically to deal with such examples as the hon. Lady has raised, so I hope that, if Hannah and Hettie are not registered for business rates, the local council followed the guidance and was able to provide them with support. We are now providing £1 billion of discretionary support to local councils, so I hope that the council can provide support to the hon. Lady's constituents.

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is a welcome package from my right hon. Friend, particularly in relation to the self-employed, but I hope we will look again at some of the detail of the exclusions and definitions in the self-employed scheme—things like the definition of trading profits and other matters that exclude some people.

Will my right hon. Friend also look at the position of the private and corporate events sector? Currently, businesses in the sector fall into a gap: they have not qualified for business rate relief because they sell food not directly to the public but through their clients, and they have not qualified for VAT relief on similar grounds. Such businesses are a critical part of the sector, worth many millions of pounds to the economy and employing some 600,000 people. Will my right hon. Friend look at what specific help they can be given?

**Rishi Sunak:** I am always happy to hear suggestions from my hon. Friend, particularly on improvements to technical language or drafting and guidance. If he has some suggestions, I look forward to receiving them soon.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP) [V]: In March, fewer than 8,000 people in Aberdeen were in receipt of universal credit; by September, the number had more than doubled to over 17,000 people. The Chancellor has made one spectacular U-turn today, so will he make another? Will he confirm that he will provide the funding necessary to maintain the £20-per-week universal credit uplift beyond the spring?

**Rishi Sunak:** Obviously, the Scottish Government are due to outline a budget at some point soon and, in respect of future tax and welfare policy, if that is

something that the hon. Gentleman and the Scottish Government want to do, I am sure they have every tool and lever at their disposal to do exactly that.

**Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for all that he has done during this challenging time to support jobs and businesses. As he will know, this is Tomorrow's Engineers Week. As the former engineering envoy, I am keen to see our vital engineering sector continue to thrive and prosper, so will my right hon. Friend tell the House what steps are being taken to ensure that the sector has full access to and participates in the excellent kickstart scheme, to bring on the talent of the future?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for the engineering sector, which he cares deeply about and has spoken to me about previously. He is right: it is important that we train the engineers of tomorrow, and what better time than Tomorrow's Engineers Week? I would be happy to talk to him and any organisations that he wants to connect me with to make sure that the sector fully benefits from the opportunities we are providing for companies to take on bright new people and provide them with a better future.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): This is a simple question to the Chancellor: why does he dress up on social media the financial support—which, as he stated today, has been given equally and fairly, wherever people live—by saying that the Welsh should be grateful for what is equally and fairly theirs to receive?

**Rishi Sunak:** As I have said before, this is a United Kingdom approach. We have universal schemes that benefit people equally wherever they live. On top of that, for those things that are devolved—that we do solely in England—I have announced today extra funding of hundreds of millions of pounds, with £5 billion in total for the Welsh Government, which can be used as they wish to support their constituents. I look forward to seeing how they plan to spend that money.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): My constituents understand the enormous challenges that the Government face, and that we cannot save every single job, but does my right hon. Friend share my pride that the IMF has said that our response to covid is “one of the best examples of coordinated action globally”, and that it specifically praised our response for “holding down unemployment”?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At the heart of our approach throughout this crisis has been the protection of people's livelihoods. We have strived at every turn to make sure that people can stay in work and their incomes are supported. As we go through this crisis, I assure every Member of the House, and the country, that that remains my overriding priority. We will throw absolutely everything we can at it.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): In contrast to some of the churlish comments from colleagues north of the border, I thank my right hon. Friend for listening and acting and demonstrating yet again, as the Government have throughout this crisis, that this UK Government—this one nation Conservative Government—act for and support people around this country, no matter in what region or nation they reside.

**Rishi Sunak:** A fitting place to end, I think. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a demonstration of the strength of the Union, and an undeniable truth of this crisis, that we have been able to provide this level of economic support because we are one United Kingdom.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Chancellor for his statement today, and for responding to 38 questions in just over one hour. I am now suspending the sitting for three minutes.

1.21 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## UK Terrorism Threat Level

1.26 pm

**The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire):** With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement regarding the UK terrorism threat level. The UK faces a serious and enduring threat from terrorism. Recent events in France and Vienna have provided a stark and brutal reminder of the risks that we face and the continuing need to be resolute in the face of those who would wish to sow division and hatred. This Government are committed to tackling terrorism in all its forms and to supporting our friends, partners and allies against those who would do us harm. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of France and Austria at this time of hurt and pain. Our thoughts are with the bereaved and all those who mourn the loss of loved ones. We have made formal offers of support to their Governments and underlined our shared resolve to stand together in solidarity against the extremists who despise our liberal values and our very way of life.

Since March 2017, UK police and security services have foiled 27 plots, including eight motivated by right-wing ideologies. The threat level system is designed to give a broad indication of the likelihood of a terrorist attack. It is a tool used by security practitioners working across different sectors and used by the police to determine the level of their overall protective security activity. It is also an important way of keeping the public informed about the threat from terrorism and to providing the context to understand why security measures are in place.

The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, JTAC, is responsible for setting the threat level to the UK from terrorism. JTAC operates independently of Ministers and keeps the threat level under constant review. It is based on the latest intelligence from our world-leading intelligence agencies and from our allies around the globe and considers factors including capability, intent and timescale. JTAC took the decision on Tuesday to change the UK threat level from international terrorism from “substantial”, meaning an attack is likely, to “severe”, meaning an attack is highly likely. JTAC keeps the threat level under review based on the very latest intelligence and taking into account international events. The recent terrorist attacks in France and Monday night’s attack in Vienna suggest that the temperature of the threat in Europe is rising.

I should stress that this change in the threat level is a precautionary measure and is not based on any specific threat. However, there is a risk that the recent attacks in France and Austria could have a galvanising effect in other parts of Europe, including the UK, and the change of threat level is therefore seen as prudent. We know that these incidents can be exploited by those who want to further their own cause, especially on online platforms. I am pleased to note that communities from across the UK stand together in uniformly condemning the attacks in Vienna and France. In particular, they stress that places of worship should never be targets for violence, and that religion should not be used to justify murder.

The national terrorism threat level takes account of the threat from all forms of terrorism, including—but not only—Islamist and right-wing terrorism and Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Great Britain. A separate

threat level for Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Northern Ireland is set by the Security Service, MI5, and remains at “severe”. When JTAC’s assessment of the threat changes, it is important that it is communicated as quickly as possible to ensure that those who rely on it to inform their decision making and planning can do so.

Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu has confirmed that the police have activated their established planning mechanisms following the change in threat level, and the public will see additional police officers deployed to certain places over the coming days. Our counter-terrorism strategy, *Contest*, sets out how the Government will confront all forms of terrorism. It aims to reduce the risk to the UK and its citizens and interests overseas from terrorism, so that our people can go about their lives freely and with confidence. Already, the Government have taken steps to ensure that Counter-Terrorism Policing and the Security Service have the necessary tools and powers to keep us all safe from the threat from terrorism.

In response to the horrific Fishmongers’ Hall and Streatham attacks, the Government acted swiftly by passing emergency legislation, the Terrorist Offenders (Restriction of Early Release) Act 2020, to end the automatic release of terrorist and terrorism-connected offenders. The Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill is currently being debated by Parliament. It will improve protections for the public by strengthening every stage in the process of dealing with terrorist offenders. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the police, security and emergency services, who show such resilience, courage and professionalism when responding to terrorist incidents, both in the immediate aftermath and in the investigations that follow. They put themselves in harm’s way to protect us, and we should never forget their service in keeping us all safe. Their skill and dedication are why we constantly invest in our security and intelligence agencies, to help ensure that they have the resources they need to deal with the threats we face.

We also continue to challenge ourselves as to what more we should do. The public inquiry into the Manchester Arena attack is currently taking evidence. I know that this is a difficult and painful time for many people. The inquiry is rightly examining the events of that terrible night so that those who survived and those who lost loved ones can get the answers they need, and so that we learn and apply the lessons, whatever they may be.

Finally, at this time, I urge the public to remain vigilant. We should be alert but not alarmed, and any suspicious or concerning behaviour should be reported to the police. Those responsible for these attacks want to change our very way of life. Our clear message to them is that our values, our freedoms and our principles are what make us strong, and that they will never succeed. I commend this statement to the House.

1.33 pm

**Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for early and advance sight of his statement. I know that the Home Secretary also spoke to the Leader of the Opposition this week. It is important that the House and, indeed, the country know that there is unity of purpose between the Government and the Opposition on these matters.

I start by extending our heartfelt sympathy to the victims of the recent attacks in France and Austria. Our hearts go out to the family of Samuel Paty and to those



who lost loved ones, killed in the most horrific and senseless way, in Vienna and Nice. I am sure that many Members will join me in sending solidarity and support to our friends and allies, the citizens of France and Austria, who have experienced this assault on their values, their freedoms and their way of life.

I have been clear from this Dispatch Box that we on the Opposition Benches consider it our first responsibility to keep this country, its people and our communities safe. We will be forceful, fair and robust in supporting the fight against terrorism and crime in all its forms. We therefore wholeheartedly support the decision of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre that the terror threat be raised from substantial to severe, and we share the Government's view that this decision should not cause undue alarm. It is a precautionary move, but it demonstrates the importance of us all remaining vigilant, building up our current capabilities and closely monitoring existing threats. We are deeply grateful for the work of JTAC alongside our security services and Counter Terror Policing, who continue to carry out vital work to keep us safe.

I would, however, like to ask the Security Minister a few questions. First, what is the Government's strategy for enacting and reinforcing these heightened measures? Will the Minister outline to the House how regularly JTAC reviews the terror threat level, or is it on an ad hoc basis? We welcome the proactive response from the head of Counter Terrorism Policing, Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, whose work and team I pay tribute to. He said that the police had "activated ... established planning mechanisms", increased "levels of visible patrols" and implemented wider security and protection measures. Will the Minister inform the House what additional resources have been made available to counter-terror police, the UK intelligence services, UK law enforcement and their operational partners to keep the public safe, in line with the heightened measures? Public communication will also be vital to the efficacy of these changes, and at a time when public health messaging has been uniquely bombarded and we are asking a lot of the public in terms of interpreting and co-operating with it, how can the Government ensure that they are successfully promoting a strong, clear and consistent message on public safety in this regard? What routes are available to the public for reporting suspicious activity?

Can the Minister confirm to the House the status of the independent review of the Prevent strategy? We feel that this is long overdue and it has a vital role to play as part of the holistic, preventive approach to tackling terrorism. Will the Government provide additional border and port checks in Great Britain as part of the measures? Does the Minister continue to be satisfied that a separate assessment for Northern Ireland continues?

We have faced our own challenges in this country, as the ongoing inquiry into the Manchester Arena attack demonstrates only too well. The citizens of France and Austria are enduring this pain now. We know that we can never let terror or extremism, whether from Islamism or the far right, divide or undermine our core values or diminish our way of life. It must always be met with a robust and decisive response. Keeping the public safe is our shared priority. We support today's decision and urge the British people to remain vigilant and, as ever, steadfast.

**James Brokenshire:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support and that of the Opposition. As he highlighted, the Home Secretary spoke to the Leader of the Opposition. Indeed, I also spoke to leaders in the devolved Administrations to ensure that there was good communication and co-ordination across the whole United Kingdom, recognising that this threat level speaks to all the UK.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the role of JTAC. I can say to him that JTAC keeps the threat level under constant review, so it is a question always of assessing not only the intelligence and information that is available, but the context, which is why, as I indicated, the international perspective is also so important when analysing this.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the public communication. I underline that the counter-terrorism policing network effectively sent a communication around the entirety of the network so that policing in all parts of the UK had consistent messaging. There are established processes and procedures that apply to ensure that we step up visibility in public places, thinking about how to provide support to places that may have areas of vulnerability, crowded places and all those sorts of themes. Therefore, this is part and parcel of the standard approach that is reflected in the resources we provide to our intelligence and Counter Terrorism Policing.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Prevent strategy. We are in the final stages of the recruitment of the independent reviewer, and there is a real opportunity to examine those elements of our work and see what further steps we need to take. As I have indicated to the House already this afternoon, we will continue to challenge ourselves on what additional measures may be appropriate.

In terms of Northern Ireland, we judge that a separate assessment is appropriate. It is a separate process that operates, and the Security Service is involved in that step, looking at the threat, sadly, from dissident republican terrorism in Northern Ireland. That threat very much endures. We remain vigilant and robust in meeting the challenges there, in co-ordination with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, as well as other agencies.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. We stand united against those who would seek to divide us. National security and the safety of our citizens remain the utmost priority for this Government.

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Ind):** I welcome the fact that the Government have chosen to make this statement. The attack plans of lone terrorists are obviously the hardest to anticipate, yet their behaviour often sends signals to those in their immediate circle. What advice does my right hon. Friend have for people who see worrying signs that someone they know is developing an extremist outlook?

**James Brokenshire:** My right hon. Friend makes a really important point about the nature of the threat that we face from self-motivated individuals, but they are not isolated and they are not alone; they sit within communities and within families. They have connections with different agencies. That is why we introduced the Prevent duty on statutory agencies, but if people have concerns, they should report them in confidence to the police. The counter-terrorism hotline is 0800 789 321. There are additional resources online at gov.uk and also

[James Brokenshire]

the Action Counters Terrorism—or ACT—app. That can be downloaded and provides further information and ways to report.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This is a prudent move, and the United Kingdom Government have the full support of the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government in the fight to keep all our communities safe from terrorism. I take this opportunity to express condolences on behalf of my party to those bereaved or injured in the recent terrorist atrocities in Vienna and across France, and to express our solidarity with the people of Austria and France. I pay tribute to those who risk their lives to keep us safe. The funeral of Sergeant Matt Ratana yesterday was a sad reminder of the high price they pay for our safety. I salute his courage and his service, and extend the sincerest condolences of my party to his family and friends.

Will the Minister tell us what work is being carried out with local communities and faith groups to ensure a co-ordinated response as the threat level is increased? What support and assistance are being offered to minority groups in need of additional reassurance? He will be aware that in Scotland, the delivery of the Prevent strategy is devolved and has worked well to foster strong relations between communities and the police. Will he consider looking at the success of Scotland's approach and seeing what lessons can be learned for the rest of the United Kingdom?

Finally, it is the remit of the Home Office to ensure that all our communities are kept safe and secure. In mid-September, counter-terrorism police warned the Home Secretary that it was suspected that a far-right extremist had attempted to carry out a terrorist attack at a solicitors firm in London, yet in early October she and the Prime Minister went on to intensify their anti-lawyer rhetoric. Will the Minister acknowledge that there is a responsibility on politicians and other public figures to avoid saying anything that could inflame tensions or put people at risk?

**James Brokenshire:** I welcome the support that the hon. and learned Lady gives to the steps that JTAC has taken, and I underline to her the contact that I had shortly afterwards with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to again emphasise that co-ordinated approach across the United Kingdom. The hon. and learned Lady rightly highlights those who put their very lives on the line for us, and the funeral of Matt Ratana, as she highlights, underlines that so clearly. I know the thoughts of the whole House will be with his friends, his loved ones and his colleagues today.

The hon. and learned Lady highlights the issue of communities. The counter-terrorism network clearly works across the UK to provide support, contact and advice to faith communities and other places of vulnerability in order to ensure that appropriate measures can be put in place. The places of worship scheme, which was established by the Home Office, has awarded 183 grants in England and Wales. I also highlight the broader work that we co-ordinate with the Scottish Government to ensure that we can work and learn together, recognising, as Neil Basu said, that it is communities standing together that defeats terrorism.

In relation to the hon. and learned Lady's last point, let me say very gently that this case is pre-trial and it would not be appropriate to provide any further comment that might have an impact on legal proceedings.

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for making it clear that Islamist terrorists are a threat not just to our physical security, but to all that we stand for. They are of a separatist tendency, intolerant, violent and against our very way of life. Does he agree that all of us, in this House and beyond, have a duty to constantly re-emphasise our belief in democracy, a secular rule of law, freedom of the individual, religious tolerance, and equality between men and women? Do we not have a further duty to make it very clear that what we believe in is not just different from the Islamists—that what we believe in is better?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for expressing that view. It is our liberal democracy, values and principles—who we are—that these terrorists want to attack and change. We will not allow them to do so, because it is the very essence of our country, our values and our democracy that makes us strong; by being vigilant and robust in our defence of those values, we will ensure that these people never, ever succeed.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank the police, and security and intelligence agencies, for the work that they continue to do to defend our values and keep us safe. I join the Minister in thinking of those who have been affected by the terrible attacks in France and Austria. We stand firm with our friends and neighbours against these violent extremists and terrorists.

Given how important it is for us to be able to work closely with our neighbours against terrorism and extremism, will the Minister update the House on the progress with establishing a new security agreement for the end of the transition process? In particular, can he confirm that the Government expect to have strong arrangements in place on information sharing, access to crucial databases, work with Europol and arrest warrants in time for 1 January, and that not to do so would make it much harder for the police and security agencies, who work so hard to keep us safe?

**James Brokenshire:** As the right hon. Lady will appreciate, the negotiations with our EU partners are at a sensitive point. We continue to focus firmly on security issues, but I remain positive that we will find a way through, recognising the important message that we are stronger by working together and that it is that co-ordination and co-operation that assists us all. As we look to a future beyond the end of the transition period, the focus on national security—ensuring that we are a safe nation and a safe place to be—will remain. As the negotiations continue in these crucial days, I hope that we will achieve a positive outcome that reflects the interests of us all in defending our values and our citizens.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con) [V]: May I put on record my gratitude, and the gratitude of my constituents and the Community Security Trust, for the decision by the Metropolitan police to provide additional patrols in

the Hendon constituency following the Vienna attack? Is the Minister aware that some parts of the media erroneously reported that the attack in Vienna was at a synagogue, and that this produced an increase in the amount of online incitement from jihadists and far-right extremists? If the threat level has been changed as a result of a heightened threat to the Jewish community, can the Minister provide reassurances that sufficient police resources will be provided to meet that threat?

**James Brokenshire:** My hon. Friend is clearly aware of the reassurance approach that Counter Terrorism Policing has taken. That has led to increased patrols and discussion with the Counter Terrorism Policing network and the Community Security Trust, to provide that reassurance, and ensure that action is well co-ordinated. As my hon. Friend will know, the Jewish community protective security grant has been provided for protective security measures at community sites, including a number of synagogues. We keep this issue under review, recognising that important essence of support so that all communities can practise their faith, and those are precisely values that we as a country seek to uphold.

**Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** I, too, wish to extend my thoughts and prayers to the families, and to all those who have been bereaved or injured by these horrendous, horrible and evil attacks. The Vienna authorities have indicated that they failed to act on some of the advice they were given, and I hope that such a criticism could never be made of our British authorities and the good work they do. The jihadist and Islamist terror threat, and the Irish terror threat, are well known and well voiced, and this adds weight to calls to have the Muslim Brotherhood proscribed in this country. Will the Minister take this opportunity to commend the work of the National Crime Agency? It has a magnificent approach to its work across all the United Kingdom, and it works closely with our authorities in Northern Ireland. Is there any effort to extend that organisation's footprint in Northern Ireland?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the excellent work done by the National Crime Agency. Earlier this year I was able to travel to Northern Ireland and see the actions of the NCA, and meet some of the officers who are doing sterling work in Belfast and across the whole of Northern Ireland. It is important to continue to support that, and I underline the connections between the National Crime Agency and Counter Terrorism Policing. If any links or intelligence straddle organised crime and terrorism, those should be picked up, and we must ensure that that strong co-ordination has the effect on our security and safety that we all wish to see.

**Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]:** All of us owe a daily debt to the security services, the Foreign Office and the police for all that they do to keep us safe, and my heart goes out to all those who have lost friends and loved ones in the recent devastating attacks. I appreciate the supportive tone of those on the Opposition Front Bench, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that just a few weeks ago, when the House was asked to give our security services the support they need in the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill, those on the Opposition Front Bench sat on their hands and refused to stand by our security services?

**James Brokenshire:** Parties across the House need to reflect on the messages they give, and Conservative Members stand four-square behind our police and security agencies. That is why we judge that the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill is important to safeguard capabilities and ensure that terrorist plots can be disrupted, and our security services can certainly rely on our support, and on continued support in the future.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):** I thank the Minister for advance sight of this statement. He is well regarded across the House because he takes his duties seriously, and he generally goes about his business in a thoughtful and non-partisan way that prioritises keeping us all safe. I think we should place that on the record, whatever other disagreements we may occasionally have. With that in mind, is he aware of the comments of former EU security commissioner, Julian King, who said that a Brexit deal would still provide useful access to intelligence and security co-operation across the European Union, but that a no-deal Brexit would mean cutting ourselves off from that? Given his approach in other areas, what is the Minister doing to ensure that we have the best possible access to security and intelligence sharing post 31 December?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and yes, I do take these issues incredibly seriously, as he well knows from the discussions on these topics that we have had over many years. Clearly, negotiations are going on with our EU partners, but if they do not conclude successfully, we will move back to pre-existing tools and powers. I would say to him that the emphasis on security and protecting our citizens is the utmost element of all that we do and therefore so is ensuring that, whatever the outcome, we keep our citizens and our country safe.

**Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con):** The current, floundering Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has threatened to cut the Metropolitan police budget by £110 million. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that would be grossly irresponsible and leave us at greater threat of terrorism?

**James Brokenshire:** I am concerned by what my hon. Friend has said. In January, the Home Secretary announced a £90 million increase in funding for counter-terrorism policing, taking the total for this year to £906 million, the highest ever. Clearly, that sits within the footprint of other policing activity, and I would say to those in authority to think carefully about the decisions they take and how they then relate to the security that we all feel.

**John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]:** The UK Government fund community groups to work against extremism. Were the budgets for those groups cut this year? If so, is the Minister concerned that any reduced funding at a time of increased threat could hinder efforts to help communities fight the battle against extremism?

**James Brokenshire:** I would say to the hon. Gentleman that clearly we have supported communities. We have supported funding for places of worship and those who may be effective. We have our Prevent strategy, which



[James Brokenshire]

absolutely is about engaging and ensuring that communities can come forward, and that we do all work together. That remains part of our strategy, keeping us all safe.

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Colleagues across the House have talked rightly about defending our liberal values, but it is first and foremost our people we must defend—the first duty of any Government. Can my right hon. Friend elaborate to the House on what powers and tools he is giving to our police forces, including my own force, Thames Valley police, to keep us safe from this emerging and evolving terrorist threat?

**James Brokenshire:** As I have indicated, the Government will do all that is necessary to ensure that Counter Terrorism, Policing and the security services have the necessary tools. We have acted swiftly in seeing the end of automatic release for terror-connected offenders, and the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill will strengthen things further, ensuring that serious and dangerous terrorism offenders will spend longer in custody and strengthening the regime on terrorism prevention and investigation measures. We stand reflective, and the Home Secretary and I have asked officials to review with partners existing and proposed powers in the light of the horrific attacks in France and Austria to consider what more, if anything, might be needed.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): The likes of me were saddened and sickened by the horrific terrorist atrocities perpetrated recently in Paris, Nice and Vienna. While expressing condolences, I would like to convey my solidarity with the good people of France and Austria in the battle against extremist ideology. While our brave counter-terrorism police and security services have already thwarted several terrorist plots here in the UK, and I thank and commend them for helping to keep us all safe, the Security Minister will appreciate that our constituents will be extremely concerned by the heightened terror threat right here in the UK. Will he outline what lessons have been learned for the counter-terrorist strategy in our country from what has happened on the continent?

**James Brokenshire:** Clearly, there is a broader network of information sharing, intelligence sharing and working with partners—our Five Eyes group, as well as our European partners. Therefore those exchanges, that work and that sharing of good practice and ideas are very firmly in place, and our Contest counter-terrorism strategy has informed the thinking of others. We remain vigilant. We remain reflective and open-minded in terms of how we can strengthen our tools and powers and strengthen our approach, and it is through that co-ordination and co-operation that we can do so.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the Minister's statement. He has outlined the number of incidents that have been foiled by our excellent intelligence and police services. Can he clarify the number of people currently considered potentially to be violent Daesh or far-right-inspired extremists in the United Kingdom, and has that number gone down or up over the past 12 months?

**James Brokenshire:** I commend the work of my hon. Friend in challenging so much of these issues around extremism, and indeed the work that he has done on the issue of faith in such a positive way. He will understand that I will not get drawn into matters of intelligence, but the head of MI5 has said that there are several thousand subjects of interest that are monitored and assessed. We are very vigilant against the threats and challenges that are there. Therefore, through our approach on the threat level and our approaches through the Contest counter-terrorism strategy, we challenge ourselves to do all that we possibly can. Equally, this Government will support our counter-terrorism policing and the Security Service in that endeavour in keeping us safe.

**Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: Those detained under terrorism legislation are entitled to legal representation. Many, after all, are released without charge, or indeed even stain on their character. Northern Ireland has previously seen attacks on lawyers doing such work, as the deaths of Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson testify to. Will the Minister ensure that legal representatives are not besmirched or undermined, and that their necessary and appropriate role in due process and the rule of law is respected?

**James Brokenshire:** This Government stand behind the rule of law. It is part of the essence of who we are as a country. That obviously does necessitate, require and oblige fair representation. I say to the hon. Gentleman in very strong terms that I condemn and take strong issue with those terrorists who would seek to undermine our very values. That is why I made the comments in the statement about seeing that as a Government, as a House and as a country we stand up for our values and stand against those who would wish to destroy them.

**Imran Ahmad Khan** (Wakefield) (Con): Having devised, implemented and managed effective and successful Prevent programmes at home and overseas, I know that the best way to prevent terrorist atrocities from taking place is to stop people being drawn into terrorism in the first place. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress of the Prevent review, and does he agree that we must make this programme more effective?

**James Brokenshire:** I commend my hon. Friend for the work that he has done and the powerful and important point that he makes—that we need to do all we can to prevent people from becoming engaged in terrorism and moving down a pathway that takes them further and further into it. We launched a full and open competition to appoint the next independent reviewer of Prevent, and the successful candidate will be announced as soon as possible. I want to get on with this. There is some very good practice within Prevent, but equally we need to challenge ourselves as to how we can improve that—what more we can do—and that is what I am committed to doing.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: Coming from Manchester, I can say that we stand in absolute solidarity with the people of Paris, Nice and Vienna. National security and protecting the population is one of the most important duties of Government. Indeed, it is something that this House should always take seriously. I thank and support the police, security and intelligence services in the difficult job that they do to keep us safe from vile acts of terrorism. Given the

upcoming comprehensive spending review, can the Minister tell the House what level of resources our Counter Terror Policing has requested and whether that funding will be forthcoming?

**James Brokenshire:** I understand why the hon. Gentleman takes me down that route, but the spending review is obviously ongoing. We do take these issues of national security incredibly seriously, and announcements in relation to the spending review and allocations to Departments will be made in due course.

**Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): South Kensington in my constituency is the heart of the French community in the UK. Given the recent terrorist atrocities in France, can my right hon. Friend assure me that we are doing everything to protect French sites in the capital?

**James Brokenshire:** I can give that assurance to my hon. Friend. It is a point of discussion that I have had with Counter Terrorism Policing, and I know how seriously it takes this in looking at sites and providing support to the community. It is the richness of our community that I think makes our capital city and our country so special, and why we give that sense of reassurance to everyone here and stand against those who despise that and would wish to destroy it.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I know that the Muslim community in Swansea will be appalled by and condemn the awful terrorist attacks in France and Austria and stand in solidarity with the victims. Islam, after all, is the Arabic word for peace. Does the Minister agree that we need to ensure all our communities stand together side by side to identify and to root out terrorism, whether it is based in a perversion of mainstream religion or in right-wing violence, and that all our communities deserve the protection the state must apply in that process?

**James Brokenshire:** I do. The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about the peaceful religion of Islam, and the twisted perversion that terrorists seek to apply to it to advance their twisted cause. I think it is important to underline that message of standing together shoulder to shoulder with all our communities against those who would wish to create division, hatred and extremism. That is not what our country is all about, and it is why, as a community and as people, we stand against those who would use those sorts of terrorist tactics, which are in complete opposition to who we are.

**Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): The UK's terrorism threat level has just been raised to severe, and from today the Government are once again telling people to stay at home because of the risk caused by the virus, with Remembrance Sunday services cancelled up and down the country, yet tonight thousands of people will be protesting in London, which is a complete slap in the face to my constituents in Redcar and Cleveland. Can the Minister confirm that, in the light of these things, today's protest should not be going ahead, and will he encourage the police to enforce the law, protect the public and disperse the protest?

**James Brokenshire:** In response to my hon. Friend, I think I would make the point that the right to peaceful protest is one of the cornerstones of our democracy, but in these unprecedented times any gathering risks

spreading the disease, leading to more deaths, so it is vital that we all play our part in controlling the virus. People must follow the rules on meeting others, which apply to all gatherings and therefore to protests, too. As they have done throughout the pandemic, the police and local authorities will engage, explain and encourage people to follow the rules before moving on to enforcing the law.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Having recently joined the Intelligence and Security Committee and as a member of the Home Affairs Committee, I have huge respect for the vital work of our police and security services in keeping our citizens safe and protecting our values. However, it is strongly suspected that covid lockdowns have increased the conditions in which largely unknown lone individuals are radicalised online by terror groups, including those of the far right. Can the Minister say what he is doing to review the adequacy of the powers to monitor and take action on potentially dangerous individuals?

**James Brokenshire:** The hon. Lady sits on the ISC, and I commend the Committee and the comments of its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), earlier in relation to these really important issues. The hon. Lady is right to highlight how the increased use of the internet as a result of covid-19 has brought into focus the need for us to remain vigilant of terrorists seeking to exploit the situation. We are working closely with tech companies to ensure that preventing terrorists' use of their platforms continues to be a priority and that companies are responding quickly to any emerging threats. We need to focus on the issue of end-to-end encryption, which intentionally blinds tech companies' access to content and would have a disastrous impact on public safety. That is why we ask them to find solutions that put the public's safety first, and they must not turn a blind eye to this problem.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for what he has said. Last weekend, the papers in Northern Ireland reported that dissident republicans had a very large bomb, and intelligence agencies indicated that they were trying to find it. For our police to effectively prevent and respond to terrorist attacks, they need to have all the funding and resources required. Can he confirm that the £90 million funding boost that this Government delivered for our counter-terrorism police this year ensures that our regional forces have the capabilities to mount a swift and effective response to any terrorist attack and that additional funding is making its way to Northern Ireland as we deal with our additional threats of the home-grown variety—dissident republicans?

**James Brokenshire:** It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to know of my focus on issues of Northern Ireland's security, given the incredible and positive time that I had experiencing the wonderful people of Northern Ireland. We remain very conscious and vigilant of the threat. As he will understand, I will not comment on issues of intelligence, but I can assure him that we take a co-ordinated and resolute approach, which plays into the consideration of funding, to ensure that all parts of our United Kingdom are safe and secure.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): The terrorist threat to this country does not only come from isolated individuals but from some hostile states as well. Can my

[*Scott Benton*]

right hon. Friend outline the powers that this Government have given our police forces and security services to ensure that they are able to combat those threats as well?

**James Brokenshire:** I appreciate the powerful point that my hon. Friend makes about the threats to this country. We stand resolute and vigilant against the threat from hostile states. We are actively considering further measures in this space. There is a commitment in the Queen's Speech on further legislation to counter hostile state activity, and I will update the House further in due course in that regard.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: The Minister will be all too aware that many individuals start their path to extremism and radicalisation on the internet. With our lives moving online even more this year due to the pandemic, does he agree that it is even more crucial to move forward with legislation such as the much delayed online harms Bill and that there can be no excuses for further stalling?

**James Brokenshire:** I have already outlined the emphasis that we give to the online space, which we will not allow to be in any way a place where those who wish to foment terrorism or extremism are able to thrive. That is why we are working with online companies and have established the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit, which does takedown work. The response to the online harms White Paper will be published shortly, with legislation to follow thereafter.

**Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): The recent terrorist attacks across Europe are deeply concerning, and I want to thank the emergency services and multiple agencies in Carshalton and Wallington for their joined-up approach to preparations for major incidents. Can the Minister assure me that this multi-agency approach is being taken across the United Kingdom and that all these services have the powers and resources they need to deal with developing threats?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his words of support to our emergency services for the incredible job that they do. As I have indicated, we have strengthened the powers, we keep this under review, and we have provided additional resources. But I underline that national security and keeping our citizens safe is the priority of this Government, and we will do all we can to see that that continues.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): My thoughts are with those who recently lost their lives and were injured in the horrific attacks in France and Austria. We must not let recent events and the increased terror threat level correspond with increases in racism and hate crimes against our Muslim communities by the far right. Will the Minister outline the conversations that he may have had with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the actions that the Government intend to take to stop that happening?

**James Brokenshire:** The hon. Lady makes a powerful and important point about supporting all communities. The issue of right-wing terrorism is firmly on my mind.

We have taken action on proscribing various groups. We keep that under careful and steady review.

As I indicated, since March 2017, the police have disrupted eight right-wing terrorist plots. It is concerning to see the ages of some of those involved, but we work closely with our colleagues across Government to take action and to provide assurance to all communities that hatred and division are firmly responded to and that we act together as a collective community.

**Robert Lorgan** (High Peak) (Con): The attacks in Paris, Nice and Vienna are attacks on all of us that cut to the heart of our values. We all stand in solidarity with the people of France and Austria. To tackle the constantly evolving threat, it is vital that we give our security services the tools that they need and that we learn the lessons of past attacks. With that in mind, will the Minister urgently introduce legislation when the Manchester bombing inquiry reports on its findings?

**James Brokenshire:** As I have already indicated, we will continue to challenge ourselves as to what more we need to do. As we speak, the Manchester inquiry is rightly asking searching questions and taking evidence clearly. As I said, I know that this is a very difficult and painful time for many people. We want to see that inquiry conclude and to reflect on its recommendations. It is important to state that we have already taken a number of steps, but if there is more learning that we need to take or apply, we will do so.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: The Minister knows that, despite our political differences, I have a great deal of respect for him, so I am sure it was only an oversight that he did not reply to part of the question of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). She reminded us that we all have a responsibility to remember that if we allow the language of hatred and intolerance to become acceptable in our lives, actions of hatred and intolerance will follow.

Last night, for example, election observers from the internationally respected Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe went as far as to accuse the man who claims to be the leader of the free world of deliberate attempts to weaken confidence in the election process. I give the Minister another chance to follow the example of his colleague the Justice Secretary earlier this week in committing to being mindful of the language that he uses and urging all his Cabinet colleagues to do the same.

**James Brokenshire:** As the hon. Gentleman said, we have had a number of discussions on many different fronts over the years. I stand for the rule of law and for our upholding it to ensure that we reflect on seeing it as a core part of our values as a country. Therefore, we stand shoulder to shoulder against those who would seek to create terrorism, whether against lawyers or parts of our community. Terrorism and hatred have no place in our society and the Government will always stand against them.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend will be well aware that many of the attacks across Europe have been religiously motivated. Sadly, our places of worship across England and across the UK are currently closed for collective worship, but



available for private worship. In particular, Hindu new year is in two weeks' time. Can he confirm what arrangements have been made to make sure that people who attend places of religious worship for private prayer can do so safely and securely and that places of worship will be thoroughly protected during the lockdown?

**James Brokenshire:** If it is helpful to my hon. Friend, I can reassure him that Counter Terrorism Policing has asked all forces to review all events over the next 14 days to ensure that appropriate advice and security arrangements are put in place. As we have a heightened threat level, it is important that we reflect on forthcoming events and where communities may be celebrating or marking particular events in the religious calendar. I underline that and recognise that, yes, of course, at this time when communal acts of worship are not permitted, notwithstanding that there will be individual acts of worship, places themselves may be potential challenges, which is why the police are taking that co-ordinated approach in offering reassurance and advice for the good reasons that he highlights.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank both the Minister for his statement and the security services for the work that they do, day in, day out, to keep us safe. We know that many perpetrators of terrorism are isolated and vulnerable individuals and so taking a safeguarding approach is really important. May I ask him what terms of reference will be in the Prevent review to ensure that a safeguarding approach is taken?

**James Brokenshire:** When I was last in this role a number of years ago, that element of safeguarding was how I very firmly articulated our work in relation to Prevent, to deal with some vulnerable individuals who may be isolated and who may face a whole host of different factors. For many of them, it is about ensuring

that we have the right preventive measures and the right support measures in place, which is why so many different agencies are involved.

We are in the final stages of appointing the independent reviewer, and the terms of reference will be discussed with that individual. That will enable the review to move forward and, I hope, ensure that we have the right learning and the right lessons that we can apply so that we take action not only to prevent, but to safeguard.

**Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) [V]: As my right hon. Friend will know, the threat that we face from terrorism is ever evolving. Will he tell the House what technology and data tools have been made available to our security services so that they can stop these attacks before they occur? What monitoring and disruption weapons are in the armoury that he can give to our very, very important security services?

**James Brokenshire:** I recognise the leadership and the interest that my hon. Friend has shown in science and technology over so many years and I commend him for everything that he does. I hope he will understand that I will not be drawn down a route of opening up techniques and tactics and the way in which our intelligence and security agencies operate, but I can say that we keep these issues under very careful review. We are blessed with world-leading intelligence agencies which invest very firmly in ensuring that they have the right capabilities to meet the challenges of an ever more data-driven age, and they will continue to do so.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** The last question from Steven Bonnar is, I believe, audio only. [Interruption.] Unfortunately, we are unable to get through to the hon. Member.

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

## Point of Order

2.23 pm

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 24 September, when responding to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), the Minister for Digital and Culture claimed that only £59 million of a total £97 million in Barnett consequentials had been allocated by the Scottish Government for spending. The Minister then suggested that the Scots had “trouserred the rest”. Not only was she factually wrong, but the implication of corruption in the word “trouserred” is both distasteful and, may I suggest, even possibly unparliamentary. My hon. Friend has tried to resolve this matter subsequently, but has not been able to do so. May I ask for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how we can clarify on the record that creatives have welcomed the Scottish Government’s use of that resource and that none of it has been “trouserred”, and how can we bring the Minister to the House to apologise for suggesting otherwise?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me notice that he intended to raise this matter and for confirming that he sought to give notice to the Minister concerned, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage). It is not really a point of order for the Chair, but Ministers are expected to correct factual inaccuracies in answers and statements. All hon. Members should be mindful of the distinction between two categories: the first is the use of inadvertent errors of fact by Ministers or other hon. Members; and the second, of course, is that we do not want points of order to continue a political discussion that had taken place earlier. However, I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the point the hon. Member has made.

We will have a three-minute suspension for cleaning the Dispatch Boxes.

2.25 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## BILL PRESENTED

### PLASTIC POLLUTION

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Alistair Carmichael, supported by Caroline Lucas, Dr Matthew Offord, Wera Hobhouse, Ben Lake, Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Stephen Timms, Chris Loder and Geraint Davies, presented a Bill to set targets for the reduction of plastic pollution; to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy and annual reports on plastic pollution reduction; to establish an advisory committee on plastic pollution; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January, and to be printed (Bill 207).*

## Backbench Business

### Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme

2.28 pm

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House believes the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme is not adequately fulfilling its role for SMEs across the UK; and urges Government intervention to ensure that all businesses are provided with the financial support they need.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate. My co-sponsor, the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and I applied for this debate some months ago after hearing of the anguish felt by business owners in our constituencies who could not access emergency support and were left struggling to find critical funds to see them through the crisis. I know that colleagues from all parties in this House and from all parts of the UK will have heard similar tales: people who did not know where to turn when the billions of pounds they heard being bandished about were no more than fantasy figures doing nothing to help the reality faced by the businesses they had to work so hard to build. The situation has been in constant flux and the support schemes have been a moveable feast—or a never-ending famine, certainly for those who have been excluded so far—so I want to reflect on the current situation and dangers going forward, rather than dwelling too long on some of the errors of the past.

A rising tide of debt is making the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme an issue again. Changes to the scheme announced by the Treasury so far do not go far enough to see businesses through to the end of this crisis. The pandemic has gone far beyond anything imagined when CBILS was first announced. England begins lockdown again today and most of Scotland remains severely restricted. The feared second wave is upon us and will possibly be worse than the first. Debt and desperation are rising, yet at the same time support is being cut, withdrawn or very reluctantly extended, without due time to plan or prepare. Those excluded remain so, and banks are getting more tetchy about lending. There has never been a more crucial time to review the effectiveness of Government-backed loans and support, and to make sure we better meet the needs of everyone across the UK.

When lockdown began, CBILS was one of the first schemes off the blocks, with a promise of £350 billion being made available in this and other Government-backed loans. Although grants would certainly have been better than loans, I commend the Chancellor for that swift action. It is a pity that after seven months, £62 billion—less than one fifth of that figure—has actually been approved via the various loan schemes. We need to find better ways to make funds accessible to those who need them and to hope that bold replacement mechanisms for CBILS and the bounce back loan scheme, with an emphasis on grants, can be found. Those would plug the gaps in the support already in place and would help to stimulate recovery.

Flaws in CBILS quickly became apparent. It was reported on 12 April, only three weeks after the scheme was launched, that 300,000 inquiries had been made yet

only 1.4% of those went on to be successfully approved for loans. Some people did not pursue loans beyond the call to the bank, whereas others gave up before completion of the heavily bureaucratic process. Some seven months later, on 18 October, 73,094 companies had been approved for CBILS out of 159,277 completed applications—that is still an approval rating of less than half of those who completed the process, never mind those who were too worried about the debt to take it on in the first place.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this important debate, because although there have been successes with CBILS, there are some shortcomings too and it is right that we discuss them. I accept, to a great extent, the point he makes about grants rather than loans. However, he would probably accept that grants have been made as well as supporting loans, in the form of the job retention scheme and the business rate grants.

**Owen Thompson:** I do accept that point, and it is important that some of those grants have been in place. I would far rather have seen some of the large sums available through CBILS and the bounce back loan scheme made available as grants, as opposed to loans, which add to the debt burden on business.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. Ninety-four businesses in my constituency have taken out a CBILS loan, but they are really concerned now about their ability to pay it back, even with the new measures in place. Does he share my concern that we need to see some underpinning and underwriting in order to secure these businesses for the future?

**Owen Thompson:** I absolutely do, and I hope that some of the points I will make later will address the hon. Lady's concern.

Although improvements were made, the mechanics remain flawed, and take-up is not helped by the fact that the state guarantor is for only 80% of the loan, so risk-averse banks are the gatekeepers to lending decisions. Initially, banks were cherry-picking the very best—the blue chips and the big corporations—while lending for the rest was far harder to find. Now we see a second wave of banks becoming less willing to lend as the uncertainty of the crisis continues and worries grow about the ability to repay. We need the Government to step in to fix that. Of course, getting cash to smaller firms was aided by the launch of the bounce back loan scheme in May, and again I commend the Chancellor for taking the action to introduce that. It is a faster process, with a far greater take-up, accounting for about two thirds of the total loans received, with about two thirds of those reaching small and medium-sized enterprises. That is aided by the Government guarantee of 100%, the capped interest at 2.5% and the lender agreeing not to charge fees. That is far closer to what I think CBILS should be if it cannot be a grant. It is a pity that bounce back loans remain limited to up to £50,000, which is nowhere near enough for the needs of many businesses around the country. I hope the replacement for CBILS will take account of the mechanics of the bounce back loan scheme.

By contrast, the commercial companies approved for CBILS can set the rates for business interruption loans, with massive variation in what is offered, averaging

around 6% but going up to almost 15%. One local business told me that the initial rate it had been offered was 34%. That may bail out companies in an immediate cash-flow crisis, but it will lead to crippling debt in the longer term when the taxpayer support ends. As *The Sunday Times* reported this week, some CBILS-accredited lenders are not only charging double-digit interest rates but are charging arrangement fees of up to 5%, a considerable sum to any business. Some are apparently marketing the loans as ways to fund management buy-outs or to refinance existing debts. It looks like some of these loans are less emergency support and more picking the bones of companies in trouble.

Covid-19 has certainly brought out the best and worst in our society. We have seen the very best in the public-spiritedness of our communities: essential workers, volunteers and small businesses struggling to keep things moving, supporting the vulnerable and saving lives. The very worst, though, are those who see the pandemic as an opportunity simply to make a quick buck on the back of other people's struggles, whether through price gouging on hand sanitiser, creaming off cash from shadily signed Government contracts for personal protective equipment or, in this case, hiking up fees and interest on loans to desperate companies. There are always people out there who see a disaster as an opportunity to make money, but they should not be able to do so with a Government badge of approval.

Many companies are not taking on CBILS or BBLs loans because having more and more debt around their necks is the very last thing they need. Small and medium-sized enterprises in Midlothian told me that it was an absolute last resort, and that the schemes were far better suited to big players. They say they needed a short-term financial injection, not a loan, but businesses were being pushed towards debt as the only option. One local business that contacted me put it far better than I could have put it myself:

“Business owners are being unfairly expected to shoulder a massively disproportionate share of the burden. Many SMEs have been built up over years of toil and are supported by personal guarantees of directors who are being pushed into positions of potential or actual insolvency which can lead to personal bankruptcy. This is at the bequest of people in authority who are at no personal risk at all. Are they aware that these businesses are where the tax receipts come from that will be needed to pay back the debt now being built? Many of them took years to build into the position where they pay and collect a good level of taxes and if these companies are forced to fail it could take many years to build their replacements”.

I hope the Treasury Bench will take note of those comments.

In May 2020, the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast a likely 10% default rate on the loans. By July, that was updated to 40%. In September, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's annual report went even further, estimating losses ranging from 35% to 60%. TheCityUK recapitalisation group's report estimated that UK businesses will have £100 billion of toxic debt by 2021, with £35 billion of that related to the Government schemes. The report warned that up to 3 million jobs across the UK, and 780,000 SMEs, are at risk if urgent action is not taken to tackle that projected £35 billion of unsustainable debt from covid loans.

Worryingly, there are reports of banks bringing in specialist debt collectors to help lead the recovery of loans. Of course, the loans spare the banks from the



[Owen Thompson]

credit risk, but if they cannot be repaid, will we witness thousands of small family businesses pursued through the courts for recovery before the guarantee kicks in? The National Audit Office report on the bounce back loan scheme published on 8 October stated that

“the Bank expects lenders to pursue ‘appropriate recovery processes’”

if companies default. However, it is not clear what that means, and the UK Government need to provide clearer guidance on that process. Given that funds were provided on terms set by the Treasury, it is only fair that, as a minimum, there is a clear framework for recovery, so that customers are treated fairly and consistently, regardless of their banking provider. Even better, why not take the stress off the shoulders of small business and dump the debt that will only hold back recovery? There are also small businesses facing bigger debt on their loans than others, because they rushed to take out the loan when it was the only game in town. They could face a 50% or 60% increase in repayments compared with a bounce back loan. The banks do not seem particularly keen to make it clear that businesses may switch these loans, and I hope that the Government will help to get the message out there—that one simple step could make a big difference to so many companies.

As the pandemic crisis continues and companies try to adapt and rebuild, the best thing the Government could do would be to write off the outstanding debt to SMEs altogether. That would help small businesses have room to recover. The Association of Accounting Technicians called for the bounce back debts to be written off for small businesses, accounting for £40 billion of loans. It says that the “pay as you grow” scheme does not solve the problem; it just defers it, whereas writing off the debt would be a much-needed boost for SMEs and the economy.

**Rachael Maskell:** Charities have been pushed in the direction of CBILs as well, and of course that is completely inappropriate, so to add to the list, will the hon. Gentleman say that charities should have their debt written off as well?

**Owen Thompson:** Yes. Charities, who spend so much of their time having to collect from the public and are now having to adapt to new ways of doing that, are among those many who have been pushed into an impossible situation, where the only game in town is what they had to take. We absolutely need to look to see what we can do to support them, to help them out of this situation.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** It is an interesting point, but how would it be fair to people who did not take a loan, or to businesses that paid back their loan, if one wrote off the debt of businesses that did not pay back their loan? How could that possibly be fair?

**Owen Thompson:** Each business took its decision based on what position it was in at the time. Many would face the prospect of going out of business; the heart of our communities would vanish overnight. One swift step by the Treasury could solve that, to support and maintain our communities.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** It is an interesting point, and it is worth having a debate about it, but lots of businesses, including mine—I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—took loans on the basis of a safety net. Not only did they not need it, but they were unsure about their commercial circumstances and they will be able to pay that debt off without going bust, and intend to. Is the hon. Gentleman intending to write off the debt to my business, which I did not need, which the taxpayer has funded, even though I do not need that money, on the basis that everybody should just get free money?

**Owen Thompson:** As I say, every business took the decision about why it needed to take a covid loan or a bounce back loan. This is about ensuring that we protect the jobs and security for those businesses going forward, and making sure that our communities are protected.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend has been making a powerful speech. Does he agree that when businesses across the nations of the UK have not needed public funds, they have returned the money, in their many millions? Are those not exactly the same circumstances that he is calling for here?

**Owen Thompson:** Absolutely; I completely agree with my hon. Friend. This is about ensuring the security and the future of thousands of businesses across these islands. It is a bold move—I accept that—but we are in a crisis and bold action is exactly what is needed.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am wondering whether consideration might be given to certain sectors, because we know that, sector-specifically, there are areas such as tourism that have been able to make no money whatever over the summer. Could this be a medium by which that could be addressed?

**Owen Thompson:** That is an excellent suggestion. Tourism, events—a number of industries have no opportunity to make the income that they need at the moment. Looking forward, there is no immediate prospect of their being able to do so, which is where the threat of those loans becoming due for repayment really starts to come into its own.

The Government, when considering a replacement for CBILs, need to look at ways to use the remainder of the £350 billion promised to be released on direct grants, perhaps equity, and make sure that reaches those who actually need it. Many viable businesses have received nothing so far, and they are not going away either.

Today—5 November—is an important day to hold this debate. It is not just the beginning of the new lockdown in England, but it commemorates the date of a failed gunpowder plot. Let us make it our day to properly remember, and not leave a giant powder-keg sitting under the businesses across our nations. We must ensure that our businesses survive and our democracy works for the people it is supposed to serve. I urge the UK Government to act now, to prevent a debt crisis, to boost support for businesses, and to stop more jobs and livelihoods going up in smoke.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** We are running a bit behind schedule on account of the debate starting slightly later than anticipated. On the assumption that everyone turns up, I think speeches should probably last for about seven minutes.

2.45 pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for bringing forward this important debate; I agree with many points made by the hon. Member for Midlothian. I also draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This is such a key debate. We live and work in a capital society, so access to capital is not just a nice-to-have; it is absolutely vital. Unfortunately, the way that banking works in our society tends to mean that access to capital is available at times when we probably do not need it or when we need it least. It is like the old adage about being given an umbrella when the sun is shining and having it taken away when it is raining. That is definitely a feature of the way in which banking works in this country. But it does not need to be like that. In fact, it is not like that in many other very successful capitalist countries, as I will mention later.

We talk about building back better, and we have an opportunity to build banking back better. There is no doubt that banking can have a commercial purpose. As somebody who believes in free markets as the best way to drive down prices and drive up service, I absolutely think that commercial banking should be a feature of our financial system, but I also think that it should have a social purpose—through both our commercial banks and another form of banking. A mutual, not-for-profit approach to banking is a key feature of the banking systems in many other countries, including Germany, the US and Japan. I will talk more about that in a second.

Let me first discuss the main topic of the debate, which is CBILS. Although there have been some gaps, to which the hon. Member for Midlothian was quite right to draw attention, there is no doubt that there have also been huge successes. Some 73,000 businesses have been supported by the scheme, with around £17 billion. I do not think that anybody ever expected that there would be a demand for £300 billion of loans. There have been £40 billion of bounce back loans; there is no cap on that, and the application process is very easy. There is probably a finite market for these loans, because most businesses will try to get through without taking a loan, but they have been a tremendous success.

My business has taken one of these loans. We will never touch it and we will pay it back. But if a message was sent out to businesses, saying, "You don't need to pay this money back. Don't worry, we're going to write it off", or if the repayment were subject to certain criteria, businesses would find a way of adjusting their business cases to meet those criteria. It is moral hazard to say to companies, "You're just going to get this money and you don't have to pay it back." To my mind, that would not be fair to businesses that did not take a loan, or to businesses that can and do repay their loan.

It was Government intervention, of course, that made this scheme a success. There is no way on earth that our commercial banks would have made it a success without the intervention of the Government, so I applaud the

efforts of the Minister and his colleagues on the Treasury Bench. Credit should also go to the British Business Bank, UK Finance and the banks themselves, which rolled out these schemes at a tremendous pace, particularly the bounce back loans. We should recognise the successes.

Inevitably in such debates we need to talk about the flaws and the gaps in the measures, and there have been some in this scheme because it was rolled out at pace. The flaws are particularly sector-based, and this strikes at the heart of the problem with UK banking. Our commercial banks look at lots of these sectors, and are attracted to some and not very attracted to others. That has been a feature of the CBILS. The performing arts sector found it very difficult to get loans. Football clubs found it impossible to get them; they will not be supported. Despite the Government guaranteeing 80% of these loans, they were still inaccessible to some sectors.

Many SME housebuilders also found it difficult to get loans. As we know, the house building sector in the UK is increasingly dominated by large business. I come from very much a small business background so I always favour SMEs in my speeches in this place, and I think we should always try with our policies to look after small businesses. Many banks simply will not provide finance to SME house builders. It is a key issue, it was an issue with CBILS loans, and I really hope that the Minister will look at it and try to address it.

The hon. Member for Midlothian is absolutely right that there have been some pricing issues. In the first year, of course, the taxpayer has to pay for that—it is a feature of the loans that the Government in effect fund the first year's interest, so the taxpayer picked up the 12% interest that the hon. Gentleman was talking about. A company called SWIG Finance used really quite exploitative pricing. The Government have done this to some extent, but we do need to look at top-ups for people who have taken a certain size of loan and will need more. We have done that for bounce back loans but we have not yet done it for CBILS, for which the exact same dynamic could apply. Bounce back loans have been a tremendous success, but we still need to work on the basis of the fact that lots of people bank with companies that do not have access to the term funding scheme for SMEs from the Bank of England and therefore do not have the liquidity to lend their customers bounce back loans. Tide is the most obvious example: those who bank with Tide cannot access a loan, because there is no funding for Tide's customers because the bounce back loans are so cheap, at 2.5%, and if they try to go to another bank, all the doors are closed. Those doors are closed even in respect of opening a bank account. We really need to find a solution for non-bank lenders.

I agree with the hon. Member for Midlothian entirely about forbearance: we need a standardised process for it. As I have said a few times previously, I am the co-chair of the all-party group on fair business banking. We would love to be part of the conversation, because we can inform the debate that the Treasury is having with the banks about how we standardise forbearance.

In my final minute, I wish to talk about banks having a social purpose. Banking in the UK is massively dominated by our big commercial banks: 80% of SME finance is with the big four banks. It works completely differently in different countries. Germany is a classic example, where there are 1,500 not-for-profit mutual banks. That is

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so important. In the UK, between 2008 and 2013, the amount of finance extended to SMEs dropped by 25% because the banks drew in their horns and thought, “It’s all too risky, thanks very much. The shareholders come first.” That was understandable, but hardly good for UK plc. In the same five-year period, lending to SMEs in Germany went up by 20%. We need to make sure that that happens here. There are lots of examples of fledgling organisations that want to provide regional mutual banking, including South West Mutual and Avon Mutual. They need funding from the Government to do it.

Community development finance institutions can also play a part. They need funding from the Government to do it. All we need to do is tell the banks, as they do in the US, to lend money to these organisations, which can lend money profitably and with sensible lending conditions, but with a social purpose. They can provide more patient capital and more financial inclusion. It is a huge opportunity. Before I sit down, let me give a last example. The state of Wisconsin in the US is the size of Yorkshire—around 5 million people live there—and there are 139 mutual banks with, collectively, around £100 billion-worth of assets. They are there for that financial inclusion and making sure that lending goes to the productive economy. I urge the Minister, who is a great businessman himself, to be part of building banking back better.

2.53 pm

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing this debate. I was extremely interested to hear some of the contribution of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), particularly the idea of increasing the local stake and interest of banks in communities. It would be really useful to take that forward.

Covid-19 continues to cast a dark shadow over all four nations of the UK, blighting lives and businesses. This debate is an important moment to consider the ramifications, legacy and lessons from one of the key economic measures that have been our response to the virus. Nearly 1,700 coronavirus business interruption loans have been provided to businesses in Wales, totalling approximately £374 million in much-needed support to our economy. This represents one aspect of a broader intervention by not only the UK Government but the Welsh Government and local authorities, who have directed more than £1.6 billion of public support in the form of grants and reliefs to Welsh businesses. Indeed, the resilience and effectiveness of the devolved Governments can perhaps be compared with the Westminster record, which has shown itself on occasion to be prioritising headlines over competency. Westminster has exacerbated rather than eased confusion among businesses, and I refer to the furlough scheme and the lack of transparency in Government contracts as stand-out examples.

I want to make a point about the furlough scheme. I have spoken to businesses in the community that are carrying hundreds of thousands of pounds of debt, which is relevant to what we are discussing today. Because they were unsure what was going to happen with the furlough scheme, they took the necessary steps to start making staff redundant, and those processes have started. So there is an effect when these decisions are made late in the day.

It is increasingly clear that covid-19 is no equaliser, either as a deadly disease or in its wider socioeconomic ramifications. This has created a potent economic legacy, in which the CBIL scheme plays a part. A concern throughout the programme has been accessibility. Unlike in later schemes, CBILS applicants had to certify that they had been adversely affected and, more importantly, were still required to present a borrowing proposal to lenders. That posed a significant challenge for many businesses in Wales, particularly in rural areas such as my constituency of Dwyfor Meirionnydd and in post-industrial communities, particularly across Wales, a country that last year topped the UK table for bank closures.

After 43% of Welsh bank branches were closed between 2015 and 2019, businesses faced an uphill challenge, even before covid restrictions, simply to find a financial adviser to inform them on loan applications. The banks’ local knowledge, as well as their stake in local communities, has been eroded, even as they reach out with their digital capacities. Banks had that local interest and local stake in our communities, and we should be looking at the way in which they now operate in the United Kingdom. We have welcomed the improvements in the later schemes, but the Government need to go further and work with lenders to continue to improve accessibility to all covid-19 support schemes for households and businesses in rural and poor communities.

Westminster presumes that the UK is a healthy, mixed economy, but the reality is that in many areas, single industries dominate the local economy. This is particularly true in north and west Wales, where the strongly seasonal tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors dominate. This is the reality of where we are now, and I am not criticising it. I accept it, but if we want to make a difference to those communities in future, we have to realise the implications of covid and how the support measures will work their way through. We had a harsh winter last winter, and we are going into winter now. In the meantime, many businesses in the sector had no choice but to pursue UK and Welsh Government support schemes. They banked on a strong summer season’s earnings that never materialised sufficiently for them to pay off their debts. That was their usual business model. They are usually viable businesses, but this summer they did not have time to make that up. These businesses, and now the whole communities in which they operate, face a bleak future.

It is therefore vital that CBILS should be part of our effort to rebuild, rather than being employed as a stopgap in the immediate crisis. That is why I urge the UK Government to work with lenders and the Welsh Government to lighten the mounting debt burden facing UK businesses. This should include measures such as debt relief for viable Welsh businesses, particularly in badly affected industries such as hospitality. The effect of such an action would be immediate and direct. It would immediately improve businesses’ balance sheets and outlook, give certainty on employment and free up capital that could be set aside to ultimately fund our economic recovery. Although bold, such an intervention on the back of historically low interest rates for Government borrowing would recognise that debt is an economic and political problem, not a health one.

Time is ticking. TheCityUK’s recapitalisation report estimates that, without action now, UK businesses will have £100 billion-worth of toxic debt by March next year, leading to further unemployment and ending in



permanent economic scarring in areas that can least afford it. We have a golden opportunity to turn this debt crisis into a vote of confidence in our economy, freeing businesses from an avoidable debt crisis to reinvest in their livelihoods and workers. I urge the Chancellor to seize this opportunity.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** As all our speakers are now here, I remind Members that I would like to start the winding-up speeches at about 3.25 pm, and speeches of between six and seven minutes should make that possible. I call Virginia Crosbie.

2.59 pm

**Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con):** I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for securing the debate, and I say to the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) that it is always a pleasure to follow a Welsh neighbour.

For many people across the United Kingdom, this year has brought great hardship and significant challenges, and whatever our individual circumstances, each one of us will have had times in the past nine months when it has felt so hard to be optimistic about a brighter future. Despite the challenges the nation has faced, this Government have not given up. They have continued to deliver on their election promises and to invest in the future. I am particularly talking about the levelling-up agenda and building back better, which my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) alluded to.

So far, businesses in my constituency have received over £5.5 million in coronavirus business interruption loans. That is a monumental sum for an area with the lowest gross value added of any area in Wales and where investment is so desperately needed. I have seen businesses take advantage of the scheme and put the money to good use, generating jobs and optimism for the future of our island's economy.

I would like to highlight what this scheme means to my constituents and the people of Ynys Môn and mention one business that is waiting to hear about its application. I have a fantastic, ingenious technology company called Orthios Eco Park, which generates electricity from imported plant waste. It intends to use this loan to develop a new mechanical recycling facility that will not only significantly increase its recycling capacity but create more than 100 jobs on the island next year, in Holyhead—a part of Anglesey that desperately needs investment and employment.

That company's expansion will enhance Anglesey's reputation as the energy island. Members have heard me wax lyrical about how important energy is to the island and to the whole of Wales. That is a reputation gained from the large number of green energy producers working locally to harness our natural resources. The work of Orthios and the support it has had will mean that those other innovative development companies will also benefit, such as the Morlais tidal energy project and Minesto at Holyhead Deep. That is part of the jigsaw that will help to deliver our Government's net zero carbon target. All these companies are intertwined in helping us to deliver that target.

I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton said about the social purpose. I spoke to the CEO of Orthios, Sean McCormick. He said that

it has been such a challenge for businesses like Orthios on Anglesey, but the support the company has had from the UK Government will help it to retain jobs and provide a springboard, helping it to invest in and deliver the future of the island. Entrepreneurs like Sean are critical if we are to grow our economy. Ynys Môn has an abundance of entrepreneurs, and I have been pleased to support them through a Make It Your Business event that I launched. There is so much more we can do to support entrepreneurs, who are the backbone and the lifeblood of our communities.

I have seen the Government support businesses during this crisis. They have come up with a toolbox, from the self-employment income support scheme to the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme. The Chancellor's announcement today that he will provide additional support and extend the furlough scheme to March will come as a relief to many across the country, particularly in constituencies such as Ynys Môn, which is dependent on the tourism and hospitality sector.

3.3 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for introducing the debate and all those who have contributed so far. I look forward to the Minister's response—there is no pressure on him, but we need a lot of answers, and I am sure he will be able to come up with the answers we want.

During these challenging times, we must ensure that we do the right thing by our constituents, many of whom are facing the most difficult financial circumstances in their lives. Those I have spoken to have told me clearly that the Government's support has been incredibly helpful to them, meaning that their businesses can continue. I want to put that on record, because if it had not been for that, many businesses would not be here today—that is a fact, and I thank the Government for that. Other Members have mentioned this, but I am going to give the bankers a bit of a spanking in this speech, so I am, because that is one group who have not been as good as they could have been. I will come to that in a wee minute.

I want to mark up the effect of SMEs and how much they mean in my constituency, because they are the backbone of the economy. They account for three fifths of employment and about half of turnover in the UK private sector. That, I believe, is why the Chancellor designed this scheme in itself, and why it needs to be right for the future of our nation. I loved what the Chancellor said today—it was music to my ears, but I suspect perhaps not to my nationalist colleagues—when he said, referring to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that, wherever it was, the money was available from Edinburgh to Cardiff and from London to Belfast. I loved that because that is just me: a person who believes that the Union is really important.

Right across all business sectors large and small, the effects of the pandemic have been fast changing, and the sudden economic impact has required an immediate response not only from business owners, but from banks and other financial institutions. The coronavirus business interruption loan scheme was established between March and May in response to the pandemic, with loans of which 80% would be backed by the Government. While the scheme was offered with attractive terms, those with high hopes of securing the funding did feel that it fell

[Jim Shannon]

far short of expectations, with many business owners giving up during the application process when they discovered how the scheme works.

I am very fortunate to have an extremely good office. I am surrounded by good staff, and the fact is that they are five ladies. Behind every man there is a woman, and behind this man there are six women keeping him right, and I want to thank them for that. The manageress of my office was almost like a Jack Russell with a bone, because when she got that bone in her teeth, she kept on and on, and we were probably able to help many businesses because of her dogged determination. Even when the Government came back to say, “No, you can’t have that”, or “This doesn’t work because”, we would appeal against everything. We appealed and appealed, and I have to say that, by and large, those appeals were successful. I think 99.9% of them were successful, but that is just by the way.

The 1,470 loans for my constituency were worth £50 million. That gives hon. Members an idea of what this meant. Those businesses needed this effective and efficient help not because they were not viable. Those businesses were viable, but they just needed that wee bit of time to get them over the line, and the Government did that because they are absolutely viable in normal times, as they would be.

I know of well-established local businesses that have struggled and fought to hold on to be able to continue trading. I have spoken to so many business owners who are frustrated by the process of being subjected to standard commercial lending practices while in the middle of a public emergency. Because we are in these circumstances, the banks must fall more into line—this is the banks again—with the people who are depending on them to get them through the crisis. At a time when business owners are being asked to be resilient, it would do well for the lenders—the banks—to realise that attitudes and behaviours towards banking have changed, probably forever. I suspect that some people will probably never get over how they were treated. People are in crisis, and now require services in a matter of days or even hours. We are not out of the woods yet—I understand that—and a new normal means that lenders must adapt to these rapidly changing times, but the old rigid approach is now counterproductive.

I have to say that the Chancellor’s decision to extend CBILS to the end of January will be welcomed as England enters another phase of national restrictions. We do not know what lies ahead. It is my fervent desire that we do not enter another lockdown, but who knows what the future holds. However, we do need to be prepared. More than this, the banks must be prepared to put the good of this nation—the whole nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—against their quarterly reserve and implement the scheme envisioned by this House and the Chancellor. I do not want to have to fight for more of my businesses to have what the Chancellor has said is readily available. That is why the banks have to step up to their responsibilities, and they cannot deny that. Some Members have said it, and others probably will.

This is my last paragraph, Madam Deputy Speaker. The fight for survival for countless businesses is not over, and it is vital, as we enter 2021, that CBILS continues to

meet the needs of those who will turn to it and that lenders adopt a more flexible and co-operative approach so that no businesses anywhere in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are left behind. I ask for a resounding message from the Minister to be sent to the banking industry that the availability of these loans is not a request. If they wish to operate in this nation, the banks should do the honourable thing and in a mutually beneficial way.

3.9 pm

**Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con):** I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—in particular, my significant shareholding in a business that has received a CBIL.

We have heard about the Government’s actions. We have heard about the enormous numbers that are involved, which were referred to directly by the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), and about how they are just fantasy numbers because they are outside the essence of our individual experience. It is just for the same for me. Big numbers mean little to most people, because we do not really understand them in our normal lives.

However, I have a very real experience of the transformative effect of the CBIL system. Before to entering this place, I was the managing director of, and a significant shareholder in, a seasonal tourism-based leisure business of just the kind that we have heard so much about over the past six to nine months. It operates in 34 locations across the United Kingdom, employing people in Scotland and Wales as well as England. In March this year, we had weathered our planned seasonal losses over the winter. The business had been invested in and had recruited a large number of staff, looking forward to Easter trading. It was an irony not lost on me and everyone else who was employed in the business that the lockdown was announced in the very week of our minimum cash flow in the entire year, by which I mean that we had the least amount of money to respond to an economic shock. As a result, the lockdown was an immediate existential crisis for that business, which employs up to 1,000 people in this country and 250 to 350 people in the United States of America.

Without doubt, the CBIL that we were able to obtain within a matter of weeks saved the business from the risk of collapse. It bought time. It cushioned the cash-flow blow—this crisis is primarily about cash flow—and allowed space for the business to adapt, survive, and then, I am very pleased to say, absolutely to thrive now, although I recognise that that is not the experience of an awful lot of other businesses in the sector. The Chancellor’s intervention directly saved hundreds of jobs and careers. Let us not forget now how fast the Government acted—and thank goodness they did, because without that, the economic damage to this country would have been so much greater.

In a previous debate, I highlighted what I considered to be one of the key weaknesses of the CBIL scheme. As we plan to grow out of the crisis phase and into the economic growth phase, we need our recovery to be led by businesses that have cash to invest, creating new products, investing in growth, increasing efficiencies, exploring new markets and, importantly, creating employment. To do this, they need access to cash, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) has identified, at a time when the unwinding of the

CBIL loans, with their straight line capital repayment scheme after the first 12 months, means that cash will actively be withdrawn—at that stage, in a one sixth per annum phase, but most likely, in reality, between two and five years. That would be taking money out of the productive economy just at the time when we want these businesses to be investing in growth. I was therefore delighted—and impressed, frankly—when the Chancellor announced recently the increased flexibility in interest and capital repayment requirements and increased the maximum period of capital repayment from six to 10 years. At a stroke, that almost halves the capital repayment requirements for businesses, it frees up a really significant sum of money to be reinvested in growth, and it focuses exactly on the businesses that are able to do it.

However, there is one further point that I hope the Treasury will look into. Lending banks currently have their covid loans sitting on their balance sheets, albeit supported by the Government's partial guarantee. This reduces their capacity, and their appetite, to lend further to support the business-led recovery. I ask the Minister whether the Government could develop a scheme to allow these covid loan books to be sold to institutional investors via a special purpose vehicle, because this would provide long-term, very low-risk, fixed-income investments that are sought by pension funds, for example, particularly if the resulting coupon was tax-free. I know that is an ask of the Treasury, but it would ensure the success of the scheme.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, but one of the mistakes we have made in past years is allowing the sale of loan books to very aggressive companies that pursue those loans and repayments in the most inappropriate way for SMEs. Does he propose any restrictions on who those can be sold to?

**Jerome Mayhew:** It would be an unwise legislator who had not learned from the financial crisis of 2008-09. It would require regulation and careful oversight by the Bank of England, I suggest, but we should not throw the policy baby out with the execution bathwater. This suggestion is something the Treasury should look into, and I encourage it to do so, because in return the lending banks would have their balance sheets reflat and their risk removed from the sector, encouraging them to support business investment and recovery further. When Government finances are stretched as never before, the suggestion has the merit of allowing the market to provide much needed capital for growth and not the Treasury.

There is no doubt that the Government have invested massively and effectively in supporting our business community and the jobs, importantly, that they support, through the swathe of schemes that have been discussed today, most recently with the Chancellor's announcement this afternoon of the extension of the furlough scheme. It gives me great confidence that the Government remain committed to the business sector and supporting them to lead the future economic recovery.

3.16 pm

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Much of what I was going to say has already been said, so I shall be as succinct as any lawyer can be in these

circumstances. I too pay tribute to the effectiveness of the loan scheme. It has certainly saved many firms and many jobs in my constituency of Bromley and Chislehurst. One forgets that London suburbs, although in the prosperous south-east, have many small firms among their number—many family firms and many SMEs—and they have struggled just as much as any other part of the country during this time, particularly as there has always been a problem for many of them with access to capital. I hope we can learn long-term lessons from this.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing the debate, because it is on an important issue. There are some things I hope we can embed in the system, and my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) made a number of important points in relation to that. His father, as a distinguished former Member of this House and distinguished lawyer, would, dare I say it, be very proud of him.

It is fair to say that the key thing going forward is perhaps to ensure that the business loan scheme works effectively with the other measures we are putting in place, and that is where the changes that have just been referred to—the greater flexibility around repayments and moving away from the straight line capital—will be important.

I hope, too, that we can see how that scheme links with some of the other assistance that is being given. For example, an issue that has been raised with me by firms in my constituency is that they have been able to defer tax payments in relation to corporation tax, national insurance contributions and others, but there is still some lack of certainty as to whether there will be any interest charged or any penalty charges in some types of tax deferral. There have been mixed messages on that, and it would be bizarre if we were supporting businesses through the business loan and then some of that was going back to pay the same public purse, in effect, through penalties and interest charges on things we have given them the opportunity to take up. That might in some marginal cases make a difference to firms. Can we therefore ensure that is fully aligned so we are not robbing Peter to pay Paul, in a sense?

The other area, which I think we have now resolved, but must be careful about going forward—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to this—is that some of the banks were at one time charging commercial rates of interest based on their own underwriting criteria, which is wholly unacceptable, given that there is 80% underwriting by the Government in these matters. I hope that the Treasury, the Bank and the Department will be absolutely rigorous in policing this and saying that it is not acceptable behaviour.

The majority of the British banking sector is responsible, but there have been a number of instances where it has not been, and it cannot be right to charge those rates of interest. Initially, for example, we had instances of banks declining to give a business loan, but then offering a commercial loan at about 5%. When I raised it with the banks, they said it was a misunderstanding and backed off, but we should not be getting into that situation to start with. Ensuring that there is rigorous policing and the full co-operation of the banking sector in the spirit, as well as in the letter of the law, will be very important.



[*Sir Robert Neill*]

There is a final matter that we could look at, and this is a rather sad story of a business that had been going for some 21 years in my constituency and which was not able to survive. It was in the travel sector and it perhaps had particular problems, but the issue that put it under was the requirement that its paid-up share capital, less the accumulated losses, should be 50%. In this case, although the business was clearly viable and had a good book of orders, its accumulated share capital, less the losses, was 43.3%. It was a family firm, and to make that difference the directors would have had to, and were prepared to try to, raise the better part of £58,000 to get themselves to 50%, but that cannot be done quickly. They would have had to raise equity—in their homes was the most likely route in this example; other people might have had to issue shares—and they ran out of time by the deadline. I hope that we could have some flexibility in that regard. There might be some means of bridging that, where a business can demonstrate and rigorously prove that it is still viable so that it does not fail for want of being able to access a scheme that otherwise it would have been entitled to. There may have been perfectly good reasons why the share capital was under 50% at the time.

Those were the points that I wanted to make, in addition to those that have already been made. All in all, it is great credit to the Government that we have done this. It has made a real difference to people, businesses and livelihoods and to the communities that those businesses serve. We should not forget that either. It is just about saying gently: can we keep an eye on some of those things and continue to refine, tweak and improve the system as we go forward?

3.21 pm

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (*Sir Robert Neill*) and to hear his pearls of wisdom on this particular subject. It is very difficult to disagree with anything that he said, and I hope that those on the Treasury Bench are listening. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (*Owen Thompson*) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (*Liz Saville Roberts*) on securing this debate. It is really important that we get to this issue. It is really important that we discuss this issue. For many members of the public, business support is one of the drier subjects, but the CBIL scheme is crucial to many businesses, so it is important to speak about it.

Businesses across Scotland and their employees are working heroically at the moment to keep going through the pandemic. Typically, many are innovating, adapting and defying the odds to do that in the current circumstances, but others simply cannot adapt so quickly, not because they are not viable, but because this has hit them at the worst possible time—particularly, as we heard from various Members, those in the hospitality and tourism trade and the businesses associated with that. This has made it really difficult for them.

I am pleased that today the Chancellor has extended the 80% furlough scheme—after six months of asking, I have to say. Scottish National party Members have been asking for the Chancellor to do that time and again.

Eventually this—I think it is the fourth iteration—has been put in place, and that does help, but many jobs have already been lost and businesses have already felt the pain in the meantime. It is crucial as decisions are made in the future that there is clear direction, clear rules and support around them so that businesses can survive. Of course, many are still excluded from any support, and I want to speak about them briefly later.

A lot of businesses have found themselves simply locked out of these loans, unable to access them because the banks are not allowing customers, even those with really good credit ratings previously, to open new accounts in order to access them. Of course, the Chancellor has form on ignoring people who have been excluded support from, and this is no different. Seven months into the pandemic, and as a result of the Government's failure to listen and to act, many small businesses remain empty-handed. As we heard, the all-party group on fair business banking estimates that 250,000—a quarter of a million—small businesses are locked out of support simply because they were with the wrong bank, as it were. Of the 20 accredited lenders, almost all are not processing applications from non-customers, so extending the scheme without widening access to other lenders is wrong-headed, and the Government need to make it conditional that banks offer loans to non-customers. Failure to act just exacerbates the lockdown lock-out.

It is also unhelpful that non-bank lenders are blocked from accessing funding from the Bank of England and therefore cannot offer that to their customers. I have had call after call, email after email from constituents—I know I am not alone among MPs—who are absolutely desperate and increasingly bitter about being locked out of help. They can see that they are not being listened to, and they must be listened to.

There are then those who did qualify. Their reward is that they can top up their loans and borrowing as part of the new rules meant to keep businesses afloat during England's second lockdown. It is absolutely understandable that many of these bruised and battered business owners are nervous about taking on new debt at this time of great uncertainty. They have great justification for those feelings at the moment. They need a better safety net. They deserve to be able to protect their businesses that in any other time would not only be viable, but thriving.

There is a sensible move the Government could make, given that it is clear that many firms will be unable to repay: convert the loans to equity, or, even better, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian, to grants. As he said, in May the OBR forecast a likely 10% default rate on those loans. By July, that had risen to 40%. Earlier, a report published in May by the British Bankers' Association, the body responsible for debt collection, was, as we have heard, predicting a 40% to 50% default. In September, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy annual report went even further, revealing likely losses estimated at September 2020 to be in the range of 35% to 60%. Let us never forget that this is against the background of 3 million freelancers, newly self-employed people, contractors on PAYE and company directors who have been abandoned, given no help whatever since the pandemic began. They continue to be ignored by this Government.

The Association of Accounting Technicians is calling for bounce back loans to be written off for SMEs, who took two thirds—that is, £40 billion—of all bounce

back loans. In addition to writing off SME debt, the Government should listen to TheCityUK on coronavirus business interruption loans. Its recapitalisation report suggests converting the debt to equity or contingent tax liability options for firms, so they can avoid being held back and adding to the UK debt crisis. In its report, TheCityUK estimates that UK businesses will have £100 billion of toxic debt—this is why writing off and doing something about this debt is so important—by March 2021, with £35 billion of that related to Government schemes. It makes absolutely no sense. It is dead-weight. Writing off the debt could provide a much needed boost for the economies of all four nations. As the Tories' own former Chancellor, George Osborne, agreed in evidence to the Treasury Committee, it would be an overall benefit to the taxpayer. With banks now actively working with debt collectors, the UK Government must provide urgent clarity that collections will not be necessary. Specialist debt collectors have no place in this system. It is akin to placing a noose around the necks of employers and wealth creators.

Urgency can be found in this Tory Government for business. They can do it when they want to. For example, they bypassed tendering processes to rush out contracts for over £1 billion to certain businesses, such as PA Consulting Services, Meller Designs, Hanbury Strategy, Public First, PPE Medpro and others. We have all seen this Government moving at pace. Of course, the common factor there is that they are all major donors to the Tory party.

The continued failure of the Government to listen to those affected is leading to job losses, frustration and squandered opportunity. While this affects businesses and jobs across the nations of the UK, the failure to empathise and to act is driving citizens of those nations to look to their future options. In Scotland, the path is clear. We need a different path to be a normal independent country that makes choices that are right and suitable for our people and businesses.

3.29 pm

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), although I do not agree with his last sentiment. I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—that is my best Welsh—for securing this important debate. It could not come at a more opportune moment, given that today marks the first day of the second lockdown and given the Chancellor's statement earlier.

The coronavirus pandemic has hit our economy hard and continues to do so. Unfortunately, until the Government get a handle on the public health measures to control the virus, particularly sorting out test, track, trace and isolate, it will continue to have more far-reaching economic consequences than it needed to. We have already seen hundreds of companies going to the wall, tens of thousands of businesses shuttered, hundreds of thousands of redundancy notices handed out, and millions more workers worried about whether they will have jobs in the future. At least some will have been given respite today, but unfortunately, for far too many, it has come too late.

None of that was inevitable. The failure of the Government to act earlier on a circuit breaker means that the economic pain of this lockdown will be greater

and more far-reaching. Having said that, we have supported the Government's actions to control the virus and to protect the economy, as it is right for us to do in these difficult times. Much more needs to be done, however, especially for those who have been excluded from support again and again, and for those businesses that seem to have been deemed non-viable, when they are perfectly viable in normal times.

We welcomed the CBIL scheme when it was introduced and we support its extension. The provision of loans with state-backed guarantees was essential in the early phase of the crisis to prevent a liquidity and insolvency crisis among UK firms, but as the long-term nature of the public health crisis and the resultant economic one become clearer, there needs to be some review, alongside some other measures.

As well as loans, we have supported the furlough scheme in its various incarnations and the grant schemes. There were also legal protections in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 that we supported through the House. That support was right in March. The question is, why were Ministers not prepared to accept earlier that if those schemes were right in March, they were right today too? The recent sharp rise in infections was predictable—in fact, predicted—yet the Government always seem to be playing catch-up. The Chancellor has repeatedly acted late. His economic plans do not seem to last a week, let alone the winter.

When Greater Manchester was asking in September for the same support that its workers and shut down businesses received in March, the Chancellor said no, only to change his tune now. He should never have tried to lock down the north on the cheap. The row with the north was misplaced and wasted valuable time. Andy Burnham, Steve Rotherham and other metro Mayors were right, and the Chancellor has now confirmed it.

It is welcome news that the Chancellor has extended the furlough scheme, but if businesses go bust, there will be no companies for those workers to be furloughed from. The grant schemes have become less generous just as businesses face particular cash-flow problems after months of the crisis. Typically, they are now worth a third per week of what they were in March, so how can that be right? For medium-sized businesses, the grants were not enough, which is why they were so reliant on the CBIL scheme in the first place.

Now is the moment for a long overdue long-term reset plan, because it is clear that we will be living with this virus for longer and many of the provisions previously put in place, including the CBIL scheme, need to be looked at in that context. Many businesses will have already taken a loan thinking that it was for two or three months of the first lockdown. They will have been struggling for many months with reduced demand and trade hit by social restrictions through the various tiers and things that came before that. Any long-term plan needs to include more support now for cash flow. Businesses cannot and should not rely on loans to pay fixed overheads during a period of enforced Government closure. That is morally wrong.

We need a six-to-12-month plan—or at least a six-month plan—to support the economy, with a flexible and sufficient package, not all the chopping and changing we have seen. The support available needs to match and reflect the plight of businesses that have suffered many months with fixed costs and little income. Alongside

[Lucy Powell]

that, the Institute of Directors has said that the Government must expand and extend the measure suspending wrongful trading in line with other measures in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act, and we agree. That would go some way to prevent the predatory sort of behaviour that others have mentioned.

The measures introduced to support businesses in the first phase of the pandemic must now rise to the challenge the economy faces now and for the medium term. A debt-laden economy will make any recovery more difficult and longer. As we have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the House, there are several outstanding issues with the CBILS loans, and they should be looked at as a matter of urgency. We need more transparency about who is getting the loans. We need to look at fraud, misuse and mis-selling, and we need to look at how lenders are setting their own interest rates, because wide discrepancies have crept in between banks and other lenders. The Government paid more than £65 million in interest to lenders between April and June. Ministers should have got a better deal, and the costs will soon fall to business.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that one in 10 business loans may default, and I suspect the number will be even higher. That is why it is so important that the Government do all they can to stop viable businesses—previously viable businesses—going bust in the lockdown. As we have heard, the concern is the effect on the economy of that huge debt burden of between £70 billion and £100 billion, weighing down the recovery. It would result in continuous waves of business insolvencies, especially as we see the end of the tax breaks, tax deferrals and business rate holidays and all the costs that that will cause to our economy. What is more, a debt-laden recovery is no recovery at all, as it is investments that pay the price—investments in people, in technology, in research and development, in new business plans and in infrastructure, all not happening because businesses need to pay down debts from a covid crisis that was no fault of their own.

The Government need to set out a clear package of support: sufficient grants, some loans and rates relief and other measures for businesses of whatever capacity to operate in. Crucially, we need a plan for reopening businesses working in weddings, events, live music, the arts and other forums, as well as those that are now affected by the second lockdown. I am sure the Minister will agree that when we speak to businesses, they say that most of all they want to trade. They want the certainty of when they can trade, and they want a clear timetable to give them that certainty. At the end of the day, it will be hard-working, decent business people who spent years and years of their lives and their life savings building up businesses that could now go bust through no fault of their own. Not only do we have an economic obligation to support those businesses through this crisis, but we have a moral one too. The Government need to step up to the plate and do more to support them.

3.28 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi):** I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd

(Liz Saville Roberts) for initiating this important debate. We have had some very thoughtful contributions from many colleagues, not least my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) and, of course, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), who gave a detailed and forensic explanation of why CBILS was so important to the business that he was involved in, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Scottish National party spokesman on business and the shadow Minister.

We know how worried people are about their health, the health of their loved ones, their jobs, their businesses and their financial security. That is why the Government's economic priority remains the same—to protect jobs. To support this, we have announced the following: an extension to the furlough scheme until March; more generous support to the self-employed and paying that support more quickly to them; cash grants of up to £3,000 per month for businesses that are closed—90% of small and medium-sized businesses' premises in the closed retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, which have been mentioned several times today, should broadly have their monthly rent covered by these grants—plans to extend existing loan guarantee schemes and the future fund to the end of January next year and an ability to top up the bounce back loans as well; and, although we are debating CBILS, there is an extension to the mortgage payment holiday for home owners. These announcements will give businesses—whether they are open or required to close—the flexibility to adjust and plan over the coming months. That comes on top of what I think is an unprecedented £200 billion package of support that we have committed to since the beginning of the pandemic.

Let me turn to the specific subject of this debate. The coronavirus business interruption loan scheme has delivered finance to a wide range of businesses. As of 18 October, more than 73,000 loans, worth £17 billion, have been approved. The benefits of the scheme have been seen across the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. In Scotland, more than 3,300 coronavirus business interruption loans, worth £759 million, have been offered. In Wales, more than 1,600 loans, worth more than £374 million, have been offered. In addition, businesses in Scotland have been offered more than 76,000 bounce back loans worth £2 billion, and those in Wales 48,000 loans at £1.3 billion.

Since the start of the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme in March, we have responded to feedback from businesses—I have to say that today's feedback is equally important—and made changes where we needed to. This includes prohibiting lenders from requesting personal guarantees on loans under £250,000. That has reduced the risk to small businesses taking out loans under the scheme and opened access to those who could not afford to offer personal assets as security.

We extended the scheme to all viable small businesses, not just those unable to access commercial finance. Various technical changes were also made to the application process to speed it up for businesses, and we removed the forward-facing viability test to support firms that faced uncertainty regarding their income.

We also recognised that the scheme could not be the answer for all businesses seeking finance and in April we introduced the large business interruption loan scheme,



which provides loans of £200 million, with an 80% guarantee from Government. As of 4 May, recognising that some of our smallest firms were finding it difficult to access CBILS or CLBILS, we introduced the bounce back loans. As of 18 October, we have supported 1 million businesses with £40 billion of bounce back loans. These schemes are not without cost. I know that the SNP are advocating the writing off of the loans. There is no Government money; it is taxpayers' money, which is why we need to be prudent. We cannot save every business and, inevitably, some of these loans will sadly not be repaid, but, as the OBR has said, the cost of inaction would almost certainly have been much higher.

My colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and I, as well as ministerial colleagues in the Treasury, continue to engage with businesses and representative bodies on a regular basis. We also engage, of course, with the devolved Administrations and I pay tribute to Fiona Hyslop, Ken Skates and Diane Dodds for the deep engagement that we have had since March.

As the Prime Minister announced on Monday, we will adjust the bounce back loan scheme rules to allow those businesses that have borrowed less than 25% of their turnover to top up their existing loans. Businesses will be able to take up this option from next week. They can make use of this option once. To help businesses to repay loans that they have taken out during this intensely difficult period, we have also introduced the pay-as-you-grow measures. Under these measures, businesses will be offered more time and greater flexibility to make repayments on their bounce back loans. Loans can be extended for up to 10 years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland quite rightly shared with us. That would almost halve the rate of payback that a business would have to deliver.

The Government acknowledge that access to debt finance is important, but it can only form part of our approach to supporting businesses through this period. We have already provided the devolved Administrations with unprecedented up-front funding guarantees, so that they have the certainty they need to decide how and when to provide support. The funding guarantees to the Scottish Government are worth £7.2 billion, to the Welsh Government £4.4 billion, and to Northern Ireland £2.4 billion.<sup>1</sup>

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made an important point, which was also mentioned by the hon. Member for Midlothian, and that was the question of the bad behaviour of banks. If it is determined that a lender is not passing on the economic benefits of the CBILS guarantee to borrowers, the lender will be required to take such action as is required by the British Business Bank to rectify the situation. That could include compensating the borrower and/or remediating their existing book. Ultimately, the British Business Bank could suspend the lender from new lending or remove its accreditation. Any action will take into account the impact on the underlying SME. I wanted to ensure that

we put that point about businesses' relationships with their banks on record for any businesses that may be listening to the debate today.

The Government fully recognise the tremendous impact that the pandemic has had on businesses across the four nations of our country. The response from the four nations is always much better and greater than that of any individual part of our family. The Government have been there to support them and to protect, create and support jobs via the largest package of emergency support in post-war history, of which the loan guarantee schemes are an important and successful part.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) asked how we will repay this debt. We are focusing support on families and businesses through this difficult period. Although both borrowing and debt will rise this year, the cost of servicing that debt is affordable and sustainable because of the dynamic and resilient size of our economy. We will set out further details of our fiscal policy at the next Budget, when the economic and fiscal outlook becomes much clearer.

Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for your indulgence. We have had a great debate.

3.48 pm

**Owen Thompson:** We have seen a great degree of consensus this afternoon around the important part that the loan schemes have played. There has been recognition of the absolute need for the schemes, but it is almost as important—if not more important—that we take the opportunity to highlight any shortcomings and the challenges ahead. As we look forward, I certainly want there to be as many opportunities as possible to ensure that the debt burden on so many small businesses across our nations does not become the next crisis that ends up tearing the heart out of communities the length and breadth of the country. There also remain countless businesses that are not able to trade in any shape or form in many different industries and sectors. That needs to be addressed.

I thank all Members for their participation in the debate. I suspect that it is an issue that we will return to in the months ahead.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House believes the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme is not adequately fulfilling its role for SMEs across the UK; and urges Government intervention to ensure that all businesses are provided with the financial support they need.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** 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 time, I am suspending the House for three minutes.

3.49 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

1. [Official Report, 10 November 2020, Vol. 683, c. 10MC.]

## International Covid-19 Response: Innovation and Access to Treatment

3.53 pm

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK Government's role in ensuring innovation and equitable access to treatment within the international covid-19 response.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the time to have this debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who is in her place, for co-sponsoring the debate with me. We applied for the debate before the summer, but it arguably could not be more timely, given the encouraging news yesterday from the chief investigator of the University of Oxford covid vaccine trial. Results of the trial are due before the end of the year, and there is a small chance of a vaccine being available by then. I echo the comments of the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran): that is promising news, but we should not rely on a vaccine alone.

As has become increasingly clear over the course of this pandemic, a vaccine will not be a silver bullet, and for any vaccine to work effectively, we have to suppress the virus sufficiently within the general population in the first place. None the less, the production of a successful vaccine would be a landmark moment in the fight against covid-19; I recognise and commend that.

In that regard, the reality in the UK is that we are, in relative terms, fortunate. Our scientists and researchers are leading the battle through their ongoing work. We have deals in place in relation to six of the vaccine candidates currently being developed. The Government have now bought access to 340 million potential future doses of vaccine. That equates to five doses for each person in the UK. When a vaccine candidate's efficacy is proven, we will be at the global forefront of rolling it out—with, I am sure, a particular focus on our healthcare workers and the most vulnerable in our society, many of whom, including in my constituency of North East Fife, have been shielding or taking extra precautions for some months.

As we consider our own situation, we also have to recognise that, as things stand, if a vaccine candidate is approved soon, billions of people—two thirds of the world's population—are likely to have no access to such a vaccine until 2022 at the earliest. While we might live in hope that a vaccine will be with us in the next six months in the UK, for others, it is a matter of years. That is because, right now, access to covid vaccines is a zero-sum game. A limited number of candidates are being manufactured by a small handful of companies only, and between them, they do not have the capacity to produce dosages in the billions required at a global level.

When the world's wealthy countries, representing about 13% of the world's population, bought up access to 50% of future covid vaccine doses, it became very hard for the remaining 6.8 billion people on the planet to obtain the same protections. Almost inevitably, it is less affluent nations, and in particular the most vulnerable countries, that are crowded out. It is important to remember that this is not limited to vaccines, and we are not talking hypothetically about what might happen in

the future. It is happening right now, because there are already huge inequalities in access to covid treatments that already exist.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is laying out clearly the inequalities in the world. I have been present in a number of debates this week in which Members have highlighted the inequalities faced by some ethnic groups and religious minorities. When it comes to receiving any covid help, they are at the end of the queue. When it comes to getting the vaccine, they will be at the very end of the end of the queue. Does she agree that those ethnic minorities and persecuted people must have an opportunity to get a vaccine?

**Wendy Chamberlain:** Absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I entirely agree with his sentiments. We have seen that those who are on the frontline, those who are marginalised in our society and those from minority backgrounds are often the most impacted, so it is even more important that we consider the treatments and vaccines that are available for them.

The two drugs that have been proven so far to help treat covid-19 are dexamethasone and remdesivir. The entire global stock of remdesivir was bought up by the United States Government during the summer, hence Donald Trump was in a position to receive the drug when he became unwell. What is left of the stock is currently accessible only at a very high price. The manufacturer, Gilead, sells it at almost £2,000 for a five-day course of treatment, yet it is believed that the cost to produce it is £7.

Fortunately, dexamethasone is widely available and a cheaply sourced steroid. If a patient suffering from covid requires ventilation, administering this drug reduces the chance of death by up to a third. That is great news and has greatly improved outcomes for patients who need to be ventilated. But for there to be a chance for that drug to be effective, there must be enough ventilators available for patients who need them, and there must be enough oxygen to supply those ventilators. Again, in some of the most vulnerable places globally, access to those things is very limited. In South Sudan, for example, a report earlier this year stated that there were only four ventilators available in the whole country—four.

This debate is not just about the cost of drugs or vaccines. It is also about the resources, technology and equipment needed to manage a pandemic successfully. Even with easily accessible and cheaper treatments, there is no equality of access internationally. As things stand, we run a serious risk that by 2022 we will inhabit a two-tier planet in terms of the pandemic response.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she share my concern that those parts of the world where people do not have immediate access to healthcare systems also do not have furlough schemes, and people do not have the money to be able to isolate? The public health aspect is just as important as access to medicines.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** I entirely agree. Dare I say it, even the UK's Prime Minister this week accepted that the isolate part of the test, trace and isolate system is not working. That is largely driven by the fact that

people who have an economic need to continue to work will do so if the supports are not available, and that must be true in other parts of the world as well.

As I was saying, the most affluent countries will inevitably benefit, in terms of vaccines, access to treatment, some form of recovery and a return to aspects of day-to-day life, which we so miss in this place and beyond. For the majority of people in this world, that will, arguably, be a limited prospect; it would be a hollow victory indeed if we could get the virus under control while many people around the world continued to suffer. It would be a false victory, too. Let me go back to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon that I mentioned at the start. In order for a vaccine to be effective, we need to suppress the virus both at home and abroad, because coronavirus does not respect national borders. No one is safe until everyone is safe. That approach has been endorsed by the UK Government. I thank them for recognising that covid-19 medical products need to be treated as global public goods and for making commitments to deliver on that.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and apologise for the fact that we have not been able to field a Front-Bench spokesperson from the Scottish National party today. I endorse everything she is saying and the points she is making about the importance of global access to a vaccine, when it is developed. As she says, it should be treated as a common good. We have to seek assurances from the Minister that the UK Government will live up to that, given all the changes they have made to their foreign policy, with the merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the risk to scrutiny from that, and the potential abolition of the Select Committee chaired by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). We have to keep up that pressure on the Government, and I hope we will get a positive response from the Minister today.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** It is always good to find common ground with a fellow Scottish MP, and I absolutely endorse his comments. One reason my party was so opposed to that merger was exactly that: the UK is seen as a global leader in this regard and we do not want anything to risk the continuation of that.

I congratulate the Government on making commitments to deliver on covid medical products being treated as a public good, for example by contributing to the covid-19 vaccine global access facility, which will help procure and equitably distribute vaccines for covid. I look forward to hearing from the Minister today, but I urge her that we must do more. We must ensure that what the Government are doing on behalf of their own citizens does not unintentionally undermine global efforts. There is simply not enough global co-ordination on equality of access, and the UK has a moral duty to engage further. It is the highest per capita buyer of future vaccine doses in the world; we have bought up 10% of potential doses, despite making up less than 1% of the global population. I wish to mention two steps—which I hope the Minister will consider and commit to—that will be vital in ensuring that equality of access for these treatments and technologies is delivered as they come to fruition.

First, the Government need to recognise that currently there are just a handful of vaccine candidates, which means that production capacity is limited. One important step the UK Government could take is to work through international institutions to help encourage reform of the patent system, given the exceptional circumstances of this pandemic. Currently, there are legal safeguards for members of the World Trade Organisation, which means that members can override patent monopolies if public health is at threat. Germany, Australia and Canada have already taken those steps. South Africa and India have also proposed at a recent WTO meeting that all intellectual property monopolies relating to covid-19 tools, medicines and vaccines should be waived. In these exceptional circumstances, the Government need to be engaging with those ideas.

It is also worth noting that many of the vaccine candidates are being produced or developed using public funds. According to the charity STOPAIDS, the cost of development of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, whose successful outcome we are all awaiting, is being covered by public money, from the UK Government and others. It is a publicly funded exercise. Concerningly, STOPAIDS reports that from July next year AstraZeneca will have the ability to determine the future price of the vaccine. Given the timescales that I have outlined, as well as the ongoing uncertainty as we enter winter, with cases climbing again in many parts of the world—we are all too aware of that in this Chamber—clarity on this is essential. We cannot have nations crowded out during vaccine development and then priced out once the vaccine is available.

So much public money is being spent on covid-19 research and development, in all our interests, and it is therefore right that the Government ensure that the products created as a result of that spend are accessible to all. These reports give more weight to the idea of relaxing patents, and that leads me to my second point, which is transparency.

The Government should attach stringent conditions to future funding of covid research and development, to ensure that public money is not being invested in products that will go on to generate exorbitant profits for their owners who, as a result of public funding, have developed a vaccine at low or no cost or limited risk. Those steps will also help to speed up research and development, and will arguably make products more affordable, enabling generic competition, driving prices down and ensuring that people from all over the globe, from the wealthiest nations to the most disadvantaged, can access covid treatments in a swift and timely manner. I hope that the Minister will take those issues into consideration.

The developing situation of what is almost a vaccine nationalism must end. Let us start to engage even more fully with multilateral institutions and our allies. Let us work together to ensure that, this time next year, we are celebrating a pandemic in abeyance worldwide, rather than still being in the shadow of this deadly virus.

4.5 pm

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for calling for the debate, and I hope that my speech will amplify the points that she has made.



[Sarah Champion]

The International Development Committee, which I chair, has been examining the impact of the coronavirus on developing countries, and the contribution of the UK Government to initiatives to help the global south tackle the pandemic. A key part of the UK's strategy for the global south is funding an array of partnerships and collaborations aiming to develop, at speed, vaccines, therapies and tests for preventing, treating and diagnosing the disease. The Government have allocated the lion's share of their global coronavirus funding to the race for those products—£388 million initially for vaccines, therapies and tests and, more recently, another £571 million for the production, purchase and distribution of vaccines. That is very welcome, but a key concern that emerged throughout the evidence that we received was about the importance of legal and practical measures to guarantee equitable access to corona vaccines, medicines and tests around the world, based on need, not economic power. The former chief scientific adviser to the Department for International Development, Professor Charlotte Watts, told the IDC:

“It is not only about finding a vaccine that is going to work, but how to ensure that there are the resources and future investment in production capability, so that that can be distributed to low and middle-income countries.”

It is worth recalling why equitable access to medicines is such a concern. First, let me take the example of the antiretrovirals for HIV and AIDS. In Durban in 2000, at the XIII International AIDS Conference, Justice Edwin Cameron of the South African Constitutional Court famously declared that he had been living with AIDS for 33 months, but that

“there are 24 or 25 million people in Africa who at this moment are dying, and they are dying because they don't have the privilege that I have of purchasing my life and health.”

In 2000, the antiretroviral drugs capable of transforming AIDS into a manageable illness were far beyond the means of most South Africans, costing up to \$10,000 a year—much more expensive than any other country when compared with generic substitutes. When South Africa passed legislation to facilitate the use of cheaper, generic and imported products on public health grounds, 39 multinational pharmaceutical companies banded together to sue the Government for violating WTO rules. Rightly, that resulted in a PR disaster for the pharmaceutical industry. The case was dropped and the WTO recognised member states' rights to take such measures to protect public health and, in particular, to promote access to medicines for all. But even now, the use of that safeguard is largely limited to the original HIV/AIDS drugs because of the complexities required in legislation, health system weaknesses and political pressure.

Let us look at cancer. Cancer drugs are a lucrative pharmaceutical market—for example, representing 27% of the sector's revenue in the US. Efforts to set prices to recoup research and development costs over a set period are one thing, but funding the inflated billion-dollar trade in whole companies holding just one or two attractive patents seems less defensible. Whatever the reason, low and middle-income countries invariably find the prices set to take advantage of demand in a high-income country an insurmountable barrier to access. Pricing invariably results in wide variations in survival rates. For example, the US five-year overall survival rate for breast cancer is 84%, compared with just 12% in Gambia. That is hardly equitable.

Finally, I want to talk about polio. The polio story is essentially a triumph, with a 99% reduction in cases since the start of the global effort in 1985. However, each year, the oral polio vaccine, which is widely used in the global south, is linked to outbreaks of the disease where the wild virus has been eliminated. The injectable vaccine is an inactive virus, but it costs about \$3. The oral vaccine, at about 12 cents, contains live virus. Unfortunately, children can shed a mutated version of the live virus in their stools, which can then infect unvaccinated children in areas with poor sanitation. Clearly there are considerations other than just costs when comparing injected and ingested doses of medicine, but the reality is that cost kills.

Let us hold these examples in our mind as we consider equitable access to future coronavirus products. And let me be blunt: the prospect of the international community behaving morally, or at least rationally, on a global scale over the distribution of an effective vaccine, or even accurate and simple tests, at an affordable price, is not good. In his September speech to the first virtual United Nations General Assembly, the Prime Minister rightly lambasted the international community over its fractious and competitive reaction to the procurement of personal protective equipment during the first wave of the pandemic—and that was just over masks and aprons. Imagine the pressure on every Government to deliver the long-awaited panacea of covid-19 immunity to their own populations.

Any rational response to the pandemic must surely take account of the science and the almost unique status of this crisis by incorporating the sustainable development principle of leaving no one behind. No one will be safe and secure until everyone is covid-free. For once, everyone's interests are overtly aligned. The UK finds itself at a unique moment in time when we can reposition ourselves as a global leader for good. The soft power gained by doing the right thing for the very poorest in the world, and by standing up to those looking to profit from others' misery, will be immeasurable. I am grateful for the leading role the UK has taken to date in the development of covid vaccines and products.

**Patrick Grady:** I will be brief, because there is pressure on time, but I just want to say that the hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech that is demonstrating the importance of the scrutiny that her Select Committee has been able to provide. I want to re-emphasise the point I made to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) that the Scottish National party fully supports the continuation of that Committee, either as a non-departmental Select Committee or as a wider official development assistance-scrutinising Committee. I hope that those on the Government Benches will bear that in mind.

**Sarah Champion:** I am extremely grateful for the hon. Member's support for the International Development Committee. Development is a specific and key area of the work that we do, and it demands parliamentary scrutiny.

I ask the Minister to give us some certainty today on the Government's commitment and resolve to fight to ensure that covid drugs and treatments are accessible to everybody, not just those with the deepest pockets. Will the Government support the proposed waiver of all intellectual property monopolies related to covid-19 tools,

as put forward by India and South Africa to the WTO? Can the Minister confirm that, for all R&D projects that the UK has funded, transparency on finances and an obligation for resulting products to be free from monopolies were embedded in those contracts at the start and will be enforced? Finally, will the Government follow Germany, Australia, Canada and Israel in championing the use of legal safeguards that all World Trade Organisation members can implement to override patent monopolies if public health is at risk?

4.14 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this debate. It is a great pleasure to be part of a debate that actually gives me a huge amount of hope. I was a science teacher before I was an MP, and I spent a lot of time explaining to young people why science can be exciting and why it is the one thing that connects humans, no matter where they may be across the globe. Science is universal, regardless of our sex, creed, or wherever we may have been born. What a great time to be a science teacher! During coronavirus, by studying science someone could literally save the fate of the world. I am particularly proud that scientists in Oxford are leading from the front with the vaccine right now, and we should not forget that these times of great turmoil often spark moments of enormous human ingenuity, and we should celebrate that.

Whenever we have such moments, however, we first have to go through times of strife, and we must recognise—it is important that the House is united on this point—that it is not just morally right to ensure equitable access to these vaccines and therapeutics, but it is also scientifically smart. It is in our own self-interest, and regardless of whether people feel good going to bed at night knowing that we have done that, it is also the thing that will save us.

No one is free from these diseases until everyone is free, and I am sure hon. Members will have been struck by today's news from Denmark, where on the mink farms it has been discovered that the virus has passed from humans to mink, and then back. The virus has mutated, and 12 people in Denmark now have that new mutation. The entire mink population is to be culled, to try to keep that at bay.

My first thought was that I am very much against mink farming, but let us put that to one side. My second thought was, "Well, that's Denmark." Denmark has a well developed public health arm in its Government, and they are able to act within 24 hours and introduce those measures. What about other countries that do not have that kind of safeguard? We have been talking about vaccines and therapeutics in the fight against coronavirus, but what if we forget about that public health arm, and as a result end up with a new mutation that will make those vaccines pointless as we will not be able to catch up? That underlines the importance of ensuring that all such matters are taken into account.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife has already spoken about how intellectual property rights need to be reformed, and I have a few questions for the Government. Why have we not supported the TRIPS waiver proposal? What was our rationale for not doing that? Why did we not endorse the WHO covid technology

access protocol? That global initiative is meant to prevent monopolies from blocking global access to coronavirus vaccines, and I do not understand how we in this House can say that we believe in global access to these vaccines, yet not back that protocol. It does not make any sense.

Finally, it is important to mention the context of aid and 0.7% of gross national income. Ministers have said helpfully at the Dispatch Box that they have no intention of changing or de-escalating that figure, and keeping up the pressure to ensure that that does not happen is important. As we have seen throughout the pandemic, there are already knock-on effects on other countries. In October we saw media reports about 2.5 million girls around the world being forced into child marriages over the next five years, and enormous rises in child labour in India. Suicide rates in Malawi have skyrocketed as a result of the economic downturn due to covid-19, and the UN's "Global Report on Food Crises" warns of famines of "biblical proportions" as a result. Such economic disparities are just going to grow as the response to the virus continues. I hope that the Government will lead from the front, and that "Global Britain" is not just rhetoric but backed up by action and not only words.

I will end on another point of hope. I hope that coronavirus will be the start of a reformation of what has been a creaking international global response over the past few years. I also very much hope that later today we can declare that Biden has won, because Trump out of the White House would certainly help that cause. The next big crisis—the one that makes coronavirus look like just a warm-up to the main act—is of course the climate. Climate is linked to biodiversity, and biodiversity is linked to more likelihood of future pandemics. It is in our self-interest to use this crisis to create the new international order that will help us with our country's and our planet's future.

4.20 pm

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this important and timely debate. I pay tribute to the many organisations that have campaigned so powerfully on this issue, including Global Justice Now, Doctors Without Borders, and Just Treatment.

We are in the middle of battling a global pandemic, and to successfully overcome it, there must be a united cross-border approach. Anything less only undermines the United Kingdom's reputation as a development superpower. It also jeopardises the health of our citizens, given the rapid speed at which the virus travels around the world. The Government's failure to provide equitable access to covid vaccines means that many developing countries that already have overstretched and underfunded healthcare systems will suffer further still if they are unable to access affordable covid vaccines. As a member of the International Development Committee—it is great to see the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), in the Chamber—I know how the coronavirus crisis could set development progress back by 30 years. That is completely unacceptable, and a failure to intervene to prevent it would be wanton disregard for our international obligations. Countries in the global south should not continually be low in the pecking order: they must be prioritised in order to help them, and us, to overcome this deadly virus.

[Navendu Mishra]

Our Government must take the lead in tackling this crisis, but pharmaceutical companies must also play their part in finding a cure. Currently, the Government are handing billions to big pharma, which is taking very little risk while maintaining monopoly control of the drugs once they are developed. For example, AstraZeneca has stated that its costs in developing a covid vaccine at Oxford University will be fully covered by Governments. This approach will serve only to exacerbate gross health inequalities and cannot be tolerated during a pandemic when tens of thousands of lives are at stake. Terms and conditions must be attached to any funding the Government provide to ensure innovations for all those who need them, including those living in low-income and middle-income countries. Indeed, the Government should not relinquish their responsibility to introduce stringent public interest conditions on their funding to ensure equitable access. That means, with millions of pounds of public money going into the research and development of future covid medical technologies, that it is critical that the final products are sold at cost, and that the pharmaceutical companies do not profiteer from public funding when Governments are required to buy back the products that they initially funded the development of.

We are now in the ninth month of this crisis, yet there remains no clear policy from this Government for grantees to ensure effective technology transfer, open sharing, and licensing of covid medical technologies so that there is sustainable follow-on development and manufacturing globally, especially in the very poorest countries. That is why more than 130 cross-party parliamentarians, led by the all-party parliamentary group on vaccines for all, wrote to the Government, as far back as April, to call for equitable access to a coronavirus vaccine. This followed the announcement that £250 million will be pledged to its funding, research and development. We have yet to see any stipulations attached to this funding. This is despite a YouGov poll commissioned by the Wellcome Trust that found that 96% of adults in the UK believe that national Governments should work together to ensure that all treatments and vaccines are manufactured in as many countries as possible and distributed globally to whoever needs them. Therefore, I would like to hear from the Minister whether the Government will stipulate that, as a condition of any covid funding, any vaccine and medical product developed as a result of public money will not be patented and exclusively licensed.

I would also like to hear from the Minister whether the Government will join more than 30 countries in supporting the World Health Organisation's covid accessible technology initiative, aimed at making vaccines, tests, treatments and other health technologies to fight covid accessible to all. This would stop situations arising like the one I mentioned with AstraZeneca, which followed assurances from Oxford researchers that they would maximise access to the vaccine through open licensing before they subsequently signed an agreement with the pharmaceutical company. Although it has claimed that it will not make any profit from the vaccine during the pandemic, it was recently revealed that AstraZeneca has built a clause into the deal that states that the covid-19 crisis will be considered to be over in July 2021, regardless of what the situation is globally, at which point it will be able to hike its prices and begin profiteering. As the

*Financial Times* made public last month, AstraZeneca's deal with Oxford University allows it to make as much as 20% on top of the cost of goods for manufacturing the vaccine, and it has declined to reveal how much it is to produce.

The hon. Member for North East Fife made a very important point regarding the proposal set out by South Africa and India to waive intellectual property rights on health advances against covid-19. At-cost prices for pharmaceutical companies should be the norm, not the exception. Any profiteering will clearly hamper the ability of Governments and health systems around the world, including our own national health service, to be able to afford enough vaccines to meet the needs of their populations. We cannot have a situation whereby this or any other crisis is being privatised and putting at risk the lives of those who cannot afford or access vital vaccinations.

Will the Minister therefore assure us that the Government do indeed have plans to ensure responsible pricing for this vaccine both for our own health service and those of our global partners, and do so over the time-limited assurances such as those provided by AstraZeneca? Will the Minister also explain the Government's reasons for failing to demand transparency in the conditions attached to public research and development funding, as well as licences and agreements related to the Oxford University and AstraZeneca covid vaccine? This immoral situation cannot be allowed to continue, and the Government must now consider issuing Crown use licences in the event of future shortages of life-saving covid products and medicines.

That will help to offset the failure of the current patent system, which has dominated biomedical research for decades and hindered the rapid roll-out of equipment in countries that urgently need it as well as access to affordable vaccines. That is why I supported the call by the shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), earlier this year, ahead of the global vaccine summit in the UK, for an end to the unilateral approach to accessing vaccines at the expense of other countries as well as to overturn export bans on potential covid products.

As I have made clear, multilateral collaboration is not just the only way to ensure equitable access for all, but the only path for putting in place a global cure to end this pandemic, prevent an endless cycle of lockdowns and ensure that our country's physical and economic health recovers as quickly as possible.

4.27 pm

**Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this debate, which could not have come at a more important time.

Our ability to rise to the challenge that Members have laid out so compellingly today is in many senses dependent on the outcome of the US election and the UK's response to it. I think I probably speak for many in this House when I say that the approach the United States has taken to participation in global efforts to tackle covid-19 has been of serious concern to many of us. We know that a potential Biden Administration would mark a change in the approach of the United States, but do the Government have a strategy for a second-term Trump Administration? What is their strategy to convince the United States to change course? The UK is due to



host the G7 next year. We cannot afford to see a repeat of what happened earlier this year, when despite all the talk of the special relationship, the Prime Minister was unable to persuade the United States even to participate.

The director general of the World Health Organisation said recently:

“The greatest threat we face now is not the virus itself. Rather, it is the lack of leadership and solidarity at the global and national levels.”

I think we all accept that the issues around vaccine, treatment and diagnostics have the potential to become a competition and to pit people against one another both within countries and between them, and that this poses a significant challenge for the Government.

At the beginning of this crisis, there was a chaotic and cut-throat global scramble for PPE and medical supplies. Some countries introduced export controls on vital equipment, even to neighbouring countries and allies. Prices were inflated as countries sought to outbid one another, and while scientists and doctors across the world have worked together to understand and fight the virus, they have too often done so in a vacuum of global leadership.

I hope the Minister will confirm today that she shares our view that this just will not do. There is a clear moral obligation that we must not shy away from in ensuring that some of the poorest people in the world are not shut out from access to treatment, diagnostics and vaccine, but there is also the reality that a second global wave would have disastrous consequences for Britain, for our health and for our economy.

This is not easy. There are hard decisions and difficult trade-offs ahead. Decisions will have to be taken about who is first in line for a vaccine in the UK and how to ensure that it reaches the maximum number of our own citizens while extending it to people in every country across the world. That is why I hope that we will hear a clear strategy from the Government based on three principles. The first is clarity: who will be prioritised for access to a vaccine? The second is transparency and the reasoning behind those choices so that there is no implication of unfairness. The third is implementation: how will we ensure that sufficient quantities of a vaccine are produced and distributed equitably around the world?

A two-dose vaccine presents significant challenges in the United Kingdom, let alone in countries without infrastructure or with significant numbers of internally displaced people or people in refugee camps, which have already been seriously affected by covid-19. A vaccine that has to be stored at temperatures well below freezing also presents serious challenges in the United Kingdom, so we can imagine the challenge in other parts of the world.

We must learn from the mistakes that we have made so far. Too often, we have been too slow to act. We must have a clear strategy now from the Government, so that as soon as better treatments, diagnostics and a vaccine are available, we are ready to move.

We welcome the Government’s participation in COVAX, but sufficient progress has not yet been made. Will the UK use its position as a Gavi board member to ensure that COVAX has adequate doses to vaccinate priority groups, such as health workers in participating countries, and that the design is equitable, effective and genuinely global in scope?

I welcome the Government’s commitment to fund multilateral initiatives and institutions, such as the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and the World Health Organisation, but the Minister will be aware that there remains a multibillion-pound funding gap around the access to covid-19 tools accelerator and other initiatives. What is she doing to address that and what specific diplomatic efforts have been made so that others around the world step up and play their part?

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham, I am enormously proud of the work that our life sciences and research institutions are doing here in the United Kingdom, but there is a significant challenge to ensure that intellectual property works for public health. Will the Government commit to transparency of all bilateral deals signed between the UK Government and pharmaceutical companies related to covid technologies and products? Will the Minister ensure that every deal agreed as part of COVAX is published in full, and that any agreement mandates transparency around all costs of development and production?

The success of COVAX depends on the ability of low and middle-income countries to afford co-payments. The Minister will be aware of concerns that the current proposed price arrangements may require some Governments to redirect money that is usually reserved for other immunisations or health services. Can she press for financing arrangements to be realistic and flexible to take into account the economic impact of the pandemic?

We welcome the commitments of some pharmaceutical companies to supply vaccines at cost, but there are reports that those pledges are for only a limited duration. Can the Minister tell us when the not-for-profit price commitment made by AstraZeneca as part of the deal with Oxford University is due to expire? If that decision is conditional on determining when the pandemic is over, who will make that determination?

What estimate has been made of the effect of the expiration of that commitment on the affordability of the vaccine for developing countries? Will conditions related to public health interests be attached to UK public funding? What work is being done to ensure that we are sharing technologies, know-how and data to allow us to deliver and upscale the manufacture of a vaccine across the world quickly?

Although the world has been slow to come together at a political level, the scientific community has been genuinely inspirational in reaching across borders to try to get us to global safety more quickly. The Chinese Government may have been slow to warn the world about the pandemic, but the same cannot be said for Chinese doctors and researchers who bravely blew the whistle on things that they saw happening in their communities. They have worked together in a difficult political environment, as tensions have been raised, and as the ramping up of hostilities between countries, particularly the US and China, has created a highly politicised, very risky environment for medical and scientific co-operation. Will the Minister tell us what efforts the UK Government are making to support those researchers, medics and scientists and the continued collaboration between them, and to de-escalate the rhetoric and tension among vital global partners?

This pandemic is a truly global crisis: it has reached every corner of the earth. More than 1.2 million people have died, with millions more suffering ill health, often

[Lisa Nandy]

for months on end. Just as here in Britain the virus has highlighted long-standing socioeconomic and racial inequalities, so covid-19 threatens to exacerbate the gulf between rich and poor around the world. It risks undoing decades of work to reduce poverty and tackle inequality globally, and many of the world's vulnerable refugees, the displaced, those in conflict settings and those without access to adequate healthcare are exposed to the worst effects of the virus. We cannot stand for that, so there is no question but that the UK must rise to meet this unprecedented challenge. A global crisis requires a global response and now is the time to stand together and show leadership. If the Government are prepared to rise to the scale of the challenge ahead, I assure the Minister that they will have our full support.

4.35 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton):** I thank all Members who contribute to the debate. In particular, I am grateful to the hon. Members for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing it. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rotherham for her work on this issue in her role as Chair of the International Development Committee. As a former member of that Committee, once upon a time, I recognise the work that it has done over many years.

I am conscious that Members asked me a number of specific questions on a number of themes. I will do my best to answer as many of them as I possibly can, but I shall also make some comments of my own.

Innovation and equitable access to treatments are critical in the fight to end the covid-19 pandemic. The UK is committed to ensuring rapid and equitable global access to safe, effective vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics. On 26 September, the Prime Minister told the United Nations General Assembly that

“no one is safe until everyone is safe”—

a phrase that I have heard Members use in this Chamber on many occasions. It is that important that I am sure we will continue to use it.

The Prime Minister also told the UN General Assembly:

“The health of every country depends on the whole world having access to”

safe and effective vaccines, treatments and tests. The Government are working to deliver on that commitment through our innovation and scientific co-operation, our leading levels of funding and our close collaboration with other nations and multilateral partners. Scientific co-operation has led to swift breakthroughs and enhanced our collective knowledge of how to tackle this virus. The UK has played its part by supporting clinical trials of life-saving treatments and backing vaccine research at the University of Oxford and Imperial College London.

In June, the recovery trial based at the University of Oxford announced that dexamethasone, a low-cost corticosteroid, was the first treatment in the world shown to reduce the risk of mortality in hospitalised covid-19 patients who required oxygen or ventilation. Dexamethasone is a widely available and—crucially—affordable drug that is now being used to help covid-19 patients. This was the first robust clinical trial anywhere

in the world to show a treatment that significantly reduces patient mortality for those with covid-19. Such a breakthrough was possible only thanks to our world-class British life sciences, and has been described by Dr Tedros, director-general of the World Health Organisation, as a “lifesaving scientific breakthrough.”

From the beginning of the pandemic, we have focused on robust clinical research. This enables us to take evidence-based decisions, backed by rigorous science, to improve access to effective treatments both in the UK and around the world. More broadly, the UK is committed to collaborating with public and private partners at home and abroad to accelerate development and equitable access in all countries to affordable health technologies to respond to covid-19. This includes exploring voluntary arrangements and approaches such as non-exclusive voluntary licensing that promote affordable access for all, while also providing the incentives that help to foster the innovation needed to create new vaccines, treatments and tests.

The UK is proud to be the largest donor to the access to covid-19 tools, or ACT, accelerator. The ACT accelerator brings together leading international organisations in global health to support collaboration in developing and ensuring access to the new vaccines, treatments and diagnostics that will be needed to bring this pandemic under control.

**Sarah Champion:** Just out of curiosity, I am interested to know why we did not join ACT when it was initiated in April.

**Wendy Morton:** I will cover that point later, if I may, but that we have made commitments to the ACT accelerator partners across the health technologies of up to £813 million. Our commitment is very clear. That includes up to £500 million to Gavi, the vaccine alliance, for the COVAX advance market commitment. The support will also help to ensure access to covid-19 vaccines for up to 92 low and middle-income countries, providing up to 500 million people with vaccinations. The UK is also the largest ACT accelerator donor to the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics, or FIND, which is leading the way in developing diagnostic tools for the world's poorest countries.

In terms for treatments, the UK is providing up to £40 million to the covid-19 therapeutics accelerator, alongside the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, Mastercard and other funders. The covid-19 therapeutics accelerator and Unitaid lead the work of the ACT accelerator therapeutics partnership. Unitaid has a track record of helping companies to bring affordable health technologies to developing country markets quickly, and the UK is the second largest funder.

Our funding for the ACT accelerator is supporting a pipeline of promising treatments, including monoclonal antibodies and new antivirals. New clinical trial data will emerge in coming weeks. The ACT accelerator is also preparing the way for the rapid deployment of new therapeutics as soon as possible after they have proved effective. We have seen some impressive results so far, but we recognise that the scale of the crisis means more funding will be needed across all three health technologies. We will continue to work with our international partners to encourage them to join us in stepping up their support and to support new and innovative solutions to address this challenge.

The UK is proud to be at the forefront of international efforts to develop vaccines, treatments and tests and ensure equitable access for the world's poorest countries, but we recognise that we cannot do that alone. Only through global collaboration with our international partners and working through effective multilateral systems will we bring the pandemic under control. That is why on 30 September, the Foreign Secretary co-hosted a side event at the UN General Assembly with the UN Secretary-General, the World Health Organisation director-general and the Health Minister of South Africa. The event raised up to \$1 billion in bilateral contributions for the COVAX advance market commitment. The World Bank also announced a package of \$12 billion of support for countries to access vaccines, treatments and tests, and a coalition of 16 industry leaders announced a shared commitment to equitable access, including not-for-profit pricing. The commitments by this range of partners are a powerful demonstration of the international support for the ACT accelerator and the need for partnership across the international system.

Vaccine nationalism was raised by Members on the Opposition Benches. In the UK, we are challenging vaccine nationalism. We are a leading supporter of the COVAX facility, which is open to all countries and aims to make vaccines widely available when they are proven. At the UN General Assembly, we used our diplomacy to convene countries in support of that and announced UK aid to fund the COVAX advance market commitment.

Intellectual property rights provide incentives to create and commercialise new inventions, such as life-changing vaccines. They keep innovators innovating, creators creating and investors investing. The UK believes that a robust and fair intellectual property system is a key part of the innovation framework that allows economies to grow while enabling society to benefit from knowledge and ideas. Multiple factors need to be considered to ensure equitable access for all to covid-19 vaccines. These include increasing manufacturing and distribution capacity, measures to support or incentivise technology transfer, ensuring that global supply chains remain open, and ensuring that effective platforms are used to voluntarily share IP and know-how.

The UK has long supported affordable and equitable access to essential medicines. We have not signed the solidarity call to action, but we remain committed to collaborating with public and private partners, including by exploring voluntary arrangements and approaches such as non-exclusive voluntary licensing.

**Layla Moran:** Will the Minister give way?

**Wendy Morton:** I would just like to make a bit more progress so that I can cover as many points as possible.

Several hon. Members asked about the allocation of vaccines. I assure them that this is being considered. The World Health Organisation's allocation framework recommends the highest priority populations by age, underlying conditions and health workers—estimated at about 3%. We cannot prevent a country from administering doses as they want, but there is a framework and countries will submit national deployment plans that will be reviewed by the WHO and COVAX.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of inequalities for minority groups. I assure all hon. Members that we are working closely with

organisations such as UNICEF and Gavi in that regard. These are organisations that we have worked with for many years.

I really hope that the House is reassured by the Government's comprehensive approach to supporting innovation and equitable access to covid-19 vaccines, through scientific co-operation, working with industry, funding and multilateral collaboration. The UK is leading efforts to respond to the pandemic by developing and delivering the medical tools that are essential to ending the pandemic for everyone everywhere, but we must all work together to develop safe, effective and affordable vaccines, treatments and tests that can be produced quickly and made available to all.

**Sarah Champion:** I appreciate the Minister's giving way. I just want to challenge her on the use of the word "voluntary" when it comes to intellectual property sharing and access to the vaccine. With all respect, big industry—particularly big pharmaceuticals—is not known for equitable sharing on a voluntary basis, so will the Minister please answer this specific question? When the UK taxpayer has been putting money into R&D, what right do we have to ensure that the information that we are paying for is shared in an equitable way?

**Wendy Morton:** As I explained, we believe that a robust and fair intellectual property system is a key part of an innovation framework that allows economies to grow while at the same time enabling society to benefit from knowledge and ideas. There are existing mechanisms that facilitate the sharing of IP—for example, expanding the mandate of existing organisations such as the Medicines Patent Pool to cover covid-19.

We have played a leading role, with our international and national partners, to identify end-to-end solutions that ensure affordable access for all, such as mechanisms to support the voluntary sharing of IP and know-how, manufacturing at scale and ensuring that no one is left behind, including the poorest and most vulnerable. We are committed to collaborating with public and private partners in the UK and internationally, including by exploring voluntary arrangements and approaches such as non-exclusive voluntary licensing, to help deliver what we all want, which is the promotion of affordable access while providing incentives to create those new innovations.

It is fair to say that, if we are to defeat covid-19, and if we are to achieve a global recovery and avoid a future pandemic, we must work together across borders. Covid-19 is a virus that has no respect for borders or barriers, which is why the UK is promoting multilateral solutions to end the pandemic, working with international organisations, our partners in the G7 and G20 and industry.

4.50 pm

**Wendy Chamberlain:** I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and the hon. Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra). A year ago, I was commencing a career break at the start of the general election campaign. At the time of my election to this place—I dare say it was the same for all Members here—none of us foresaw what was coming in 2020.



[Wendy Chamberlain]

I remember speaking in my former role as the Liberal Democrats' International Development spokesperson about the real concern that covid-19 was going to rip through the global south. In some respects, we have not seen that, for a variety of reasons, including the younger populations in some of those countries. That is a positive thing. However, we do not understand the impact of things such as long covid or the mutations that my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon talked about. Although the debate has rightly focused on the vaccine, we have to acknowledge that the public health infrastructure and access to other treatments is a real issue in developing countries and will make the delivery of vaccines more difficult.

The UK is a global leader in this area and has been for a number of years. I note the Minister's commendable actions to date, but it is clear that there are still key steps to be taken. It is also clear that other countries are now taking those steps, on issues such as patents, waivers and support for the World Health Organisation's C-TAP—covid-19 technology access pool—which, without UK support, risks being undermined. I thank the Minister, but it is clear that there is much still to do, rather than just giving assurances. We need key commitments and sign-ups, and it is clear that Opposition Members will continue to press for those.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered the UK Government's role in ensuring innovation and equitable access to treatment within the international covid-19 response.

## Offshore Wind Transmission Connections

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

4.52 pm

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): This is my first Adjournment debate, and I am proud to have been granted a debate on one of the most important areas that the Government are tackling. At its heart, we are dealing with climate change, and our efforts to provide clean, green power will set us apart as we tackle the single most important issue that all Governments around the world face.

Perhaps it is rather fitting that I am standing here at all on Guy Fawkes night, because had Guy Fawkes got his way back in 1605 and blown up the Houses of Parliament, I would not be here to talk about a different kind of blow—the blowing of the wind that is to transform our energy sector and make us the leading nation in the world in the race to decarbonise and reach net zero. Back in December 2019, I stood on a commitment to care about and tackle climate change. Eleven months in, how are we getting on? We are doing that, aren't we, but why? Wind energy has the potential to be our greatest story and to give us energy security—just imagine that—as well as protecting our natural environment; all those things together.

Off the coast of Norfolk and Suffolk, we already have 52% of all the wind farms in the country, and we will contribute well over 60% of all the country's energy once the current applications are built. This programme, along with all the other initiatives we are contributing to, is making us the fastest country in the G7 to decarbonise since 1990. As well as that, we have been the first nation to legally commit to being bound to achieving net zero by 2050, an achievement that we on the Conservative Benches are all rightly proud of. But recently, we heard the Prime Minister announce that we will go even further, even faster. Not content with that, the Prime Minister announced four weeks ago that by 2030 every single household in the country will be powered by wind-produced energy. He said:

“As Saudi Arabia is to oil, the UK is to wind”.

And I have no doubt that the Prime Minister is sitting watching, having a cup of tea.

It is an intrepid quintet of Norfolk and Suffolk MPs who are already ahead of the curve. We saw that vision and we have a method to deliver it. It is at this point that I want to thank my colleagues, some of whom are here this evening, because without them we would not be as far down the line as we are now. My hon. Friends the Members for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) have been working on how to achieve that vision for months and, certainly before newbies like myself, even longer. For there is a problem that brings us to this debate. How do we connect that much power and put it into the transmission grid? We need a better system, a better method, and a fit-for-purpose and future-proof way.

Five years ago, nobody really cared. It was not the problem that it is now, but we have come an enormous way since then. We have now to catch up with the technology, catch up with the regulatory framework and catch up with the legislative processes.

**James Cartledge** (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward this vital debate and on speaking so eloquently. I am proud to be one of the quintet to which he refers. Does he agree that what we all share is that our constituencies will see very significant infrastructure built in the years ahead to accommodate the new demand for offshore wind? We all support that, but is it not the case that bringing forward a new transmission method, whereby we have more co-ordinated wind farms, would not only reduce infrastructure pressure but sustainably develop the industry in the interests of UK plc?

**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend makes perhaps one of the most important points I am about to come on to. He is absolutely right that as our growth has become almost exponential, we have had to tackle the problem of infrastructure and find that better way. We will come on to that in a moment, but first of all I just want to highlight some of the problems that that presents for my communities and the communities of my hon. Friends the Members for Broadland and for South Suffolk.

I have said before that it is about the rate of growth. Because of the rate of growth at the moment, communities are blighted by the invasiveness of connecting these mammoth pieces of infrastructure to the transmission grid. I have said many times—for the record, I still believe it—that I am lucky enough to represent the most beautiful constituency in the country, which is my home of North Norfolk. An increasing number of offshore wind projects are being granted in similar locations within my constituency, breaking land and sharing cables routes that go through my countryside. My communities, such as Weybourne and Happisburgh, which I am sure some of my hon. Friends know well and where I am sure they have holidayed here, are seeing year after year of destruction as cable routes tear through villages, communities and farmland.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that, although cable corridors call to mind something rather minor, they in fact run a 100-metre corridor through whatever is in front of them, whether it is the environment or local communities?

**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend is right, and he highlights another important point. It has been a privilege to serve in this place since December 2019. Since then, we have held many meetings with—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. The hon. Gentleman has not done anything wrong, but it is five o'clock.

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Duncan Baker:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is a privilege not to have done something wrong in the Chamber.

Since December 2019, I have had many meetings with my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland, and I commend him for the passion with which he has served and tried to help those communities that have seen potential road maps of cable corridors coming through

their small villages. He has been a champion for trying to stop that in those communities. I used to live in one of those communities—Cawston—and I know how much he has done to help it. One of the problems is that the current regulations prohibit the sharing of infrastructure due to competition rules, so each individual company must construct separate cable corridors.

**Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am not fortunate enough to have a beautiful coastline along my constituency, although Beaconsfield is beautiful indeed—the most beautiful, I would wager, but we can debate that later. Does my hon. Friend agree that those who are passionate about tackling the climate change emergency and are providing new and alternative forms of energy need infrastructure that can be shared with everyone, including small community energy suppliers, and that we need to look at how we can expand that infrastructure to not only wind farms but other alternative forms of energy?

**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that she has an equally beautiful constituency; perhaps we should do an exchange programme one day and view each other's constituency. She makes an important point: wind energy is just one part of the jigsaw of how we decarbonise and create enough green energy. There will be other forms of energy that are part of the mixture that will help us to decarbonise by 2050. We are lucky in Norfolk and Suffolk to have an enormous amount of wind energy off our coast, but there are many areas around the country with leading initiatives that are helping in the fight to tackle climate change.

The point I want to highlight, and the reason why this debate is so important, is what these cable corridors are leading to. They are causing major environmental damage, as wildlife habitats and agricultural land are dug up multiple times. Nutrient-rich land is sometimes irreversibly damaged from the disturbance caused, and many farmers report poor crop growth along cable routes—much worse than before those cables were put into the ground—caused by the disturbance of the digging. Communities also suffer great socioeconomic damage from the disruption and upheaval caused. For businesses that are along cable routes, there is disturbance, including from heavy goods vehicles and traffic for many months—sometimes up to a year—while these trenches are being dug. It causes enormous problems for these small, often rural communities in my part of the world.

**Jerome Mayhew:** My hon. Friend has already made mention of the beautiful village of Cawston in my constituency and the neighbouring village of Oulton. Does he agree that when we look at the socioeconomic impact of these cable routes, it is wrong to look at them in isolation? In the case of Cawston, for example, there are no fewer than two routes crossing each other in the same community, yet we have individual planning applications. Does he agree that a more integrated approach dealing with all the infrastructure requirements for offshore wind should be taken?

**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He makes a hugely important point: we have places that are seeing multiple crossings of cable routes. Of course, what we should be doing is looking ahead with some vision about what is coming in.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He is making his case extremely passionately. He has clearly done an awful lot of research for this debate, but I do not know whether he has seen this week's Policy Exchange report, "The Future of the North Sea" which highlights the enormous potential of the North sea basin to generate jobs and to achieve our carbon reduction targets. Does he agree that the way to do this is to work collaboratively with industry, which wants to help, and to look at reviewing and changing the regulatory framework, as indeed Policy Exchange has suggested, but in a way that does not disadvantage industry?

**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend has, as he always does so beautifully and succinctly hit the nail on the head. This is all about our wanting to promote, help, collaborate and work together on such an important issue. Ever since we have been involved in this whole discussion, we have come together with the industry, and worked with people from across the world, mainly in Europe, who have brought such brilliant ideas to the table. Only through collaboration and working with them do I even stand here today to try to present some of the issues and explain why it is so important to work together. I thank him enormously for that contribution.

**James Cartlidge:** As a supplementary to that intervention, will my hon. Friend give way?

**Duncan Baker:** Absolutely.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend is being very generous in taking interventions. I hope that he continues in that spirit—I am sure he will. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) is absolutely right to highlight the Policy Exchange report. I believe that it calls for a more holistic approach to planning the future of the North sea. Is that not in keeping with what we are asking for, which is a more co-ordinated approach? After all, not only is it in the interests of our communities to reduce infrastructure and build more of it out at sea, but it supports the industry, enabling it to grow more sustainably because it does not have to be bogged down with constant planning changes and all that comes with that.

**Duncan Baker:** Again, my hon. Friend, in his enthusiasm and excitement, is leaping ahead to the point in my speech that I am going to get to in just a moment, but he makes the point so passionately and enthusiastically. That is why I said at the beginning that he was part of the quintet. I feel almost guilty that my great friend the hon. Member for Waveney is not included in this quintet. I want to invite everybody to be part of this, because they have all been such champions for the securing of this important debate this evening. That point is absolutely right, and we will come to that point about co-ordination and integration point in one second.

As more and more developments are granted and our communities recover from one cable corridor and get back on their feet, another one comes along in close proximity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland mentioned, even in such close proximity, they cross over the top of each other. I say to all hon. and right hon. Members in this place today that we cannot go on like this. There is a better way and it is only right that we urge the Government to address this problem. For months

now, we have met with all manner of stakeholders, from the operators to the regulators, to those around the world who have helped us in our quest, and I do think that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

I am hugely grateful, as we all are here, to the Minister for giving up his time and for so willingly allowing us to lobby him. I have even disturbed him when he was eating his dinner in the Dining Room to talk about this. He has always been so engaging and has allowed me to shamelessly talk about this. I know that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is charging ahead with the offshore transmission network review, which we also welcome. What started off as a very fixed vision of an offshore ring main has in just a few months morphed and evolved into something probably best summarised by the National Grid ESO report published last month. The report's findings outline many of our concerns, but, as in all governance, we should not just come up with a problem—we should offer a solution. There is something there: an integrated offshore network using high-voltage, direct current- or HVDC-technology that could save consumers approximately £6 billion by 2050. More than that, by using an integrated approach with the infrastructure out at sea, we reduce the environmental and social impacts of the point-to-point connections, such as cables and onshore landings, by about 50%.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous in giving way. Is not another big advantage that once we start building that offshore transmission network, it massively increases the capacity for exporting energy once a surplus is generated? We will come ever closer to linking through those big DC connectors into Europe through France.

**Duncan Baker:** Again, my hon. Friend hits such an important point. We touched on this at the very beginning when we talked about the ability to create energy security for ourselves. Where else do we produce a solution in which we could actually end up exporting energy? We will be a sovereign nation—we are a sovereign nation again—and the ability to have that security but export excess energy to other countries in Europe is almost a no-brainer. I know that he has very close links to the Chancellor, and I am sure that he, too, is watching this speech and that his eyes will light up at the potential export opportunity and income to the Treasury.

The integrated technology is reasonably available, but a key way to unleash the new system is through the use of HVDC circuit breakers. As we heard very recently, some of the technology is already available. Some is being developed. We are very much at the cusp of this.

**Jerome Mayhew:** In your discussions—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** His.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I am so sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my hon. Friend's discussions with members of the offshore industry, has he formed a view that they are keen to adopt the new system? If so, have they indicated that the sooner they get clarity and the sooner the rules change to facilitate the new system, the better it will be for industry, the environment and our constituents?



**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend again makes an important point. Even in my short time in this place, it has been amazing to see how many people seem to want and agree on this, and to be pushing in the same direction. He is absolutely right—yes, there are people out there, and industry bodies, who do this day in, day out, who want us to push in this direction. Suddenly, for the first time, everyone is pushing at an open door and it is now incumbent on us to help try to deliver this, and that is part of the reason why we are here this evening.

I was trying to make out the point that if we ensure that the legislative and regulatory frameworks are right, using this new technology we will have a chance to link wind farms together and send current down new cabling straight into the locations that need it. No longer will it have to go through my communities and those of many other hon. Members. It will go directly to the locations that need it. What would that do? It would minimise the need for onshore infrastructure and trenching and disruption in our communities.

**James Cartledge:** Is it not the case that this is precedent? There was a plan to build new power lines over the border from Scotland into England, but because of the damage that that would have done to the countryside, they built an under-sea link, known as the western link, down into north Wales and the rest of the grid. Does that not show that we can already deliver large amounts of power underneath the sea so that it is closer to the population centres where the demand exists?

**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend has again picked up on the fact that some of this technology is already out there. It may be in its infancy, but it is on the way. It is being developed and, in some parts of the country, it is even starting to be there already. We just need to unleash it for the rest of the country to take advantage of it.

We often lose sight of why we are even talking about this issue. The current piecemeal approach was perhaps appropriate in the early stages, but as we quadruple our wind generation and commit our energies to decarbonising, we have to look again, and in my case and those of my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk and other Members here, pay particular attention to our coastal communities, where such technology has been an enormous problem.

**Peter Aldous:** I appreciate the point that my hon. Friend is trying to make, but for coastal communities such as mine, these developments have been an absolute godsend in bringing jobs to the area.

**Duncan Baker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is enormous generation of jobs on the back of this green energy revolution. He is absolutely right to point that out and I do not dispute it in the slightest. The point I was making was that in coastal communities, where we are trenching into the side of cliffs—in areas of outstanding natural beauty—I want to make sure that we can properly improve things for the future.

This is now an issue of speed. We have all read the report that I referred to earlier, and I think we now have to get on with things as quickly as we possibly can. I know that the Minister is hugely supportive of the case, so I wonder whether there will be time in the Queen's Speech next year for Bills to be laid out so that we can really get to grips with ensuring that the legislation can change for the better to benefit all our constituencies.

There are significant challenges ahead. Nobody should stand here and think that this is going to be a walk in the park, but we are offering a solution—a way forward. I want this day to be as important as it was 415 years ago, when Guy Fawkes, luckily, did not get his way. He did not get quite the explosion that he wanted, but perhaps five intrepid MPs from the east will help to blow us back on course with an energy solution that we need for a truly green future.

5.17 pm

**The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng):** I am delighted to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), whose forays into parliamentary history, going back 415 years, I particularly appreciated. I was very pleased to be reminded of the fact that it is 5 November, but I will make no further reference to it in my speech. I will briefly, but as succinctly and comprehensively as I can, address the points that he very ably made.

I also thank my hon. Friend for his efforts, along with the quintet—I can count only four—of MPs who have so ably, over many months, lobbied me, persuaded me and cajoled me to look at this issue in a much more detailed way than we had done in the past. I commend them also for a classic example of MPs coming together, forcing an agenda and getting some quite substantial results over a relatively short time.

When I took over this brief, and I had the privilege of accepting the Prime Minister's offer to be the Energy Minister in this country, I was struck by the fact that thinking on this subject had not really evolved since 2015. That year was significant, because it was when Ofgem, to all intents and purposes, ruled out an offshore transmission system network of the kind that my hon. Friend has promoted. However, in the short time since—in the last year and a bit—we as a Government and a lot of industry players have really shifted on this issue, and the contribution of hon. Members in this regard has been remarkable.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk also did a good job in suggesting that net zero was at the centre of our strategy to fight climate change. We are, as he said, rightly proud of our commitment to that. In many ways, the problem that he refers to is a function of our success. It was not long ago that we thought 10 GW of offshore wind capacity by 2030 would be a significant achievement, and that it was a reasonable target. Today we want to have 40 GW by 2030. That is a quadrupling of the ambition, and because we have upscaled our ambition so considerably, his argument about the disruptive effects that point-to-point landing of electricity would have on his and other communities has been recognised. I would suggest that the argument for some form of offshore network system has been won.

What is critically under discussion at the moment is the timing. In a way, that is the devil that lurks in the detail, and it is precisely the reason that, in July this year, thanks to the lobbying of my hon. Friend and others, I launched the offshore transmission network review, to bring together key stakeholders involved in the timing, the siting and the design of an offshore wind transmission system. The 40 GW ambition equates to installing one turbine each weekday throughout the whole of the 2020s. That gives an impression of how comprehensive and ambitious this deployment will be.

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

We cannot afford to slow that rate, so, given the nature of the ambition, it is absolutely right that we should look at developing an offshore transmission network system.

My hon. Friend did a good job in referring to the National Grid ESO analysis, which was published only in the past few weeks. It showed that the economic benefits of a fully integrated approach could save as much as £6 billion by 2050, and that is not even considering all the local environmental benefits that such an offshore network system would provide. The crucial thing to remember is that most of this technology is already here with us right now. Shifting away from individual connections towards a larger, more integrated solution would be environmentally sensible as well as presenting an enormous economic opportunity not only for the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) but for the whole country. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, this is about UK plc at the end of the day.

**Jerome Mayhew:** My right hon. Friend referred to the review undertaken by National Grid ESO. When considering the cost-benefit analysis of the integrated design compared with the counterfactual—the current system—the report concluded that adopting the new integrated system immediately or as soon as possible would be the way to get the majority of the £6.4 billion of savings, in both capital expenditure and operating expenditure from then right up to 2050 and beyond. That is an 18% saving for consumers. Does he agree that it would be irrational if the Government did not do all in their power to put this new system in place and get the benefits as soon as possible?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I fully appreciate my hon. Friend's point. We want to expedite this process, but we are talking about very expensive infrastructure and about redesigning or tweaking the regulatory framework in order to accommodate that investment. These things take time, but it is absolutely right for him and other MPs to hold the Government's feet to the fire. That is entirely legitimate, and he has done a great job on that.

**James Cartlidge:** It is brilliant how the Minister is engaging with us on this subject. On timing, we feel that there is an issue about legislation, and if we are to

reform the regulatory framework as quickly as we are pushing ahead with output targets, we may need legislation in the forthcoming Queen's Speech. We are ready to help in any way we can to ensure that we get something ready quickly.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** Perhaps regrettably, the subjects of the Queen's Speech are beyond my pay grade, as people say, and I cannot possibly divulge what will be in the speech in that context, because frankly I do not know. However, my hon. Friend makes a serious point, and any subsequent legislation from BEIS, or that I try to introduce to the House, must consider the question of the regulatory regime and the environment through which we can develop the offshore network system. We are looking at that issue and taking it seriously.

**Peter Aldous:** Does the Minister agree, given the highly innovative solution that he is working up, that industry has been working ingeniously in the North sea for more than 50 years, and it has come up with the most remarkable technological solutions? Industry must be involved, along with us, with business, with the Government, and with regulators.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** My hon. Friend will know that I have visited his constituency and seen the wind farm installations off the coast of Suffolk. Industry and the operators of offshore wind farms, National Grid and others will be involved, and I am sure they will be consulted. They have come up with their own review, and people are very much engaged in that wider debate.

I am pleased that our review has been welcomed across the sector and across the House, and I am pleased to respond at any time—perhaps not at dinner-time, but at any other time—to my hon. Friends' insistence and brilliant advocacy on this issue. This is a remarkable instance of a group of MPs representing a locality pushing an important issue, not only for their constituencies but for the country as a whole. I commend them in their efforts and look forward to hearing from them. I hope that together we can all push forward and deliver on this agenda.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.27 pm

*House adjourned.*

## Westminster Hall

*Thursday 5 November 2020*

[*SIQBHAIN McDONAGH in the Chair*]

### BACKBENCH BUSINESS

#### **Baby Loss: Covid-19**

1.30 pm

**Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on people experiencing baby loss.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. Before I start, how should I address you—Chair?

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair)**: However you like—it will not be the worst thing I have ever been called.

**Cherilyn Mackrory**: This is now the fifth year the House has marked Baby Loss Awareness Week—as with many things, covid-19 caused some delay, as Baby Loss Awareness Week took place a month ago—and I am pleased and grateful that we are here today. It is extremely encouraging and moving that right hon. and hon. Members have ensured that this important issue has been debated often in recent years, helping to deliver an unmistakable message outside this place about its importance in Parliament, the Department of Health and Social Care and the national health service. Most importantly, that sends a message to bereaved families, letting them know that there are people in this place who truly understand how it feels.

Please forgive me for telling my story today, in as much detail as I dare. It is important to me that my baby's short story helps to shine a light on what is a really dark situation for many people. "I can see straightaway that something isn't right"—those are the words that broke my heart and changed my life forever. It was 3 January 2019, and my husband and I were at the routine 20-week scan for our second baby. My first pregnancy had been healthy and straightforward and resulted in our fabulous daughter. At age 42, I had been slightly anxious about my 12-week scan, but happily all tests had come back clear. My midwife encouraged me to birth again at our midwife-led centre, and I was keen to stay healthy in order to do just that.

We had celebrated a low-key but cosy Christmas and new year with family and friends. I felt content and reassured by my kicking baby and wondered what the following year would bring. Three days later, we went for our 20-week scan and would receive the terrible news from the sonographer that our baby had an extremely severe form of spina bifida. I lay on the couch and grabbed my husband's hand tightly. Tears stung my eyes—not unlike now. When I glanced at him, his eyes were watering, too. We did not dare believe what had just happened.

Just over an hour later, we were sitting in the office at our main hospital, the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro, with a wonderful consultant and an incredibly kind bereavement midwife. We were met at reception

and taken to a small room and brought some tea. I just knew this was not going to end well, but I did not know what to expect. I was checked again, and any hope we had was extinguished by a slow and silent shake of the head. But my baby was still kicking. So started the most traumatic weekend of my life to date.

We had no idea what would happen next. Our world had started to swim and spiral away, and neither of us knew what questions we should ask.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I will try not to get emotional myself. I understand the hon. Lady's grief—we all do. We understand how important it is for parents to come through this terrible time. We have had similar things in my own family, so I understand exactly how she feels. I was trying to give her a bit of time, and what do I do? I start to blubber as well. I apologise for that. I just want to say that I really feel her pain.

**Cherilyn Mackrory**: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which has succeeded.

I must say that we were looked after with extreme kindness by everyone at the RCHT. Not a day goes by when I do not think of them and thank them silently. On that day, we were barely left alone. We were provided with lots of information and given lots of time to process. I want to emphasise that, because what comes next feels pretty brutal. However, the staff make it all as bearable as they can, but it is shocking when it happens, and I want to convey that.

We were talked through what I am going to call the process. Before we left that day, I had signed a form to consent to infanticide—the termination of our much-wanted baby's life. This is a decision that the mother must make, as the baby still belongs to her body. I could have chosen not to do this, but at nearly 21 weeks gestation my baby had no rights of its own. To be born before dying, a midwife would stay with the baby until it passes away. I am told that this is much more traumatic for the baby.

The next day we returned and endured the procedure. I have never felt so helpless. I was voluntarily allowing somebody to inject a long needle through my skin, into my womb and into my baby's heart, so that they could inject some potassium to end that little life. Our baby was very strong, and it took longer than it usually does. I hung on to my husband and let him be strong for me, not that he felt that he was. I felt my baby kicking until the very end.

Two days later we returned to the RCHT. It was a Sunday morning, and we had been told to go to the Daisy suite. That is where women birth if their baby is going to be stillborn. It means they do not have to interact with other pregnant women or newborns while labouring. However, when we got there, it was being used by another woman who was there with her dad. She had been brought in as an emergency the night before, and her baby had stopped moving at 38 weeks. I felt that she needed the space more than I did.

I was induced and endured an eight and a half hour labour, which was much longer and far more intense than with my first baby. Finally, I delivered. I had not planned to look at my baby. To be honest, I was scared of what I might see. The midwife said to me, "You have the most beautiful baby girl." And there she was, a perfect, beautiful, sleeping girl. She was tiny. She looked



[*Cherilyn Mackrory*]

just like her big sister. I held her, I kissed her and I told her how much she was loved, and then I let her go. We named her Lily Wren Mackrory—Lily for peace, Wren because she is our smallest little girl, Mackrory.

Baby loss is far more widespread than I ever realised before it happened to my family. Many people are bearing this grief, often silently. Pregnancy and childbirth have always been perilous for women. Even now, in 2020, with all our medical advances, there are so many babies we simply cannot save. Miscarriage, stillbirth and the death of a newborn are all too common. Thousands of parents experience pregnancy or baby loss every year. It is estimated that one in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage, and 14 babies are stillborn or die shortly after birth every day in the UK.

I do not want to be completely self-indulgent during my speech today, but I do not know how else to relay how raw that feels for those parents and how important it is that we talk about it. I have one word to describe the grief I felt following the loss of Lily—primal. I just wanted to bring my baby home. I wanted her to be healthy. It dominated my entire being. I wanted to watch her kicking feet and to feel the grip of her tiny fingers on mine.

Weirdly, I gained an understanding about why some species, particularly penguins, steal each other's babies when their own eggs do not make it. It is a physical ache down the arms and in the stomach. What had I got wrong? What had I eaten or not eaten that had made her so poorly? Was it because I was too old? Since I already had one healthy, amazing child, perhaps I had simply pushed my luck. Of course, none of that is true.

Having our then four-year-old meant that a daily routine had to continue, thank goodness. My husband and I were alarmed by the statistic we read that 50% of couples who experience baby loss end up splitting up. We were determined not to be one of them. We vowed to let each other grieve at our own individual pace and not to expect too much of each other. One would take the load when the other felt overwhelmed, angry or helpless. We allowed family and trusted friends to help us as a couple, as well as separately, but during the worst days I thought I would never recover. People do, of course, but they are changed. That was how 2019 began for me, and it ended with me coming into this place.

The experience I have just described is fairly shocking when it happens, but sadly it is not unusual. This year, Baby Loss Awareness Week focused on highlighting baby loss during the covid pandemic. From start to finish, I simply could not have got through that horrendous weekend without my husband at my side, yet we have been expecting women to do that since covid hit our shores earlier this year. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, I have had the privilege of listening to many experiences and testimonies and learning what baby loss charities and the APPG have achieved so far. Despite my position in this, I am still fairly new to the experience.

Last year, during Baby Loss Awareness Week, before I became a Member of Parliament, I attended a service in Truro with my husband as a member of the public and a bereaved parent. I looked at the book of remembrance, at Lily's date, and there was her name in

full. It was the first time I had seen it written anywhere, apart from in a small memorial that we had placed on my grandmother's grave. There was another name there: a little boy named Isaac. I realised straightaway that he was the baby boy who had been born on the Daisy suite on the same day as Lily.

In August 2020, the APPG held a virtual meeting—my first as co-chair—focused on the impact of covid-19 on pregnancy and baby loss. We heard evidence from organisations that support women and partners who experience loss at any stage. The evidence was stark. Covid-19 has exacerbated existing challenges and has had a negative impact on the experience of women and their partners and families at the worst possible time of their lives. Hospital trusts that had traditionally been struggling in this area appear to be the most vulnerable.

I will summarise what the APPG found. Partners have been excluded from appointments and scans, and often have not even been able to join the consultation by video or speaker phone. That has led to women receiving bad news or making decisions alone. In a neonatal setting, mothers and partners had visiting rights severely restricted. Those factors all increased the sense of isolation experienced by bereaved women and their families. Thanks to a successful campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), many trusts have reversed the decision to prevent partners from being present at scans and births. However, many still cannot or will not.

Women have reported restrictions on the way that they can access health services relating to their pregnancy. They often find that accident and emergency is the only route available. Scans have been cancelled, and mothers with concerns about their baby's movement have reported being sent away from hospitals. Some key staff, such as health visitors, have been redeployed during the pandemic, which means that women cannot access the services they need. After receiving bad news, information on options and choices has not been forthcoming. For example, women report a lack of information about pain, bleeding and what to do with pregnancy remains after experiencing a miscarriage.

In maternity and neonatal settings, a lack of time and available space has impacted on whether staff can provide opportunities for memory making after a stillbirth or a neonatal death. That is massively important for grief and recovery. In some cases, women chose not to access health services, taking the important "stay at home" message of the Government's campaign to heart. In the early stages of the covid pandemic, in some hospital settings, personal protective equipment was a barrier to delivery of compassionate bereavement care, and staff struggled to communicate in the way they would prefer. Hospitals reported shortages of face-to-face interpreters to help communicate with women who do not speak English. After a stillbirth, neonatal death or sudden infant death, some families whose baby had a post-mortem had the results communicated by post or email, which is not appropriate.

Although some new ways of communicating began during lockdown, such as virtual antenatal appointments, they are not accessible to all and do not always provide the same reassurance as an in-person scan or consultation. I even heard the tragic story via one of our bereavement charities of a woman who had given birth to a stillborn baby, and because the mother had tested positive for

covid, her baby was simply zipped in a body bag and taken away. I must add that that was at the height of the pandemic in April.

The APPG found that lockdown had exacerbated risk factors for some types of baby loss—particularly involving deprivation and domestic violence. After a loss, the isolation of lockdown contributed to negative impacts on women's and partners' mental health and their ability to access support from friends, family, psychological professionals and community outreach services.

In response, the APPG called on NHS England to initiate a minimum acceptable standard for involving partners when pregnancy or baby loss is anticipated or occurs, whether in relation to attendance at scans or appointments, or parental access to neonatal units. There is too much variation between hospitals at present, which must be addressed with national guidance. I know that that has already begun. I also ask for the swift reinstatement of the provision of choices for women facing pregnancy or baby loss in respect of the mental health impacts of covid-19 on those bereaved through pregnancy and baby loss, in order to plan services for that group in the future.

I thank the Department of Health and Social Care; health professionals; baby loss charities such as Sands, The Lullaby Trust, Aching Arms, and particularly Cradle in Cornwall and a lovely lady there named Emma Pearce—there are so many to mention; Members of this place, past and present; and, most of all, bereaved families for their co-operation on the work to date in this vitally important APPG. I hope that, while in post, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) and I can continue their important work and bring solace to families in their darkest time, as well as trying to prevent more losses in the first place. I look forward to working with colleagues, including the Minister, to achieve that.

1.46 pm

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): I thank and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for securing this important debate, and also for speaking with such bravery and honesty. It is a real inspiration—she has done Lily proud.

Coronavirus has impacted every part of our lives, often in ways that we did not think or expect. We took things for granted—little things, such as holding the hands of loved ones who are in pain or upset, or even those across the political divide. When restrictions were put in place in hospitals for visitors, fathers, partners and support networks in relation to scans for expectant mums, I was not surprised to receive pleas from women in Luton who were saying that they really needed somebody there to support them through their scans and neonatal appointments.

That is especially important to people who have had difficult pregnancies or miscarriages or who have suffered baby loss in the past. Not every scan is one of joy, and the time before a scan can be an incredibly anxious, nervous one, full of dread. Holding someone's hand during that time is incredibly important. That is why I am so pleased to say that, having worked closely on this issue, the fantastic team at Luton and Dunstable University Hospital was one of the first to enact the new guidance allowing visitors to come to scans with expectant mothers.

As we know, with coronavirus everything is always under review. I really hope that the Government continue to support trusts in enabling that to happen as long as is humanly possible, because it is important. It is not like the films on TV when someone sees two pink lines and then suddenly the film fast-forwards to the very large woman buying lots of baby clothes and then screaming for a couple of minutes, and out pops the baby. For many people, that is not the reality of pregnancy. It is not that simple. Miscarriage and baby loss are part of the pregnancy journey that are often just not talked about. Yet, a quarter of all pregnancies end in miscarriage. If we are to end the stigma, the silence and sometimes the shame, we need to be open and honest.

The first time I miscarried, I was at work. I knew that something was not right, so I booked myself a scan during lunch break. I was by myself then, and they told me that there was no heartbeat. To be honest, what happened next was a bit of a blur, but I still remember the emotional and physical pain as if it was yesterday. I will be perfectly honest: a miscarriage is not like a period. It is incredibly physically and emotionally painful. The second time, we were further along. I was not alone for that scan. It did not make the news any easier, but I cannot describe the difference it made to have my hand held, gently squeezing support to one another.

During these losses, and throughout the pregnancy of my wonderful rainbow baby—the term for a baby born after miscarriage or baby loss—my friends and family were there every step of the way, and held me close to get me through those dark times. But my fear is for all those women who no longer have that support. That is exactly why I urge the Government to hold out for as long as they can to ensure that visitors can come to the scans of expectant mums, and to tackle the cause of the doubling of stillbirths during this lockdown.

I want to pay tribute to the Miscarriage Association. Without its support, I know that myself and thousands of women would still have struggled, and struggled alone. Social media is often a cesspit; but I have to say, for any woman who has miscarried, or is pregnant following miscarriages or baby loss, the Miscarriage Association's website and forums on Facebook are an oasis of comfort, information and understanding. During this time, I know that we cannot hold the hands of everyone we want to. There are women out there, associations, charities and hospitals doing their best to get us through, and I hope the Government listen to their concerns and work with them so that no woman endures baby loss alone and so that women are no longer an afterthought throughout this pandemic.

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair)**: I have been here 23 years and I have never seen a Doorkeeper distributing tissues to Members during a debate—I thank him. I am sure this is going to be a harrowing debate. There is a limit of about seven and a half minutes on speeches so that everybody can tell us their story.

1.51 pm

**Jeremy Hunt** (South West Surrey) (Con): It is an honour to follow two such remarkable speeches. Nothing I say will come close to the extraordinary emotions that we have heard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), with whom it is a great honour to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss. When my hon. Friend talked about

[Jeremy Hunt]

seeing Lily's name in the registry of Truro cathedral, I think what we all thought was that is just the first of many important moments that Lily will be remembered—this is another of those moments. What is so striking about the courage shown by my hon. Friend, and by so many families, is that she chose to relive the agony that she went through over and over again, because she wants to stop other families going through that same pain. That represents extraordinary courage, and I think it is an incredibly good omen for her time in this place that she is prepared to do that.

It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who has made an extraordinary contribution to the Health and Social Care Committee in the short time that we have been working together. She drew my attention to the issue of women having to cope with extreme emotional stress on their own during the maternity process. I thank her for that, along with all the other work she has done on the Committee on maternity issues. On Tuesday we heard from James Titcombe, one of the best known baby loss campaigners in the country, who, the Minister told me, lost his son Joshua exactly 12 years ago today. James gave an inspirational testimony. It is because of those many families up and down the country that we are having this debate today. I also thank the Minister, who I know will give a compassionate and supportive response. She totally gets patient safety and these issues, and will be doing everything she can to resolve them.

We all understand the importance of infection prevention and control in a pandemic. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), as a doctor herself, will understand that. The answer surely has to be an expansion of the testing facilities, which we know are in the process of being expanded. If we are able to test everyone in the city of Liverpool, it must be within our grasp to make it possible to test people who want to be with their partners in those crucial moments of a pregnancy.

I hope that today's debate will shine a spotlight on the wider issues around baby loss. The uncomfortable truth for all of us is that in this country, according to the latest figures I have seen, we lose about 3.9 babies per 1,000 born in neonatal deaths—deaths within the first 28 days. In Sweden, the rate is about half that. That means that if we had Swedish safety levels in this country, about 1,000 more babies would live every year.

The Select Committee is doing a big inquiry into what lessons need to be learned. I will just talk about one particular lesson that has long been a concern of mine. We make it far too difficult for doctors, midwives and nurses to speak openly about any mistakes they may have made or may have seen, because still, in too many parts of the NHS, we have a blame culture. People are worried that they might lose their job, they might get disbarred or there might be negative consequences for others they work with. We heard on Tuesday that one reason why Sweden has managed to achieve a much lower neonatal death rate is that they have made it much easier for doctors, midwives and nurses to speak openly about things that may have gone wrong. They have managed to change a blame culture into a learning culture.

One thing I hope we will look at is whether it is appropriate under the law that the only way a family can get compensation in this country is if they can prove clinical negligence. That immediately creates antagonism between a family, who perhaps have a child born disabled and desperately need financial support for that child's life, and the doctors, midwives and nurses responsible for that child's birth, who also want to help the family with every fibre in their body, but worry that if they speak openly about what happened, they might end up with a successful claim of clinical negligence against them. I hope that is something we can address.

I want to finish by saying this. As we reflect on how to be more compassionate with people going through some of the extreme agonies that we have heard this afternoon, we should always remember that the best possible way to handle baby loss is to ensure that it never happens in the first place. Getting the culture right in our maternity units is the best way that we can save heartache for thousands of families. It is the best tribute to baby girls such as Lily and to baby boys such as Joshua Titcombe, and it is the best way that we can turn the wonderful intentions we are hearing in this debating Chamber into actions that will make a difference for the lives of many.

1.57 pm

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh.

This is a very important debate on something that affects all our constituents in a very direct and personal way. Some 25% of all pregnancies in the United Kingdom end in miscarriage and 14 babies are stillborn or die shortly after birth every day in the United Kingdom. Each of us across this House, no matter what party we are from, no matter what region of the United Kingdom we are from, no matter what culture or class we are from, knows that we are here to be a voice for constituents and for those people who contact us.

I want to be a voice today for Donna. Donna emailed me this week and told me, "Ian, I want you to be in that debate today, and I want you to tell people about my story and I want you to insist that people understand just some of the pressures families and individuals and mums and women go under at these crucial times." Donna and her husband had their second consecutive miscarriage in February of this year. In April, she found out that she was again pregnant.

Donna felt that she had to isolate, because obviously she had some health issues and she wanted to make sure that she was in as good a health position as possible for what was to be a hopeful, exciting time for her and her family. Because of covid, however, she was told that she could not have an early pregnancy reassurance scan. Those scans are critical not only in giving confidence and assurance to mum, but to check on the health of the unborn child.

Donna felt pain one day. She told her GP, and the pregnancy clinic then agreed to give her an early scan. Little did she know that she was going to see two heartbeats that day, because she was pregnant with twins, so it was very exciting. She had to attend that clinic on her own, and that was the only time she saw her unborn babies alive. She tells me that on the way home in the car, she could not contain her excitement



to tell her husband, and he too was so excited. The two of them, in her own words, had “never been so happy in all of their lives.” Unfortunately, that was the only time she ever saw the heartbeats of her unborn children. It was a very stressful time thereafter. She had to go back after feeling more pain, and discovered a few weeks later that unfortunately both heartbeats had ceased and those babies were to be unborn.

Donna was given three options to expel this pregnancy: naturally, through medicine, or through surgery. Due to covid-19, the options narrowed, and she was told she would have to go for the natural expelling of the pregnancy. She had so looked forward to having these babies, but it was not to be the case. Two weeks later, she went to the hospital with the saved remains to have them tested. She tells me a week later, she got a phone call from the clinic to tell her that her “product”—an unfortunate term—was ready for collection, and that she should make arrangements to go to the mortuary. She did that. She arrived at the mortuary, and had to sign a release form as the mother, which was another pull to her heartstrings and emotions. The whole experience was beyond surreal, and made her feel very emotional.

Donna was referred to the recurrent pregnancy loss clinic. However, the waiting list is now nine months, as the consultant in Northern Ireland who deals with this unfortunately has to shield themselves. As of today, she is sitting in her eighth week of being pregnant again, and is waiting for her next scan. I think we can all understand just something of the emotion and pain that she is going through. On the one hand, the mixed feelings of increased excitement, and on the other hand, increased worry and stress. Covid-19 obviously puts pressures on the entirety of the health system, and we have heard over the last few weeks the problems relating to mental health, and the increase in mental health pressures.

None of us can put ourselves in the shoes of an individual unless we have actually been there ourselves. This is an opportunity to make sure these issues are voiced, that people hear about them, and that they start to understand that these needs are practical ones. We might see a woman walking down the street and we will not know the trauma, heartache or mental health pressures that she has gone through. We do not know what the other, related problems might be with her family or her partner. I hope this debate will serve as a very useful, powerful and positive platform and opportunity for our constituents to know that this House cares, that Parliament cares, that the Minister cares, and that the Department will try to do something about it by encouraging our health service to direct its resources towards vulnerable and needy constituents.

2.3 pm

**Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cheryl Mackrory) for securing this important debate. It is a privilege to follow so many esteemed speeches. I also want to place on the record my thanks to the Doorkeeper for bringing out tissues, because I definitely came very unprepared for this debate.

When parents first find out they are going to have a baby, it is usually a moment of immense happiness. They naturally think about what that baby may look

like, what their smile may be, whether it is a boy or girl and the things they will achieve: maybe the sports they will play, the schools they might go to, or the weddings they might have. Unfortunately, not everyone can see those dreams come to fruition. Too often, baby loss occurs and those dreams, hopes and aspirations can be shattered suddenly, leaving behind grieving and traumatised parents. As we have heard, thousands of parents experience pregnancy or baby loss every year. Where I am from in the west midlands, it accounts for 12% of perinatal deaths and 14% of neonatal deaths. From the black, Asian and minority ethnic community, we see 7.46% of stillborn babies and 2.77% of neonatal deaths.

I want to talk about the Woodland House appeal at Birmingham Women’s Hospital and also the Lily Mae Foundation, an amazing charity set up to help deal with baby loss in my constituency. The issue has long struck a chord with me. Long before I was elected to this place, I served as president of the Greater Birmingham chambers of commerce, where the president has the privilege of choosing a charity. Had I not come to this place, my charity of choice as I was entering my second year was going to be the Woodland House appeal for Birmingham Women’s Hospital. I was invited to visit the hospital by the head of fundraising, Louise McCathie, who took me round and showed me the journey that parents undertake when they go through the journey of baby loss, from the clinical rooms all the way to the mortuary.

As I walked through the hospital, three things really stuck out. The first was the emotionless, clinical places where parents first find out really bad and harrowing news. I can only imagine the isolated and lonely feeling that both parents must feel as they receive that news. The second thing that struck me was the fact that grieving parents might have to walk in and out of the hospital with celebrating parents. Of course, I do not begrudge any parent celebrating the birth of a child, but it obviously accentuates the trauma as grieving parents see celebrating parents with balloons and toys and other children running around.

Then I made my way to the mortuary, where it was pretty daunting to see the cold, clinical corridors. Next to the mortuary was the cramped room where parents can say their final goodbyes. There was also a laundry, and it struck me that having a tailored bereavement suite was the compassionate thing to do, which is precisely what the Woodland House appeal is designed to do, as it looks to raise £3.5 million to make a tailored space away from the hustle and bustle of the main hospital where families can spend time together in a safe, secure and serene surrounding before they feel ready to face the world again. I certainly wish the Woodland House appeal the very best of luck. I found out today that it is almost at the £1 million mark.

The Lily Mae Foundation, based in my constituency, was set up after Lily Mae, the daughter of founders Ryan and Amy, sadly passed away. I visited the foundation a couple of months ago, when I was allowed to, and was blown away by how the founders had achieved so much and made such a significant impact. Frankly, it makes me proud to be their Member of Parliament. I certainly hope that I can support them for many years to come. They do various things. They have regularly provided 10 hospitals in the west midlands and Warwickshire area with 500 to 600 memory boxes a year, which allow bereaved parents and their families to build precious

[Saqib Bhatti]

memories for their babies. There are potentially siblings, so they provide sibling support packs to deal with the trauma that they might have.

Amy also undertakes one-to-one baby loss support. Currently, she is providing support to 47 clients with regular one-to-one sessions. It is a sad fact that the number of people who need those sessions far exceeds what Amy is able to currently supply, and there is a waiting list of clients. Of course, there is also much more complicated grief. I should mention her husband Ryan, who, when I went to visit them, was a week away from jumping out of a plane for their 10Ten10 campaign—it has been 10 years since Lily Mae passed away. Despite covid scuppering their plans, Ryan went ahead and did it, so I commend them for their passion and hard work, and I thank them for all that they do. I might even join them for a skydive one day.

Finally, I want to make two further points, because we are here to see what we can do to progress things. I want to put on the record my desire that hospitals do not place restrictions on partners during this really difficult period, because preventing visits to mothers who might be going through the most harrowing experience that they will ever face is a callous thing to do. Allowing them to at least have their partner there to support them through the trauma can only be a good thing. It should not be beyond hospitals to allow that. Again, I make a plea to ensure that we have sufficient bereavement suites, so that parents can deal with their loss in an appropriate manner.

2.10 pm

**Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) on securing such an important debate, on her moving contribution and on her strength and courage in sharing her story about her loss of baby Lily.

This year will be remembered as a difficult year for so many people, but particularly for those who have lost loved ones—especially a much-longed-for baby. I rise to speak today because my difficult year in relation to baby loss was 2003, which coincided with the SARS outbreak. Stopping in Singapore for a couple of days in February 2003, on our way to introduce our first-born to her New Zealand grandparents, my husband, our baby daughter and I became very ill with a high temperature and a continuous cough. Only a few days later, our baby was coughing up blood and we were straight into A&E, where she was treated for pneumonia for several days. We were not counted in any official statistics, and we were not tested. It could have been any other type of virus that was prevalent at the time, but it was an illness that knocked us for six. It is the most ill I have ever been in my life. I was so ill that I was not well enough to care for my baby. I went on to miscarry in June, September and December of that year.

Although my personal experience is anecdotal, and correlation is not causation, the timing of my experience got me wondering—as we are discussing the effects of long covid and any viral illness—whether a lingering heightened immune response has any bearing on an increased incidence of miscarriages. I would be

interested to know of any scientific research, either historical or under way now, that links this issue with repeat miscarriages.

I know that my year of grief was a fundamental tipping point in my life and caused me to re-evaluate everything I thought I knew, believed, cherished and held dear. Being an immigrant to this country, I understand a little about isolation: I have not had time to build extensive networks, and I do not have the deep roots that many people who have grown up here have. I did have my National Childbirth Trust group, and I will never forget how blessed I was that I was busy hosting our regular gathering when I started contracting at 14 weeks, two weeks after we had announced to everybody that we were pregnant again. One friend scooped up my daughter and took her home to look after her, and the other took me to the local doctor. She was with me when my waters broke. Then she took me to A&E and stayed with me through a difficult labour and delivery. I was not prepared for many things, including my milk coming in afterwards—or that, years later, I would have flashbacks.

I asked for a test to be done on that particular miscarriage, because it was further along than the other two. Unfortunately, I received a note from the consultant a couple of weeks later to say that they had not done the test and that the foetus had been taken to be incinerated. As hon. Members have said, it leaves people left wondering what they have done wrong. What could have been done differently? Not having answers is probably one of the most difficult things. I can only imagine how difficult it is for families who have had to endure this situation through lockdown conditions. We need to ensure that support is in place for such families.

By the time our second child arrived, I had been pregnant, almost continually, for 18 months. I have spoken openly about suffering from both perinatal and post-natal depression. The effects of baby loss are profound and long-lasting. The passage of time has softened my grief, and my mother always said you can't put an old head on young shoulders, but if I can use today's important debate to send a message to women who are coping with baby loss during this time of extra concern and difficulty with covid, I would say this: be kind to yourself, and be patient. Do not be afraid to ask for help from your frontline healthcare providers, and get any support that you need with mental health.

Taking the opportunity to tell our stories, as we are doing today, is a wonderful thing that women can do for each other. It lets others know that they are not alone, especially at this time, when we are more concerned about isolation and loneliness than ever before.

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** I apologise to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), but I am going to ask the Member speaking for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), to come in at this point, because she has to get on to a special flight. I apologise for not having told the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam in advance.

2.15 pm

**Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** Thank you, Ms McDonagh. I apologise to anybody in the Chamber whom I may have overlooked, but I do have to get on my flight at Heathrow. I do apologise.

I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for her excellent opening to the debate and for sharing her experiences. Those of us who have suffered baby loss or stillbirth have a space in our lives that stays with us every single day. We do not get over it. We just somehow learn to build our life around that space, in that shadow—it never goes away.

This annual debate is very special to me, because I suffered in 2009 a stillbirth at full term, in which I too almost died, and that stillbirth followed a miscarriage in 2008, after five years of fertility treatment. As is the case for so many parents, perhaps the hardest aspect of coping with the loss for my husband and me—we are not unique in this regard—is the knowledge that our loss was due to glaring mistakes in my care. I am grateful to be able to have a voice in this debate today—a voice not just for baby Kenneth, whom I lost, but for all the lost babies and their grief-stricken parents, who will never be quite the same after such a profound loss.

This year, the context of our baby loss debate is that it takes place in the shadow of covid-19. It is not yet known what risk covid poses to pregnant women, although the points made by the hon. Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) were certainly worth listening to in weighing that up. It has been reported that there was a rise in stillbirths between April and June this year, at the peak of the pandemic. There were about 40 stillbirths after labour began, compared with 24 in the same period last year, according to the patient safety body, so that is something to consider. It may be, as we have heard, because women delay seeking care because they are concerned about covid. If that is the case, we need to understand that expectant mums clearly need reassurance and to feel secure in the knowledge that the NHS, even as it deals with covid, is still there for them.

Those who have suffered the loss of a child during the covid period report that the new restrictions in our hospital environments, such as the need for staff to wear protective equipment, can present a barrier to delivering the kind of care that bereavement requires. One thing that I always mention in these yearly debates about baby loss is the terrible, isolating grief that such a loss brings. With the best will in the world, people often do not know what to say to you, because the loss of a baby before, during or shortly after birth is like no other loss. In the normal course of events, when we suffer a loss, whether of a husband, father, mother or brother, there is a life that has been lived and there are memories that people can talk about and take comfort from. They can talk about what the person was like and how they lived their life and so on. Those recollections can help people to bring comfort as they share the bonds of grief. But for those families who have suffered a stillbirth or a baby loss, there are no such shared memories. There was no opportunity to make those memories. All there is, is a deep sense of being robbed of a life—a life filled with potential that will never be realised.

During covid, the isolation of grief that always accompanies the unnatural event of burying your child is all the more stark. You cannot have the comfort of close family members. You cannot have people rallying round, as they would wish to, to distract you from your stupor of grief and your sense of bewilderment at the loss of the baby you have been waiting for for nine months and for whom you had prepared, perhaps even for longer than nine months. That rallying round is simply not permitted.

The most heartbreaking thing that a parent will ever have to do is bury their own child, but even the funeral comes with limitations during covid. The numbers of people who can attend are limited, so many people who would wish to attend might not be able to do so. Parents are denied the service that they might wish to have and the flowers, the hymns and the cards that they might wish to have. There are restrictions even on who can carry the coffin. These awful, grotesque choices and decisions that no one ever wants to have to make are magnified by their absence during covid-19.

Post baby loss, when the terrible news has been communicated to the wider family, when bereaved parents leave the hospital and return home and when the funeral has taken place, many bereaved parents seek the support of counselling from baby loss charities. I pay tribute to the marvellous work that those charities do, but they tell us that as they try to support parents and families through the trauma of baby loss, measures they need to put in place, such as social distancing, have had a major impact on access to care and support for bereaved parents and have also complicated the grief and responses to pregnancy and baby loss. The Lullaby Trust has pointed out that social distancing may exacerbate grief and isolation. I think that is something we can all understand. As we all struggle with this ongoing health pandemic, as it challenges us all in different ways, how much more are those parents who have lost their child going to struggle?

In this year's baby loss awareness reflections, as we talk about the loneliness of grief, which is very particular when we are talking about the death of a baby, the context of covid-19 and the specific isolation it brings with it makes dealing with the awful life-changing event of losing a baby all the more horrific. I hope we can all consider how that can be addressed, to help those we represent who are going through this horror as we grapple with the challenges of covid-19.

2.20 pm

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I would just like to say a huge thank you to the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) and to every Member who has spoken about their experience today. It is really important that we are having this debate on the effect of covid on services.

This debate is very difficult for me. I had not planned to talk about my experience today, because the experience of many of my constituents and the stories from up and down the country show that lessons desperately need to be learned and more support is needed for how we care for people through the covid crisis. However, after hearing the contributions from other hon. Members, I feel that it is only fair that I share my story.

My thoughts go out to all those families who are facing bereavement and baby loss and miscarriage at this time. I want to focus, particularly, on partners being able to attend appointments, emergency and otherwise, and on mental health and redeployment of key staff. We need to recognise that this is not just a short-term challenge and we could be seeing many more months of disruption as a result of covid-19.

As we know, as many as one in four pregnancies will end in miscarriage and 14 stillbirths happen every day. I first raised the issues of maternity services back in June,



[*Olivia Blake*]

because I heard concerns from my constituents about them. Little did I know that I would experience a miscarriage in August and would have to go through some of the issues that my constituents had raised with me—going to A&E and my partner having to wait in the car park; getting confused and muddled about my dates; being unable to have a hug or someone to hold my hand or support me on hearing the news that I was having a miscarriage.

It was a very difficult situation and one that I want no one else to have to go through. No one should have to hear that news on their own.

**Sarah Owen:** We would all like to express our thanks to my hon. Friend for her bravery in sharing her personal experience, especially as it is so recent and clearly so raw, and also because it is an experience that her constituents have written about. You are doing a fantastic job representing them here today.

**Olivia Blake:** Thank you. I can't see because my glasses have steamed up because of my tears.

Receiving bad news alone is incredibly traumatic and challenging. Having to then go and repeat that news to your partner in a car park is another level of difficult, at a point when you are struggling to process the information. It is impossible to take in everything that has been raised or to answer any of your partner's questions when you get into the car. No one should be put in that position, but too many people have been.

While I welcome the Government's change of advice and guidance on allowing partners to attend scans and appointments, it is currently not enough to improve access. I urge the Minister to do more and not assume that the job is done on this issue. Unfortunately, when I talk to my local services about my own experience and that of others, they say that they are still unable to operate in a way that is safe to allow partners. I know partners have been forced to wait outside, not knowing what is happening on the other side of those walls, unable to attend and support their loved ones, including those who have already experienced the loss of a baby. They have been unable to discuss options and many have been left alone for long periods after receiving devastating news, as staff are unable to comfort them, other than to offer a tissue.

My constituent has started a petition campaigning for access to neonatal and specialist units, to ensure that all parents with a baby are able to visit their child if they are receiving extra care. It is clear that that depends on postcodes. Simple steps, such as testing both parents to allow them to visit when their child has to stay in hospital and receive treatment, could easily fix that situation. I call for more medium-term answers to be provided, and an increase in investment and space for more covid-secure provision, whether on a regional footprint or in the community within every trust. It should not be down to postcode. Everyone going through this should have the right to be treated with compassion and dignity.

That compassion should extend to providing even more support, in terms of bereavement counselling, at this time. The support that parents or siblings would usually provide is also very difficult. I have not been able to hug my mum since August and it is very hard.

We know that space for memory making has also been squeezed. I urge that such spaces be protected, as they are key to the grieving and healing process.

I want to focus on the redeployment of staff in these areas. I pay tribute to all the NHS and local authority staff who are working incredibly hard, under extremely difficult circumstances. However, I question the decision to redeploy health visitors and midwives, who play a key role in helping to detect issues. The redeployment of such staff does not accept the reality that pregnancy, and complications in pregnancy, will continue. They are not elective services and will not stop during a pandemic.

We have seen caseloads massively jump up, in some cases to hundreds more than usual, as staff are left in services and are unable to give their normal professional standards and time to each family. Harrowing reports were covered by BBC Radio 4's "Woman's Hour" earlier in the year on the experience of mothers and the workforce. That was one of the biggest issues raised. I hope the Minister will ensure that the situation is not repeated in the current spike or future spikes, and will be able to make the case to the Department that these are vital key services, for which there is no pause or stop button.

Finally, I hope we can all agree that this issue needs more action, and that support for our constituents must be prioritised. We cannot face going back to a situation with partners waiting in car parks and we need to fix the postcode lottery on that.

2.27 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for applying for the debate, and everyone who has made a significant contribution. They have all been personal and heartfelt. I have spoken numerous times on this issue.

**Ian Paisley:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. One issue that this debate helps to address is the impact on the expectant father, as well as the mother, which is sometimes forgotten. I know the impact it has from my own experience 18 years ago. Thankfully, men are now more willing to speak about these issues, which is a good thing, but we must dwell on ensuring that the services that are provided are all encompassing and address the needs of men, as well as the most important needs—those of the mother of the unborn child.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my hon. Friend for intervening. I have made it my business to speak in every debate on this issue. I have looked at some recent facts. In 2018, each day in the UK there were 2,060 babies born alive, 515 babies were miscarried, 144 babies were born pre-term and eight babies were stillborn. The reason I stand here today is to pay tribute to the thousands of heartbroken mothers and fathers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said, that emptiness cannot be explained unless it is experienced. I have not personally experienced it myself in my own family, but my mother did. I remember very well that my mother had five miscarriages. That was in the 1960s and 1970s. It was a totally different time. When someone had a miscarriage, people did not talk about it. They would say, "I'm sorry to hear of your loss, but you can always try again." Two days later, they would be back at work. My sister had three miscarriages and one wee boy who is disabled. That loss

is real for her. My private secretary, Naomi, who writes all my speeches and prepares my business for me—a very busy wee girl, by the way—had two miscarriages. I lived through that experience with her, not personally, but as an employer who understood what that heartache and pain was like.

Since the last debate on this issue, so many people contacted me—not because of me, because I am just nobody—to say, “Thank you for speaking up for us,” including people whose partner had carried their baby to full term knowing that baby was neither going to live or breathe beyond two hours. The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth told the story in her introduction. That is a real story for some of my constituents. That is why I am here today.

I have two asks of the Minister, if I may. The Minister knows I am very fond of her. I look forward to her response, because I know she has a compassionate heart and understands what all hon. Members have said on behalf of their constituents and themselves.

More testing must be available on the NHS for those who lose two babies in a row rather than three, as is the case currently. I am very close to a young lady who lost two wee babies in a row. She went to her appointment at the Ulster Hospital—my local hospital in Northern Ireland—early pregnancy unit to confirm that all of the baby had come away. The midwife—the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) referred to the midwives—compassionately advised her and her husband to look at private options when they talked about their despair. It was terrible that they had to go elsewhere to get that help, but they paid for the private consultation and private tests, and found that something as simple as taking an aspirin daily could possibly address the blood clotting issue that had caused the loss of her little loved ones. For the life of me, I cannot understand why we traumatised women by making them go through a third loss before they can get the help that they need. That is my No. 1 request to the Minister and my Government.

I sincerely urge the Minister to take this back to Government and press the case for at least rudimentary tests to be carried out. I have been contacted by a nurse in my constituency begging me to address the lack of support under pregnancy during the coronavirus. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam and others spoke of that. I want to read from her email:

“It was a terrifying, lonely experience made worse by the fact that when I attended the Ulster hospital on Monday morning to have the assessment and scan to confirm if I was indeed miscarrying, I had to do so alone while my husband waited in the car due to the policy of only admitting the patient to the appointment”.

My heart aches for that separation, of which the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam and others spoke. It is a real trauma for those involved, including the nurse and the midwives, and those who have to advise because of the special times we live in.

I understand the difficult times, but the fact is that a woman needs the support of her partner and her partner must be allowed to give that support. The Prime Minister’s reply—he has been quite good with his replies—said that fast and efficient tests will be made available, but we want to see that in place right now. We need to allow support partners to have tests immediately to allow them to attend appointments with their expecting loved

ones. Again, I look to the Minister to assure me and others that such people will be on the priority list for a fast test.

Miscarriage is so devastating to families. The effects are felt for years. I remember one of the first cases I heard as a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland of a constituent who lost her baby in the ’60s. She told me that she was never allowed to talk about it and mourn. Sixty years later, she still thinks about that. It does not matter how long ago it was; it is still real every day in life.

We must do better for these families, and offer hope, testing and support in taking steps to allow their loved one to be with them every step of the journey. I simply do not want to have to read again of the devastation that my constituent described:

“As a result of this policy my husband learnt of the loss of our baby in the car park of the Ulster hospital, hardly a suitable or private place for a sensitive and emotional conversation. His role as parent was completely undermined and dismissed by this policy”.

To conclude, the journey is that of a family, and the family must be allowed to provide whatever support and love they can give in the face of a devastating loss. To those who have lost a baby I say, “The loss of your baby is important. Your pain is real and you have the right to grieve the loss of the future that you had planned together. It is my honest belief as a Christian and a man of faith that your wee one is safe in the arms of Jesus until you can be with them again.”

2.35 pm

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Eagle. It is an honour and a privilege to respond on behalf of the Opposition to this profoundly moving and powerful debate, which I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for securing. Bravery comes in all forms, and today she has shown the very best of us and done Lily proud. Lily’s honour and name will be timeless in the records of the discussions that we have had today. The hon. Member is incredible.

This is the fifth year running in which we have had such a debate during Baby Loss Awareness Week. It is becoming a very welcome tradition and long may it continue, although obviously we have heard today of the importance of ensuring that we prevent as many deaths as possible. I pay tribute to every Member who has had the courage and conviction to share their experiences on an issue as devastating as baby loss. To live through it is one thing, but to speak about it in a bid to help others is another altogether. After what we have seen today, I have never been more proud to be in this place and to stand among all Members present, regardless of party, political persuasion or geography. It is an honour to hear their stories first hand.

The fact that we cannot provide comfort to one another when talking about this, though we are compelled to, illustrates how hard it must be for people going through it not to be able to have the comfort of the ones they love the most, and for some parents to have to hear the very worst news that they will ever receive in a car park or down a phone. Such debates hopefully go some way towards breaking down the stigma that sadly persists. I am sure that having the bravery to speak out on this will bring a great deal of comfort to many who have been affected by baby loss.

*[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]*

I wish to reflect on a few of the compelling contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) spoke so movingly about the experience of multiple loss and was a powerful advocate for the importance of having a loved one there. She was able to draw a stark comparison between the experience of not having someone there and having someone there. We must pay attention to that powerful contribution. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) is no longer present, but baby Ken will be immortalised in this place through the story that she shared. I do not know how she delivered that speech, to be honest. Most people I know would not have even been able to speak those words.

I am sure that all of us send our love and best wishes to Donna, who has a powerful advocate in the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). I thank him for bringing her story and lived experience to this place—he has done her proud. When my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) spoke, I was lost for words. That she lived through the very worst of experiences in August, in the very worst of ways and in the most difficult of circumstances and yet is here now, not even three months later, telling her story in a bid to help others represents a strength rarely found in this world. I thank her so much for all the good she is doing and the voice she is for all those who cannot have one at this time. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) showed, through his emotion, the power of the need to have something to cling on to. He has his faith. However, as he rightly explained, people also need a loved one to be there. I turn to speech of the hon. Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson)—wow. It is so important that she raised the issue of what an infection at this time could do to a woman’s body and to the ability to carry a pregnancy. Given how the hon. Member for Guildford—I want to say her name, because this feels like the sort of debate where we should—went through a horrific experience not even in her own home or own environment while having a young child and went on to experience three subsequent losses, I cannot imagine what it took to talk about that today.

The hon. Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) is no longer in his place, but it was great to hear about his incredible work to raise awareness. Jumping out of a plane is testing at the best of times. The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), spoke powerfully, as always.

As we have heard, losing a baby is one of the most harrowing experiences a person can go through. It is painful, it is devastating, and it is ultimately cruel. It feels like the cruellest of circumstances. We know that, unfortunately, it is all too common and can happen to anyone at any time.

I am often the doctor in A&E who meets the mum when she is coming in. We have heard powerful contributions about stigma and guilt. For me, the take-home is always the overpowering sense from a mother that there is something she could have done. I want to put on the record, and say to those who may be watching, that she has done nothing wrong; she has done everything right. We must do all that we can to fight against the

stigma and shame that so many women feel, going through pages and pages of internet sites, wondering, “Did I eat something wrong? Did I lie the wrong way? Should I have gone for that jog?” She did nothing wrong; she did everything right. Her baby was loved.

It is heartbreaking to have conversations like that without a partner, a parent or a best friend present. The first step supporting those affected is drawing attention to this tragic event. I am so proud of the fantastic work of the Baby Loss Awareness Alliance, a collection of more than 90 charities who work relentlessly to ensure that this is on the agenda during Baby Loss Awareness Week and beyond.

In 2020, it would be remiss not to return our attention to the effects of covid-19 when we discuss baby loss. This year of social isolation, solitude and sacrifice has made such tragic occurrences even more tragic. The coronavirus has stripped the humanity out of grieving, with a mother unable to get a hug from her mum and bad news delivered in personal protective equipment while unable to hug a grieving mother or father. We are unable to do what is so instinctively natural to us: to share our grief with those who love us as we lose someone we love.

During the pandemic, there has been reduced access to face-to-face appointments. When appointments do take place in person, partners have been excluded, leaving women to receive the worst news or make the most difficult decisions alone. That has been deeply isolating not only for mothers but for fathers as well. They have that helpless feeling of waiting on the other end of the phone, pacing the room, waiting for it to ring, and then wondering whether they are allowed to show grief, because they are not carrying the baby but they feel the loss equally. They try to be strong for their partner while a part of them dies inside. Virtual appointments just do not carry the same compassion and assurance as seeing someone in person, and as we have heard it can be especially difficult for parents who have already suffered a previous loss. There are challenges in hospital settings, too.

We cannot overestimate the impact that this has on expectant parents. I do not doubt that the Minister will talk about the work that the Government are doing to try to make this more bearable for parents who undergo such a loss. To support bereaved families, it is absolutely crucial that they receive immediate care. There is a direct correlation between when the person going through grief receives the package of mental health support and how long the need for intervention and mental health support continues. The sooner they get it, the better it is for them. Access to bereavement support varies across the country at the best of times, but the redeployment of many NHS staff in the wake of the pandemic has resulted in even greater challenges in accessing that vital support.

This is the most difficult of journeys. Very often, we cannot change the outcome, but we can influence the journey and make it more bearable. The NHS is here for parents going through this. Maternity and neonatal care must not be curtailed during the second wave of covid-19.

I thank all hon. Members for bravely sharing their experiences. I am sorry that I have spoken for so long; I did not even finish what I had planned to say, but



sometimes we have to go with the moment. I could not be more proud of the contributions and to call all hon. Members here colleagues.

**Ms Angela Eagle (in the Chair):** Minister, could you leave a couple of minutes before the end so that I can call the mover of the motion to reply?

2.47 pm

**The Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (Ms Nadine Dorries):** I definitely will. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Eagle. I thank the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for doing the round-up and highlighting everybody's speeches. I thank all hon. Members for being here today, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for securing this debate. Her speech was a difficult and incredibly brave thing to do.

Normally this debate would be in the main Chamber—I responded to it last year—and were it not for the social distancing in this Chamber, other colleagues would have been here today giving their support, and telling their own difficult stories or sharing their experiences, which is so important in raising the issue. Let us hope that next year the debate will be in the main Chamber. I am disappointed that the debate taking place in the Chamber right now is not taking place here and that we are not in the Chamber. It has almost downplayed the importance of this subject. I want to put it on the record that this debate deserves its place in the main Chamber next year.

I want to pick up on a few of the important points that have been made before I get to the substance of explaining what the NHS is doing. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raised the issue of the increased number of stillbirths from 24 to 40, and I want to use that to piggyback on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson). This is a new virus. We do not know its full pathology or impact or what we will learn going forward, but the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran is absolutely right that the number of stillbirths has gone up. The Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch has launched a thematic review into the reasons behind the change, and we hope it will report within the next few months. We want to unpack that—was it to do with the virus, or was it to do with circumstances?—and to know fully what those details were. She was quite right that the numbers have gone up, but we need to know why. It may not be the virus at all, but we absolutely have to know what it was, and that work is already under way. I just wanted to reassure colleagues on that.

I am delighted that a regular at these debates has just joined the Public Gallery—my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) has been instrumental in the APPG and in bringing forward this debate on a yearly basis. I am delighted that she has joined us, because it would not be quite the same if she was not here, and I thank her for that.

Before I move on to the substance, I will pick up the point raised by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake). I thank her for sharing her story, because it was so raw and so new, and her experience was—there is no other way to put it—a dreadful one. However, as

the Minister, I have to tread the line of balance, and I would like to say that, yes, on 8 September, along with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, we agreed new guidance that would be sent out to trusts to allow, where possible, partners—and not just partners, but parents or friends—to go in for scans with sonographers and to be there for the mother, so that she has somebody with her to support her throughout all those appointments. Trusts that can do that are doing it wherever possible.

Of course, the answer is the testing, and a lateral flow test will be available for anybody who wants one in Liverpool from tomorrow. That is the key to the future. Those tests give the results in 15 minutes, so they are a bit like a pregnancy test, and the specificity is, I think, 99.9%, so we can be sure and confident in maternity units that parents and partners can go in and that it is a covid-secure place.

As we know, and as the hon. Member for Tooting can inform us all, when young babies are born, their immune systems are very compromised—almost non-existent, and there has been a balance in ensuring that the environments in maternity units are covid-safe. I just give one example of a birthing mother who had two partners accompany her for the birth, both of whom had tested positive for coronavirus within the previous few days.

There is that balance for the NHS staff and midwives as well, because NHS staff have gone down with covid themselves, and we need to keep our midwife workforce working as healthily as possible. Each trust, in conjunction with NHS staff, decides how to apply the guidance and how to make its areas safe and secure for pregnant mothers to go to.

I also mention the case of one sonographer, who does the scans, who told me that her room has no windows because of the glare on the screen. It is 6 feet by 4 feet, and it has a table, the ultrasound equipment, and room for one chair and the bed. There is no ventilation whatever; it is almost an extended cupboard on the inside of the hospital. There is no way that that room could be covid-secure for her for the amount of time it takes to do a scan. Again, we need to keep our sonographers working.

There is a balance. I know that some trusts have changed where the scans are done and that the NHS is trying its very best to ensure that situations such as the one the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam went through—it was just dreadful, and it was so brave of her to recount it so soon—are minimised as far as possible, but having the lateral flow test is the key, so that we know that people going in and out of the hospital are negative for coronavirus. That is the key to the future and to ending this particularly difficult problem.

I thank the charity Sands and the Baby Loss Awareness Alliance for making Baby Loss Awareness Week a success once again. This year, it focused on the feelings of isolation that many women, fathers, partners and other family and friends experience after pregnancy and baby loss. Those feelings of isolation have sadly been amplified by the covid-19 pandemic and the measures that have had to be put in place to keep healthcare workers, patients and the general public safe.

To mark the week, I met with the charities Sands, Bliss and Tommy's, and hosted the first meeting of my new maternity inequalities oversight forum, a small group of clinical and academic experts and service users

[Ms Nadine Dorries]

that will regularly discuss women and babies from black, Asian and other minority and ethnic backgrounds and those from lower socioeconomic communities. Every stillbirth or baby loss is a tragedy, and it is only right that we support, and remain absolutely committed to supporting, parents through any difficult situations that they may experience at that difficult time.

The reason I established the inequalities oversight forum is that women from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds suffer inequalities during birth. We need to find out the reasons why. We need to find out why black women are five times more likely to have a stillbirth or to die during childbirth. We need to get to the bottom of the reasons and to find out what we can put in place to ensure that, by addressing those issues, we reduce the number of stillbirths.

I was deeply affected by the heartbreaking photographs shared by Chrissy Teigen last month when she lost her son Jack around halfway through her pregnancy. It was incredibly brave, moving the debate out into the public arena again. Closer to home, one of our colleagues and friends, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), tragically lost his twin boys, Rafe and Teddy, shortly after they were born. I commend the bravery and strength of all those individuals who have come forward, as everyone in the Chamber has today, to open up the conversation about baby loss. For far too long it has carried a stigma, as we have heard, and has been treated as a taboo subject.

I would like to mention the death of Mary Agyapong, a pregnant nurse who died with covid after her baby was delivered at Luton and Dunstable University Hospital, where she worked. That deeply affected me, as the hospital serves my constituents. It is a tragic case, and our deepest sympathies remain with Mary Agyapong's family.

It is one of the Government's highest priorities to reduce the number of stillbirths and other adverse maternity outcomes, and to make sure that grieving families and friends have access to the support that they need.

**Sarah Owen:** On the point about the loss of Mary Agyapong, I would like to share my sadness, as she was a constituent of mine. I hope the Government will continue to support her family throughout this difficult period. As to the point about black, Asian and minority ethnic women suffering more stillbirths and miscarriages throughout pregnancy, that has been heightened throughout covid. What is being done to look into the situation, and how can this be improved for the future?

**Ms Dorries:** I apologise: I had not realised that Mary Agyapong was one of the hon. Lady's constituents.

The situation that the hon. Lady describes is why we established the inequalities forum with a group of clinical experts, including National Maternity Voices, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent and others. It was for exactly that reason: to try to find out why this is happening, to look at some of the myths around the reasons and to get down to the clinical reasons and to the changes we can implement to stop this. MBRRACE-UK, hon. Members, National Maternity Voices and Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, as well as a number of other people known and recognised as leaders in this field, are trying to drill down into the reasons.

In a way, it is covid, and what has happened, that has made us drill down to focus on that. I hope that as we move a little further forward—we have had our second meeting—I will be able to report some of the findings back to the House. I particularly encourage the hon. Lady to read the MBRRACE-UK report, which focused on the issue. It contains some interesting reading and findings. That report also stimulated the need for the group to look at these issues.

**Ms Angela Eagle (in the Chair):** Minister, in the light of the time—

**Ms Dorries:** Oh, gosh, I am sorry. I will just mention James Titcombe. It is the 12th anniversary of the death of his baby, Joshua. James has absolutely been an advocate of patient safety, and his work has influenced it. However, I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth time to respond.

2.58 pm

**Cherilyn Mackrory:** I will make it brief. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for being here this afternoon and for the stories that they shared, and particularly the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake)—that was incredibly brave; it is so raw still. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who has shown such kindness to me over the past few weeks and spoken to me privately—we have shared our stories. I think this is a tribute to how this Parliament can work, and I hope that we will be in the Chamber this time next year.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on people experiencing baby loss.

2.59 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Food Supply: Covid-19

3.2 pm

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, COVID-19 and food supply, HC 263, and the Government response, HC 841.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Eagle. We launched our inquiry in April after the start of the coronavirus pandemic. It is good to see the Minister and the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner)—and also the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), who is a great member of the Select Committee. We are a very select bunch this afternoon. What we lack in quantity, we make up in quality—there is no doubt about that. As long as we agree on that, things will be absolutely fine.

When lockdown measures to control the virus took effect and began to have a significant impact on the food supply, panic buying took place in supermarkets, and many businesses in the food sector were forced to close. The Committee therefore took evidence from businesses in the food supply chain, food aid organisations, charities, members of the general public, academics, and Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to inform our report.

I want to pay tribute at this stage to those working in the food supply industry, because they kept working through the pandemic—they kept our factories and processing plants going, the drivers got the supplies out, and the farmers produced the food throughout the pandemic. That showed the need to have good home production as well as making sure that imports get in. Although this is not part of the report, I say to the Minister that it is essential that we have a process for getting the lorries and food through our ports and docks as we leave the European Union. I am sure she is well aware of that.

Our report was published on 30 July, just before the summer recess, and we received a Government response on 10 October. Our report was wide-ranging and was intended to help the Government, particularly on how best to react to a second lockdown, which now, unfortunately, has come to pass. Fortunately, we have not seen the same levels of panic buying in supermarkets yet this time around, and we are better prepared to cope with the demand and surges.

I would like to put on record the fact that there never was any real shortage of food in the supermarkets. It is just that, naturally, once people believe they are going to be locked down, the first thing they think is, “Let’s go and stock up on the essentials.” Let us get the clear message out that the food is there and that we do not need to panic buy.

There are, however, several key issues to with food insecurity, which we addressed in our report, and it will continue to be an issue for the Government as a result of covid-19, especially with a further lockdown. One of them is food redistribution. When we launched our report back in the summer, we did so from the FareShare depot in Deptford, in east London. In our report, we praised the Government for the £5 million they provided to FareShare to redistribute food to the most vulnerable,

and we asked whether that money could be extended over the next two years. Could the Minister refer to that when she replies to the debate?

As well as helping those who struggle to afford food as the effects of the pandemic continue, redistributing food would also reduce food waste at the farm gates. In my view, it is very much a win-win and a good use of taxpayers’ money and Government money. It buys a lot of good-quality food and delivers it directly to those who most need it.

We also recommended that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should evaluate the impact of the £63 million it provided to local authorities, assist those struggling to afford food, and consider whether further support is necessary, especially in this new lockdown. The second lockdown has started. Is DEFRA planning to provide any additional funding for the redistribution of food for those who most need it? I know that the Minister is keen for those in the most need to have food. I look forward to what she may have to say.

The Government have recommended that clinically extremely vulnerable people shield again during the current lockdown. It is not clear whether food parcels will be provided through a central scheme led by DEFRA, as they were during the first lockdown. Again, will the Minister confirm whether that will be the case?

During the first wave and the first lockdown, there were a number of issues with delivery slots for online shopping for some vulnerable people, who were unable to get priority booking. I hope, because of all the experience we have had, that that will not happen this time, but we have to be aware that the most vulnerable people who are getting their food online need to get that food. Has DEFRA assessed whether enough online delivery slots are now available, not just for people shielding, but for others who rely on them, such as people with disabilities? We took evidence from people with disabilities who found it quite difficult last time during the lockdown to get food. People advised to shield again are advised not to go to the shops and to shop online. We must ensure that they have support to access the food they need.

I also want to talk a little about free school meals and food vouchers. I know it is not the direct responsibility of the present Minister, but she is the Minister responsible for farming and food. While our report did not make recommendations on whether free school meal vouchers should be available during school holidays, it did look at how the system worked, with vouchers provided to redeem at supermarkets to get foods to the poorest families.

I know from my experience, and from my wife’s during her teaching career, that there is great need to get those vouchers out to vulnerable families. I know this was set up to provide meals while schools were closed, but it was also extended to school holidays. Children in poverty are particularly vulnerable to getting insufficient nutritious food during the school holidays, so I hope the Government are looking at what more can be done for the poorest and most vulnerable children in terms of food access at this time.

I accept that the Government have given more money in universal credit, but the benefit of food vouchers is that they allow people to buy the food directly. The



[Neil Parish]

Government would be wise, ahead of the long Christmas holidays, to look again at providing free school meals for children at Christmas, particularly with Marcus Rashford—who is, naturally, very sincere in wanting food to go to children—making a case for it.

In part one of the national food strategy, Henry Dimbleby made a number of recommendations to the Government on food security. As we know, Henry Dimbleby was put there by the previous Secretary of State for DEFRA. The report recommended expanding free school meals for children up to 16 in a household in receipt of universal credit, extending the holiday activities and food programme across the country, and expanding Healthy Start. It would be interesting to hear whether DEFRA and the Minister can say anything about what is happening to that food strategy and that report. Are the Government actively looking at those proposals now?

In our EFRA Committee report, we recommended that the Government consult on whether a right to food should be given a legislative footing. If a person is hungry, the right to food is so important. It takes only one look at me to see that I have probably not been hungry very much lately, but if a person is hungry, that is their main problem in life and it needs to be sorted. Though I make a joke about myself, I take the matter of food security and having enough food very seriously.

We also recommend that a Minister for food security be immediately appointed to deal with these issues. That was a very good part of our report—it had many good parts, but that was a particularly good part. I understand from the Government's response to our report that Lord Gardiner is actually the Minister responsible for food security, so he might have been here today. I very much respect Lord Gardiner, but I think we actually need a Minister who is almost in the Cabinet if they are to be able to deliver a cross-Cabinet report on food security.

I pay tribute to the Minister for her great work in amending the Agriculture Bill yesterday; it is in a much better state than when it started, although it may need a few more tweaks before we are finished.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** Never again.

**Neil Parish:** Never say never again, Minister, especially in Parliament and in politics. In particular, I am pleased that the Government now have to review food security every three years instead of every five years. However, I think the Agriculture Bill should be much more about food production and food security, as well as about delivering food to everybody—those that can afford it, and those that cannot.

We have an opportunity—it is probably slightly broader than our report—to look at the way we produce healthy food in this country through our agricultural policies, and then deliver that food into the market and to those who most need it. I have always believed that through the new Agriculture Bill, as we move away from the common agricultural policy, we can have more food, healthy food and vegetables—all the things we need in life. Can we not link these things much more? You will probably tell me off, Ms McDonagh, for going a little off the report.

In our EFRA Committee report, we found that the responsibility for food falls across several Government Departments, but there is a risk that food insecurity falls between the cracks, with no clear lead. DEFRA is responsible for food. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has helped to get food parcels out to vulnerable people, the Department for International Trade has a huge impact on our food supply through trade, and the Department for Education is responsible for school meals vouchers. Given the increased challenge of food security in the nation post covid-19, would it not be wise for the Government to ensure that one single Minister draws together policies across Departments, and even in Cabinet? I again emphasise that we need that food—not only what we produce in this country, but imports—to flow freely across the country.

Finally, our report found that the hospitality and food services sectors may take more than a year to recover from forced closures and that further financial difficulties are likely, and that was before this latest lockdown. What assessment has DEFRA made of how this lockdown will affect hospitality and food services businesses and their food and drink suppliers? It is a huge blow to those businesses. We understand why we need a second lockdown, because covid is spreading, and I am not at all against what the Government have had to do, but we have to consider the effect on all those businesses.

When the Government closed businesses back in March, there were huge problems up the supply chain. High-value beef did not have a market in restaurants, and coffee shops closed, which badly affected the milk sector, with many farmers reportedly having to pour milk down the drain. The Government moved to set up a dairy response fund, which was very welcome, and the industry was given more flexibility to take into the retail sector the milk that had been going to the restaurant sector, so the situation improved quite quickly, but we need to be very careful as we go forward. How are the Government going to support food and drink suppliers this time? Restaurants, pubs and bars are now having to close, so that will have an effect.

I am grateful to the Minister for being here today. I have put to her a number of questions from the report and some from me as well. We have today presented what I believe is a well-considered and thoughtful report. It is critical in parts, but it is also helpful to the Government. I look forward to the Government adopting absolutely everything in it.

3.18 pm

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is lovely to see a friendly face from Merseyside sitting in the Chair, Ms Eagle. I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). It is a great pleasure and an honour to serve under his chairmanship of the EFRA Committee—it is really enjoyable and one of the highlights of my week up here. I thank him very much for all that he has done to secure the debate and promote what is in the report.

The debate could not have come at a more important time, at the start of a second national lockdown, when access to food is so critical to people's health and lives. My contribution will focus on the Government's response to the Committee's recommendations on food insecurity,

and particularly the response to recommendations 9 to 13, which relate to the local authority emergency assistance grant, free school meals vouchers, food parcels for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable and, of course, putting the right to food into UK legislation.

The following point in the report underlines the unfolding disaster of food insecurity happening in all our communities right now:

“Use of food banks was increasing before the pandemic and has effectively doubled during the pandemic. It is likely that the situation will get worse before it gets better.”

Last night we received a report from the Trussell Trust that predicts significant increases in levels of destitution this winter: 670,000 additional people are forecasted to be classed as destitute, meaning that they cannot afford essentials such as housing, energy and food. Of course, that is on top of the millions already suffering food insecurity.

With that in mind, I will start with recommendation 9 of the report, which asks the Government to evaluate the impact of the £63 million provided to local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food, and to consider whether further support is necessary. That funding ran out in October, just ahead of the second lockdown, worryingly. There was rightly an outcry from council leaders when the Prime Minister suggested that they should use the grant, which had already run out, to pay for free school meals over half term. The Government's own guidance stated that it should not be used to duplicate free school meals vouchers.

In their response to the report, the Government said that they expected the majority of that money to be spent within 12 weeks. They also said that they would evaluate its impact, so I hope the Minister can now commit to the grant being extended, as the Trussell Trust and many other reputable food organisations have called for. The Trussell Trust's forecast for this winter is indeed shocking. It estimates a 61% increase in need compared with last winter, which is equivalent to an additional 300,000 emergency food parcels.

I know from first hand that the grant has had such a good impact in Liverpool. It has been an absolute lifeline. As a councillor in Everton, I have often used the local welfare assistance funds to target people in need. Local authorities can ensure that it makes a real difference to individuals. I pay tribute to Liverpool City Council, Mayor Joe Anderson, Councillor Jane Corbett and officers such as Martin Jungnitz, who, despite austerity cuts, are championing this scheme, having kept it afloat and allocated £18 million. Unfortunately, the money has run out, so I will ask again: can the emergency assistance grant for food and essential supplies be urgently extended over the winter to support councils in their efforts to ensure that nobody goes hungry?

Recommendations 11 and 12 made it clear how important free school meals vouchers are, noting that the number of children dependent on them is likely to go up significantly as people shift into the benefits system. In their response, the Government claimed that they had:

“taken unprecedented and substantial action to ensure that no child should go hungry as we take measures to tackle coronavirus, including in relation to free school meals.”

That simply does not reflect reality. The Government have not ensured that no child will go hungry—hence there are over a million signatures on Marcus Rashford's

petition on the matter. Just two weeks ago the Government voted down a motion to provide free school meals to children over the winter holidays, and the public have made clear their opinion on this shocking decision. I ask the Government to listen to Marcus Rashford, and to the other agencies, and provide free school meals over Christmas and the holidays that follow. It is their moral duty. Over 4,000 children in my constituency of Liverpool, West Derby who rely on free school meals are now at risk of going hungry, in the middle of winter and in the middle of a pandemic, as a direct result of this refusal to extend the scheme.

Recommendation 12 deals with food parcels for the clinically extremely vulnerable. The report made recommendations about the distribution of these food parcels during the first lockdown. There were some extremely concerning findings, such as the feedback that the food parcels did not meet those individuals' dietary needs, or that they actually put their health at risk. The independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies has stated that a small but significant proportion of people had been waiting longer than a month for their first food parcel. I know from first hand the issues faced by many of the people advised to shield, because I work alongside the two co-founders of Fans Supporting Foodbanks, and they are both in that category. They and many thousands across the country will once again be revisiting those fears. We discussed it yesterday on the phone, and they really are both fearful.

The Government's response to that recommendation is not good enough. It does not address in any detail what they are going to do to ensure that delays in food parcels to the clinically extremely vulnerable do not happen again. It does not recognise the realities that people are living through. Our report stated that if the Government repeat such an endeavour in future, such as during a second wave of covid-19, they should make greater efforts to ensure that nutrition and dietary needs are given a higher priority from the start. Now that day has come, as the second lockdown starts today. Will the Government urgently set out in detail how they will ensure that the dietary needs of the clinically extremely vulnerable are met in the days and weeks to come?

I turn to recommendation 13. I thank the Minister for once again listening to my arguments, and for her interest in this subject and in the community projects in Liverpool, which I spoke to her about. She showed great interest and it really was appreciated. I look forward to updating her in the coming months. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who has been and continues to be a great champion on the subject of food insecurity, and who offers wise counsel when it is needed.

The EFRA Committee recommended that the Government should consult on whether a right to food should be placed on a legislative footing to ensure that they have a reference point for action to tackle and measure food insecurity. It is the Government's moral duty, regardless of which political party is in office, to ensure that nobody in the country goes hungry. That was echoed last week by Henry Dimbleby, the Government's adviser on the national food strategy. It should be a legal duty on the Government and a legal right, and it should be taken out of the hands of political decision makers.

[*Ian Byrne*]

Putting a right to food into legislation would oblige the Government of the day to ensure that people never face food insecurity, and issues such as the five-week universal credit delay and the refusal to provide free school meals would be subject to legal challenge. Enshrining a right to food in law would make clear the Government's obligations, create mechanisms to set positive targets and monitor progress, and introduce avenues to hold Government bodies to account for violations. The events of this year demonstrate that we need that legislation in place now more than ever.

The Government cannot let the disaster of food insecurity continue to unfold, and stand by while so many of our citizens, including my constituents, are at risk of hunger and have to deal with its devastating impact on their health, wellbeing and livelihoods. I urge them to look at the Committee's report and take urgent steps now to ensure that nobody goes hungry during the second lockdown.

3.28 pm

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Eagle, albeit very briefly. I am sure it will be a pleasure to serve under Ms McVey's chairmanship too.

[*ESTHER McVEY in the Chair*]

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), who speaks with great passion and knowledge. The shadow DEFRA team appreciates all the work and effort he puts in. It is also a huge pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). I thought he rather undersold his Committee's report.

**Neil Parish:** Unknowingly.

**Daniel Zeichner:** It is not only timely but extremely important. I am possibly somewhat biased. I came to this role somewhat unexpectedly just after Christmas, and although I had done rural policy many years ago, it was not recent. No one at that time imagined that we would be going into the kind of year that we have had so far and, sadly, it looks like we will continue to have.

One of the consequences of that was that I and the shadow team quickly found ourselves in the unusual position of having a dialogue with many of the people who came to give evidence to the Select Committee, in some cases on a weekly basis. On behalf of the shadow DEFRA team, I want to thank Ministers for the access that they gave us at the time—it felt like the door had been cracked open slightly. We are beginning to see just a little of how Government operate. I have to say that we did not get to see very much, but sometimes in those conversations we began to get a sense of how Government work, or maybe do not work—I will make one or two observations on that—and it was appreciated.

It also meant that, from the conversations I had regularly with some people, particularly those who gave evidence, I recognised in the Committee reports what had been going on for many months. I was a shadow Transport Minister in a previous Parliament, and nobody ever explains to you how to do things in this place. Having been on a Select Committee, I realise how much

hugely important information is derived from Select Committees. I suspect that the right way to do it is to be on the Select Committee first and then to be a shadow Minister, but it does not always work like that.

Sadly, we come here today at the start of a second national lockdown. Almost the first thing to do is to pay tribute to all the people in the food production system, from farm right the way through to shop, right across the food sector, including charities and all workers in the supply chain. It must be said that in those early conversations there were genuine anxieties and concerns about the supply chain, because it was not clear that it would survive. In the beginning, we did not know how many of the workers would fall prey to covid. It is fair to say that we were fortunate that it did not spread through the workforce in the way that some of us had feared, but that was not guaranteed, and we saw the issues in the shops. It was difficult in a trying period. It was a good example in this place of people working together to make sure that we kept things going.

The report quite rightly asks a series of detailed questions. Any Government faced with that kind of crisis will not get it all right, so I hope that my criticisms, as they are, will be taken in a constructive spirit, because anyone would have struggled with it. There were some important lessons. The first goes back to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby. Frankly, there is a level of food poverty and insecurity in this country that was already there, and a light has been shone on that to some extent. It is sometimes hard for people in this place to understand what other people's lives are like. That is a general comment. I look across the Atlantic and I cannot believe that 67 million people have done what they have done—hopefully, 70 million have done the right thing, in my view. The sad truth of the report is that too many people in this country are already in a poor position.

We have already seen a huge rise in food bank use, which is a dilemma for all of us. Whenever I go to my food bank, I always say, "I want to get rid of you." I am sure that others say the same. We do not want food banks. We should not have food banks in the 21st century, but they have a vital role. The next thing I say is, "Thank you," because it absolutely needs to be done. The worry is that during this crisis, unsurprisingly, usage has shot up. There were particular challenges for food banks, not least because many of their volunteers were in exactly the age group that needed to shield. It was a difficult period for them. The number of people who came forward to help at that point was encouraging, certainly in my city. I heard that from others too, and it was helped by the fact that they were not necessarily doing other things. As the city unlocked, it meant that there was a transition back again. None of it is easy.

The most recent data from the Food Foundation shows that 14% of adults living with children have now reported experiencing food insecurity in the last six months. That is a trite phrase: "experiencing food insecurity." What does it mean? It means that they do not have any food. That is an almost unthinkable situation for many of us in this country in the 21st century. A total of 4 million people, including 2.3 million children, are having to make really difficult decisions about what they eat, and then make difficult decisions about nutritional content because they cannot afford to access food.



Some 10% of adults living with children reported that food insecurity has affected their children, forcing them to rely on only a few kinds of low-cost food and possibly unbalanced meals—I am afraid that we have seen cases of people skipping meals altogether. It is only day one of the second lockdown, but I fear that we will see similar issues arising again, and somehow it all seems that much more difficult in winter than in spring, particularly with some of the religious festivals approaching.

This is an issue not just of food supply, but of insufficient income and social support. Labour has repeatedly urged the Government to ensure that the welfare safety net is fit to handle the crisis. Those simple measures that we have proposed include scrapping the five-week wait for universal credit, suspending the benefits cap and updating legacy benefits so that they match the increase in universal credit.

We are not here to re-rehearse those arguments, but it is important that they are put on record, and I think it is pretty incredible, in the face of where we are now, that the £20 per week increase in universal credit is still not guaranteed. I know it is not within the Minister's gift to make a promise on that today, but I am sure that message will go back strongly. It is quite clear that the £63 million that was put in place, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned, was there for a particular time and a particular purpose. We will need it again, so I echo his questions: what is going to be in place, when, and can we get some guarantees on that quickly?

When the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned part one of the national food strategy, he said that Henry Dimbleby had been appointed by the previous Secretary of State—the hon. Gentleman is losing count of Secretaries of State, because by my reckoning it was the previous but one. However, it is an important report and the huge petition that has been running recently picks up those recommendations. We appreciate that they are quite significant and that they are expensive, but the Opposition also recognise that they are what the public are looking to achieve, and I urge the Government to look at them closely. At the start of the pandemic, Labour called for an emergency coronavirus food plan to ensure that everyone in the country has access to nutritious food. I urge the Government to lay out, if not today then very soon, how they plan to meet those kinds of objectives in the period ahead.

The report makes it clear that the Government have made some mistakes. The national free school meals voucher scheme was a particularly trying period. As I think the Chair of the Select Committee pointed out, the Minister is not directly responsible for each Government Department, but she does have an overall co-ordinating role, so it is entirely right and proper that we criticise the scheme that was run by Edenred. I am afraid every MP across the House probably had examples in their constituencies; I certainly did in mine. It was a nightmare, frankly, for teachers doing their best to ensure that children were fed. Again, let me be generous to the Government and say that it is not easy to set up a scheme very quickly, but there were some fundamental problems with it, particularly with the online portal. It was very tough on parents who were facing considerable difficulties accessing it, so it really did not seem to work.

One of the biggest problems was the failure to come up with a scheme that gave those vouchers to shops where people live and shop. I could not believe that the

Co-op, which is such a fundamental part of so many communities, particularly in cities such as mine, was left out. Of course people can get to the big shops—the people who do not need vouchers; the people who needed the vouchers were much closer to the shops that did not have them. The Minister is acknowledging the problem, but it did go on for a very long time, despite detailed questioning and pressing. I know the Co-op was in near despair, speaking to us very regularly, and my shadow DEFRA colleagues and I kept raising that with the Secretary of State.

Schools needing to source alternative food voucher schemes from this one were also left in confusion about the costs that they were able to bear and the effect that might have on schools that had a financial surplus. We do not want schools to be completely running down their reserves all the time. There was a whole series of things that could have been done better, and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton's report highlights them very effectively. The Committee is absolutely right to say that children in poverty are particularly vulnerable to experiencing insufficient nutritious food during the school holidays.

Given the significant impact on people's incomes, it is extraordinary that we have had this series of crises. A feature of the Government's response is that they do not seem to spot very obvious things coming down the road. I can, probably fairly accurately, predict that the Christmas holidays will come along in a few weeks. Without being unkind, I think it might be sensible for the Government to acknowledge that it will happen again and again, and they might as well get things sorted out in advance.

Of course, Marcus Rashford is always cited, and he has done a fantastic job, but it should not have taken him to resolve this issue; the Government should have seen it coming. The Government will be judged on how they respond to this. I hope that they will not fall into the same trap again. Certainly, Labour's view is very clear that free school meals should be extended.

Alongside children are those people who are clinically extremely vulnerable. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby made some important points about some of the early food parcels. Again, let me be generous and say that it was hard to organise them quickly, but it was clear that particularly some of the early parcels were quite inappropriate for many people. If, as I hope we do not, we get to a situation where we need to do that again, I hope that lessons have been learned.

I wholeheartedly echo the Committee's conclusion that going back to the pre-pandemic normal will not be good enough. That is why we look forward to Henry Dimbleby's work continuing and a national food strategy emerging. This has been a long-running campaign, and I pay tribute to some of my colleagues, particularly—I cannot remember her constituency, but I think hon. Members will know who I mean. She has done a lot of work arguing for food poverty to be tackled better.

I also hope that the Government will listen on food security. We had this discussion on the Agriculture Bill. There are two types of food security, of course: individual food security, which I have been referring to, and food chain security. Although we had that debate and the Government conceded to move from five years to three,

[Daniel Zeichner]

given the situation that we may find ourselves in fairly soon we may have to address that on a more regular basis.

**Neil Parish:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response to our report. What we found in looking into the food chain was that it worked, but it is very much a just-in-time food chain. Especially with fresh fruit and vegetables, and especially in the winter, we need to ensure that we can get those imports in. As much as I want to produce everything in this country if we can, at certain times of the year we will import a lot of salad, vegetables and fruit especially.

**Daniel Zeichner:** The Chair of the Select Committee is right. I will come on to the very pressing fresh food issues that we face, but I agree we need to ensure that that works.

I will touch briefly on the right to food, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned, and which featured in Labour's manifesto last year. I am pleased that the Committee is recommending that that be looked at. It is a complicated issue, because is not quite as obvious as it might seem in just a few words, but it encompasses a range of issues around income security and how we judge what is appropriate in a modern, civilised society. I suspect that that will come in time.

The report mentions how our food is produced. This was a remarkable achievement by everyone involved in the food chain, from farmers right the way through to food processors, but one thing that the report could have touched on a bit more, and that the Government need to look at much more, is how we hear the voices of the people involved in the food processing sector. I have been struck by the lack of transparency. It is a hidden workforce to some extent, and of course it is not always a UK workforce.

That workforce is a key part of how we will ensure that food gets on our shelves and to our people. However, at the moment, we are seeing week by week more incidents of sickness—in East Anglia, my part of the world, we have had some very difficult outbreaks—in some of those factories. The bit that is missing from the analysis is the voice of those workers. I am disappointed that more evidence was not taken from trade unions and particularly some of the national officers. I know that the Government are not necessarily particularly keen on all trade unions, but my work and conversations with national officers show that they have a huge wealth of knowledge, and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), and I have been pressing the Government to make more use of that knowledge. I think we all know that if we go to any trade organisation or any major organisation, we will hear a whole series of things about what they would like to be the case. When we talk to the people who are actually doing the work, we very frequently get a rather different account, and it is the lack of that account that is contributing in some cases to the problems that we are seeing.

At the beginning, there were problems about ensuring that there was adequate statutory guidance. There were problems with personal protective equipment. There

were problems about social distancing. We hope that that is now sorted, because there has been plenty of time to get the information in place, but there are good employers and less good employers. We want to ensure that the practice of the good employers is spread widely, and there is a real opportunity to do that. I would suggest to the Minister that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs might look at commissioning some research on whether there is any link between the work practices and the spread of the disease, because there is a worry about that, which I hear.

There is also, of course, the issue of proper sick pay, because without that people cannot afford to isolate. Even if we get the testing system sorted out, if people are not isolating, it will not work, and if they cannot isolate because the statutory sick pay is too low or they are not getting it properly, we will be able to see exactly why the problem has got worse.

Back in July, the shadow Secretary of State did write to the Secretary of State, urging the Government to follow what we think is the good example of risk assessments being carried out in Wales. I would encourage the Minister to look at that.

We are hearing from our trade union colleagues that they do think that there is a problem, not least because in some cases people are working on agency contracts, which moves them from factory to factory. That has been, I think, addressed in care homes, but I do not think it has been addressed in the food processing sector, and that is in all our interests, frankly. Obviously, we need to get on top of the virus, but if there are people who are putting themselves at risk, that puts others at risk, too.

Some research was done by an organisation called PIRC—Pensions & Investment Research Consultants—which I think did a desk job of looking at some of these things. It found that the number of covid-19 cases at food factories could actually be 30 times higher than those being reported to the Health and Safety Executive. I have been pressing the Department of Health and Social Care with a number of questions on this, but frankly, we have not been getting very good answers, so I think that there is more work to be done, and it would be to everybody's benefit.

We have of course been supportive of the lockdown measures, but I do think that, right at the beginning, more could have been done to anticipate some of the problems that arose from the closure of the hospitality and food service sector. Again, this is not an easy thing to do. At the beginning, there was criticism, including from the National Farmers Union, of the Government for being too slow in responding to the problems in the dairy sector. It is not an easy thing to shift so much product from one area to another. And on the financial support scheme—the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned this—there is a sense that by the time that the scheme was finally in place, the complexity of it and the eligibility criteria meant that probably not that many people benefited from it, so I hope that that can be looked at again.

I have raised this point informally with the Minister. At the beginning, there were, rightly, measures to relax some of the competition laws, to allow co-operation, particularly in the dairy sector, that would not normally be allowed. I spoke to Dairy UK at the time, and it was very disappointed that one of the statutory instruments

was not actually brought before the House for discussion. It said to me that it would have been extremely useful for some of the points to be clarified. As a consequence, the first measure did not really work and a second one had to be laid. I will just make the point. Ministers say of the CRaG—Constitutional Reform and Governance Act—process, for instance, that we can absolutely rely on it. But what happened when we came to try to use this procedure? I spent a lot of time and effort on this. I got the Leader of the Opposition to lay an early-day motion, pray and all the rest of it. When we came to try to use this procedure, what happened? It was earlier than July. The measures have come and gone. They will probably have to be introduced again and we will still not have had any opportunity to query them or, as would be in the Government's interest, to clarify them. The competition laws are very tight and many producers are nervous about discussions because they have been stung before and ended up with big bills. It is in everybody's interest. I say gently that we need to make that work better.

It is difficult when the public is worried about supplies, so one has to be careful about one's use of language. I understand why the Secretary of State was careful. But we asked for a proper, national public advertising campaign at the beginning. That did not seem to be done quickly enough. The Government's communication messages need to be refined.

We felt that leaving frontline retail staff to deal with some of the issues they faced was rather unfair. We have seen continuing incidents of violence against shopworkers, up 9% this year compared to last year. In response to the report, the Government said they will take lessons from the first lockdown, to deliver better aligned and joined-up communications. I ask the Minister, what communications will they be making to reassure the public that they do not need to stockpile?

I will conclude on a subject, Ms McVey, on which you and I will not agree, namely, the future relationship with the European Union. Looking at what is coming down the line in a few weeks, I would echo the comments of the Chair of the Select Committee. Some have thought that it will be fine, because we got through covid-19 with the food supply chain. I think it is exactly the other way around, I am afraid. I would not say we were lucky—people worked very hard—but it was close. When I see all the things exporters and importers will have to do over the next few weeks, it is eye-watering. I am hearing that it is very difficult. However much communication the Government do, it will not be solved.

Everyone is on tenterhooks as we come to the end of the transition period. We will need some urgent planning to get us through all of it. There are some fundamental differences between the approach this Government have taken and the approach of a Labour Government. I do not think we would have relied so much on the private sector to provide solutions. The school meals fiasco showed why that did not work.

As we face a second wave of the pandemic and the second lockdown, I ask the Government to up their game in ensuring people have access to nutritional food, and particularly that food businesses and retailers get good, sound advice, so that the buck is not passed on to them to take responsibility. Finally, we must give all the support we can to the farmers, food producers, delivery drivers, factory engineers and all the other people. It is a

just-in-time system, and we do not have much time to secure it before we face the problems of the epidemic and some of our own making.

3.53 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** It is a great pleasure to serve for the first time under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank all those who have worked so hard to keep the nation fed throughout this difficult year. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and his Committee for the work they have done on this excellent report. I also thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), with whom I have discussed food security and insecurity before. I know he works very hard and is very knowledgeable in this sphere. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who I know will also continue to work with us on these difficult issues.

I will start with the Government's preparations for the new restrictions that have come into place today. On Monday, the national shielding service system was switched on, allowing clinically extremely vulnerable individuals to register their need for support. That should get them a supermarket delivery slot within seven days as a maximum—so, with any luck, before that. I have done the gov.uk website click-through myself. The system is simple to use, and it can be done on behalf of an older person or someone who cannot access technology.

If that does not work for anyone or for anyone's constituents, please get in touch with one of the charities that I shall list later, or local authorities, which are able to provide direct access to online delivery slots. Having said that, there is good supply of online delivery slots at the moment, commercially. I keep checking that as well, and slots are available today, or they were when I checked earlier.

Today, too, there was further good news from the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the coronavirus job retention scheme. That is worth checking, but I do not intend to go into any detail, because we have enough to do to go through the recommendations in this extensive report in order, which I will now do.

We welcome recommendations 1, 2 and 3. We have been in daily contact with retailers throughout the pandemic. They told us what was happening abroad before it started here. We in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—given that we supply a lot of food abroad, not least at the smarter end of the fisheries sector—were very aware of what was happening on the continent of Europe before the pandemic got bad here. We knew that the strains on demand experienced in March and April were inevitable as the numbers went up, but the supply chain response demonstrated real resilience.

**Neil Parish:** The point made by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) was that when we had the previous epidemic, our imports and exports were all under single market regulations. Is the Minister absolutely certain that DEFRA and the Government are ready for the hauliers to be able to import and export food without delay? She mentioned fish, which got me to rise to my feet immediately, because fish by its very nature is perishable. We have to have the right certificates and enough people to issue them. We cannot delay the hauliers, so I seek that reassurance for the record, please.



**Victoria Prentis:** Yes. I am happy to go into immense detail with my hon. Friend, possibly not in this debate because, frankly, that is the subject of several hours of discussion in itself. I am absolutely certain that we are working very hard, that we have prepared for a no-deal scenario—as the Department has done several times already, and which we still hope will not be the case—and that we have daily meetings about the plans for 1 January.

I am not prepared to say, and would never say, that there will not be bumps along the way in the next few months. I am sure that there will be, and of course the pandemic is not helping the situation. I had a useful meeting with local authority leaders this morning, who are working on this very issue. I am also acutely conscious that the same workforce is dealing with the issues of both the pandemic and the end of the transition period. I will not say that there will be no bumps; I will say that we are as prepared as we possibly can be, but that it is challenging.

To go back to today's lockdown, supermarkets have seen a clear uplift in sales because of the lockdown and in anticipation of it. We are monitoring the situation closely, and supermarkets say that they are confident of managing availability by using existing stocks and working with their suppliers. Evidence shows—I say this politely to the hon. Member for Cambridge—that messaging to consumers to highlight the resilience of the food supply comes best from supermarkets and those in the retail supply chain. I am prepared to accept that evidence.

It is also clear that as soon as the words beginning with “p” and “b” are mentioned in the media—I will not even say the words, and this is why we never talk about them—people act in a way that is not necessary, buying things that they do not need. We have a swear box in the office for those words. To reassure hon. Members, food supply is holding up very well. There are products on the shelves and nobody needs to buy anything they do not need to eat in the normal course of events.

On recommendation 4, exclusion orders are intended to be used in exceptional circumstances only. The Competition Act 1998 (Groceries) (Coronavirus) (Public Policy Exclusion) Order 2020, which provided a specific and temporary relaxation of elements of UK competition law, was very effective. We should give active consideration to whether it is needed again, and we are doing so. I accept what the hon. Member for Cambridge said about law generally being better scrutinised. When the House was sitting virtually, however, we did not have a virtual way to undertake scrutiny of statutory instruments, and that remains the case. I know that consideration is being given to that, but not everything is perfect in the course of a global pandemic. It was definitely worth introducing that exemption, and I am pleased that we did so.

We agree with recommendations 5 and 6. Click and collect boomed, and retailers worked really hard to increase availability. There were enormous increases in online delivery supply. Tesco is just one example, but other supermarkets are available. The number of its delivery slots went from 660,000—at that point, delivery was not a huge part of Tesco's business—to 1.5 million, which is an immense job. Many other supermarkets increased their deliveries, too.

There was also a lot of really hard work locally. The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned the Co-op, which did enormous work in my constituency just to do local deliveries to old people who had rung up. A volunteer or shop staff member would then drop off the

shopping. An immense amount of work went into all that. The temporary relaxation of drivers' hours rules also really helped—that was another win—and DEFRA waived the 5p carrier bag charge for online orders, which helped minimise contact between drivers and customers. That was another useful learning point.

On recommendation 7, we spent a considerable amount of time on the food and essential supplies to the vulnerable taskforce, which I was privileged to chair, targeting this specific group. Personally, I always refer to the vulnerable instead of putting people into different categories. We work closely with retailers, local authorities and charities to help them make connections and put in place a whole range of services for people who need them. They are still available. We have our own delivery slots, which are obviously provided by retailers but which local authorities and national charities, including the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Age UK and Scope, can access directly. Some 81% of local authorities can now do direct referrals for supermarket slots, and I thank the team who worked for our taskforce. They did all this very difficult work amazingly quickly. They built computer systems to help deliver it and worked with local authorities to ensure that the supplies and food delivery slots were there for those who needed them.

Recommendations 8 to 11, and probably a few others, focus on food security. In the first weeks of the pandemic, the taskforce's focus was on ensuring that food got to people who were finding it physically difficult to access it because they were locked down in their houses. However, it became very clear—indeed, this was not a surprise to anyone—that there was a growing and substantial problem with economic access to food. We got a great deal of evidence from those who work on the frontline, and we continue to do so. It is very much a priority of our work going forward.

Food poverty is, of course, a part of wider poverty and is usually dealt with by the welfare system. The Government have put in place a great deal more welfare measures than have been available in the past, with £9 billion extra this financial year, benefiting 16 million extra households. It is important to remember that not everyone in food poverty has children. Indeed, the granular evidence we received daily from those who work on the frontline shows that probably about half of those in food poverty have children. Many of them are single people—they are not necessarily older—living on their own. When we have this discussion, it is important to recognise the different sorts of families.

**Neil Parish:** We are having a thoughtful conversation. It is interesting to hear the Minister say that probably less than half of those receiving benefits have children. Is there an argument that food should be targeted with vouchers, so that it gets to families with children? If the benefit is available to everyone, which is a good thing, those with children are not necessarily targeted. School vouchers target them and make sure that vulnerable children get food.

**Victoria Prentis:** This is a difficult and delicate area, but the point I am trying to make is that we need to address the needs of all those who are in food poverty. Obviously, children are particularly important but so are adults. If, sadly, we need to get welfare systems up and running later in the pandemic and to address the economic problems that might follow it, we will need to ensure that a holistic approach is taken to all those in food

poverty. I will come to more detail in a moment. In terms of the welfare net, universal credit has been increased by £20 a week, and increases to local housing allowance rates have also been helpful to families. We also continue to spend over £95 billion a year on working-age benefits.

In the last few weeks I have had useful conversations with the Trussell Trust and the Children's Society about the targeted support for which DEFRA made a bid in May and which local authorities dispersed. Some £63 million-worth of food and essential supplies was distributed to the people who local authorities knew were in most need, about half of whom have children. The Trussell Trust and the Children's Society say that that money was helpful and very well spent. It is being assessed at the moment, not least by those two organisations and other frontline deliverers that communicate regularly with DEFRA.

In May, £16 million was provided directly by Government to food charities, such as FareShare. That was an unusual step for Government to take. Some of that £16 million went directly to the Waste and Resources Action Programme, as none of us likes to see good food go to waste. There is other funding available to WRAP, which is doing excellent work.

In respect of today's lockdown, for which the hospitality sector did not, given the nature of the disease, have long to prepare—restaurants, for example, still have food that they had ordered—WRAP has today been sharing knowledge, at very short notice, on increasing redistribution. If businesses with multiple pallets of surplus food cannot find a recipient, they should contact WRAP, which will help facilitate connections with people who need it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) was a key part of my taskforce. We work closely together on the issue of children who access free school meals during term time. We know very well that Christmas is coming and we understand that there will be winter pressures. I am not able to make any announcements today, but I am confident that the right work is being done to prepare for winter.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I do not expect the Minister to make an announcement late on a Thursday afternoon, but if local authorities are going to be in a position to help, they need to get funding fairly soon. May I also say that the Member I was referring to earlier was my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck)?

**Victoria Prentis:** On recommendation 12, food boxes contained a basic selection of food and other essential items for those who were unable to leave home. They were a standardised package, designed to be suitable for the majority of people. They had been reviewed by a nutritionist. I know there were complaints, but I am very proud of the fact that 4.5 million boxes were delivered at short notice to people who needed them. It was not a long-term solution—a box of ingredients delivered by the Government is not how we want people to be able to feed themselves in the long term. We are not planning currently to do it again for this lockdown because we have online delivery slots, the volunteer network—the GoodSAM volunteers who are prepared to go and shop for anybody—and the excellent local authority systems. We therefore think we have a good and robust system in place to deal with those who are shielding now. The message for those experiencing difficulties is: please do get in touch with the local authority.

On recommendations 13, 14 and 24, we remain committed to publishing a White Paper within six months of the publication of Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy, which we still expect next spring.

**Neil Parish:** I think I am right to say we have been expecting the food report for a very long time. Although I welcome it coming in the spring, I thought it was due here before Christmas. The seasons seem to be getting prolonged.

**Victoria Prentis:** I think my hon. Friend is being rather impatient. He had the first part of the report in July, to which the Government are actively considering their response, and he will get the rest of it next year. Henry Dimbleby is in charge, and the Government will respond within six months of the final report. The report is a large piece of work, which was commissioned to help inform our food strategy and will include proper consideration of measures needed to tackle food insecurity. On the other report that we have promised to provide, the Agriculture Bill commits us to providing a food security report at least every three years. My hon. Friend and I discussed that matter at length in the Chamber and we came up with a sensible solution.

On recommendation 15, the work of the cross-Government taskforce was very valuable. I do see the value in working across Government. This matter continues to be under live consideration. I meet or communicate regularly on food issues with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), the Minister for Housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). Whether or not we are a formal group meeting in person at the moment, we are very much in touch on these issues.

I turn to the food service sector and recommendation 16. We know how the closure of the hospitality and food service had a huge impact across the food supply chain. That was inevitable. That is why the Government stood up enormously our existing stakeholder forums with industry and developed new forums to facilitate close collaboration and know exactly what was going on. In DEFRA, we helped with specific funds for those sectors that were particularly struggling, such as dairy and fish. Of course, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor introduced a wide-ranging package of measures available to businesses generally and across the food supply chain, including the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, which helped many businesses, and continues to do so, across the UK; the bounce back loan scheme, which has also been popular in the food sector; and the coronavirus job retention scheme, which provides for payments to be made from the Treasury to employers.

I turn to key workers in the food sector and recommendations 19 and 20. We are very grateful to all those whom we started to call food heroes during the course of the pandemic: people like Geoff Norris, the Asda delivery driver who shopped and delivered food to vulnerable customers in his own time to ensure that they had food, and Sharon McKendrick, the Morrisons

[Victoria Prentis]

store manager in Berwick who set up a food ordering phone line for local vulnerable people in her community as well as personally delivering a lot of it. There are many, many more. We have been able to honour some of them in various ways, but I would like to thank all of them—they know who they are.

**Ian Byrne:** In the evidence the Select Committee took, it was extremely comforting to see the link between industry and trade unions. We saw the benefits of talking to each other to get each other through this, using the expertise of the trade unions and industry. It was fantastic. One of the most heart-warming things was the link between them, not seeing each other as enemies but working collaboratively to get the nation through. Once we get past covid, hopefully we can build on those relationships and that collaboration. As we have touched on, we have many issues with sick pay and conditions, but the value of the workforce has now been seen by the entire country, and the Minister is right: they are heroes.

**Victoria Prentis:** I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman, which brings us nicely to processing plants and recommendation 21. The hon. Member for Cambridge made important points about an unheard workforce. The issue is obviously a real and pressing concern. We are working closely with Public Health England, the Health and Safety Executive, the joint biosecurity centre, the Department of Health and Social Care, and, of course, the Food Standards Agency. It is a very active problem for all of us in DEFRA at the moment. Anything that the hon. Gentleman hears can be passed on to me. I also work closely with Health Ministers. Our current understanding is that outbreaks are probably linked to a combination of working conditions, working culture, living conditions and shared transport. We are also working with our devolved Administration colleagues to seek consistency of approach across the UK. Statutory sick pay is just one part of our wider offer to support people. During this challenging period, we are taking every opportunity to ensure that people are supported to do the right thing and stay at home where necessary.

On recommendation 22, we anticipated many things in Government, but not the coronavirus. As recognised by the Committee, we muddled through in the food sector and adapted as best we could, but of course there are lessons to learn.

On recommendation 25, we are not complacent. We know we have a highly resilient food supply chain and a food industry that is experienced in dealing with disruption, but there is a great deal more to do. We have extensive engagement with industry, which includes very regular—sometimes daily, sometimes twice weekly—meetings with industry and in particular the food resilience industry forum, which meets twice weekly at the moment. We will build on that approach as we plan for the end of the transition period, on which work is very much going on with 56 days to go.

Through engagement with industry for EU exit planning and, of course, the pandemic response, we have significantly improved our knowledge of the supply chain this year, but we will continue to adapt and, I hope, manage the nation's food supply as best we can. I am quietly quite proud of what the team has managed to do this year. I sincerely thank everyone who has worked so hard to

feed the nation during the pandemic—from farmers, to those involved in the food supply chain—and I thank the team in DEFRA. It has not been perfect, but I think it has been okay and we have managed it. We have had a good debate. I welcome the report and look forward to working further with all of the hon. Members present on this very important topic.

4.18 pm

**Neil Parish:** It is a pleasure to sum up this debate. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), speaking on behalf of the Opposition, has looked at the report and embraced it. He has criticised the Government, but in a constructive way. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) is a very constructive member of the Select Committee. He mentioned the 4,000 children in his constituency who need food because they are hungry. That point is relevant to us all. I thank the Minister, who has a genuine understanding of the need to supply food to everybody.

We are learning all the time. That is the point of the report. A great strength of Select Committees is that we have the chance to look at issues in great detail. I thank Xameerah Malik, our senior Clerk, who wrote and put together much of this excellent report, along with other members of the team. I would like that to go on the record.

The hon. Member for Cambridge talked about the food processing sector and the Minister summed it up well. It is not just about what happens in the factory; it is also about travel and the way people actually live and where.

Lots of languages are spoken on many of these sites. We visited some in the midlands and other places where that created a challenge in ensuring that people knew what they should be doing on food safety and other issues. I think there is probably more work to be done there with the industry.

The issue of having enough food is not just about the covid outbreak, although that has put huge pressure on it. Once we are out of covid—let us pray that one day we will have a vaccine and be able to move forward in our normal way—there will, unfortunately, be pressure on the economy, more people will be without jobs, and the most vulnerable will be in greater need of food.

I thank the Minister for the detailed way in which she went through the report and our recommendations. I suppose one benefit of not having many Members present for a debate is that both the shadow Minister and the Minister have enough time to sum up. My friend the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby also had enough time to make his points, and I have probably spoken more than at length.

We feel very strongly about this issue. Despite our differences—naturally, this is a political issue as well—today has shown that we can co-operate and work together. At the end of the day, the onus is on all of us, whatever our political party, to deliver food to those who most need it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the First Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, COVID-19 and food supply, HC 263, and the Government response, HC 841.

4.22 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 5 November 2020

## CABINET OFFICE

### Prosperity Fund Annual Report 2019-20

**The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt):** I wish to inform the House of the publication of the Prosperity Fund's fourth annual report for the financial year 2019-20.

Over the last four years, the Prosperity Fund has aimed to promote economic growth and reduce poverty in developing countries. As well as contributing towards achieving the UN sustainable development goals, the fund has responded to the increasing demand from developing countries to build deeper trade, investment partnerships, and economic relations with other countries.

I am placing a copy of "The Prosperity Fund: Annual Report 2019/20" in the Library of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government's continuing commitment to transparency in the delivery of official development assistance.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-11-05/HCWS557>.

[HCWS557]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Independent Review of Insurance

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** On 27 December 2019 the then Secretary of State, my right hon. the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), commissioned an independent review following the severe flooding in South Yorkshire in November 2019. The River Don recorded its highest ever peak flows at Rotherham and Doncaster, with South Yorkshire experiencing its wettest November on record—seeing over two and a half times its average rainfall and over 760 properties reported as having flooded.

This independent review has been led by Amanda Blanc, former chair of the Association of British Insurers (ABI) who was appointed on 14 April 2020 and was supported by BMG Research. Amanda Blanc has provided me with a comprehensive report that sets out her findings into why some residents of Doncaster did not have sufficient insurance cover, and in some cases no insurance at all. Where necessary, it considers and makes recommendations for action to mitigate the impact of future flood events. Full terms of reference for the review can be found on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/flood-insurance-review-2020-blanc-review>

I would like to thank Amanda for her investigation and recommendations, which the Government will now consider.

#### *Report findings*

This report sets out the findings of the review in relation to the level of insurance cover held by those affected in Doncaster, the barriers they may have faced

in obtaining cover and whether there are any systemic issues in the provision of flood insurance.

The report identifies that 95% of homeowners were able to confirm that they had both buildings and contents insurance. This compares with 94% of households at risk of flooding in DEFRA's national 2018 survey looking at the availability and affordability of flood insurance. I am pleased that this shows the sustained availability of home insurance for homeowners especially in this area of high flood risk. However, among homeowners who had insurance, 6% of buildings insurance policies did not cover flooding, and 7% of contents insurance policies did not cover flooding.

The report also found that there were significant differences between the insurance cover held by homeowners and tenants, and that

"owner-occupiers were generally far better protected than renters".

While tenants are responsible for arranging their contents insurance, they do not organise their buildings insurance as this is the responsibility of landlords. The evidence shows that only 25% of tenants had contents insurance that covered flood damage. The report identifies reasons why tenants did not have suitable contents insurance that covered against the risk of flooding, such as the cost of the insurance, the time it takes to renew the insurance policy, and not being able to find a quote that included flood cover.

#### *Report recommendations*

The report makes 12 recommendations for actions that can be taken by the insurance industry, Flood Re, landlords, local authorities, the Government and others to help enable homes and businesses to access sufficient insurance cover for flooding, while also informing any future policy decisions in this area:

Four recommendations focus on the role of insurers, insurance brokers and their representative bodies in helping customers find the most suitable flood insurance to cover individual needs.

Two recommendations focus on the need for landlords to make sure tenants are adequately supported in the case of a flood event.

Two recommendations relate to the need for further evidence gathering at a national scale, through a repeat of a national 2018 survey on the affordability and availability of insurance.

One recommendation calls for Flood Re to reduce the cost of its contents insurance premium for council tax band A and B properties.

Other recommendations focus on the need for increased awareness of flood risk for communities, highlighting the role of local authorities, the Environment Agency and representative bodies.

The report will be published today on gov.uk.

This review is essential in identifying some of the barriers that are in place for residents in high flood risk areas and understanding how we can take positive action to improve the protection available to residents moving forward.

The Government will be working with the insurance industry, Flood Re and the Environment Agency to explore the recommendations within the report and will respond formally to the recommendations in due course.

[HCWS554]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### FCDO Services

**The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams):** My hon. Friend the Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) has made the following written statement:

FCDO Services operates as a trading fund of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Notwithstanding covid-19, I have set the following ambitious performance targets for 2020-21:

Achievement of the return on capital employed (ROCE) of at least 3.5% (weighted average before accounting for costs directly associated with covid-19);

A productivity ratio of at least 80%, measuring actual billable hours versus available billable hours (Q3 and Q4 only—normalised for the impact of covid-19);

An in-year customer satisfaction rating average at least of 80% (Q3 and Q4 only normalised for the impact of covid-19); and

An average Your Say score for “My Manager” measuring 63%.

In addition to the performance targets, FCDO Services will continue to maintain high levels of staff engagement for 2020-21 throughout the period.

FCDO Services will report to Parliament on its success against these targets through its annual report and accounts for 2020-21.

FCDO Services is a trading fund of the FCDO. It provides a range of integrated, secure services worldwide to the FCDO and other UK Government Departments, supporting the delivery of Government agendas. Services include protective security, estates and construction, cloud computing, communications and monitoring, logistics, translation and interpreting. This is combined with a portfolio of global maintenance work. FCDO Services also manages the UK National Authority for Counter Eavesdropping (UK NACE), helping protect UK assets from physical, electronic and cyber-attack.

[HCWS556]

### NATO Parliamentary Assembly

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab):** The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) has replaced the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) as a Member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

[HCWS555]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Rough Sleeping

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick):** Today, in the light of the national restrictions, I have announced targeted, additional support for areas with higher numbers of rough sleepers, to enable local authorities to protect the most vulnerable in our society from the effects of covid-19.

This continues our ongoing work to support rough sleepers, to keep them safe during the pandemic and to provide a long-term sustainable end to rough sleeping.

This Government are committed to ending rough sleeping and we have already taken huge steps to working with local authorities and their partners to protect rough sleepers during the pandemic. The Government are spending over £700 million to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping this year alone.

I am today launching the Protect programme which builds on the ongoing success of Everyone In and ensures we are protecting the most vulnerable in our communities during the four-week period of restrictions and across the winter period.

This programme will see the Government working intensively with a selection of local areas with the highest levels of rough sleeping, backed by £15 million of funding.

Throughout the pandemic, we have worked closely with local authorities and the sector to offer vulnerable people safe accommodation and support. That work is ongoing and by September we had successfully supported over 29,000 people, with over 10,000 still in emergency accommodation and nearly 19,000 provided with settled accommodation or move on support.

These efforts have been backed by significant Government support:

Over £6.4 billion provided to councils to help them to manage the impacts of covid-19, which we have been clear includes their work to support rough sleepers. This is alongside wider additional funding for councils to support local test, trace and contain activities, and their local businesses.

Work with councils to develop tailored local plans to support rough sleepers over the coming months.

A £266 million next steps accommodation programme aims to ensure that as few people as possible return to the streets. This includes the £91.5 million allocated to 274 councils in September to fund their individual local plans for rough sleepers over the coming months; £150 million which is being used to bring forward 3,300 new homes for rough sleepers this year; and

£112 million provided to local areas through the rough sleeping initiative.

A £10 million cold weather fund for all local authorities to bring forward covid-secure accommodation this winter; a new £2 million transformation fund for the voluntary sector; and comprehensive guidance on reopening night shelters more safely, where not doing so would endanger lives.

In the light of the recently brought-in national restrictions, we will work with local authorities and their partners, to build on this work and make sure that they have updated plans in place to protect some of the most vulnerable in our society.

All councils in England will be asked to update their rough sleeping plans and consider interventions for anyone sleeping rough.

We recognise that areas with high numbers of rough sleepers will require an increased health focus alongside accommodation for those sleeping rough, prioritising those who are clinically vulnerable. This support will continue throughout winter. The Protect programme will provide £15 million, alongside targeted Government support, to ensure additional support for rough sleepers is available over this winter period in the areas that need it most.

We will set out further detail about how local areas can access this additional support under the Protect programme imminently and I encourage all relevant partners and local authorities to consider how they can best use the available support to protect the most vulnerable.

[HCWS559]

## JUSTICE

### Chief Coroner: Annual Reports

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk):** I am pleased to lay and publish the Chief Coroner's combined sixth and seventh annual reports to the Lord Chancellor on the operation of coroner services under section 36 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 ("the 2009 Act"). The joint report covers both 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020.

Publication of the sixth report was delayed last year, and in the light of the emerging covid-19 pandemic at the start of 2020, it was considered preferable to postpone its publication until later in the year and release it as a joint edition with the seventh report.

In particular, the Chief Coroner's report sets out:

The work that he as well as coroners, their officers and their staff have achieved to manage the effects of the covid-19 pandemic;

The continuing work to promote consistency in the resourcing of and practices in coroner offices across England and Wales;

The training and guidance that coroners and their officers have received and the engagement with a wide range of stakeholders; and

Recommendations to improve coroner services further.

Annexed to the report are the Chief Coroner's revised "A Model Coroner Area" blueprint, the list of cases over 12 months old reported to the Chief Coroner and tables of senior and area coroners' salaries.

I am very grateful to His Honour Judge Mark Lucraft QC for building so effectively on his previous achievements as well as those of his predecessor, His Honour Sir Peter Thornton QC. I also thank him for his excellent and much appreciated service since October 2016 as he now moves on to become the full-time recorder of London. I am particularly grateful that he continued to serve as Chief Coroner over the last months to guide and support coroners in facing the incredibly difficult challenge of the covid-19 pandemic.

I am grateful too to all coroners and their officers and other staff, for having supported the Chief Coroner to improve services for bereaved people and for their valued and continuing frontline work. Their work in managing the impact of the pandemic on their own services but also more widely, in support of their local resilience fora, has been inestimable.

The report will be available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-coroners-combined-annual-report-2018-to-2019-and-2019-to-2020>

[HCWS558]





# Ministerial Correction

*Thursday 5 November 2020*

## GOVERNMENT EQUALITIES

### Covid-19: Disparate Impact

*The following is an extract from the statement on covid-19 on 22 October 2020.*

**Mr Dhesi:** Having volunteered in recent months to become a community champion locally, I welcome the additional funding announced by the Minister and sincerely hope that our excellent scheme in Slough will be able to gain some of that funding. The report mentions a SAGE sub-group on ethnicity. What are its terms of reference, membership and programme of work?

**Kemi Badenoch:** The SAGE sub-group is looking at this issue. Not all of our research is original—much of what we have found out has come from that sub-group. Emran Mian has been leading from within that sub-group and is working with us. I am afraid that I do not have the sub-group's terms of reference, but I will write to the hon. Member on that to provide more information. However, we are very supportive of the work of all

community champions, and the work he is doing in Slough is very important. If it is possible, we will ensure that he can access the community champions fund. He will have to apply through the regular process, but we want to do as much as we can to support MPs across the House.

*[Official Report, 22 October 2020, Vol. 682, c. 1281.]*

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch).*

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

The correct response should have been.

**Kemi Badenoch:** The SAGE sub-group is looking at this issue. Not all of our research is original—much of what we have found out has come from that sub-group. **Osama Rahman and Professor Kamlesh Khunti co-chair the SAGE Ethnicity sub-group and are working with us.** I am afraid that I do not have the sub-group's terms of reference, but I will write to the hon. Member on that to provide more information. However, we are very supportive of the work of all community champions, and the work he is doing in Slough is very important. If it is possible, we will ensure that he can access the community champions fund. He will have to apply through the regular process, but we want to do as much as we can to support MPs across the House.





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**not later than**  
**Thursday 12 November 2020**

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