

**Thursday
12 November 2020**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 12 November 2020

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Covid-19: Local Discussions

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with local leaders on tackling the covid-19 outbreak. [908664]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with local leaders on tackling the covid-19 outbreak. [908670]

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with local leaders on tackling the covid-19 outbreak. [908686]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): At every stage of the pandemic, the UK Government have engaged with the devolved Administrations, metro mayors and local councils. Local resilience forums are at the frontline of providing the response to tackling covid-19, and the Government will continue to engage with local authorities to beat the virus.

Julian Sturdy [V]: With covid cases in York now well below the level they were when the city went into tier 2, can the Minister reassure me that the Government are listening closely to the feedback and case numbers they are receiving from the city authorities, and that York's restrictions from 2 December will be based on the local virus situation and local judgments, not based on decisions imposed by central Government or on wider regional figures?

Penny Mordaunt: First of all, let me acknowledge the immense sacrifices that people in York and elsewhere around the country are making, and what people are having to endure. As the Prime Minister has made clear, the current restrictions will end on 2 December, and we will then return to a local and tiered approach. The Government will work with my hon. Friend and other local leaders in the area to determine the most appropriate response. We will be tailoring any tiers that people have to go into, as we have done previously, depending on what is needed locally.

Damian Hinds: Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the strong local agency working and local resilience forums, such as our own in Hampshire? Will the Government commit to working with local areas to really understand the pressures that, sadly, will persist even after this time? I am thinking in particular of areas such as children's services.

Penny Mordaunt: I am very pleased to join my right hon. Friend in sending thanks to Hampshire LRF and all the LRFs around the country, which are doing an incredible job in such difficult circumstances. We very much understand that they are in the frontline of this fight, and communications with them and with local authorities are vital. That is why we put in liaison officers at the early stage of the crisis. We know and understand very well the additional pressures that they are under, particularly, as he says, with regard to children's services, and children going into care or being in care for prolonged periods because of pressures on the family courts.

Darren Henry: Will my right hon. Friend let us know what Government discussions are taking place about an exit strategy for lockdown, so that local businesses such as pubs and close contact businesses such as Skinderella in Broxtowe can plan ahead?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done in recent weeks to stand up for individuals and businesses in his constituency. The Government do listen to all representations that are made, as we have seen in recent weeks—for example, over takeaway beer, which was a suggestion as to how pubs and related businesses could help themselves throughout this period. The Government are always keen to hear ideas from business and hon. Members about how we can best ensure that our economy comes through this strongly. We will continue to listen to all representations made as we leave the current restrictions on 2 December and return to the tiered system.

Transition Period: UK Preparedness

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the UK's preparedness for the end of the transition period. [908665]

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure business preparedness for the end of the transition period. [908672]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government have been clear that the transition period will end on 31 December, when the UK will be outside the single market and the customs union. There is a guaranteed set of changes and opportunities for which the Government, businesses and citizens all need to prepare. The vast majority of the changes that will come into effect will take place regardless of the outcome of negotiations with the European Union on our future trade relationship. Although we have seen a significant increase in readiness among businesses and citizens, there is still more to do, which is why I encourage everybody who needs to do so to go to www.gov.uk/transition, where there is a range of tools to help people to make the changes they need to for life after the end of the transition period.

Chris Elmore [V]: I have every confidence that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—and all Government Ministers—wishes to continue to prioritise the protection of children online after we leave the transition period. Over the past decade, the UK Safer Internet Centre has removed millions of child sexual abuse images and videos from the internet. Its work costs the UK Government 10p per child under the age of 15 in the UK. What assurances can the Minister give me that the UK Government will continue to fund this work, and will work with the centre, after the EU funding it receives ceases at the end of the transition period?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman raises a critically important question. The online exploitation and abuse of children is one of the most horrific crimes, and the more that we investigate, the more we are aware that its scale is even greater than any of us feared. That is why it is so vital that we continue to fund all the organisations that are fighting this scourge. Funding will be maintained. I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area.

Mrs Murray [V]: The Marine Management Organisation has stated that about 700,000 tonnes of fish caught in UK waters are landed by other member states. We catch a tiny amount in their waters by comparison. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that fishing businesses are ready to take advantage of a rebalance once we have finished the transition period?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Under the common fisheries policy, it is not just the case that environmentally we have lost out, but that the coastal communities that she stands up for so brilliantly have lost out as well. As an independent coastal state, we will be able to rebalance the opportunities in our waters in order to ensure that our coastal communities can benefit more financially. We will replace the European maritime fisheries fund with new funding to ensure that there are facilities onshore to help with the processing of the fish that we catch, and of course we will enhance our maritime security capability as well.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab) [V]: We left the EU in January and there are now less than 50 days to go until the end of the transition period. Labour Members have been clear that failing to achieve a deal with the EU would be a disaster for the British economy, but deal or no deal, preparations need to be in place for whatever our new trading relationships are on 1 January. In February this year, the Minister recognised the need for 50,000 customs agents trained and ready to go by the end of this year, and in July he announced a £50 million new fund to make this happen. So can he update the House: how many customs agents are now trained and ready to go?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question and also for the emphasis that she quite rightly puts on the need for all businesses to prepare, whether or not we secure a deal. Of course we are determined to secure a deal, and that is why our negotiators, under Lord Frost, are working hard with Michel Barnier to close the remaining gaps in the negotiations. As to the number of customs agents, 50,000 was always an estimate. There has been a significant increase in the number of

customs agents who are being employed, both by companies themselves with in-house capacity, and through intermediaries who have been scaling up their activities as well.

Rachel Reeves: It is frustrating that the Minister cannot answer this basic question. One minute he wants to channel his inner Roosevelt and the next minute he says that this should all be left to markets, but businesses are demanding leadership and demanding action. Last week, the National Audit Office expressed its concerns about a lack of preparation, and now more and more businesses are expressing their concerns that crucial technology like the customs declaration system is just not ready. Is the Minister actually in control, and will he stake his own reputation on there being no delays, disruption or lost orders due to this Government's gross incompetence?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for drawing attention to the National Audit Office report of last week. I would encourage everyone who cares, as she does, about making sure that we make the most of the success that life outside the European Union can offer us, to read that report. One of the points it makes is that there are many IT systems for which the Government are responsible. Progress on all those systems has been good. The customs declaration system is essential to making sure that we make a success of life outside the European Union. That is why we have invested, particularly, hundreds of millions of pounds in making sure that businesses that will use CDS when they are transferring goods to Northern Ireland can do so with the support of the Trader Support Service.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: It is now some 50 days until we go over the Brexit cliff edge, and in the meantime the covid death rate in the UK reaches 50,000. England is in the middle of another national lockdown, unemployment is on the rise, and the faceless characters that actually run this country at No. 10 are at each other's throats. Should Scotland be celebrating this incoming Brexit, and whose side is the Minister on—Dom's or Carrie's?

Michael Gove: I am on the side of people from Aberdeen to Aberystwyth who voted to leave the European Union. They want us as a United Kingdom to make a success of these new opportunities. I know that the Scottish Government are total strangers to behind-the-scenes intrigue and briefing wars, so I can imagine his shock and amazement to see these things reported in the newspapers, but let me assure him that the Government continue to make decisions in the interests of the whole United Kingdom. The people of Perth and North Perthshire can have confidence that they have not only a gamesome representative in the House of Commons, but a Government committed to their welfare.

Pete Wishart: May I tell the right hon. Gentleman what Scotland is in fact doing? Scotland is quickly determining that it wants no part of this incoming Brexit nightmare after the transition. Independence and a European future is now the new settled will of the Scottish people. We are now the majority, so can he think of an example anywhere in the world where another dilapidated, finished Government are attempting to deny a majority in a democracy?

Michael Gove: I think that the hon. Gentleman might be referring to Belarus, of course, with his last question, but let me assure him that the United Kingdom Government remain strong, resolute and committed to delivering on the will of the British people. In particular, the Union, which has provided for 300 years an example of people coming together in a spirit of solidarity to proclaim the values of democracy, human rights and liberalism, will endure for many decades to come.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We now learn that the First Minister and her deputy have said that there is a “real threat” to the continuity of food supplies in Northern Ireland. The Road Haulage Association has described border preparations as “frankly pathetic”. The customs declaration service probably will not be ready in time, and the NAO has warned that widespread disruption for 1 January is likely. Given that the right hon. Gentleman has repeatedly assured the House that it will all be fine, why does he think so many other people do not share his optimism?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. His Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union has done extensive work drawing attention to the preparations that are required to be made. There are still significant preparations that we and businesses need to make to conclude our preparedness, which is why later today, I will be meeting representatives from business representative organisations, including the CBI and others, to ensure that everything possible is being done to prepare for the changes. I do not shirk from acknowledging that there are challenges we all face in the run-up to the end of the transition period, but there are also significant opportunities for which the British people voted and which we are pledged to deliver.

Transition Period: UK-EU Relations

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Scottish Government Ministers on preparations for the end of the transition period in the event of no agreement on the UK’s future relations with the EU. [908673]

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Scottish Government Ministers on preparations for the end of the transition period in the event of no agreement on the UK’s future relations with the EU. [908677]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): I and other Ministers have regular discussions with representatives of the Scottish Government and also other devolved Administrations to ensure that we can be prepared across the United Kingdom for the challenges we face as we end the transition period and the opportunities that will follow.

Mr Speaker: Let us head into the dark with Kenny MacAskill.

Kenny MacAskill [V]: A shared prosperity fund is by its very name inclusive. Why then, given the proximity to the end of transition, are not just Scottish businesses but the Scottish Government excluded from its details?

Michael Gove: The Scottish Government, unlike the hon. Member, will not be in the dark about the future of the UK shared prosperity fund. He is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that outside the European Union, we will be able to take back control of the billions that currently we give to the European Union, and we can invest that money in our shared priorities—for example, making sure that his constituents in East Lothian are better connected digitally, by rail and by other means to other parts of the United Kingdom, so they can enjoy the shared prosperity that comes from a strong United Kingdom working for all.

Neil Gray [V]: We now know, through leaked Cabinet papers, that this Tory Government hid their Brexit plans from devolved Governments, including on state aid and food supply availability. How does the Minister expect these Governments to prepare when those crucial details are blocked from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland? Does he agree that this level of ignorance and contempt is helping to deliver record levels of support for independence and a consistent majority over the last 12 polls in a row?

Michael Gove: I have no secrets from the hon. Gentleman. We take an open-book approach to our preparations for leaving the European Union, which is why, later today, the Cabinet Sub-Committee that deals with the preparations—

Neil Gray *indicated dissent.*

Michael Gove: I can see the hon. Gentleman making goldfish-type movements of his lips and teeth. Now he is breaking into a smile. That smile, of course, welcomes the fact that later this afternoon, the Government Sub-Committee that deals with our preparations for leaving the European Union will have Ministers from the devolved Administrations, including my friends from the Scottish Government, taking part. It is one of the pleasures of this role that I have the opportunity every week to talk to excellent colleagues such as Mike Russell, Humza Yousaf and others, who do such a good job in working across the United Kingdom in the interests of all.

Regional Equality of Economic Opportunity

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What progress the Government have made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [908667]

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): What progress the Government have made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [908669]

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): What progress the Government have made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [908675]

The Minister without Portfolio (Amanda Milling): The Government are doubling down on levelling up opportunity across the United Kingdom, ensuring that everyone benefits from economic growth. That includes longer-term measures such as £1 billion for local projects to boost local economic growth, alongside unprecedented support

for businesses, workers and local authorities in every nation and region of the United Kingdom in the light of covid-19.

Steve Double: Cornwall has been in receipt of funding through the European regional development fund for many years. I am delighted that the Government have committed to continue to support the Cornish economy at a similar level through the UK shared prosperity fund, which will be vital for continuing to level up our country. With the current ERDF programme coming to an end shortly, it is vital that the replacement fund is put in place as soon as possible. Can the Minister update the House on when we can expect the Government to come forward with details of the shared prosperity fund?

Amanda Milling: I thank my hon. Friend for his question about Cornwall. I was delighted to have the chance to support the Cornish economy as part of a south-west visit over the summer, which included visiting him in his seat of St Austell and Newquay. As we said in our manifesto, we will introduce a UK shared prosperity fund that will match at a minimum the current levels of funding to each nation from EU structural funds. The arrangements for the fund will be confirmed following the upcoming spending review.

Gareth Davies: In order for us to truly level up, we will need to mobilise billions of pounds of private capital. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as part of the national infrastructure strategy, we should launch a new financial institution such as a British development bank to make that happen?

Amanda Milling: The Government are committed to ensuring that businesses and infrastructure projects continue to have access to the finance they need. The UK has a range of existing tools to support investment, including the UK guarantees scheme. The Government will bring forward further measures to boost investment in UK infrastructure as part of the national infrastructure strategy.

Mark Fletcher: This year has presented many challenges, but as my right hon. Friend will know from her visit to my constituency in the summer, there remains a strong desire to see a levelling-up agenda in constituencies like mine, with better infrastructure, better educational standards and more affordable housing. Can she assure me that this Government remain committed to levelling up constituencies like Bolsover?

Amanda Milling: I want to take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend once again on his historic election victory in Bolsover exactly 11 months ago. I was delighted to visit him in Bolsover during the summer. I can assure him that the Government are as committed to levelling up opportunity across the UK today as we were last December.

British Nuclear Test Veterans: Service Medals

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Whether his Department has made an assessment of the potential merits of service medals for British nuclear test veterans. [908668]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): I appreciate how important medallic recognition is to so many of our veterans groups. There is an independent process that looks at the consideration of historical medal claims. That sub-committee restarted in 2018, and I know that it has received representations from nuclear test veterans. Those review recommendations will be made public as soon as possible.

Lee Rowley: I thank the Minister for his response. My constituent John Ward was one of many veterans sent there in 1957, and he has campaigned for many years for recognition of his work and also for acknowledgement through a medal. May I encourage the Minister to continue to do what he can to acknowledge the service of those veterans and to confirm that the recent Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill, which was passed, has no bearing or impact on their cause?

Johnny Mercer: I have for some time been a supporter of his campaign, and I would urge him to continue in that vein. When it comes to the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill, there were a huge number of misunderstandings about this. It deals with people who are deployed on overseas operations. The nuclear test veterans were not deployed on overseas operations, and their ability to claim compensation for what happened to them is unaffected by this legislation.

Civil Service: Apprenticeship Targets

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on apprenticeship targets for the civil service. [908671]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): The Cabinet Office has been working closely with the Department for Education to deliver on our ambition of 30,000 new apprentices by the end of 2020 and of 2.3% of the civil service workforce in England as apprenticeship starts. We had been on track to meet those targets; unfortunately, because of the pandemic, that has been delayed slightly to April, but we will be publishing further performance data as it becomes available. In the past fortnight, I have written to the skills Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan)—and the Minister for Universities about how we can broaden the apprenticeship supply market and use apprenticeships to attract ever more talented people into the civil service.

Robert Halfon [V]: Will my hon. Friend just make it absolutely clear that all public sector bodies must fulfil the legal requirements to fill the 2.3% apprenticeship target, and will she ensure that every new appointment, where possible, is advertised as an apprenticeship to the civil service, whether at level 2 or degree level? Will my hon. Friend also make certain that all Government sector employment contracts have a significant percentage of employees as apprenticeships before the jobs of procurement are offered out?

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I wish to assure him that apprenticeship recruitment is an absolutely core part of Departments' resourcing plans. We want to make sure the apprenticeship route is used for all recruitment activity, where it is appropriate. I shall look into some of the other issues that he raises.

I am also very keen that we as MPs play our part in highlighting to our constituents some of the absolutely incredible civil service apprenticeship opportunities on offer. In that vein, I am going to host an online apprenticeship event to advertise some of the civil service apprenticeship opportunities, and I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend joined me in that event so that he can advertise them to places such as Harlow College in his constituency.

Civil Service Jobs outside London

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of civil service jobs based outside London. [908674]

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of civil service jobs based outside London. [908676]

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of civil service jobs based outside London. [908681]

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of civil service jobs based outside London. [908685]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): We want to make the administration of government much less London-centric and more reflective of the country as a whole, with an ambition to relocate 22,000 civil service roles out of the capital and into the regions and nations of the UK by the end of this decade. Our Places for Growth programme is an incredibly exciting one, working with Departments and public bodies to establish a series of hub locations that we hope will deliver on our levelling-up ambitions, strengthen the Union, reduce estate costs, support our industrial strategy, and take advantage of untapped talent and expertise.

Mark Jenkinson: I thank the Minister for that answer. Can she confirm that, as well as civil service reform, this Government will use the opportunity to level up all parts of the UK? With a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs site already in Workington, does she agree that we are perfectly placed to take this forward and ensure that the north-west does not get left behind?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We hope to be able to announce where we are going to place hub locations shortly. I am afraid that I am not in a position to confirm that now, but I am very confident that the north-west will benefit from the programme. I hope that he will engage with that and contribute in his role on the levelling-up taskforce.

Jacob Young: The purpose of moving civil service jobs out of London is not simply to relocate jobs from one part of the country to another, but to place policy makers in communities that have been left behind for too long, such as mine in Redcar and Cleveland. Can my hon. Friend confirm that she has seen the plans presented by Ben Houchen to relocate civil service jobs to Teesside, and will she commit to meeting me and my Tees Valley colleagues to progress these plans further?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I have heard the Mayor of Teesside mentioned in this place perhaps more than any civic leader in the country, and I find myself in awe, once again, of the raw power of the Teesside parliamentary caucus. I am pleased to say that I spent last night eagerly reading the Mayor's plans for the international campus in Teesside, and I particularly enjoyed the value-for-money comparisons with the London housing market. I understand that he has already met the lead official for Places for Growth, and I will be asking for an update on those discussions so we can make sure that the north-east benefits from this agenda.

David Johnston: In 2018, just 9% of the civil service fast stream came from a working-class background, which was higher than some previous years, but still low. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as improving the locations that civil servants work in and come from, we need to improve the social backgrounds they come from for better policy making and delivery?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend's commitment to opportunity for people from less wealthy backgrounds extends back many years to his tremendous work at the Social Mobility Foundation. We are looking at how we can get a more diverse array of people via the Places for Growth programme, but it is not just limited to places for growth; we are looking at the whole human resources strategy in the civil service so that we look at diversity in a much broader way than previously.

Mr Speaker: We now head up to Jonathan Gullis in Stoke-on-Trent. No, he is unavailable, so I call David Simmonds.

Future Relationship with the EU

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What recent progress he has made on negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU. [908678]

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the progress of the UK's negotiations with the EU. [908702]

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the progress of the UK's negotiations with the EU. [908708]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Negotiations are continuing in London this week, and this of course is a continuation of the intensive talks that both sides agreed to on 21 October. Progress is being made, but divergences remain. That said, the UK will continue to engage in negotiations on a free trade agreement, and the UK's negotiation team, led by Lord Frost, will continue to work hard to find solutions that, of course, fully respect the United Kingdom's regained sovereignty.

David Simmonds: In pursuit of the levelling-up agenda, which we are so passionate about, will my right hon. Friend provide an update on the progress being made to ensure that powers that are being released from EU treaties are devolved to local and regional government, where they may most appropriately sit?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point and, as a distinguished former local government leader, he knows the power of good local government to make a difference for the better for all our citizens. That is why, as we take power back from the European Union, we are working not just with the devolved Administrations in Holyrood and Cardiff and Belfast, but also with local government leaders and metro Mayors—including, of course, the superb metro Mayor in Teesside, Ben Houchen—to ensure that we exercise the distribution of power in a more equitable and progressive fashion.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: These negotiations are not going well and time is running out. The best the UK can now hope for is a very basic trade deal with the EU. The Minister knows that in all negotiations there needs to be concessions and some give and take on all sides, so what exactly, if anything, is the UK willing to concede or compromise on?

Michael Gove: The UK has already shown a great degree of flexibility in these negotiations, but it is that the European Union shows flexibility too, and in particular there needs to be full recognition that we are sovereign equals, and any attempt to continue to tie the UK into EU processes or to extend EU jurisdiction by other means will be quite wrong.

Tony Lloyd [V]: May I remind the Minister that the Road Haulage Association described the Government's preparations for the transition as not only "chaotic" but "pathetic" and said that

"logistics may not be able to deliver"?

The Minister has a deserved reputation for politeness, but can he also be candid and give us a guarantee that there will be no jobs lost and no goods not delivered, particularly to and from Northern Ireland, when we hit the end of the transition period?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, and in his time in this House he has been a distinguished champion of the rights of the people of Northern Ireland. It is very important in the discussions that we have in the Joint Committee that we make sure that we implement the protocol on the future of Northern Ireland in a way that ensures that its people can continue to have unfettered access to the rest of the UK, and in particular that we can maintain the flow of goods that are so vital to the life of the Province. That is why I am confident that the Vice-President of the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič, who is the co-chair of the Joint Committee, will work pragmatically, as he has in the past, to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland have a secure future.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): When the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster made his statement to the House on the negotiations on 19 October, his former boss, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), was left incredulous when he told her that without access to previously shared databases, the UK could act

"more effectively to safeguard our borders outside the European Union than we ever could inside."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2020; Vol. 682, c. 761.]

So can he explain precisely how without that access we will get the real-time information needed to pick up foreign criminals at the point of entry in ports and airports?

Michael Gove: One of the things that we will be able to do when we take back control is to have total discretion over who comes into this country. One of things that we will be able to do, for example, is to end the abuse of ID cards, which are easily forged, easily used by organised criminals, and utilised in order to gain access to this country. Once we are out of the transition period, we will take back control of our borders, a precondition of greater security for all.

Paul Blomfield: Frankly, we are at a stage of this process where empty reassurances and dodging questions just will not do. Earlier this week, the president of the Police Superintendents Association said that without this access, information sharing will be "less effective", and highlighted his concern about the implications for policing and security. So let me try again. At the Home Affairs Committee on 4 November, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), was asked repeatedly by the Chair to state which real-time system will be available for Border Force to identify foreign criminals, without access to SIS II. Repeatedly, the Minister was unable to give an answer, so can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster simply answer that question?

Michael Gove: Yes, of course; it is the case that Border Force will be in a stronger position to be able to detect a criminal—[*Interruption.*] Well, if the hon. Gentleman keeps asking the same question, I will give him the same answer, which is that Border Force will be able, through the deployment of safety and security declarations, to have a more effective means of monitoring organised criminals. The truth is that when we take back control of our borders, we enhance our ability to deal with criminality.

Covid-19 Vaccines: Logistics

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with (a) other Departments and (b) local leaders on the logistics of distributing covid-19 vaccines; and if he will make a statement. [908679]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): The Department of Health and Social Care is working closely with Government Departments and bodies and the NHS, as well as local leaders, on all aspects of vaccine deployment, including distribution logistics.

Michael Fabricant [V]: In his response to the urgent question on Tuesday, the Minister for Defence Procurement said that it is not for the Ministry of Defence to suggest that it should do the logistics. I think he was being unusually shy. My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General will know how good the armed forces are at logistics, so will she ask the Ministry of Defence to definitely get involved in the deployment of the covid-19 vaccine when it is available?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for affording me the opportunity to pay tribute to the work that our armed forces have done across many aspects of this, often visibly but also behind the scenes in providing

planning expertise. They have provided in an incredible service to every aspect of the response. This is a massive undertaking—the largest vaccination programme, I think, in the NHS's history—but, as the deputy chief medical officer has said, plans for it have been under way for some time. That includes logistics, transport and personal protective equipment, but also an expanded workforce so that we can deploy it rapidly. Every part of Government is going to be making a contribution to that, and as soon as the vaccine is approved, we want to be in a position to deliver it to as many people as possible.

Covid-19: Government Use of Consultants

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): What plans he has to review the (a) Government's use and (b) value for money of consultants during the covid-19 outbreak. [908680]

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What plans he has to review the (a) Government's use and (b) value for money of consultants during the covid-19 outbreak. [908683]

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Government outsourcing during the covid-19 outbreak. [908699]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): Working effectively with the private sector is a vital part of our response to tackling the covid-19 crisis, allowing us to procure quickly and innovatively and to obtain specialist solutions to the myriad challenges that are facing us. Rapidly obtaining PPE is the most obvious example, but we have also turned to the private sector to help us operate things such as the virtual courts service and video services for families wishing to see loved ones in intensive care units.

We are clear throughout that contracting authorities must use good commercial judgment and continue to achieve value for money for taxpayers, and we are engaged in both internal and external audit to satisfy ourselves that that has been the case. Through "The Outsourcing Playbook" we are also improving the decision making and quality of contracts that the Government place with industry, and we are building our internal civil service capability, as we believe it is important that we invest in our in-house capacity and expertise so that we rely less on external consultants and contractors.

Kate Hollern [V]: The Government failed to publish any information about £4 billion-worth of covid-related contracts, all awarded to private companies, in what appears to be a flagrant breach of the law. Will the Minister hold an independent inquiry—and if not, why?

Julia Lopez: I am unaware of the details of the allegations that the hon. Lady makes and I would be grateful if she wrote to me about them. As I mentioned in my earlier answer, the National Audit Office will conduct an external review of the procurements during the pandemic, but we are also doing our own internal review. I note some of the criticisms that are made by the Opposition and I wish to satisfy ourselves that those have no basis, because it is very important in this time of crisis that we maintain public confidence in everything that we are doing.

Mr Dhesi: Some £175 million of taxpayers' money has been shelled out so far on covid consultants. There has been £252 million for face masks from a company specialising in currency trading and offshore property—more than half the masks were not even fit for purpose because they had the wrong straps on—£43 million for hand sanitisers from a company that was previously dormant, 11 PPE contracts for a pest control company, and so the sordid list goes on. All aboard the covid Tory gravy train. It is no wonder that across our country, there are accusations of corruption and cronyism, with contracts handed down to Tory firms that have links to Tory chums and donors. Does the Minister think that it is right that consultants should be paid up to £7,000 a day to work on test and trace, which, in itself, is a world-beating failure?

Mr Speaker: We are going to have to have shorter questions for other people to get in—it is only fair.

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the points he raises. As I mentioned, we wish to reassure the public through the use of external and internal audits on some of the issues that he raises, but when it comes to some of the contracts that have been let, we were advised by Labour that we should be looking into a number of different companies, from people producing costumes to a number of other interesting leads that actually led nowhere. We were trying to procure at speed and I have a good degree of confidence in the PPE contracts that were let during this time.

Matt Western: I understand what the Minister is saying about trying to procure at speed, but it does seem that some of the agencies that the Government have chosen to do this are completely not fit for purpose and inappropriate. I cite Deloitte, which was appointed to set up a testing centre in south Leamington in my constituency. It took six weeks for a couple of portakabins and a couple of gazebos. How difficult is it? Why was Public Health England not more involved? It could have done this better.

Julia Lopez: There is some naivety from Labour Members about how easy it is to do some of these very complex operations at the speed at which they need to be done. We have to thank the private sector for the support that it has given us. We do not have huge volumes of public sector workers sitting there ready to be deployed, and if we did, they would have to be sucked out of other important frontline services. I think we should thank the private sector for the support that it has given us in this very difficult time.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): £1,040,585,807—that is the value of Government contracts that have been directly awarded without competitive tender to companies that have links to the Conservative party's friends or donors during the covid crisis. Will the Minister explain why, with the Tory party, it seems to be all cheques and no balances?

Julia Lopez: The hon. Lady makes a very serious insinuation about some of the ways in which contracts were let. As I said, we have external and internal audits to make sure that those allegations are investigated and that we are confident that they are baseless. I am happy

to continue to engage with her on these issues, but the challenges that have faced us in this time have been substantial and a lot of people have dedicated substantial amounts of time, often for free, to giving their services at a time of crisis. To have insinuations about their character and integrity is very damaging to public confidence.

Covid-19: UK-wide Response

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on co-ordinating a UK-wide response to the covid-19 outbreak. [908684]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): We have extensive discussions across Cabinet and with representatives from the devolved Administrations as we co-ordinate an appropriate UK-wide response to the covid-19 outbreak. Only yesterday afternoon I was discussing with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales how we can ensure that we can co-ordinate effectively the roll-out of mass testing.

Dr Evans [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer. Building on that answer, what steps is he taking to ensure that, as the guidance and lockdown measures change, the public are fully informed about what is expected of them across the UK?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. Of course, devolved Administrations have the right and responsibility to tailor solutions to their geography and their populations, but unity of communication is important. That is why, in the call we had yesterday, we also talked about the vital importance of having an aligned approach towards relaxation of restrictions for the Christmas period so that people can be with friends and family across the United Kingdom, confident that they are following rules that have been agreed by all.

Topical Questions

[908634] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): As a number of hon. and right hon. Members have reminded us, there are just 50 days to go before the end of the transition period. That is why I am pleased to be able to discuss with the CBI and other business representative organisations this afternoon exactly how we can ensure that we are all ready for both the challenges and the opportunities that that will bring.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to Scotland with an enlightened Kenny MacAskill.

Kenny MacAskill [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Even senior Tories are accepting the inevitability of a second referendum. As Parnell once said:

“No man has a right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation.”

Scots have learned, as the Secretary of State will know, from the trickery of 1979 when even the dead were counted against. Does he not then realise that the people of Scotland will not accept political chicanery on the number or the nature of the question to be asked?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. It is vital that we have confidence in the integrity of our democratic institutions. That is why the Electoral Commission and other bodies play such an important role. Of course, it is also important that people can have confidence in the promises made by politicians, and it was the case in 2014 that Nicola Sturgeon and leading Scottish nationalists made the point that that referendum was for a generation. Just six years later, I do not believe a generation has passed.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): [V] Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke are rich with industrial heritage, from the pits of Chatterley Whitfield to the pots of Middleport Pottery. We are also a UK-leading city, having installed a full-fibre network that will connect every home and business to gigabit. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we are the perfect location for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's new hub?

Michael Gove: I cannot think of anywhere better to put DCMS Ministers than Stoke-on-Trent: a jewel in the heart of Staffordshire, home to industrial innovation for generations and boasting three of the finest Members of Parliament in the House of Commons.

Mr Speaker: Talking of which, what will you say to Robert Halfon? Let us bring him in.

[908635] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con) [V]: During the Brexit campaign, my right hon. Friend wrote an article in *The Sun* stating that we would be able to reduce VAT on energy bills, saving the taxpayer a considerable amount of money per year. Can he set out the progress we are making on that and confirm that we will be able to cut VAT on energy bills, therefore cutting the cost of living for hard-pressed families across the country?

Michael Gove: Yes, my right hon. Friend makes an important point. While taxation matters are questions for the Chancellor, who will be updating the House shortly on a variety of important fiscal matters, it is nevertheless the case that outside the European Union we can lower VAT in a way that we could not within the European Union—one of the many benefits of Brexit.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The right to vote independently and in secret should be enjoyed by every voter at an election. I draw the Minister's attention to the recent report by the Royal National Institute of Blind People about the last general election that found that just one in 10 blind voters and less than half of partially sighted voters were able to cast their vote independently and in secret. What steps are the Government taking to turn around those terrible statistics so that blind and partially sighted voters can enjoy the right that sighted voters have to vote independently and in secret?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and it is important that everyone's vote counts. Those who are living with a disability, blind or partially sighted must feel that they can have confidence in the integrity of our electoral system. We have forthcoming legislation on electoral integrity, and I know that the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), has been working with charities to ensure that we have a fully inclusive and modern voting system.

[908637] **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend reassure fishing families in my constituency and around the Cornish coast that in the remaining stages of the negotiations with the EU, our negotiators absolutely will not compromise our fishing waters and that we will have the ability to act as an independent coastal state come 1 January?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend does a fantastic job speaking up for the fishermen on both the north and south coasts of Cornwall, and I can absolutely reassure her that in the negotiations we are standing firm on ensuring that her constituents and the coastal communities that she represents can benefit from our exit from the common fisheries policy.

[908641] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD) [V]: We need to have inclusive education across society, including the teaching of the less glorious parts of our history, that extends beyond Black History Month. Memorial 2007 is campaigning for an enslaved Africans memorial to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, to ensure that present and future generations learn about this part of our history. Will the Minister meet me and campaigners to discuss how we work together to build this important memorial?

Michael Gove: Yes, I would be delighted to.

[908638] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that levelling up is not just about increasing expenditure but about changing mindsets and creating a better understanding of the everyday issues faced by people in the north of England. Moving senior civil servants out of Whitehall and into places such as Blackpool will help to achieve this, so will he meet me to discuss the opportunities that moving Government Departments up north will help to deliver?

Michael Gove: Yes. My hon. Friend makes an important point, and it was one that was emphasised earlier. The relocation of parts of Government to different parts of the United Kingdom is not just about distributing economic opportunity; it is also about ensuring that, as we think about the future, we represent in particular those undervalued communities and overlooked families in coastal communities just like Blackpool, who for generations now have not been at the centre of our thinking about how to ensure that we truly represent every citizen. One of the lessons of the Brexit campaign and its aftermath is that far too many people in the United Kingdom felt that the values and instincts of those who governed them were out of tune with their own sentiments and beliefs, and we have got to ensure, as we restructure government, that their values and instincts are at the heart of everything.

[908640] **Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is only because of this Government supporting business and the private sector that the Government have been able to secure the personal protective equipment, medical supplies and treatments that are needed for us as a country to beat this virus and return to the way of life that we are all looking forward to?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Listening to some of the questions from the other side of the House, you would think that the only way in which we could ever procure vaccines, testing or personal protective equipment was by having some sort of Gosplan Stalinist approach in which no private sector individual or organisation could ever be involved. I think that most people looking at, for example, the contribution of—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think we need more political broadcasts. We have had a good day today. We are meant to have short, punchy answers to these questions, not rhetoric.

[908647] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Speaking of political broadcasting, I understand that the Government are going to spend £217 million in this financial year promoting adverts, mostly on covid, such as “We’re all in it together” in our local papers and so on. They are very fluffy ads, featuring bakers and so on. How are the Government going to measure the success of that campaign when we are clearly not all in it together, as demonstrated by the north of England?

Michael Gove: Well, we are.

[908642] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we enjoy the freedoms we have today only because of the sacrifice of those in our UK armed forces who gave their lives? Does he also agree that the UK forces are playing a vital role in protecting us against coronavirus and showing how much stronger we are as one United Kingdom?

Michael Gove: Again, my hon. Friend makes an important point. There is no better representation of how we work well together as a country than the shared sacrifices made by those in our military, and they are doing an outstanding job in supporting us in the fight against coronavirus, as they did in all the challenges we have faced in the last 100 years.

[908643] **Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): Last night, the immigration Bill was signed into law, ending freedom of movement from 31 December and allowing us to create our points-based immigration system, delivering on our promise to get Brexit done and take back control of our borders. Can my right hon. Friend outline what he envisages our future travel arrangements will be with our European Union partners?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes absolutely the right point—we will be able to control who comes into this country—but we will also have visa-free travel with the EU.

[908650] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have had four and a half years to negotiate a future deal with the EU, yet 50 days before

we leave the transition period we still have no deal. Businesses are not only furloughed, so the staff are not there, but fragile, such as in my city of York, so what additional support will the Government bring to business both before the end of the year and to meet the additional £7 billion of customs costs that they are going to have to pay?

Michael Gove: As I mentioned earlier, I will be meeting businesses this afternoon to make sure we provide all the support necessary for businesses, in York and elsewhere. The hon. Lady makes an important point about working together, but she prefaced her remarks by reflecting on the length of time from the referendum to the conclusion of the transition period, which would have been shorter had her party been committed to implementing the results of the referendum. I commend to her the words of the hon. Members for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) and for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery)—wise men indeed.

[908646] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): The south-west is home to some of the most innovative and cutting-edge companies in the UK, with the Exeter science park, in my constituency, home to many highly skilled jobs. But there are still more fantastic opportunities ahead, with a potential free port at Exeter airport and formal recognition of the Great South West, to give our region a louder, unified voice. What plans do the Government have to ensure that we continue to invest in the south-west and to ensure we are not left behind?

Michael Gove: With excellent advocates such as my hon. Friend the south-west will always be heard and never left behind, and it is indeed crucial that we make the most of the opportunities that Exeter and Devon can provide for a bright economic future.

[908651] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Now that the Lords have overwhelmingly opposed the UK Government breaking international law in the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, as have the United

States President-elect and the EU, will the Government now honour, not renege on the EU withdrawal agreement, in order that we can support our trade, underpin the Good Friday agreement, restore our reputation and bring sunshine in place of Frost to our negotiations?

Michael Gove: Whenever I see the hon. Gentleman, I am irresistibly reminded of the words of “Bring Me Sunshine”. I do not know whether he is Wise, but he is certainly one of the reasons the Conservatives represent Morecambe.

Mr Speaker: I think there was a little blush as well in there.

[908652] **Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) [V]: The Minister will be aware that even with a vaccine coming on stream and passing safety tests quickly, a roll-out will take many months, and we have local and mayoral elections coming next May. What steps is he going to put in place to ensure that vulnerable and older people are still able to vote? Will he consider, in that process, encouraging local authorities to register people to vote by post?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and he has been a consistent and effective advocate for the rights of older and vulnerable citizens in all his time in the House. We must make sure, both through effective voter registration and through the effective roll-out of our vaccination programme, that older and vulnerable voters are in a position to take part in the democratic process, and I will work with the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution to do just that.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for getting through topicals on time—we have done well. 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.

10.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Hong Kong

10.36 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the disqualification of pro-democracy lawmakers in Hong Kong.

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): Yesterday was another sad day for the people of Hong Kong. China's National People's Congress Standing Committee imposed new restrictions that mean that any Hong Kong legislator who is deemed to support independence, refuse to recognise China's sovereignty, seek foreign forces' interference or endanger national security should be disqualified from membership of Hong Kong's Legislative Council. This decision led to the immediate removal of four elected Members of the Legislative Council, who were, at that moment, sitting in the Chamber.

It is my unfortunate duty to report to the House our judgment that that decision breaches the legally binding Sino-British joint declaration. It breaches both China's commitment that Hong Kong will enjoy a high degree of autonomy and the right to freedom of speech, guaranteed under paragraph 3 of the declaration. This is the third time that the Government have called a breach of the joint declaration since 1997, but the second time that we have been forced to do so in the last six months.

This decision is part of a pattern designed to harass and stifle all voices critical of China's policies. The new rules for disqualification provide a further tool in that campaign, with vague criteria open to wide-ranging interpretation. Hong Kong's people are left now with a neutered legislature, and 15 pan-democratic legislators have already resigned en masse in protest.

China has yet again broken its promise to the people of Hong Kong. Its actions tarnish China's international reputation and undermine Hong Kong's long-term stability. The UK has already offered a new immigration path for British nationals overseas, suspended our extradition treaty with Hong Kong and extended our arms embargo on mainland China to Hong Kong. The permanent under-secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has today summoned the Chinese ambassador to register our deep concern at this latest action by his Government.

Hong Kong's prosperity and way of life rely on respect for fundamental freedoms, an independent judiciary and the rule of law. China's actions are putting at risk Hong Kong's success. The UK will stand up for our values. We will stand up for the people of Hong Kong. We will call out violations of their rights and freedoms. With our international partners, we will continue to hold China to its international obligations.

Layla Moran: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for his words. Today I have a very simple question. What are the Government going to do as "one country, two systems" disappears before our eyes? The disqualification of pro-democracy lawmakers from the Legislative Council of Hong Kong means it has effectively been reduced to a rubber-stamp Parliament and democracy on the peninsula is now in mortal peril.

Although the previous actions of this Government are to be commended, it is time to do more. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary told the House in July that the Government

"will hold China to its international obligations."—[*Official Report*, 20 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 1832.]

Yet here we are again. Through these actions, the Chinese Government are making a mockery of the joint declaration. I ask the Minister what legal routes to defend the joint declaration are being considered. What has the Minister done to co-ordinate a response with our allies internationally, in particular the USA, including President-elect Biden, and the European Union? Will the UK finally impose Magnitsky-style sanctions on those individuals in Hong Kong and China who are responsible for human rights abuses, and, if not that model, will he look at a sanctions register, as used by the US?

The BNO citizenship scheme excludes those who need it, particularly young people who have so bravely protested in the best traditions of democracy. We must protect them. The estimated true cost for a Hongkonger to come here for five years is £3,000, and that is before living costs. Many simply cannot afford it. Will the Minister confirm how many applications have been made under the scheme and how many have been granted? Will he consider introducing a bursary scheme for those unable to pay, and will he introduce a lifeboat policy for all Hong Kong citizens regardless of age and, if not, will he agree to meet me to discuss this matter further?

In 1996, John Major underlined our commitment to Hong Kong when he said:

"If there were to be any suggestion of a breach of the Joint Declaration we would have a duty to pursue every legal and other avenue available to us."

He concluded:

"Hong Kong will never have to walk alone."

It is time for actions, not just words. It is time to make good on our promise.

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this urgent question. One of her points was about whether I would meet her; of course, I am more than happy to meet her. I know how important this issue is to her and other Members of this House, and my door is always open for conversations with me and my team. I can tell her that we have already seen statements from our partners thus far on this particular issue. Australia, the USA, Canada and Germany have all made statements on the matter and we will continue to work with all our Five Eyes partners to hold China to account. The actions we have taken at the UN over the last few months are testament to that and proof of our leading diplomatic role in this regard.

The hon. Lady asked about sanctions and we will continue to consider designations under our Magnitsky-style sanctions regime. She will appreciate it is not entirely appropriate to speculate on who may be designated under the sanctions regime in the future, as that could reduce the impact, but we are carefully considering further designations under the scheme.

The hon. Lady was right to mention the action we have taken on British nationals overseas. The Home Secretary issued a statement on 22 July on the new route for BNOs, which states that

[Nigel Adams]

“in compelling and compassionate circumstances, and where applications are made as a family unit, we will use discretion to grant a visa to the children”

of BNO status-holders

“who fall into this category...the existing youth mobility scheme is open to people in Hong Kong aged between 18 and 30, with 1,000 places currently available each year. Individuals from Hong Kong will also be able to apply to come to the UK under the terms of the UK’s new points-based system”.—[*Official Report*, 22 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 115WS.]

The hon. Lady asked about the number of BNOS. From July 2020, BNO citizens and their dependants have been eligible to be granted six months’ leave outside the rules at the border to the UK, and from 15 July to 14 October 2020, a total of 2,116 BNO citizens and their dependants have been granted that. That data is not a reliable proxy for the number of people who may apply for the visa when it opens in January, but it does suggest that the number of BNO citizens seeking to come to the UK in the short term is unlikely to be at the high end of the scale.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s designation that this is the third breach of the Sino-British joint declaration, and I do not think that anybody in this House disagrees with him. After all, we are now seeing that China really does believe in “one man, one vote”, and that man, of course, is Chairman Xi. We now need Her Majesty’s Government to respond not just, as my hon. Friend quite rightly said, by looking at our own laws and Magnitsky sanctions, or, indeed, by seeking to work with others, but by working on the international trade platform as well. What conversations has my hon. Friend had with the Department for International Trade, partners at the World Trade Organisation and others around the world to make sure that Hong Kong is designated correctly as a part of China and that it no longer has a separate status for customs or, indeed, any other form of commerce?

Nigel Adams: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs for his question and for his ongoing leadership on this particular issue. Trade with China is absolutely pivotal and crucial to the UK. Figures over the last six months show that China is only one of two countries where our exports have actually grown over a very difficult period. We have a high level of ambition for our trade partnership. We want to work with it to increase trade, but as we strive for that positive relationship we will not sacrifice our values or our security. We are very clear-sighted about the challenges. As we continue to engage, we will always protect our national interests. Absolutely and imperatively, as the Foreign Secretary has said at this Dispatch Box on many occasions, we will continue to hold China to its international commitments and its promises.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) [V]: This assault on democracy represents not only a clear breach of the Basic Law and the joint declaration; it also confirms that the Chinese Government and the Hong Kong Executive are committed to the removal of dissenting voices from the democratic process, and to the repression of the rights of the people of Hong Kong. The Labour party stands in solidarity with the four pro-democracy representatives who have been removed from the Legislative

Council, and with the 15 additional Opposition Members who have resigned in protest. Their departure leaves Hong Kong without an Opposition in the legislature, removing one of the vital checks on the Hong Kong Executive and effectively denying the people of Hong Kong the right to choose their own representatives.

The UK Opposition welcomed the Government’s recent announcement regarding BNO passport holders, but it would be unacceptable for the UK Government now to conclude that they have done all they can for the people of Hong Kong. With that in mind, I ask the Minister the following questions.

First, does the Minister agree that the British Government are legally obliged, through the joint declaration, to defend human rights in Hong Kong, and that failure to do so, to the utmost of their abilities, would put the UK in default of its treaty obligations? Secondly, when will we see details of what the UK Government are offering by way of support to Hongkongers born after 1997? Thirdly, will senior Hong Kong Executive officials now be added to the Magnitsky list? The Minister has been asked this question many times and he has consistently declined to give a definitive answer. Who in Government is holding this up? Fourthly, the Foreign Secretary has rightly condemned the likes of HSBC and Standard Chartered bank for their stance on Hong Kong, but could the Minister please update the House on what action, if any, has actually been taken against those two banks?

Nigel Adams: I thank the Opposition spokesman for his questions. On sanctions, he will be fully aware that it is not appropriate to speculate on who exactly will come under the radar of our new sanctions regime. We are considering further designations constantly. In terms of HSBC and Standard Chartered in Hong Kong, I have had previous conversations with HSBC, and I am very happy to have more. I am also more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on that particular issue.

As I said to the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), our door is always open. Our offer to British nationals overseas of a pathway to UK citizenship is compelling and compassionate, and as I said in my previous answer, the youth mobility scheme is open to people in Hong Kong aged between 18 and 30. I am more than happy to flesh this out with the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) when he is next in the Chamber or in London.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on her position. She is a friend, because she is part of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, and of alliances on many other countries around the world.

I fully understand the issues for my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government, but the reality is that we face an arrogant country, led by an arrogant leadership that has trashed the Sino-British agreement and is guilty of huge human rights abuses and dangerous confrontations with its neighbours. The British Government must lead in this matter, not wait. It is time for us to let the Chinese Government know that these actions come with serious repercussions. Does he accept that we need to sanction individuals responsible for any of these actions? Let us start with Carrie Lam in Hong Kong.

Nigel Adams: I thank my right hon. Friend for his continued efforts on this issue, and for working positively with the Government. We will continue to consider designations under the sanctions regulations. I fear I am repeating myself, but he will know, given his background, that it is not appropriate to speculate on who may be designated in the future, as putting that on the record may well reduce the impact of the designations. I completely agree with his opening comments, but we have offered a new immigration path for BNOs; we have suspended our extradition treaty with Hong Kong; we have extended our arms embargo on mainland China to cover Hong Kong; and we have led international efforts to hold China to its international obligations. Gaining 39 signatures at the UN is no mean feat. We have also, rightly, consistently raised our concern with the Chinese authorities.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: I try to be fair, and I have much respect for the Minister. I listened to his statement carefully, and anyone would accept that there are limited things that the UK Government can do about the internal workings of the Chinese state. It would be unfair to say that the UK Government have done nothing on this, but it would be fair to say that they have not done much of any consequence—certainly nothing that has elicited a change of heart from Beijing. I reiterate colleagues' calls for Magnitsky sanctions. We are not looking for speculation; we are looking for announcements, which are overdue. I appreciate that it is difficult, but we need to take that forward.

There are things that the Government can do, and that are in their control. I would be interested to hear plans for an audit of Chinese engagement with our academic infrastructure, and particularly of Confucius institutes and their activities in the UK. We are overdue an audit of Chinese involvement in the UK's physical, and data and communications, infrastructure, big chunks of which are being bought up by Chinese companies that are emanations of the Chinese state. We should also look at audits of UK companies engaged in trade in Hong Kong to make sure that they are not benefiting from slave labour. There are things that the UK Government can do domestically now, and I support calls for, and moves towards, our taking those steps.

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his considered question. He is absolutely right to raise the issue of academic interference. UK universities are international at their core, and we warmly welcome overseas students, including from China, and the valuable contribution that they make, but we will not tolerate any attempt to interfere with academic freedom, or freedom of speech. As I have said before in the House, if any universities experience any attempts to undermine free debate, we encourage them to get in touch with the Government.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned data infrastructure. The long-term security and enduring resilience of our telecoms network are incredibly important, and we are taking difficult decisions to protect those interests. The position in January on high-risk vendors was based on the need to balance security with the need for us to level up and be a world leader in our digital infrastructure. I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman's point, but I am more than happy to have a direct meeting with him when he returns to London, as I have said to the Lib

Dem and Labour spokespeople, the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): First, the Minister says that our Government continue to hold China to account. Has the Chinese ambassador been summoned to meet the Foreign Secretary following the most recent developments? If so, with what results, and, if not, will the ambassador be summoned? Secondly, it is clear that human rights safeguards have effectively collapsed now in Hong Kong. One of those, of course—a key human right—is freedom of religion. We have seen what has happened with the attacks on freedom of religion in China. Have the Government considered how that can be protected in Hong Kong? What calls have they made to ensure that the right to worship remains there?

Nigel Adams: I can confirm that the Chinese ambassador has been summoned to the Foreign Office this morning. Freedom of religion or belief is a key issue for this Government. My hon. Friend has spoken on this matter on many occasions, and I have had the pleasure to be in such debates. We are very concerned by what has been going on in mainland China—particularly in Xinjiang—but we are concerned by all restrictions placed on freedom of religion or belief in China.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: It started with the disappearance of a bookseller. Then there was state-sanctioned violence against protesters and health workers, university lecturers were sacked and the free press challenged. Twelve Hong Kong youths have been detained for over 80 days, and now we see the disqualification of four moderate legislators. Things are clearly escalating. What will the Minister actually do to hold China to account for the breach of the joint declaration and international treaties, and what consular support is he providing to Hongkongers?

Nigel Adams: As I have laid out in previous answers, we are working with international partners and have summoned the Chinese ambassador. We have done an immense amount of work at the United Nations whenever we believe that China is transgressing, particularly on human rights. We could not be any clearer; our assessment is that this action is a breach of the joint declaration. This is a subject on which we have been incredibly robust over the past 12 months, as the hon. Lady will know. The joint declaration is in force and the policies contained within it should remain unchanged for 50 years. It is a legally binding international agreement that is registered with the UN, and we are fully committed to upholding Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy, rights and freedoms.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Just last year I had the privilege of meeting, here in Parliament, one of the legislators who has now been disqualified, and we had extensive discussions about the rights of British national overseas passports. It is now clear that our very generous offer to BNO passport holders is a critical lifeline to Hongkongers, but there is concern that those in positions of power in Hong Kong with links to Beijing may seek to use the BNO route to come to this country and enjoy the very democratic liberties that they are seeking to oppress. What discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office on this matter,

[*Steve Double*]

and will the Government do everything possible to ensure that those who seek to undermine democracy and violate human rights are not able to come to this country and enjoy the benefits of BNO passport holders?

Nigel Adams: We have a duty to uphold our promise to the people of Hong Kong to protect their rights and autonomy. I am pleased that my hon. Friend realises that the offer that we are making to BNO citizens and their dependants is a generous one. In turn, they will be expected to be self-sufficient and contribute to UK society. We look forward to welcoming applications under this new immigration route. However, he raises a good point, and I can tell him that the existing provisions in the immigration rules will apply in relation to criminality and other adverse behaviour.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Under the national security law, individuals and companies outside Hong Kong and China can be prosecuted for offences that pertain to that law. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Hongkongers in the UK or British-based businesses with operations in Hong Kong will not be targeted by this repressive law?

Nigel Adams: We have made our position very clear on the national security law—the second occasion that we called out a breach of the joint declaration. That certainly should not be the case, but as the hon. Lady would expect, we are in contact with firms that have investments both ways between China and the UK. It is key that we do not agree with the principal tenet of this national security law. We believe it is vague and far-reaching and could have very damaging consequences. I appreciate the question, and we do have communication lines open with those firms.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: Yesterday the world witnessed the ousting of elected lawmakers in Hong Kong by the Chinese Government, and over the past week the world has witnessed the outgoing President of the US fail to concede defeat, despite the outcome of the election being clear. It is in everybody's interests—especially here in the free world—for the benefits of democracy not to be undermined. Will the Minister join me in condemning these blatant attacks on democracy, and does he recognise that continual attempts to deny the will of the Scottish people in relation to our own constitutional question will also be viewed by the watching world as an attack on democracy?

Nigel Adams: That is the one of the cleverest ways I have seen of segueing from an urgent question on the actions in Hong Kong to a question about Scottish independence—the hon. Member should be applauded for his gall. Of course, we object in the strongest terms to the actions that have been taken in the last 48 hours.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran)—she is my hon. Friend, because we are both members of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China—on securing this urgent question, and I welcome the Minister's robust language. He stated that China's policy is to

“stifle all voices critical” of it and that China has failed to meet its international obligations. I want to ask about the Magnitsky sanctions; I am not asking the Minister to speculate, but to explain. If our friends and allies can gather enough evidence on Chinese officials' abuses of the Uyghur, what is stalling the Minister's Department in doing the same?

Nigel Adams: As I have said in previous responses, it is not appropriate to speculate on sanctions or individuals. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will consider any evidence that is put forward, and if my hon. Friend has such evidence, I urge her to get in touch with that Department.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: The sleeping giant is most certainly not sleeping anymore, and Hong Kong is shaking. The new legislation passed this week is not just illegal but, frankly, tyrannous. Are the Government actively considering compiling a case to take China to the International Court of Justice for breaching the Sino-British treaty for the third time, as well as the Vienna convention on the law of treaties?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and for her continued interest in China and her work at the FCO previous to her work in this place. The simple answer is that we cannot submit a case to the ICJ without the consent of China. In my judgment, and I would imagine that of anybody of sound mind, it is very clear that China would not accept that. There is no easy adjudicative route, I am afraid.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: What progress has the Minister made in identifying the senior Chinese Government officials who have committed serious human rights violations in Hong Kong, and also those who have persecuted Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang? We are not asking for speculation: when will the Government do more than just consider Magnitsky sanctions and actually use them?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. We are deeply concerned about the extrajudicial detention of over 1 million Uyghur Muslims and other minorities in so-called political re-education camps. We have made our case very clear to the Chinese authorities in this regard—that invasive surveillance targeting techniques and suppression of freedom of religion and belief are unacceptable. I am sorry to have to refer to my previous answers in terms of sanctions. We are constantly considering designations under our Magnitsky-style regime, but it would not be helpful to speculate on the names of the people that are being considered at the moment.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for his response and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for the urgent question. On Monday, the United States State Department announced that it was to impose further sanctions on four more Chinese officials over their alleged role in recent crackdowns on democracy in Hong Kong, and that is further to its sanctions on officials with regard to the actions in Xinjiang and the unacceptable treatment of the Uyghur Muslims. My question is on sanctions, but it is slightly different to the questions being put by others. Can the Minister explain

the difference in terms of why emergency Magnitsky-style sanctions were rightly imposed in Belarus and why they are not being imposed on Chinese officials with regard to their behaviour in Hong Kong or their behaviour in Xinjiang on the treatment of Muslims?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for all his work as the Prime Minister's special envoy on freedom of religion and belief. We are aware of the designations by the US, and we will continue to consider designations under our regulations. I am more than happy to write to him to try to clear up the point he has made. Again, I apologise for repeating this, but it is important to emphasise that it really is not appropriate to speculate on who may be designated under the sanctions regime in future.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Depressingly, I think we know where all this will end, and it is not pretty. We are therefore into mitigation. Does my hon. Friend agree that, not least out of a sense of enlightened self-interest, we should encourage and welcome Hongkongers who wish to leave Hong Kong for the UK, as those from other countries have also done, noting, for example, those we welcomed from Hungary in 1956, as well as Iranians in 1979 and Chinese after Tiananmen Square in 1989?

Nigel Adams: My right hon. Friend is very highly skilled in this area, having served in a similar role to me at the FCO, and he is absolutely right. Hongkongers are highly skilled and highly educated individuals, and we very much look forward to welcoming applications under our new immigration route.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I listened to the answer that the Minister gave to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I can understand the logic of it and I can understand his caution, but, in practical terms, the idea that the likes of Carrie Lam might at some stage be subject to Magnitsky sanctions is something for which we may now have lost that element of surprise. Therefore, the practical consequences of the Government's position are probably not that significant, but the political consequences of a more robust answer to the hon. right Gentleman and others could be immense, especially if we were to pursue this through our membership of the UN Human Rights Council, to which we have now been elected for the next two years. What will the Minister do with that very useful tool?

Nigel Adams: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman, my former ministerial colleague, on his question and also on the interest that he takes in this particular issue, but he will have to forgive me when I say that, as tempting as it may be, it is absolutely inappropriate and not right for us to speculate on our sanctions regime. We do not want a situation where the effect of our regime is diminished, and speculation could very much do that. We are working very closely and very hard with the EU, as he will be aware.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I hope that every self-respecting member of the international community will condemn this action by China. I also hope that the

businesses that have tried to shut their eyes to what has been going on now open them and realise that this affects them, too. This is the latest attempt to try to crush the spirit of the people of Hong Kong and my friends from there are understandably anxious. What is the Minister's message to the people of Hong Kong?

Nigel Adams: We will always stand by Hong Kong. That is why we have taken the actions that we have. We believe that there have been three breaches of the joint declaration. Our offer to BNOs is generous, compassionate and widely welcomed. We have a duty to the people of Hong Kong, clearly, given our history there and we will not stop speaking up on behalf of the people of Hong Kong when we believe that there have been these serious breaches.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: In October this year, the Government confirmed that a new immigration route for BNOs from Hong Kong will open in January. Unfortunately, under the current plans, BNOs will still be subject to an expensive immigration health surcharge of £1,560 per 30 months and £3,120 for five years. Will the Government consider abolishing the immigration health surcharge for BNO applicants?

Nigel Adams: We have been generous with regard to BNOs, and rightly so, given the duty that we owe to them. We have developed proposals for a bespoke immigration route for them and their dependants with five years' limited leave to remain, with the right to work or study. The issue to which the hon. Lady refers is a matter, of course, for the Home Office. It is entirely appropriate for her to write to the Home Office and see whether she can get a response that gives her the satisfaction that she requires.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for confirming to the House this morning that this is the third breach of the Sino-British agreement, which was registered at the UN. As a friend of China for 25 years, I say that this is unacceptable. He and the Foreign Secretary must now show the Chinese that this sort of breaking of international norms has consequences. Will he therefore build as wide a coalition of the free world as possible to act in unison on things such as the Magnitsky sanctions? If he does that, they will be much more effective.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. We have already seen statements from four of our partners earlier today. I understand there may very well be a statement from the European Union later. In response to these developments, we have, as I say, offered this new immigration path, suspended the extradition treaty and extended our arms embargo on mainland China to Hong Kong. We have summoned the Chinese ambassador. We will continue to raise our concerns internationally at the UN. We will continue to lead the international community in calling on China to live up to its obligations under the joint declaration.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: One country, two systems was supposed to be a magic formula, but it has turned out to be nothing more than a mirage. Democracy and free speech are as good as

[Andrew Gwynne]

dead in Hong Kong. The British Government are bound by their obligations through the joint declaration to defend human rights in Hong Kong. The offer to BNO passport holders is welcome, though it does nothing to hold the Hong Kong Executive to account for the human rights violations they are carrying out against their own people. Does the Minister not run the risk of allowing the UK to default in its treaty obligations if it fails to do more to hold the Hong Kong Executive and the Chinese Government to account on this?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise his question. I do not necessarily agree with his last point. On the one country, two systems point that he raises, these actions by China have had an incredibly detrimental impact on many areas of one country, two systems. We will do everything possible to uphold Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and, most importantly, the rights and freedoms under the joint declaration.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I welcome my hon. Friend's clear statements in relation to the violations of freedom and democracy in Hong Kong. Will he assure me that he will continue to speak out against any violations of the one country, two systems protocol that we have and take up in every international institution, including the United Nations Security Council, this clear abuse of democracy in Hong Kong?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Again, I would like to thank him for his continued work on this issue. We have played a leading role in the international community in holding China to account. On 6 October, 39 countries joined a statement at the UN General Assembly Third Committee, in which we expressed our deep concern at the situation in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet. We will continue, as I have said, to bring together our international partners to stand up for the people of Hong Kong, to call out the violation of their freedoms and, importantly, to hold China to account for its international obligations.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am sorry to say that it feels as if the Government have given up on this, to be honest. They did not choose to make a statement on this; they had to be dragged to the House by an urgent question. Frequently, it is Back Benchers in this House who are dragging the Government to make more categorical statements and to stand up to the cross words, which is so far all we have had. They have devoted next to no energy to pursuing this in the vast majority of international forums. The one thing that they could do they repeatedly refuse to do, which is to implement Magnitsky-style sanctions against Carrie Lam and others. I do not know what more the Minister needs to know. We have a country that has millions of people in concentration camps. We have people who are being refused the right to their own religion, and women who are having forced abortion and sterilisation. We have the whole of democratic systems being suppressed, and, frankly, communism today looks remarkably like fascism. Every single time he says, "I can't speculate," he is actually announcing that he is not implementing sanctions. Please, please take the whole of the House seriously on this. We must not give up.

Nigel Adams: I have got an awful lot of time for the hon. Gentleman, but to accuse this Government of sitting idly by on this issue, frankly, is nonsense. We have led the international community in this regard, and we have made incredibly generous offers in terms of the BNOs. I applaud him for harrying and hassling the Foreign Secretary in terms of making sure the sanctions regime has been delivered; it has been delivered. I appreciate that we are in the theatre of the Chamber, but the hon. Gentleman will know in his heart that it is not right to speculate publicly about individuals and sanctions before there are any designations—he will know that—but I would just ask him to reflect on the actions that we have taken, particularly internationally, where we have led the way.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I am afraid that history teaches us what happens if regimes like this are not stood up to, but we cannot act alone, so what engagement has the Foreign Office had—at an early stage, I know—with the incoming American Administration, because their support on these issues will be key?

Also, I recognise that we have a healthy and robust debate in this Chamber about matters such as Scottish independence, and I know we proceed with good humour, but does the Minister agree that to link in any way, shape or form what is happening in Hong Kong, with the absolute destruction of people's rights and fundamental freedoms, with the healthy debate that we have around Scottish independence is disrespectful to the people of that country making that fight?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a reasonable point. I will not use the term "disrespectful" to describe the comments of the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) from the SNP, but I would say that he has more front than Scarborough in trying to link the two issues during this urgent question.

I can tell my hon. Friend that we have seen this morning the United States make its statement on these latest moves to disqualify the four legislators. The Prime Minister has had conversations with the President-elect, and I am sure that Hong Kong will feature in future conversations. I would add that we have consistently led the international community with regard to the response to breaches of the joint declaration and the events in Hong Kong.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The Security Council is hamstrung because of China's veto and the General Assembly is largely supportive of Chinese policy. May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister what sort of feel he gets from the forum of the world, the United Nations, in support of what we are trying to do against China?

Nigel Adams: What I can tell my hon. Friend is that we work very closely with our international partners, and to have 39 countries sign up to our statement at the UN on this single issue was quite the achievement. People internationally do realise that China has yet again broken its promise to the people of Hong Kong, and its actions tarnish its international reputation and, more importantly, undermine Hong Kong's long-term stability.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing this urgent question and the Minister for his answer. As MPs in this House, we stand side by side with the MPs in Hong Kong; they need to know that, and we are doing that today. Will the Minister outline whether any support can be offered to these MPs who have taken a stand, specifically in regard to their families, who are often the ones left trebling in the background, fearing for their very lives? Can any support of a practical nature be offered, and what form might that take?

Nigel Adams: I have laid out the terms and the offer that has been made to BNOs over the past couple of months. We completely understand the issue for Hongkongers and MPs advocating in particular for the families left behind. If the hon. Gentleman has any specific cases that he wants to bring to my attention, I am more than happy to discuss them.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): A great many of us have little faith in the processes at the United Nations when it comes to defending liberties in Hong Kong, precisely because of the influence of China at that body. Aside from the 39 signatures at the UN that the Minister has mentioned, will he please tell the House what precisely we are doing as a Government to build the international coalition of support that he talks about, specifically in putting together an international contact group or using the G7 as a forum for bringing together a coalition of democracies, to really show China that the international community is serious about defending the rights of Hong Kong people?

Nigel Adams: As I say, and as my right hon. Friend will have seen this morning, we are working closely with our international partners. Australia, the US, Canada and Germany have all joined us with their statements this morning. We will of course continue to work with our partners—our Five Eyes partners in particular—to hold China to account. My right hon. Friend is right to point this out. There is a growing caucus of support at the UN that is very much behind the UK's leading diplomatic role on the issue of Hong Kong.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): After the ethnic cleansing of Buddhists in Tibet, the cold, calculated genocide of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and the mistreatment of Christians and other minorities, the authoritarian Chinese Communist party regime has now turned its tyranny on to pro-democracy Hongkongers. What concrete steps is the Minister taking to mobilise our international partners so that the world's democracies act against this human rights crisis in an effective and co-ordinated manner?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this, and I know that he has a deep interest in freedom of religion and belief. We are very concerned about the reports coming out of Tibet. We had a debate in Westminster Hall on this very issue. I believe that our growing caucus at the UN is bearing fruit. Thirty-nine countries is no small achievement. The Foreign Secretary should be congratulated for his work in this regard, and Lord Ahmad, a fellow FCDO Minister, has delivered several statements at the UN on this issue. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, with the Foreign Secretary

and the FCDO taking a leading role on this issue, we are getting purchase internationally, and China will have heard the remarks today and countries' abhorrence at the actions in Hong Kong.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The legally binding joint declaration signed by China as well as the UK sets out that Hong Kong will have a high degree of autonomy. China must respect that. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that he will continue to work with our international partners to condemn these attacks on democracy in every possible way?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is 100% correct in every word he has just said. I can assure him that we will continue to lead this international effort against the violations and the breaches of the joint declaration. We are in constant touch with our international partners on this, not least Australia, Canada, Germany and the US, which, I reiterate, have all issued statements today condemning this action by China.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: Given the latest brutal attack by China on Hong Kong democracy and freedom of speech, will the Minister undertake to increase the number of visas available to Hong Kong citizens, tell us what he will do if they are not recognised by China and reassure those who may need them that they will have access and recourse, in the short term at least, to public funds in the UK if they need to flee?

Nigel Adams: It is a very generous offer that we have laid out to British national overseas citizens. We will expect them to be self-sufficient and contribute to UK society. We look forward to welcoming those applications. As I have said, the new route that the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary have hammered out is compelling and compassionate, particularly, as the hon. Gentleman will welcome, with regard to applications that are made as a family unit. We will use discretion in issuing a grant to children of BNO status holders who fall into this category.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): The United Kingdom, a stalwart champion of democracy, pluralism and liberty, has demonstrated its purpose to defend those values with all available tools, including Magnitsky-style sanctions. The disqualification of four Hong Kong pro-democracy lawmakers from the Legislative Council is another case in an ever-growing list of intrusions by the Chinese Communist party into the rights and freedoms of Hong Kong. Will my hon. Friend outline what efforts the Government are making to ensure a co-ordinated approach among our international partners to the crisis in Hong Kong and ensure that the Chinese Communist party is held responsible for its violations of both its international treaty obligations and fundamental human rights?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his continued leading voice on these matters. We are focused on giving voice to the widespread international concerns, basically in order to protect Hong Kong's rights and freedoms. As I have said, the increasing number of countries supporting joint statements in the UN's various human rights bodies underscores, we

[Nigel Adams]

believe, the success of our approach. There are elections next September, and there not being an effective Opposition voice in them when half of the Legislative Council is appointed does make a bit of a mockery of the situation. We will continue, however, to call on China to uphold the contents of the joint declaration and, most importantly, live up to its responsibilities.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: Extending the right to apply for BNO status has been very welcome and indeed is a lifeline to many Hongkongers. However, the CCP is likely to do its utmost to obstruct the process. Will the Government consider giving diplomatic assistance to legitimate applicants who are still in the process of applying but might get arrested under the draconian new security laws?

Nigel Adams: We are very much opposed to, and have called out, the new national security law. We welcome applications under our new immigration system, which has been broadly welcomed in the House and beyond for Hongkongers. Of course, the Home Office will work with applicants on visas. On the specific point the hon. Lady makes, if she writes to the Home Office, it will hopefully be able to give her the satisfaction she is looking for.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this latest step really does indicate that we have seen the end of the one country, two systems approach?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend raises a good point that has been made previously. These latest actions by China have had an incredible impact on many areas of the one country, two systems approach. However, I assure her and all right hon. and hon. Members of the House that we will continue to do everything possible to uphold Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy, rights and freedoms under the joint declaration.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: The world has watched aghast as President Trump desperately tries to suppress domestic democracy. Thankfully, his successor President-elect Biden has promised to fully enforce the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. Ironically, even the Trump Administration

have imposed sanctions on four more Chinese officials in Hong Kong over their role in crushing dissent. What concrete action will the Minister's Government take to uphold the Sino-British joint declaration and the Hong Kong Basic Law, which were supposed to grant a high degree of autonomy to Hongkongers until 2047?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. This should have been a 50-year agreement. We continue to call out breaches of the joint declaration. The actions we have taken at the UN have been almost unprecedented, having 39 co-signatories. We will continue to call out China on its actions with regard to Hong Kong, and, as we speak, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has summoned the Chinese ambassador to make our points incredibly clear to him directly.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: The anti-democratic national security law shows that China is willing to break the Sino-British joint agreement, and that puts religious freedom under threat. Religious leaders in Hong Kong are already fearful for their safety, with some scared to read certain scriptures in case they are accused of subversion by the Government. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with the authorities internationally on the dangerous experience of people of faith in Hong Kong, and what will he do if the situation worsens?

Nigel Adams: It is absolutely the case that all countries, China included, must comply with their international obligations. Freedom of religion and belief is incredibly important, and this UK Government take that incredibly seriously. We will continue to make the case that individuals should have the ability to practise their religion, and whatever they believe in, in a free way. We will continue to call out any transgressions of that where people are being oppressed, not least in mainland China.

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.

11.36 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

11.39 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 16 November will include:

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

TUESDAY 17 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the National Security and Investment Bill, followed by a motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Botulinum Toxin and Cosmetic Fillers (Children) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 18 NOVEMBER—Motion to approve the draft Ecodesign for Energy-Related Products and Energy Information (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, followed by a motion to approve the Construction Products (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a general debate on covid-19.

THURSDAY 19 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on regulation and prevention of online harms, followed by a general debate on International Men's Day. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 20 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

We have a result: there is a new chief of staff at No. 10. No, seriously, what I actually wanted to do was to congratulate President-elect Joe Biden and Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris. It was a historic victory, winning not only the popular vote but the electoral college. Despite the closing of mailboxes, I think democracy won, and I agree with the President-elect that the integrity of the peace agreement in Ireland is vital. He has also made a statement on Iran, which gives hope for Nazanin, Anoosheh and Kylie. It is interesting that Nasrin Sotoudeh, the human rights lawyer, has been released, and it gives hope to Luke Symons too.

I do not know whether you saw the strapline yesterday, Mr Speaker, but while there were squabbles behind the door at No. 10, we reached the terrible statistic of 50,000 deaths. We are the highest in Europe and the fifth highest in the world, and it is a terrible statistic because the other countries ahead of us have larger populations. Everyone in the Conservative party, from the Prime Minister to the bag carriers, was focused on the power struggle at No. 10 for jobs and influence. What this country needs is proper leadership and the Government to focus on the job at hand: saving lives and livelihoods.

The Leader of the House will have to come up with an answer—I asked him this last week—on when the Session is going to end. I hope he gives us the answer soon, because we would like another Opposition day.

Government Members will be interested to note that there was a U-turn on school meals—the Rashford turn—but they must be pretty annoyed because they were asked to vote for it, and then the announcement was made by the Prime Minister to the ether, not to the

House. We could only glean what the details were from the press. It is no wonder that the Leader of the House does not want a return to remote voting, where Members actually have to vote themselves. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) was right, was he not, when he said that it is an affront to the House and everything that it stands for that there were 203 proxy votes cast by a Whip? More seriously, there are factions—the common sense group, the northern group, the covid recovery group. What the Opposition want to know—the Whips are asking us—is: do they all have their own Whips? Do we have to deal with each individual group? So I ask again, in the interests of democracy: can we have remote voting?

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport made a written statement on Tuesday on a new advisory panel for the UK system of public service broadcasting. The panel, interestingly, is this: the former Conservative Prime Minister's director of communications, who has been helping GB News to challenge the BBC; a Conservative peer; and a former Conservative Prime Minister's press secretary. After the claims from the Leader of the House about political impartiality earlier this week, can we have a statement on the recruitment process? We do not want this to be another assault on public broadcasting.

I do not know whether the Leader of the House is aware of the interactive map, "My Little Crony", which has been created by Sophie Hill. I raised last week all the contracts that have been handed out to those connected to the Tory party and I did not get an answer, but it is well worth a look. He will know that I think it might be time for a public inquiry, particularly on the £670,000 that has been allocated by the vaccine tsar for public relations. If you look at the My Little Crony interactive map, it links directly to the special special adviser's relation. I do not know whether that is because they are essential workers, to enable them a visit to Barnard Castle, but it would be interesting to know what they do, because they are actually based in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, where there are 100 comms staff. But if it is something about a vaccine, I would rather Dr Van-Tam told me about it, instead of a public relations so-called expert.

There are more concerns about the use of public money, so will the Leader of the House find time for a full debate on the Public Accounts Committee report into the towns fund? It concluded at page 5:

"The selection process was not impartial."

He was fond of saying that word earlier this week and it is a cross-party Committee. Is it the kind of Committee that the Leader of the House does not actually like, given his comments earlier? The Committee said that it was

"not convinced by the rationales for selecting some towns and not others."

We have a crowded programme coming up in the next six weeks. We have the comprehensive spending review on 25 November, and already nurseries have contacted me to say, "Can the Chancellor find long-term funding for us?" They will be part of the recovery after the pandemic, with parents going back and children being looked after. One of the heads apparently described the Secretary of State for Education as "missing in action", so can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Education, particularly ahead of the comprehensive spending review?

[Valerie Vaz]

Will the Prime Minister come to the House and update us on the trade talks that are going on with the EU? I think he made a statement to the press, but not to us.

Last week, the Leader of the House highlighted his love of heritage, and I ask him to join me in lying down in front of the bulldozers at Stonehenge. Professor Mike Parker Pearson said:

“When we’re looking at prehistory, the buried remains are the only evidence we have. It’s rather like burning ancient manuscripts...There will be almost total destruction of all archaeological remains within its path”,

referring to the road scheme. Will the Leader of the House help us to stop it?

Finally, I wish everyone a happy Diwali. It represents good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. I know that is a sentiment that the whole House agrees with.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Absolutely, we are in favour of the triumph of good over evil, and we wish everyone a happy Diwali. I think that conservatism is very generally the triumph of good over evil. As regards Stonehenge, as I take the A303 to Somerset, the sooner it is a dual carriageway the better. I fully support the proposals to have a dual carriageway, though I would add that one of the great joys of going on the current A303 is that one gets a glimpse of Stonehenge. That is a benefit and is uplifting for people to see.

As regards statements by the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend has been incredibly assiduous in updating the House, coming to the House, making statements, answering questions and leading debates. His appearances here have been exactly what we require, and he has met and exceeded the expectations of the House.

The right hon. Lady rightly congratulates the President-elect of the United States, as Her Majesty’s Government have. The Government look forward to working with—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Go on then, say it.

Mr Rees-Mogg: What do you want me to say?

Chris Bryant: Congratulate him!

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have congratulated him. The Government congratulate him, and I am speaking as a Minister for the Government. It is very important, as the Prime Minister rightly said on Wednesday, that the British Prime Minister has a good relationship with the American President, and that is in the interests of the United Kingdom. It has to be said that one person who was particularly good at that was the former leader of the Labour party, Tony Blair, who was able to get on with different American Presidents of different ideological outlooks, and that I think is a model for British Prime Ministers.

I know that the Foreign Office has responded to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) about Nazanin and the other people improperly held, and her campaign is an important campaign to ensure that they are kept at the forefront of people’s minds.

It is of course a deep, deep sadness, and a tragedy for the families, that 50,000 have died with covid, but it is too early to be making international comparisons, because

the statistics are not calculated in all countries in the same way. But the Government have made enormous efforts to limit the effect and to ensure that the interests of safety are paramount. That is why we entered into the second period of lockdown and, indeed, had the first period of lockdown. It is why £200 billion of taxpayers’ money has been provided in support to the economy in these very difficult times. Yes, it is a deep sadness, but it is not, I think, a matter of party politics, one way or another. The Government have made every possible effort, strained every sinew.

The right hon. Lady mentions my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who of course himself gave a proxy to the Deputy Chief Whip and proved the efficacy of the system, because he was able to take his proxy away and vote the way he wanted to, having listened to the debate. This is a way that is working, it is effective and it has reduced the queues in the Division Lobbies, which I know is a great concern of the right hon. Lady. I do my best to accommodate her, but I feel sometimes that she models herself on the deaf adder, and charm I ever so nicely, still no notice is taken of the efforts I have made to meet with her approbation. In spite of having made every effort to help, still more is asked for, but I am afraid we need to be here in person. Government business has to be carried through. Important legislation has to be scrutinised. This is best done in person, as we found when we were hybrid earlier in the year, so there will not be a return to remote voting.

As regards the questions about the vaccine and the vaccine tsar, and the money spent on publicity, may I say from this Dispatch Box what a fabulous job Kate Bingham has done? She deserves credit, plaudits and praise—paeons of praise—for what she has done for free. She has been working for free. She has not been charging the British taxpayer. She has brought her energy and her enterprise to ensure that we are one of the best-placed countries to have supplies of the vaccine when it comes through.

Of course, we have to tell people what is going on. There are a few nutters around, Mr Speaker—I am sure you have never met them—who are anti-vaxxers. They go around spreading rumour and causing concern to people. We need to put out the true information to reassure people. That is a reasonable and a proper thing to do. The attacks on Kate Bingham are discreditable and unpleasant.

Valerie Vaz: When did I attack her?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The reference to the vaccine tsar in disparaging terms, but more generally than the right hon. Lady. Kate Bingham has done enormous public service and we should be grateful to her for what she is doing.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con) [V]: The Leader of the House will be aware that today there is a debate in Westminster Hall on breast cancer, in which, because of his ruling, some of us with real and current life experience of the disease are disappointingly unable to participate. While I respect his commitment to traditional parliamentary procedures, I am sure if he was on the Back Benches, and not the fine specimen of health and fitness he clearly is, he would be arguing forcefully for Members to be able to contribute more often in proceedings via modern technology, perhaps

even currying favour with you, Mr Speaker, by suggesting that not every contribution to a debate requires an intervention.

Given that hybrid proceedings have been extended, will my right hon. Friend please stop thinking those of us at home are shirking our duties—in fact, quite the opposite—and urgently reconsider virtual participation, even if just for general Back-Bench and Westminster Hall debates?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by wishing my hon. Friend well? I think the whole House joins me in praying for her swift recovery. She knows she is one of the most popular and respected Members of the House, who has campaigned cross-party on a number of issues very effectively, so we all wish her extremely well.

The point about bringing back Westminster Hall is that at one point the broadcasting facilities were already being fully utilised, so it was not an issue then of whether we wanted to do it or not. It simply was not an option. But the demand to bring back Westminster Hall was great across all parts of the House. Members who are shielding—who are seriously, critically vulnerable—are able to participate in many aspects of the House's business. They are able to participate in interrogative sessions such as this, vote by proxy and participate in Select Committees, but we have to get a balance between the needs of hon. Members and the needs of the House as a whole to proceed with its business.

With debates, we need to have the proper holding to account of Ministers, which is the purpose of the debates, and to have the interventions that make a debate, rather than a series of statements. It is a question of striking a careful balance, in these difficult times, between ensuring that Parliament can serve its constituents in full and making sure that Members can complete their duties as safely and as effectively as possible.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: I have two procedural points to start. By our calculation, we are overdue a third party Opposition day. As St Andrew's Day approaches, can the Leader of the House tell us when we might get it? Secondly, we are increasingly concerned not only at the lateness of the advance sight of the Chancellor's statements, but at the level of redaction therein, especially as we know that media outlets are being provided with full, unredacted copies before they are delivered in the Chamber. This is not good practice. Can the Leader of the House stop it?

I want to ask for a debate on the shared prosperity fund. We are exactly seven weeks from the end of the transition period, yet we have no idea whether and how this fund will work. I would like a Government assurance not only that Scotland's funding will be maintained, but that decisions will be fully devolved, in much the way that EU structural funds are currently managed. After all, how hard can it be?

Uncertainty over Brexit, of which that is one glaring example, is partly why Scottish public opinion is turning to independence. You know that I like to keep the House informed on these matters, Mr Speaker. This week we have another opinion poll showing an 8% lead for independence. It is the 12th poll in a row to show majority support for yes. These developments have prompted former Prime Minister Major to call for not one but two referendums on independence. Sadly, though,

the current Scottish Secretary just burrows further into his bunker. He declared this week that Scotland should not be able to consider this matter again for another 40 years. At least Donald Trump waited until after the election before denying the result. It seems that the Scottish Secretary has gone one better: he is denying the result of the election even before it has taken place. I agree with Joe Biden that it is not for one politician or another to decide the outcome, but for the people themselves. Can we have a debate on whether the Government will respect the outcome of next May's election in Scotland; for if they will not, what is the point in having one?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman perhaps does not see the irony of what he has just said. There was an election in 2014 and I am afraid that it is the hon. Gentleman who is the Trump of Scotland, because he is denying that result. He is trying to pretend that it did not happen and that the people of Scotland, in their wisdom, did not vote to remain in the United Kingdom. May I beg to remind him that the people of Scotland voted to remain and that at that time the Scottish National party leadership said it was generational? That is why my right hon. Friend the Scottish Secretary is right to say that it must be for a generation. The hon. Gentleman cannot say that he does not like the result and therefore he is going to sulk and, in a state of high dudgeon, complain and moan and object, because the people of Scotland have spoken, and in their wisdom they wanted to remain in the United Kingdom.

Is that any surprise when £8.2 billion of UK taxpayers' money has gone to the benefit of the people of Scotland? In addition, 779,500 jobs have been saved or supported by the furlough scheme, and £806 million has been paid out to help 157,000 people in the self-employed scheme. This is the success of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman says that he gets redacted statements. The good news will be boasted about later—such as the £8.2 billion and the 779,500 jobs—but it is routine for a Chancellor's statements to have market-sensitive information not provided at the time. That is an obvious thing to do.

Opposition days are provided—I am well aware of the Standing Orders requirements—and, on the shared prosperity fund, Scotland shares in the prosperity of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): In the 45 years I have been here, I have worked for tenants and leaseholders in tower blocks. For the last 15 years, I have been trying to get Government Ministers to accept the need for changes and leasehold reforms so that at least tenants are not exploited. There are 6 million of them, with 1 million affected by cladding-type issues and many more affected by the apparent increased cost of lease extensions. The Government have got the Law Commission to produce some very good reports, and Ministers sometimes say that something is going to happen. When will the Government make a statement about implementing the needed reforms and when will we have a Government debate so that we can support the Government when they take the necessary action? At

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

the moment, the praise and plaudits cannot come in full because the Government have not supported lease tenants the way that they should.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On the issue of cladding, which my hon. Friend raises, we are providing £1.6 billion of taxpayers' money to speed up the removal of unsafe cladding. That will be of help to some leaseholders in buildings that have cladding that has not yet been removed. The issue of compounding ground rates has been raised in the House before and is clearly a problem. I shall ensure that the Secretary of State gives a full answer to my hon. Friend.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: May I say what a pleasure it was to see the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) from her home? It was really good to see her up and active—it is fantastic.

Following last week's exchanges, I thank the Leader of the House for writing to the Home Secretary on my behalf and that of my constituents. I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's Backbench Business Committee debates on Tuesday. We are getting through the queue, but we still have some way to go.

I have the privilege of being the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for football supporters, and I have written to the Prime Minister in that capacity. I know that the Leader of the House has previously admitted to not being a great fan of association football, but he may be a great fan of adherence to the Government's manifesto commitments, in particular to a fan-led review of football and its governance. The resignation of the chair of the Football Association after his frankly embarrassing appearance before the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has thrown a bright light on the need for urgency in this review, which was promised at last year's general election. Will the Leader of the House be so kind as to remind the Prime Minister of his Government's commitment to this now pressing issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his opening comments, and I would remind the House and Members here this morning that if I ever can be helpful in facilitating answers from Government Departments, that is very much part of my role. The hon. Gentleman must not confuse my ignorance of football with a lack of concern. It is a matter of great concern to my constituents and his, and although I would never hold myself up as somebody who could win a pub quiz on football, I recognise that it is an issue that people are interested in across the country and one of great seriousness. He is right to note the resignation of the gentleman from the Football Association after his really extraordinary comments and the need for football to lead the way in doing things better and more appropriately. I am sure that the Government will fulfil our manifesto commitments, because that is what the Government do.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on unexplained deaths through epilepsy? On 16 November, SUDEP

Action will be publishing a report that details how people with epilepsy have coped during the coronavirus pandemic. It makes some excellent recommendations, and I do hope that the Government will act on them.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend my hon. Friend for his campaigning on a range of health issues. He is a credit to this House and I am always happy to see him at business questions supporting these important causes. The Government welcome all research into the important topic of sudden death from epilepsy and look forward to the forthcoming report from SUDEP Action on the impact of the pandemic on epilepsy. Once it is received, the Department of Health and Social Care will consider its findings carefully and I will be sure to pass my hon. Friend's question to Ministers in that Department. In the meantime, this may well make an important Adjournment debate.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Yesterday saw the sad passing at the age of 90 of Theresa Stewart, the only woman so far to lead Birmingham City Council. She represented the people of Billesley for a total of 31 years and was a champion of childcare and the payment of family allowance and child benefits to the mother, a pioneer of women's representation and equality and a co-founder of Birmingham Pregnancy Advisory Service. May we have a debate on the contribution of Theresa and other recent civic leaders who have given so much to local government in this country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the contribution made to civic society by people like Theresa Stewart. It is the backbone of our nation. These are people who give up their time and often go above and beyond the call of their duty to ensure that local government is as strong as it can be. Whether time can be found for a debate in Government time I cannot promise him, but I think a debate in Westminster Hall in praise of those who engage in civic life is well worth having.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: People in Dudley South, such as my constituent Amy in Kingswinford, often find pavements unusable because of inconsiderately parked cars. May we have a debate in Government time on action to tackle pavement parking and progress made since the excellent Pavement Parking (Protection of Vulnerable Pedestrians) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) in 2015?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Although I always view myself as a friend of the motorist, there are, it has to be said, limits, and pavement parking can be a serious inconvenience for pedestrians, particularly those with mobility or visual impairments or—something that has had a great effect on me in recent years—with perambulators or pushchairs. [Interruption.] Even I sometimes push the perambulator! I have done it myself, I can confirm. I see that my reputation lies in tatters as I admit to having pushed a perambulator, but actually it is quite fun.

Cars parked on the road get in the way, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset succeeded with his private Member's Bill. The Government are consulting on options for tackling the problem. One must not always assume that the answer to every problem is

ensuring that more fines are issued. Sometimes gentle encouragement and telling motorists that they ought to behave themselves is a good way of proceeding.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Zoos and aquariums play an important role in the visitor economy. My constituency is fortunate to have not only the Blue Planet aquarium but part of Chester zoo within it, and like everyone else, they have been struggling. The Government set up a £100 million fund to support zoos and aquariums, but the criteria for it are so restrictive that only about £2 million has been paid out so far. The deadline for applications for the scheme is Monday, and at the moment, it does not look like it will achieve its purpose. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State on Monday on what he will do to ensure that this scheme benefits zoos and aquariums as it was intended to?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The scheme was set up to help zoos and aquariums and to ensure that they are given particular support during the pandemic. As with any scheme, if there are issues, it is quite right that they should be raised with Ministers and that Ministers should be held to account. If the hon. Gentleman has not been successful in doing that with the relevant Minister, I will of course facilitate a full answer to any questions he has.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: In response to the impacts and challenges posed by covid-19 to aviation, the Prime Minister rightly established the global travel taskforce to consider further how Government can support the sector. When will it likely report, and may we have a statement at that time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I share my hon. Friend's concerns. The global aviation sector has suffered exceptionally badly from the pandemic, and it is right that we find ways to support aviation in Britain. On 7 October, the Secretary of State announced the establishment of the global travel taskforce to explore a testing regime for international arrivals and to support the safe recovery of international travel. The global travel taskforce will consider how a domestic testing regime for international arrivals could be implemented to boost safe travel to and from the UK and allow UK residents to travel with confidence. The taskforce will report back to the Prime Minister very shortly. We have previously explained that we do not currently endorse testing passengers immediately on arrival at airports as a means of avoiding the 14-day self-isolation period, but I will of course pass on my hon. Friend's comments to the Secretary of State.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on encouraging people to participate in the civic process? If we did so, it would be an opportunity for me to encourage my constituents in Broomhouse, Mount Vernon and Baillieston to object to the planning application from Patersons to increase both the capacity and the lifecycle of a site that has blighted the residents of my constituency for many years.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise these sorts of issues on the Floor of the House. It is one of the opportunities that we have as Members—to make it clear that we have concerns about local decision making. He is being an active champion

for his constituents. It may not surprise him to know that I do not know the details of the planning issue at hand, but he has raised it on the Floor of the House successfully.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, I received a letter from Forrester Boyd, which is a major chartered accountancy company that serves my constituency. It has drawn my attention to the fact that the major banks are refusing or holding long delays in opening new accounts for businesses and the self-employed. At a time when many businesses are having to diversify and new ones are setting up to meet specific needs during the pandemic, this is an intolerable situation. Could I ask the Leader of the House if he could arrange for a Minister to come to the Dispatch Box, show how much the Government deplore this situation and urge the banks to provide a decent service to new businesses?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am exceptionally glad that my hon. Friend has raised this matter, because I have had exactly the same issue in my own constituency. I had thought that it was a one-off, with just one or two people getting in touch to say that they could not open business accounts, but it is clear from my hon. Friend that this is a more widespread problem. As the Leader of the House, it is difficult to raise issues on one's own behalf as full-throatedly as one can sometimes from the Back Benches, so my hon. Friend raising the matter gives me the opportunity to raise it more full-throatedly. The Government have always made it clear to lenders that they should be open to new customers if that is operationally possible for them. I hope that the banks will ensure that they are able to do so, although they are, of course, operationally independent.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: Bath is a world heritage site and its protection is of national importance. Currently, 40-tonne heavy goods vehicles can go over the grade 2 listed Cleveland bridge, causing structural damage on a regular basis. The Leader of the House, as my constituency neighbour, will know exactly the bridge I am talking about. In 2012, the council sought to establish an 18-tonne weight limit to fulfil its duty under the law to protect this heritage asset, but the Department for Transport said that the council could not do that. The Government's preferred option is to resolve the issue via the Western Gateway transport board, but after eight years the people of Bath are still waiting. How do the Government intend to resolve the situation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As the MP for the countryside surrounding Bath, I am only too aware of the problem, and, indeed, of the congestion in the city represented by the hon. Member. The council, under its previous administration, was considering a bypass to link the A46 with the A36, which would of course mean that Cleveland bridge would no longer be needed. I am not entirely sure that the current Lib Dem control of the council is as enthusiastic about this plan as its predecessors, but it would provide a solution and it is a matter that the local council could push forward.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I have a number of extremely concerned Carshalton and Wallington residents who live in a block of flats with

[*Elliot Colburn*]

cladding on. I will not name the block so as not to prejudice their case, but the residents are essentially trapped; they cannot move, sell or rent their property. I know that this is not the only block in the country facing problems like this, so can we have a debate about support for such residents, who are essentially trapped through no fault of their own?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), also alluded to this issue. It is a matter that the Government take extremely seriously, especially following the Grenfell tragedy. The Government are providing funding to get dangerous cladding off homes. We are proposing the most significant building safety reforms in almost 40 years, and are committed to ensuring that people are safe and feel safe in their homes. Some £1.6 billion of taxpayers' money is being spent to speed up the removal of unsafe cladding, making homes safer as soon as is practicable. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this question and for the work that he is doing for his constituents to bring the issue to the attention of Ministers. I will certainly pass on the details that he has brought to the House to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On disused coal tips, the Leader of the House knows well that a large part of the Tylorstown tip fell into the river at the beginning of the year, after Storm Dennis. I understand that the Coal Authority, a UK Government agency, has done some investigation of all the disused coal tips in the country. There are some 2,000 in Wales alone, but there is no full list of coal tips in every part of the country. Could we have a debate on this subject as a matter of urgency? I have a terrible fear that with further climate change problems, we will see more coal tip landslides. Of course, we want to make sure that people's houses and livelihoods are safe, but if we do not even know the nature of the problem, we cannot work out how much money there is for it. I have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer; could the Leader of the House encourage him to see me before the spending review is complete?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue of which I am aware, not least because my constituency is a former mining area. There is a disused coal tip in the constituency that has become a feature of the landscape in the decades since mining stopped. The anniversary of Aberfan was not that long ago, so this important issue is at the forefront of people's mind. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the UK-wide agency, and I will ensure that what he has said in the House is passed on to it, in the hope that a fuller answer can be obtained for him from it. I cannot promise to be the Chancellor's diary secretary.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: The Speaker was outraged that the new national lockdown was leaked to the media, rather than announced in Parliament first. The Prime Minister was furious and set up a leak inquiry. Last week, I asked the Leader of the House for a statement this week, so that Parliament could scrutinise the process. Instead, we have had media reports that Cabinet Ministers have been cleared of any involvement, and that the focus is on No. 10. Now we have the

resignation of Mr Lee Cain, and the suggestion that he is responsible for the leak. This is not good enough. Parliament must be able to ask Ministers questions about this. Will the Leader of the House guarantee a statement next week about the leak inquiry?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend mentions Lee Cain; may I say what a fantastic public servant he has been? He was instrumental in ensuring that the Vote Leave campaign was successful, has made a huge contribution to this Government, in which he was an important figure, and will be a loss to it.

As regards announcements to this House, the Prime Minister and Mr Speaker were indeed seriously displeased by the leak, and that the House was not informed as the Prime Minister had intended, but there are opportunities to question the Prime Minister about the leak inquiry at Prime Minister's questions; I am not convinced that it deserves a specific statement of its own.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On top of the pandemic and the economic crisis, York has experienced two floods this year. Last week, the River Ouse reached 4.22 metres, which is a real stress and strain on businesses and residents, not least as it is only five years after the devastating floods of Storm Eva. We have yet to see mitigation; we have only had the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs promising a flood conference in York this year, which clearly is not happening. We need more than promises: we need action. Will the Leader of the House ask the Environment Secretary to come to the Dispatch Box and make a statement about how the Government will approach flood resilience? My constituents have had enough of flooding, year in, year out.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) last week, it is a terrible concern for people when they face flooding, and recurring flooding. That is why the Government have an unprecedented plan of expenditure—I think that over £5 billion will be spent on flood relief, and that Yorkshire will get the largest amount. I understand that the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has specific concerns, and I will certainly pass those on to the Secretary of State.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): For too long, second home owners in Cornwall and elsewhere have been able to avoid making any contribution to local services by registering their homes as businesses, thus avoiding council tax, and then benefiting from small business rate relief. The sense of injustice has deepened this year as some of the second home owners have gone on to benefit from the grants that the Government made available to support businesses through the pandemic. In 2018, the then Local Government Minister, who now happens to be the Chancellor, stated that the Government would look into closing that loophole. Can we have a ministerial statement to update the House on what action the Government are intending to take to close the loophole as soon as possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know this is a matter of significant concern to my hon. Friend. The Government are aware of the concerns that some second homes that are also available for letting are listed by the Valuation Office Agency as non-domestic properties and therefore liable

for business rates rather than council tax. Depending on their rateable value, many of these properties qualify for small business rate relief. The Government have consulted on possible measures to strengthen the criteria that need to be satisfied for holiday properties to be assessed for business rates, and the Government's full response will be set out in due course.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Yesterday in the covid-19 debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), revealed:

"When the pandemic started, we produced 1% of our PPE needs in the UK. By December, we will be providing 70%".—[*Official Report*, 11 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 1022.]

She seemed to regard that as cause for self-congratulation. However, although it is a tribute to British industry and British workers, it reveals shocking complacency in allowing the situation to develop, which has meant lost resilience, lost industry and lost jobs—and that is the case across public spending. Can we have a debate so that we can demand that the Government put Britain first and prioritise buying to support British jobs, and send a clear message to any bureaucrat who wants to stand in the way of change: "Get on board or get on your bike"?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Gentleman must be absolutely delighted, therefore, that we have left the European Union and will end the transition period on 31 December, because once we are out of the European Union we will be able to develop our own procurement policies. We will not be bound by EU red tape. We will be free to adopt either what he suggests or not. It will be liberty restored and a day of legend and song.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): In recent weeks, a number of colleagues from across this House have been subject to an increase in abuse, including threats against them and, most concerningly, against their families. This should not be something that is just accepted as part of the job. Will the Leader of the House update the House on whether the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Human Rights will be actioned in due course?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree that nobody in this House should feel unsafe. Mr Speaker himself, as a Deputy Speaker—the Chairman of Ways and Means—ran a very effective procedure of ensuring that Members could get access to safety installations in their homes, have personal safety devices, and could make their offices safe as well. I would urge all hon. and right hon. Members to look into what support can be given. It is available and it is there to be taken up. As regards the report of the JCHR, the Government apologise for the delay in their formal response, but the Home Office will be responding shortly.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP) [V]: In the UK we have a Government willing to break international law and in America we have a President who refuses to accept the result of a democratic election. Does the Leader of the House share my concern about the dangers posed by such acts, particularly the example they set to others across the globe, and does he therefore agree that

the defining principles of democracy and the rule of law should be debated by Members in this House as soon as possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am sorry to say—actually, I am rather glad to say—that I am not answering for the United States Government; I am answering for Her Majesty's Government. The United Kingdom Internal Market Bill is an excellent piece of legislation. It is quite right that we defend the British national interest and that is what this Government will do. The Bill was debated fully in this House.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can we have a statement on the impact on lives and livelihoods of the blanket measures that we are now under, and when we are released on 2 December, will we ensure that such blunt measures are not used again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There will be a general debate on covid on 18 November, when my right hon. Friend will have the opportunity to raise these points. I cannot pre-empt the decisions that will be made prior to 2 December, but everybody hopes that our liberties will not be destroyed. Nobody wanted to take them away, but as the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) pointed out, 50,000 people have died with covid. It is a very serious problem, and difficult decisions needed to be made.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Leader of the House, as well as every other Member of this House, will be acutely aware of the 3 million excluded people who have fallen between all the Government covid schemes. Many of them are facing, and have faced for the past few months, destitution and poverty. We had a debate about two or three months ago on the 3 million excluded. Would it be possible to have another debate, but this time in Government time, on those people who are facing such gut-wrenching problems?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We all have great sympathy for those people who have been excluded. We all have constituents in that situation, and it is important to raise their cases. Inevitably, even though £200 billion of taxpayers' money has been spent, as the Chancellor set out, it is not possible to save every job that is in existence at the moment or was in existence at the beginning of March, but enormous efforts have been made. As regards a debate, the Government have set out a lot of Government time for debating covid. That is an opportunity to raise the subject in the round, and that obviously includes the people who are excluded.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Britain's heritage is under attack, ironically from those missioned to be the guardians of it. The National Trust, while losing money and sacking staff, has commissioned an expensive review of its properties' links with colonialism, including Churchill's Chartwell; unheroic characters at the National Maritime Museum are re-evaluating Nelson's heroic status; and the custodians of the Churchill War Rooms are claiming that they need to look again at Churchill's legacy. Can we have a debate on how these charitable organisations' purpose is being perverted by political posturing, as they all seem to be in the thrall of the militant Black Lives Matter movement? Mr Deputy Speaker, defending our history and heritage is our era's battle of Britain.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would like to reiterate the points made in the letter sent by my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary to museums recently that they are not political campaigning institutions and they should not be intruding into today's politics. But

"Some talk of Alexander, and some of Hercules,

Of Hector and Lysander, and such great men as these

But of all the world's brave heroes, there's none that can compare

With"—

Boadicea, Alfred the Great, Richard the Lionheart, the Black Prince, Henry V, Francis Drake, Prince Rupert, Marlborough, Wolfe, Nelson, Moore, Wellington, Gordon and Montgomery, among others. These are great heroes and we should celebrate them, and I have not even mentioned—but I will now—Caractacus. Caractacus so impressed the Romans that, when they took him to Rome in chains, they freed him because they thought he was a fine and noble warrior. We should be proud of our history, and proud of Caractacus.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Sir John, you were on personal terms with a lot of those people, weren't you? [*Laughter.*]

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: Throughout this pandemic, staff at Coventry City Council have stepped up to the challenge, doing amazing work to support residents in need, but a decade of vicious Conservative cuts to budgets have taken their toll on local authorities, and now this crisis has further hit finances at the city council. Will the Leader of the House give Government time to discuss not only compensating councils for the financial hit of the pandemic, but providing them with funding to invest in the city and meet the community's needs—from building more council houses to reopening youth centres?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be a great pleasure to have a debate praising the Government for the amazing support we have provided to local councils during the pandemic—taxpayers' money—with £3 billion to help councils through this period, £400 million to support children, £1.1 billion to support local businesses, £919 million in additional un-ring-fenced funding, £465 million to support test, trace and contain activity, £100 million to support leisure centres and £32 million to support the clinically extremely vulnerable. There is £7.2 billion in total for local authorities and £24 billion of taxpayers' money for their local businesses. Should the hon. Lady want to ask the Backbench Business Committee for a debate to praise Her Majesty's Government, I hope it will be granted.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The situation on covid remains very grave, but there are some encouraging signs that in our capital city the number of cases continues to be considerably lower than in much of the rest of the country. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House ask the Health Secretary to come to the Commons to enable us to discuss a regional approach, which might enable London to leave lockdown more quickly than other parts of the country in order to safeguard our economy and save livelihoods?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The plan, as my right hon. Friend knows, is that we will move back to a local system on 2 December, but it is certainly worth passing on her point to my right hon. Friend, and I will ensure that he gets that message shortly.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that there is evidence that human rights standards may not have been upheld in the way that people in care homes, particularly those with dementia, have been treated during the pandemic. There is a Westminster Hall debate later today on the effect of covid on people with dementia, but, given the seriousness, importance and urgency of this finding, can we have a ministerial statement on what the Government are doing to rectify this matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady always raises the most important points at business questions and I am grateful to her for raising that because, across the whole House, there is concern about the suffering of people with dementia during this incredibly difficult period. As she rightly says, there is a Westminster Hall debate later on today and there will be a ministerial response to that. If, after that debate, she feels that the response is not complete enough, she can contact me or raise it again next week at business questions, and I will see what I can do to get her further information.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): As a proud vice-president of the Cotswold Canals Trust in Stroud, I want to place on record my huge congratulations to the trust on winning an awful lot of money—over £8 million—from the Lottery Heritage Fund to connect our canal towns. This is the culmination of years and years of work that has included local people, hundreds and hundreds of volunteers and our councils as well. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising all involved and find time for a debate, so that we can look at the importance of our canals and waterways in our post-covid recovery?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I welcome my hon. Friend's support for the canals of the Cotswolds and her hard work to support them as well. I offer my congratulations to the Stroud canals team and welcome the fact that lottery funds—£8.9 million—are being awarded to such causes. I am happy to say that, thanks to the stewardship of the Canal & River Trust, our canals are in rude health and well-funded by a mixture of commercial and charitable donations. England's canals are a beautiful reminder of our industrial heritage and today provide some of the defining characteristics of our country's landscape, from Birmingham's Venice-beating network of canals to the picturesque Kennet and Avon canal in my own constituency, which is even better than those in Venice.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Numerous Members have asked about virtual participation for those of us who are unable to attend the Chamber owing to Government advice—in essence, requesting reasonable adjustments. The answer of the Leader of the House has been no. On the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the 10th anniversary of the Equality Act 2010, what message does this send to clinically extremely vulnerable people? What advice would he give me, and to anyone requesting reasonable adjustments, for seeking legal recourse to ensure that no one is discriminated against?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would say that reasonable adjustments have been made, because extremely clinically vulnerable MPs are able to contribute. They are able to have a proxy vote, so their vote can be recorded. They may participate, as the hon. Lady has just shown, in the interrogative parts of Parliament's activities. We need to get the balance right between what can be done by MPs who are extremely clinically vulnerable and what allows Parliament to carry on doing its job. I fear that that is the key point.

I hope Members will understand that although their contributions have reflected their experiences and their concerns, and those of their party, it is our responsibility to consider Parliament's work as a whole. It is not just about the duty of individual MPs, but about the duties of our Parliament to the British people. That means that we need to be here physically for debates, votes, Bill Committees and statutory instrument Committees, because the business of Parliament needs to continue. Therefore, where it has been possible and sensible to adapt, where business has been able to continue with adaptations, that is what has been done, which is how the hon. Lady was able to appear moments ago.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Further to what was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), may I say that my constituents and I are very patriotic people but we are worried that aspects of our history are being woke-washed? Will the Leader of the House invite the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the protections we can afford our nation's war heroes from the left-wing, culture-cancelling attacks we are now observing?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Woke-washing sounds extremely painful, and I hope we will be woke-dry-cleaned pretty quickly, so that we get rid of the wokeness. I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question, because we have had an avalanche of miserable, Britain-hating nonsense about our history and our culture filling the airwaves in recent months. We have only to look at Extinction Rebellion's behaviour at the Cenotaph yesterday to see that. Left-wing troublemakers are determined to ignore our history and smear our past heroes, and not even show respect to those who gave their lives for our freedom. Her Majesty's Government are clear about our history and our culture: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a fantastic nation with a first-class history. As my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary said, we should never bow to the activists who want to scrub our history bare and start from year zero. We must retain and explain all aspects of our noble island's story for the benefit of future generations.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Coastal communities, such as the gorgeous South Shields, have been hit hardest by regressive Tory policies and now by the pandemic. Members from across this House signed my letter to the Communities Secretary in September asking for a release of dormant assets to aid coastal community recovery. I know that the Communities Secretary and his team have been preoccupied recently, after his prosperous constituency was awarded £25 million earmarked for deprived areas, but will the Leader of the House please urge his colleague to respond to us?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The towns fund, to which the hon. Lady refers, is a really good way of helping high streets to improve and of ensuring their viability, and it is available up and down the country. It is an important and successful initiative, which is helping to restore high streets that faced such difficult times and have found it even harder during the pandemic. I refer her to what I said about the amounts of money made available to local government bodies during this pandemic; unprecedented levels of support have been provided, showing the strength of the centre in supporting the localities, including her constituency.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Leader of the House on the success of Parliament Week last week? In Beaconsfield, I took part in several virtual question and answer sessions with secondary schools, where the question raised time and again was whether secondary schools and students could have a definitive answer on future exams in England. There was much anxiety about that. Students just want to know and to have the ability to plan for the future, so may we have a debate, in Government time, on the importance of school exams in England for the future and wellbeing of young people? Given that it is perfectly possible to hold exams in a socially distanced manner or online, does he agree that we need a definitive agreement or commitment from the Department for Education on exams continuing next year?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Exams will go ahead next summer, as they are the fairest and most appropriate way to measure a pupil's attainments. We are ensuring that students now have more time to prepare for their exams next year, and AS-levels, A-levels and GCSEs will mainly be held three weeks later to help to address the disruption caused by the pandemic. We are taking great steps to support all children to ensure that they do not fall behind because of the pandemic, with a £1 billion catch-up plan, £650 million of which was in the catch-up premium, helping pupils to make up for lost time in education, and £350 million in the national tutoring programme, a package of targeted funding for the most disadvantaged pupils. So steps are being taken, and exams will take place because they are the best way of judging students' progress.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is now some four months since Baroness Cumberlege produced her report "First do no harm" on the problems caused by vaginal mesh, Primodos and sodium valproate. After four months, we have still had no firm action on this, so can we now have a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue and hear what the Government are proposing to do to implement the recommendations of the Cumberlege report?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I actually gave evidence to the Cumberlege report, as I think the hon. Lady knows, on the question of Primodos, so I have an interest in the response to that very important report. I will therefore take this up, as the hon. Lady is asking me to do.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Last year I was elected on a clear promise to level up in Burnley, and a key pillar of that is securing the towns deal that we have missed out on for so long, which will help to

[Antony Higginbotham]

drive forward our local economy. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government remain committed to extending towns deals to even more places, and will he go further and give his support to Burnley's bid?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not sure that I can freelance and support Burnley's bid, but I wish my hon. Friend every success with it and commend him for being such a dedicated campaigner for his constituency. The towns fund is a wonderful opportunity for regeneration throughout the regions, and he has been making a very good case for Burnley. I would say, as regards the criticism of the towns fund, that the Government completely disagree with the Public Accounts Committee's criticisms of the towns fund and its selection programme, which was comprehensive, robust and fair. The towns fund will, as my hon. Friend says, help to level up the country, creating jobs and building stronger and more resilient local economies. Those on the Opposition Benches should be ashamed of themselves for not welcoming this effort to help—

Valerie Vaz indicated dissent.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It has been discredited only in the minds of those who never wished to give any credit to it in the first place. It is a great scheme. It is an important scheme, and I am afraid the Public Accounts Committee got it wrong.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: Given that the ongoing restrictions relating to social gathering numbers will prevent businesses from hosting their annual much deserved Christmas parties, could the Leader of the House tell us whether the Treasury and HMRC plan to review the use of the social benefit allowance this year? If they do not, will he join me in urging them to do so and perhaps to allow for a transfer of the tax allowance to enable employers to provide our key workers with a gift equivalent to thank them for their efforts throughout this most challenging of years? Does the Leader of the House agree with me, and will he support me in ensuring that this can happen?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is always dangerous for any Leader of the House to trespass on matters relating to decisions that will be made by the Treasury. The Treasury will make its decisions and announce them in the fullness of time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I should like to thank the Leader of the House for his statement. Before the next ministerial statement, on Her Majesty the Queen's platinum jubilee, we will have a three-minute suspension to enable the safe departure and arrival of Members of Parliament.

12.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Her Majesty the Queen's Platinum Jubilee

12.46 pm

Mr Speaker: Her Majesty the Queen will, in just over a year from now, mark the 70th anniversary of her accession to the throne. As the House will hear from the Culture Secretary in a moment, the Queen's platinum jubilee will be marked by national celebrations.

A platinum jubilee has never been achieved by a sovereign before in the history of this country. Hon. Members may feel that it would be appropriate for both Houses of Parliament to present a gift to Her Majesty to mark this historic occasion. In 1977, to mark Her Majesty's silver jubilee, the fountain in New Palace Yard was built. In 2002, to mark the golden jubilee, the sundial in Old Palace Yard was installed. In 2012, to mark Her Majesty's diamond jubilee, the stained glass window in Westminster Hall was created. The House will therefore be pleased to hear that arrangements are in hand for a gift to Her Majesty from Parliament to mark her platinum jubilee in 2022.

Preliminary arrangements are being made. A cross-party project board, with Members from both Houses, has been established to decide on this gift and oversee the delivery of the project. Following his work organising the diamond jubilee gift, I have asked the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) to lead this project. As was the case in 2012, when hundreds of parliamentarians contributed towards the diamond jubilee gift, this gift will be funded by personal contributions from Members of both Houses entirely at their own discretion. It is proposed that no public funds will be spent on the gift. I will be outlining more details of the gift and the ways in which hon. Members may contribute, if they wish to do so, in the new year.

12.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a brief and important statement about the Government's plans to mark Her Majesty the Queen's platinum jubilee in 2022. The 6th of February 1952 marked the dawn of a new Elizabethan age in our United Kingdom. For a nation emerging from the rubble of the second world war, the new monarch represented an opportunity for a fresh start and a brighter future. The seven decades since have seen a huge amount of change, progress and—at times—turmoil. Fashions, technologies and many Prime Ministers have come and gone, but throughout there has been one constant: Her Majesty has been the golden thread that binds us, uniting our kingdom.

As you said, Mr Speaker, 2022 will represent an extraordinary milestone for Her Majesty, for the country and for the Commonwealth. No British monarch has ever celebrated 70 years on the throne, and I know the entire country will want to come together to celebrate Her Majesty's remarkable reign, reflect on her legacy and look forward.

To honour this extraordinary historic occasion, the Government are working with the royal household and devolved Administrations on an extensive programme that will unite every generation in all 54 countries of the Commonwealth, from the south Pacific islands to

the Canadian Arctic, in celebration of Her Majesty. There will, of course, be the traditional nationwide fanfare of street parties and celebrations, building up to a special four-day platinum jubilee weekend that we will celebrate by moving the late May bank holiday to Thursday 2 June and adding an additional bank holiday on Friday 3 June.

We are working with the United Kingdom's leading creative minds to make this a jubilee weekend to remember—one that mixes the best of British ceremonial splendour and pageantry with cutting-edge artistic and technological display, recognises the global contribution made under Her Majesty's reign and offers thanks for her seven decades of unwavering public service. It will involve a mixture of spectacular moments in big cities, as well as local events in towns and villages across all our United Kingdom.

We will of course continue to honour some proud jubilee traditions. When Her Majesty's great, great grandmother, Queen Victoria, reached her 50th year on the throne, she issued a special medal to mark her golden jubilee. Her Majesty has graciously approved plans to issue her own platinum jubilee medal, to be given to those who work in public service, including the armed forces, the emergency services and the prison services.

As you said, Mr Speaker, Parliament is preparing its own jubilee gift, organised by you, Sir, the Lord Speaker and, of course, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), and we are working on a series of legacy projects that will serve as an enduring tribute to Her Majesty.

We will of course unveil further plans in the coming months as they develop, but 2022 will be a landmark year for the United Kingdom. The platinum jubilee will be the jewel in the crown of a series of events showcasing the very best of this country to its people and to the rest of the world, including the Birmingham Commonwealth games and Festival UK 2022. After a very difficult year where we have come together to fight the common enemy of coronavirus, I am sure that the House will want to join me in looking forward to happier times for our great nation, when we will be united in celebration instead.

12.52 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I very much welcome the statement and the announcement that you just made. I thank the Secretary of State for setting out the terms of his statement, published last night, and I join him in his desire to look forward with optimism to this celebration.

We warmly welcome the good news that Her Majesty's platinum jubilee will be recognised by an extra bank holiday, as I am sure do many people up and down the country. The Secretary of State's reference in his newspaper article today to the celebration in 2012 of the London Olympic games evokes for many of us a much happier time—one when we all came together to celebrate and mark our shared values. We all look forward to a time when we can have street parties, watch live performances, listen to live music and be together. Those are all things whose absence is so keenly felt at the moment.

Of course, 2022 is already shaping up to be a big year of celebration, with the centenary of the BBC and the hosting of the Commonwealth games in Birmingham. It is in very large part due to the Queen herself that we

see the success of the Commonwealth as a group of nations working together, despite huge differences and the historical context from which it was formed. We look forward to hearing more about the plans to make these celebrations bring together our whole United Kingdom, as well as the Commonwealth, as we get nearer to 2022.

The numerous qualities displayed by Her Majesty throughout her long reign of dedicated service—in particular, her incredible work ethic, her kindness and her patience—represent the very best of our values as a country. As we live through one of the most difficult periods of her reign, it was a source of comfort to millions when the Queen addressed the nation earlier this year. Her promise that “We will meet again,” echoing the words made popular by Dame Vera Lynn, who sadly passed away this year, were especially poignant for millions of people for whom the Queen has been a constant in their lives.

The Opposition echo the Secretary of State's hopes that the country will emerge from this dark period in time for these celebrations and that they may be a way to mark a new optimism for our future as we reflect on the great changes that have taken place over the past 70 years.

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution, and I am very glad that we will be able to proceed with this on a cross-party basis. She was absolutely right to highlight also the centenary of the BBC, which will of course take place in 2022, and Her Majesty's role in the Commonwealth and, indeed, the comfort that Her Majesty gave the entire nation in the darkest days of the coronavirus. This in turn, in 2022, will be our opportunity to thank her for all she has given the nation.

Mr Speaker: Let us head up to the west midlands to visit the Chair of the Select Committee, Julian Knight.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) [V]: I welcome this announcement; it is right that our United Kingdom recognises Her Majesty's lifetime of service in this special and unique way. Does the Secretary of State agree that this bank holiday could also provide an opportunity for a reset for UK tourism, and will he commit to carrying out the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's recommendations for the tourism sector: a national campaign to restore consumer confidence in tourism, a tourism data hub and the implementation of a full review with the Treasury on long-term support for the tourism sector?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the challenges faced by the tourism sector. Tourism is about bringing people together; doors have been slammed shut and planes grounded, and it has been a very difficult time. I very much hope that 2022 will be a moment when the sector can really take off and we can showcase the very best of our United Kingdom around the world. We will be taking advantage of this opportunity to boost tourism, and I am of course carefully examining all the proposals that my hon. Friend has outlined.

Mr Speaker: Let us head up to Ochil and the SNP spokesperson, John Nicolson.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: Seventy years in the one job is a remarkable achievement, and we on these Benches congratulate the Queen on the occasion of her platinum jubilee. My mother, who died this summer, was the same age as the Queen. A left-wing, pro-European Scottish nationalist, she always had a bit of a soft spot for her contemporary. Mum was not a natural monarchist, but she shared a sense, as so many of that generation do, that they had gone through a dark time together; the war, she felt, had given them a bond.

The UK has changed beyond all recognition in the seven decades since the Queen came to the throne. In 1953, we were still living with the brutal consequences of a war that had seen slaughter on an unprecedented scale all across Europe and the far east. We were a new nuclear power; rationing was in place; and we were to have a new national health service treating people on the basis of need, not money. Families like my own no longer needed to live in fear of facing a choice between food and medicine. It was an age of deference: our colonies were demanding and getting independence; and there were stirrings of demands for Scottish independence, with the first SNP Member of Parliament elected in Motherwell. Westminster MPs were arguing about Europe, however, so perhaps some things have not changed that much. We recognise the years and dedication Elizabeth I, Queen of Scots, has put into a job she might not have chosen.

Politicians often have a peculiar idea of what the Queen is going to enjoy when they arrange parties for her—who can forget her look of elation when standing in the dome with Peter Mandelson one damp London Hogmanay? So I make a plea to the Secretary of State: try to arrange a shindig she would really enjoy—maybe a ceilidh; at 96, I think she deserves it.

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and perhaps I should put on record my thanks to the Scottish Government, and indeed the Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments, for their support in bringing this together. He is absolutely right to highlight both the constants and the changes throughout Her Majesty's reign. He is also absolutely right that we want to make this a party and a celebration to remember. One of the things that was always put up on the wall during the Olympic games was, "Just make sure it's not like the millennium dome celebrations." I shall not comment on it this time around, but we are ensured that we have the very finest brains and minds to make sure that it is a great occasion.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend recognise the sense of duty of not just the Queen but the Princess Royal, Princess Anne, who visited Harlow citizens advice bureau recently in recognition of its hard work? In paying tribute to the royal family, will he also pay tribute to Harlow CAB, which has done so much to help those who are struggling or facing difficulties in their lives?

Oliver Dowden: I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to Harlow citizens advice bureau and, indeed, citizens advice bureaux up and down the country, which, as I know from my constituency, have done so much to support people during this difficult coronavirus. He is absolutely right to highlight the role of other senior

members of the royal family. All of them will join in marking this celebration and be involved in events up and down the nation during 2022.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: The platinum jubilee is a wonderful prospect and we know that the Queen loves Scotland. May I say, as a Scottish MP, that that love is deeply reciprocated? I suggest to the Secretary of State that one way to mark the jubilee would be to give each and every school the length and breadth of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland a small seedling tree. Irish yews could be given to schools in Northern Ireland, Scots pines in Scotland, English oaks in England and Welsh oaks—the sessile oak—in Wales. The pupils could plant and nurture these trees as a long-term project and it would teach them about the environment, our native species and what climate change and global warming is all about. It would be their contribution to helping the environment of our country.

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good suggestion. I am trying to resist the temptation to reveal some of the plans that we are working on, but I can say that we are looking at the idea of a Queen's green canopy, working with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We will plant trees up and down the country.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I got terribly excited yesterday when I heard that my right hon. Friend would be making this statement, and of course I welcome his announcement. Will he commit to coming forward with further statements when he can announce as part of the celebrations an unveiling of a new statue of Her Majesty the Queen and a statue of Dame Vera Lynn? And will he fix something that is an obvious omission? Previously, every time we have had a jubilee celebration, there has been a city status competition, and we need that so that Southend becomes a city.

Oliver Dowden: I must say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that when I was looking at the call list, I had an inkling that this might come up. Of course, we are considering exactly that proposal and we will make further statements shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the encouragement that he gives us all across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in relation to the celebration. I, for one, am delighted to hear the wonderful plans for Her Majesty's jubilee. It excites me to my core as a loyalist and as someone who supports the royal family. I am not alone in this. I represent Strangford and, as is the case across all Northern Ireland, we have a massive community of service personnel; their loyalty to the Queen and to duty saw many of us through tough times. Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify that as well as being a part of the national events that he has referred to, Northern Ireland will see additional funding to ensure that we are able to celebrate our Queen as we so wish to do? How will that funding be allocated in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We want to ensure that this jubilee is celebrated by all generations and people from all different backgrounds

and all nations of our United Kingdom. In terms of funding, we are discussing the settlement with the Treasury as part of the spending review. The principal role of Government will be to ensure things such as the security of events, policing and so on. We will look for private contributions for individual celebrations, but we will work through the details of that and come back to the House shortly.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is great to follow my friend, who also happens to be the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). On that theme, as a long-term friend of Northern Ireland and a member of Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, may I ask that when the Secretary of State looks at the programme, he ensures that a senior member of the royal family spends some time over those four days in Northern Ireland, where—as my right hon. Friend, I and all Members fully understand—Her Majesty is held in huge regard by the people who live there?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the affection for Her Majesty shown by the people of Northern Ireland, and I am quite sure that senior members of the royal family will be travelling to Northern Ireland as part of the celebrations of jubilee year.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the update from the Secretary of State, and given the year that we have all had, this is a welcome announcement indeed. He is in such a generous mood, so will he tell the House, as a commitment to the Union, whether he has had chance to address calls from across Wales to commemorate St David's Day with its own dedicated bank holiday? I also hope that the platinum jubilee medal will be made at the Royal Mint in my constituency, and I would appreciate it if he confirmed exactly what conversations he has had with the Welsh Government about their involvement in commemorating the Queen's platinum jubilee.

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We are working very well with the Welsh Government and my officials are in close contact. I have written to my opposite number in Wales. On her point about St David's Day, there are many calls for bank holidays, and I am sure those will be considered through the normal process, which is overseen by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. On where the medal will be minted, she has made a strong case and I will take that into consideration.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): The celebration of Britain's first ever platinum jubilee will mean that the eyes of the world are placed firmly upon us. As well as showing our deep appreciation for Her Majesty's years of unwavering dedication to public service, does my right hon. Friend agree that the jubilee celebrations present an exciting opportunity to showcase the very best of Britain's cultural and artistic talents, including from those in Bishop Auckland?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the great talent in her constituency. It is one of the great opportunities of this jubilee to harness the talents of the creative industries and the best of British

tech as we look back in ceremonials and forward with new concepts. I am sure that people from her constituency will contribute to that process.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: As we come out of the coronavirus pandemic and look to recover over the next few years, it is vital that we focus our money and attention on those most in need of our support. Does the Secretary of State not agree, then, that in this time of economic hardship we should not be spending excessively on ceremonies, pageantry and celebrations, but rather should focus on supporting those least well off and those hardest hit by this pandemic?

Oliver Dowden: Of course, we are providing support for those hardest hit, although I shall not go through all the detail of that at the Dispatch Box now. I am of course mindful, and I know the royal household will be mindful, of ensuring that money is spent wisely through this process.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I dissociate myself from the rather ungracious remarks made by the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar). I warmly welcome the platinum jubilee bank holiday and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on his statement. Does he agree that these celebrations ought to be truly national, and will he join tens of thousands of people from Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland in expressing deep appreciation of Her Majesty's unblemished and extraordinary record of public service?

Oliver Dowden: I am delighted to join the people of Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland in expressing that. This is the point about the jubilee: I hope that everyone across the nation will have their own way to show their thanks to Her Majesty, whether that is in street parties, celebrations or carnivals. Many ideas will come up through this process.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I want to place on record my respect and admiration for the manner in which Her Majesty has served our country and beyond—her work ethic and sensibility in a life devoted to public service spanning an incredible seven decades, which puts the likes of me to shame. Given that our world-leading creative industries, including those in and around Slough, have been particularly hard hit by the covid pandemic, will the Secretary of State make every effort to ensure that they play a central role and that all their talents are utilised in celebrating the Queen's platinum jubilee?

Oliver Dowden: I am very happy to give that commitment. I have been very mindful of the opportunities for the creative industries. Of course, it is not just the platinum jubilee. We also have the festival of the United Kingdom in 2022, on which I am working closely with Martin Green; that will also create many opportunities for the creative industries.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): During my seven decades, I have only ever known one Head of State. This leads me to make a political point. I hope that I will not be accused of will be accused of lèse-majesté;

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

it is only a small-p political point. Street parties are great and all that sort of stuff, but could we also proclaim the virtue of the monarchical system during the celebrations? After all, if we were tempted to become a republic, we could have President Trump or President Macron as Head of State, or, even worse, a grey, colourless figure like the German President.

There is another political point that we could proclaim, which is that the only reason that we have a Union between Scotland and England is that we had a Union of the two Crowns and James VI of Scotland became James I of our country. That is another thing that we could proclaim: our United Kingdom.

Lastly, we could proclaim the fact that the Queen is the Head of State of several Commonwealth countries, particularly very important ones such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Can we take that opportunity to proclaim that union, which is particularly important for culture, trade and defence following Brexit? Perhaps a senior member of the royal family could take the opportunity to visit those countries.

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight all three points. I am an ardent monarchist, and the jubilee provides an opportunity to remind us of the benefits of monarchy. He is absolutely right to talk about the role of the Commonwealth. Although plans are still being developed, I am quite sure that members of the royal family will wish to visit other Commonwealth nations as part of this process.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: I fully recognise and respect the service undertaken for almost 70 years by Queen Elizabeth I, Queen of Scots. My parents' generation held her in great affection, and they took me to a street party to celebrate her coronation. However, my next street party attendance will definitely be on the occasion of Scotland gaining her independence. Another bank holiday will be welcome, bringing us nearer to the European average and providing folk with an opportunity to reflect on how this country has changed over the last 70 years.

Oliver Dowden: I am quite sure that many millions of Scots will look forward to a party celebrating Her Majesty's platinum jubilee more than to a celebration of such narrow nationalism.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: I, too, welcome today's announcement. Does the Secretary of State agree with the importance of ensuring that these celebrations truly are nationwide in every community? Could he help to arrange, perhaps via the national lottery, for some small grants to be made available to community groups so that they can organise events on those important days?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course we will be working with the national lottery, and we will be looking at ways in which we can seed and support such celebrations in every part of the country—the four nations and all parts of England.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I have a birthday at the start of June and I still have fond memories of the silver jubilee, when a bus conductor

spotted my third birthday badge, stopped the bus outside a bakery and bought me a red, white and blue cupcake. But jubilees are not just about parties; they are a time to reflect on and celebrate change. The world of 2022 will be very different from that of 1952 or even 1977, so what will the Government be doing to ensure that young people—and adults, for that matter—can celebrate the many technological and scientific changes, and, importantly, the massive positive social changes, that we have seen over the seven decades of the Queen's reign?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which is that jubilees are a celebration of both continuity and change. One theme that we are looking at as part of the jubilee celebrations is the important role of young people, and we are engaging a lot with young people as we develop the plans. We are also looking at technological developments. As we celebrate the jubilee, I hope that we will also be able to showcase the very best of British technology.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con) [V]: I had the huge privilege of being Lord President of the Privy Council for two years, and I saw at first hand how incredibly seriously and devotedly the Queen carries out every single one of her constitutional duties. Does my right hon. Friend agree that she really has been a rock for the world in a time of such turbulent change and so many challenges?

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: the monarch does not just exercise a ceremonial role. Her Majesty genuinely takes a deep interest in matters of state, as many Ministers and former Prime Ministers will attest.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): As part of the jubilee celebrations in 2012, the Queen visited Vernon Park in my constituency, and we had a brilliant party, celebrating the best of Nottingham and the best of Britain. We are ready to do it all again 10 years on, whether that is in Vernon Park or the many green flag parks in my constituency. I seek from the Secretary of State his commitment to hold events around the country and his personal support for an event in north Nottingham.

Oliver Dowden: I am happy to give my personal support to an event in north Nottingham and, indeed, in every town and village up and down our nation. The one thing I might resist committing to, given our experience during the diamond jubilee in 2012, is doing anything on the River Thames again.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): The celebration of the platinum jubilee is for not only the residents of South West Hertfordshire and this country but people throughout the Commonwealth. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a real opportunity to reaffirm the links of fellowship and affection throughout the nations of the Commonwealth, which help to truly make global Britain happen?

Oliver Dowden: I am a fellow Hertfordshire MP, and of course, Her Majesty the Queen has close links to Hertfordshire, since that is where the Queen Mother grew up. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the role of

the Commonwealth. The links we have to Commonwealth nations are one of the great strengths of our nation, and no one has done more to promote the Commonwealth than Her Majesty the Queen.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: The Secretary of State mentioned the Queen's astonishing unifying effect, which we saw most recently in her address to the nation during the first covid lockdown. As one of the many millions of Scots who the Secretary of State rightly said will be celebrating the Queen's platinum jubilee, will he assure me that the Queen's ability to unify the four nations of the United Kingdom will be reflected, and will he encourage the Scottish Government to reflect that in whatever jubilee celebrations take place, including in my city of Edinburgh?

Oliver Dowden: I am quite sure that the city of Edinburgh, which is home to a royal residence, will play a central role in the celebrations in 2022. Of course, in celebrating the platinum jubilee, we will celebrate the remarkable Union of our four nations—possibly the most successful union of nations in modern history.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): In the long history of our nation's monarchs, Her Majesty is one of the greatest ever, and her platinum jubilee will be a significant and wonderful moment. Our nation, and certainly the people of Harrogate and Knaresborough, will want to recognise and thank her for her wisdom, dedication and service and then celebrate it. Will there be events to celebrate up and down the country and throughout the year in which my constituents can participate?

Oliver Dowden: I am sure that all the people of Harrogate will play their role in the celebrations. There will be year-long celebrations, and then on the four days of the bank holiday weekend, there will be different moments. We will be reflecting, thanksgiving and celebrating. It is not just a party; it is really a moment to say thank you to Her Majesty.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I feel a bit sorry for the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), only knowing one queen. I have known quite a few in my time; some of them have even been members of royal families. One of the great changes that has happened during this Queen's reign is that gay men have managed to achieve phenomenal changes in social attitudes in this country. There are many people able to marry the people they love, and that was not possible when she came to the throne. I just hope that this will be a genuinely diverse celebration. I am sure it will, and I fully welcome it.

I hope that it will not just be big events in big cities, but that there will be big events organised from the centre in small towns, in places such as Treorchy, which

would run a brilliant event. We have lots of male voice choirs, and we even have a few drag queens, so we could put on a really good show. I hope that the medal will be minted in the Mint—I cannot think of anywhere else where one would want to mint anything other than in the Mint, the Royal Mint, in fact, in Llantrisant.

One tiny word of caution. I remember that, in the 2002 celebrations, because it was a long weekend, there were lots of medical problems because the NHS had not really got itself together to think about how to deal with lots of people with long-standing medical problems. We need to think about that, but otherwise, let's have a great old party.

Oliver Dowden: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support. He raises an important point about the NHS, and I will pick that up with our colleagues in the Department for Health and Social Care. He is absolutely right to highlight the huge changes that we have seen in our nation, but, at the same time, we have had this constant of Her Majesty. That is the essence of the celebration. He is absolutely right about diversity, and it is so important that everyone in our nation feels they can come together and celebrate, and that the celebration reflects the diversity of modern Britain.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): And we have even had the first openly gay Member of Parliament elected as Deputy Speaker under her reign.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: With the positive news this week that there is a vaccine on the horizon, we can look forward to a future in which we can start to get back to normal. Will my right hon. Friend work with me to assist those in North Devon who will be planning to celebrate our monarch, who has served us in both good times and bad?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, of course. I am sure that North Devon will put on a fantastic show to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's platinum jubilee and, further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), there are opportunities to have celebrations in each part of the UK, in every town and village, and to come together for larger national celebrations as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State for the statement he has made today, and we will now suspend for three minutes for the safe departure and arrival of Members of Parliament.

1.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

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

Point of Order

1.26 pm

Wes Streeting: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to you for the chance to make this point of order on behalf of my constituent Harpreet Chahal, regarding her husband's visa application. This has been ongoing since March. Her husband's visa application was initially refused, but the decision has since been overturned. Her husband Mr Singh submitted his documents, including his passport, to the Home Office, but they have not heard back for weeks. The reason I raise this as a point of order is that I have written to the Home Office and made a number of representations. My most recent letter, at the end of September, has gone unanswered. The complication here is that Mrs Chahal has given birth to a baby and the father has not had a chance to see his wife or his child for months. I do not usually raise casework in this way, but this is such an awful case and it points to wider issues that I know Members across the House have experienced in terms of correspondence with the Home Office. Even if there is a delay, I think it is right that the Home Office should keep us informed so that we can keep our constituents informed. That is why am I raising it in this way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for prior notice of the point of order. Mr Speaker has made it absolutely clear on several occasions that when Members of Parliament write to Government Departments, those Departments have a duty to respond to the Member of Parliament as quickly as possible. Members on the Treasury Bench will have heard his point of order and I hope they will make absolutely certain that the Department is made aware of it.

Backbench Business

Refugee Communities: Covid-19

1.27 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis facing refugees across the globe; has considered the secondary effects of the covid-19 pandemic on refugees and displaced persons in fragile or low-income states; and calls on the Government to provide urgent support to the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries and communities as they deal with the covid-19 pandemic.

I am incredibly grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate, to its co-sponsor my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and to cross-party colleagues who supported the call for it.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are interconnected as a global village. We breathe the same air, drink the same water and enjoy a shared humanity that transcends borders. In that spirit, this debate addresses the plight of the world's refugees in the face of coronavirus, and calls on the Government to do more to help.

This is not just a crisis across Asia, Africa and the middle east; it also affects Europe and the UK, as we have seen desperate people make perilous voyages across the English channel this summer and the terrible tragedy of refugees drowning at sea. These are desperate people exploited by criminal gangs and failed utterly by the international community.

As the MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, I can claim some connection to the word "refugee".

It was originally coined by the French Huguenots fleeing religious persecution after 1685, many of whom came to Spitalfields in my constituency and left their mark on the east end's streets, architecture and heritage.

The east end was home to many thousands of Jewish refugees in the 1880s. Jewish refugees from Portugal gave us fish and chips, and much else, of course. After 1881, Jews fleeing pogroms in the Russian empire came to the UK, and in the 1930s they came fleeing the Nazis; they included my hon. Friend from the other House, Lord Dubs, who escaped in the Kindertransport train. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude for all that he has done, and continues to do, to fight for refugee children. It is a great shame that our Government have not taken up his powerful case for our hosting refugee children.

We have accepted refugees who have fled civil war and conflict in many parts of the world, including the Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin, and people from eastern Europe, Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia and Iraq. As a nation at our best, we provided them with a welcome home, and a chance to succeed. We have benefited, of course, from their contribution to our politics, culture, economy and much else, which has added new dimensions to our Britishness. Of course, there are also the incredible contributions of many great figures, such as Karl Marx. There have been contributions to our business community, too—the founder of the Tesco family came from my constituency—and to many other fields.

The landing has not always been soft. There have always been bigots putting up barriers, and blaming and stigmatising refugees, but they have thankfully been in a minority. The UK can be proud of welcoming refugees, and of its global contribution to protecting them, for example through the role that Clement Atlee and Ernest Bevin played in the 1950s in founding the United Nations and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. There was also, under the Labour Government, the establishment of the Department for International Development, which this Government have sadly abolished in the middle of a global pandemic. I know the Minister will say that it is business as usual, despite the merger of DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; I hope so, when it comes to protecting the poorest in the world, who need our support.

Today, the refugee crisis is on a scale that none of us could have foreseen. Nearly 80 million people—more than the entire British population—have been forced out of their home by conflict and persecution. Among them, nearly 26 million are classed as refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. These children and young people have been uprooted and displaced at the most important time in their life. Millions of stateless people have been denied nationality and citizenship; access to basic rights, such as education, healthcare, and employment; and freedom of movement. They are often crowded into unsanitary camps, in which, despite the efforts of global non-governmental organisations, national Governments and the international community, there are huge issues in accessing healthcare. Life expectancy is incredibly low and infectious disease is widespread in them—and this is before we take into account the impact of coronavirus.

Over half of those affected by the Syrian refugee crisis have been displaced into refugee settlements. There are camps in Chad housing Sudanese refugees; camps on the Tunisian-Libyan border; the Kakuma camp in Kenya, one of the largest in the world; and camps in Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan and Yemen. Of course, millions of Syrian refugees are being hosted by Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and many other countries. One of the biggest camps in the world, in Bangladesh, is for the Rohingya people fleeing murderous violence and what the UN has described as ethnic cleansing; there is an International Court of Justice case on genocide committed by the Myanmar military and Government. Millions of people are living in that camp in temporary accommodation. I saw at first hand the impact on people, the vast majority of them children and women, of the unimaginable violence and genocide committed by the Burmese military. These people cannot work, and are traumatised by what has happened, having lost everything. Homes and villages were burned down; their mothers were raped in front of them, and their fathers and the young men in their family were murdered. Those were the testimonies that I heard when I visited those camps in 2018.

There is also the Syrian crisis, which we have been witnessing for many years. I visited the Beqaa Valley in 2013, at the beginning of the crisis, and saw the impact of that conflict on the children in particular, but also on the men and women. The situation persists, and the international community has failed to force the Syrian Government to end the war. Many have argued, including the president of the International Rescue Committee,

David Miliband, that the camps should be closed down, with refugees being allowed to integrate into communities and to work. We also need to do more to enable the right of return for refugees, which means that much more action is required of the international community to look at ways of dealing with the root causes of the conflicts that have often led to people being forced out of countries—whether it be Syria, Myanmar or elsewhere.

The tragedy is that the huge financial commitment required to host the sudden influx of refugees is placed on the shoulders of the countries that are least able to afford it. Eighty four per cent of the world's refugees are living in developing countries, and seven out of the top 10 developing countries hosting refugees are considered fragile states in the OECD's fragility framework.

Although many countries suspended their refugee resettlement schemes due to the coronavirus pandemic, many of them have now resumed, but not here in the UK. The Government have also cruelly voted down the Dubs amendment, which would have guaranteed family reunion rights for child refugees after our withdrawal from the EU. I call on the Minister today to think again and work with his colleagues in the Home Office to make that happen. If there is one way to pay tribute to the courage and determination of Lord Dubs, who was a child refugee himself, this would be the way to do it, and I hope the Minister will take that on. The UK has accepted only a small number of refugees and asylum seekers, amounting to about 0.25% of the UK's total population. Let us compare that with what some of the poorest countries are doing in hosting hundreds of thousands, if not more than a million, refugees.

This year, on top of all the problems facing refugees, we have seen the impact of the pandemic. We know that covid-19 thrives in crowded, cramped conditions where people cannot wash their hands frequently and where medical assistance is extremely limited. We know also that the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, which is one of the biggest in Europe, desperately needs assistance. CAFOD is warning about the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, saying that the concern for the large refugee populations is that social distancing, self-isolation and frequent handwashing are nearly impossible in the communities in which they live. This problem is widespread—whether we look at Syria, Lebanon, Bangladesh or elsewhere.

From the Greek islands to Gaza and from Bangladesh to Botswana, the pandemic is set to sweep through the world's refugee camps, and we need to do more. The United Nations Secretary-General has said that the covid-19 pandemic

“is menacing the whole of humanity—and so the whole of humanity must fight back.”

That is surely the right approach. In early April, more than 200 Members of Parliament signed a letter to the Prime Minister, which I co-ordinated, calling for urgent support. Those calls remain necessary. Our call was for the UK Government to support the UN's \$2 billion global humanitarian response to covid, to scale up the public health response, to support refugees who need help, to deliver personal protective equipment, to work with international partners, the World Bank and the IMF to cope with the impact of covid in middle income countries, and, of course, to support the UN General-Secretary's call for a global ceasefire, including any UN Security Council resolution for a global ceasefire,

[*Rushanara Ali*]

to de-escalate conflicts in many of the parts of the world that are giving rise to the forced displacement of people.

The Government have gone some way to provide humanitarian assistance, but we call on the Government to do more on this particular agenda—on ending conflicts, holding to account certain Governments who are not doing enough, and also working with the international community to provide the much-needed funding.

For many years, I have campaigned with colleagues from across the House on the Rohingya crisis, so I want to focus my final remarks on the plight of the Rohingya people who have faced, as I said earlier, incomprehensible atrocities, killings, torture, executions, mass deportations, the razing of villages, and women and girls enduring gang rape and other forms of horrific sexual violence. I heard their testimonies at first hand when I went to Rakhine state in 2013 and then in 2017 and then to Cox's Bazar, which hosts a million refugees from Myanmar who have been persecuted.

We have just recently marked the third anniversary of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing to Bangladesh to escape the genocide, but the genocidal violence against the Rohingya in the summer of 2017 did not come out of the blue. It came from a combination of decades of persecution, systematic discrimination and the denial of citizenship and basic human rights. In Myanmar, there has been and continues to be a significant escalation of violence, and the UN continues to document violence against children, including killings, maiming and sexual violence. The recent clearance operation was among the worst, and hundreds of thousands of Muslims who live in Burma continue to be vulnerable.

Earlier this year, The Gambia lodged a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice. Canada and the Netherlands have formally joined the case. As penholder for Burma in the UN Security Council, the UK should follow suit, and I have called the UK Government to do so time and again, as have others. I hope the Minister will be able to take that on and follow the lead of The Gambia, the Netherlands, Canada and a number of other countries in the prevention of genocide. This particular case is so important, because it will prevent the Burmese military from committing further atrocities and prevent people from having to take their lives in their hands once again. That is why it is so important that our Government support that move.

In terms of what we do next and how we provide support to those who desperately need it, I draw attention to the calls by former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, who has said of the refugee crisis:

“This is not a problem in far-off lands that rich countries can ignore”.

There is growing demand that the Governments of the developed world, including our own, shoulder more of the responsibility. It is in our interest. That means we need to provide funding. I know the British Government are doing some of that, but we need to go further. We need to lead the way, working with the new US Administration. We need to act to try to ensure that there is a proper global health and economic recovery plan for those countries, because that is what will stem

the rise in conflict, the increase in refugees and people being forced out of their homes, and it will help to reduce conflict.

We need to double funding to the World Bank for emergency aid. We need to provide more support to the International Monetary Fund to help those countries, so that they do not end up being desperate and the economic troubles do not cause further conflict and division, thereby causing more people to suffer and end up as refugees. We also need to do more to tackle climate change, which will create more refugees. In Bangladesh, 30 million people are likely to become climate refugees, so there is a great deal that we need to do going forward.

I hope our Government will take a stronger role in the international arena. If global Britain means anything, it means our responsibility to help the poorest in the world, because it is in our interests to do so. If we do not, those refugees out of desperation will want to flee and come to the shores of Europe, and we have seen the shameful experience over recent years where we have not been able to respond as generously as some of the poorest countries have.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she agree that we must do our part in the UK, particularly when, as we did just after I was elected in 2015, this House voted to bomb Syria? I did not vote for that, but none the less, a majority of Members did. Where we are bombing countries, we need to be taking responsibility when people are displaced from those conflicts.

Rushanara Ali: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that many conflicts have been caused by failures of the international community, so we bear a responsibility, whether it is Iraq, Libya or Syria. We need to act. We need to provide refuge to those who end up being displaced, and also we need to take action at the international level to bring an end to the conflicts that continue to rage.

In conclusion, we need our Government to take action, not only to provide the humanitarian assistance, but to work hard to hold to account Governments who are causing persecution, Governments who are failing to protect their populations and Governments who are actively responsible for ethnic cleansing and genocide in countries such as Myanmar. We also need to take a stronger role in mobilising support in the international community to provide more assistance to those countries; refugees are among the most vulnerable in the world, and covid has exposed them to even graver danger. We must protect them against the virus. We must press the world's Governments to step up aid programmes, end conflicts, tackle poverty and prevent the deaths of tens of thousands of displaced people around the world. If we are to tackle this pandemic, in the words of the United Nations Secretary General,

“we are only as strong as the weakest”.

This is not just a matter of humanitarianism; it is also a matter of self-interest.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): May I ask Members to be mindful that we have not only the call list for this debate, but another debate to follow? Both

debates are on important subjects, but it all has to finish by 5 o'clock, so please be mindful as to the length of your contributions.

1.46 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this debate and for her speech, which demonstrated her own commitment to this agenda. As she said, she represents a part of London that demonstrates the proud history of this country in welcoming some of the poorest people from around their world to make their home here and make an enormous contribution to our national life. I pay tribute to her and I agree with much of what she said.

In this crisis, as a country we have turned inward somewhat; we have looked to our own problems and challenges. We have discovered our neighbourhoods and lived more locally. We have discovered, in many ways, that we are citizens of somewhere, each of us in our local lives, yet we are also citizens of the world. As the hon. Lady said, we know that the poorest people are most at risk and most vulnerable to the effects of the global pandemic. I am incredibly proud of the UK's record this year. The Government have committed significant sums—£750 million—to the global fight against covid-19, much of it for the poorest countries in the world, with £300 million alone to be spent in the region of Syria this year.

Beyond the immediate response to the crisis, we have a very proud recent record of contributions to the imperative of building up the global economy and the economies of the poorest countries in the world. I wish to draw attention to a remark made by the World Bank last month, which observed:

“With the notable exception of the UK, which has been an absolute leader, the contributions by governments have been...flat or declining”.

It is talking about the contributions we made of nearly \$4 billion to support the poorest economies in the world, which were more than those of the United States, Japan, France and many other leading countries.

Much more can be done, and I recognise many of the points made by the hon. Lady, but I wish to focus on what we here in the UK are doing for refugees, where we still have major responsibilities to fulfil. She mentioned unaccompanied children, so I wish quickly to make the point that I regret that Opposition Members persist in pretending that this Government are somehow hostile to family reunion for refugee children—that is patently untrue and it would be political madness if it were true. Their making that point is irresponsible, as it causes fear and anxiety where none is needed. The Government are absolutely committed to creating reciprocal arrangements with the EU to ensure that unaccompanied children can continue to be reunited with their families, and I have confidence that that will happen. There will be a review of the routes that unaccompanied children can take, which will be presented to Parliament and be accountable to this House.

Another area where we need more progress is on refugee resettlement more generally. I hope the House will acknowledge that the UK's record in recent years, simply in terms of the numbers of refugees resettled here, is the best in Europe and one of the best in the world. For understandable reasons, the resettlement

programme has been halted this year. I entirely understand why—the host countries have restrictions on access and travel and our local authorities are hard pressed enough as it is—but I urge the Minister to give the House and councils an update on when they expect resettlement to restart and on whether the new UK resettlement scheme, the global programme, will replace the current system for refugees from the middle east. I know that my council in Wiltshire is keen to know the plan and is looking forward to clarity.

Perhaps a more significant question than how many refugees we can receive in this country is the question of how we receive them and what sort of help we can give them. As I have said, I think our Government are generous, but they are only as generous as a Government can be. They can only give out money and give people rights to services. That is what Governments do. Refugees get free accommodation, free healthcare and free education. They also get their council tax and utility bills paid and they get a weekly cash allowance, but that is all the Government can do. We can argue that they could give more cash, but they cannot provide more than money. Human beings need more than money, especially if they are new to a country or an area.

Hannah Bardell: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman probably means well, but his characterisation of the UK system certainly does not chime with the constituents I see coming to my surgery week in, week out. In particular, he talks about what this Government can do, saying that all they can do is give cash, but I disagree with that in the strongest possible terms. In Scotland, as I will set out in my contribution, we set up a scheme where Syrian doctors, nurses and health professionals have been able to retrain and come to Scotland, and they are now at the forefront of fighting the covid-19 pandemic. I am sorry, but I do not buy what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Surely he and his Government must recognise, as the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) said in her speech, that so much more can and should be done.

Danny Kruger: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I absolutely agree that there is more that can be done than giving out money, but it is not just the responsibility of Government to do that. That is the point I want to make. We need more than welfare, and more than a roof over our heads. Our needs are higher up the hierarchy of needs than that. We need friends and we need culture. We need agency, responsibility and a sense of purpose and belonging, and we need work to do, as she says. All of this is the responsibility of all of us in society.

I want to end with another tribute to the Government, this time for the community sponsorship scheme, which was first introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) when she was at the Home Office. It was inspired by the way in which refugees in Canada have been resettled over many decades. It is an inspirational model whereby refugees—individuals and families—are received into a community by a local community group working with the local authority and the public services. They provide so much more than a house and welfare. They provide English language support and employment and training support, and they provide friends and opportunities to access local social networks, faith communities and so on.

[Danny Kruger]

There are two such groups operating in Wiltshire, and they are doing a tremendous job. They have supported families to integrate properly into our communities in a way that the council on its own would never have been able to do. For example, we have a tailor that we did not have before in Wiltshire, working away; we have a painter and decorator; and we have people working for the council. We also have a whole range of new volunteers making a tremendous contribution to our community. These are the new Huguenots that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow referenced. They are enriching our county and our country, and they are welcomed by local people. This is the model we need much more. These community-sponsored refugees are in addition to the 5,000 a year commitment, but I think it should be the basic model by which we receive and welcome refugee families into our country. This is the model; this is the way we will build a more integrated community and fulfil our obligations to the world.

1.53 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate on covid-19 and its effect on refugee communities, and I would like to place on record my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on leading the charge. At its core, this is about the injustice of millions being forced from their homes by genocide, hunger and war, and the injustice that 85% of refugees find shelter not in the richest nations but in low and middle-income countries where healthcare systems are already under-resourced and overstretched. It is also about the injustice of the pandemic now threatening the most vulnerable displaced people far from their homes. As David Miliband, CEO of the International Rescue Committee, said:

“We know coronavirus doesn’t respect borders and that it hits the vulnerable hardest”.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says that there are 86.5 million people today who are refugees—stateless, internally displaced or seeking asylum.

Like many hon. and right hon. Members, I recently had the pleasure of visiting a refugee camp, thanks to the efforts of the Yunus Emre Institute. The camp in Gaziantep, on Turkey’s border with Syria, is home to thousands fleeing the civil war. Turkey has opened up its heart and borders, providing compassion, shelter and food to Syrian refugees. I met refugees learning new skills and heard about their efforts to find work. One thing that stayed with me is its sheer size and scale, and I think that is true for camps across the world. The Kakuma camp in Kenya has roughly the same population as the city of Oxford. The Tindouf camp in Algeria has the population of Lincoln. The Adjumani camp in Uganda has the population of Durham. Bangladesh, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow mentioned, hosts almost 1 million Rohingya fleeing genocide, over 600,000 of whom are concentrated in the Kutupalong-Balukhali expansion site—more people than the city of Manchester.

These camps are vast, sprawling settlements filled with people traumatised by violence, malnourished, preyed upon by people-traffickers, and anxious about

their future. Camps across the world, from Syria to Jordan, from Bangladesh to Calais, and in and around Yemen, have one thing in common—they are overcrowded and susceptible to infectious disease. In Cox’s Bazar, for example, there are 40 people per 1,000 square metres. In Moria in Greece, there are 204 people per 1,000 square metres—a situation made worse after terrible fires there. People are sharing toilets and showers, unable to socially distance, with no space at all for self-isolation.

When the pandemic first struck earlier this year, many of us were concerned that it would rip through refugee camps, but over the summer, although there were some tragic deaths in camps, the reports from the aid agencies were encouraging. Through isolating, enhanced sanitation and other measures, the scale of disaster that we feared was averted. Come November, that has changed, and all for the worse. The aid agencies, non-governmental agencies and people living in the camps are warning that we are on the brink of disaster. In September, *The Guardian* reported:

“Numbers of infections in camps across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories have risen sharply throughout September.”

Similar reports are coming in from camps on the Greek island of Chios, from Mahama in Rwanda, from Ethiopia and Somalia, and from elsewhere. It is clear that we need an immediate programme of emergency aid—PPE, hand sanitiser, screens, soap, disinfectant, thermometers, oxygen hoods and other medical equipment, especially ventilators. We need doctors, nurses and paramedics on the ground. We need to maintain supplies of water and food to keep people healthy.

We need a UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office that responds swiftly to the challenge. Many of us believe that it was an unforced error to merge DFID and the FCO. Now is the first major opportunity for Ministers to prove us wrong by the ambition and scale of their response to this crisis.

We should be cautiously optimistic about the prospects of a vaccine announced this week. Perhaps we have indeed turned a corner, but the vaccine will not come in time for thousands corralled in refugee camps. A cold winter is coming, and hundreds of thousands of people are at risk. The Minister must tell the House today what concrete plans Her Majesty’s Government are making to reach across oceans and borders to help our sisters and brothers and to save lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank hon. Members for showing great time discipline—I am really grateful for that.

1.59 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) for his contribution, which I think reflected a high degree of consensus on many of these issues across the Chamber, and was certainly seeking consensus on those issues where we all very much agree. I would like to spend my time focusing in particular on the impact that covid has had on three groups of vulnerable people for whom we have a particular responsibility. Those are people who have a no recourse to public funds status attached to their presence in the United Kingdom, refugee children and the people who are waiting for the recommencement—or perhaps hoping

in the future for the commencement—of the new global resettlement schemes that we know are in progress at the moment.

Starting with those with no recourse to public funds, this has been the subject of a good deal of debate in Westminster recently. While there is a high degree of recognition that the NRPF status is an answer to retaining public confidence that people are not coming to the United Kingdom simply to access benefits and welfare support, in a time when there is a national crisis, as there is at the moment, it presents some particular challenges. When we begin to look beneath the surface of how the policy is operating in practice, we see the suggestion that it may be time for a reconsideration of the way we apply that policy.

We heard from the Minister during a Westminster Hall debate on this topic that, on average, 90% of requests to remove NRPF status are agreed by the Home Office and that they are agreed very quickly—generally, within a period of 28 days. I recognise that the NRPF status is complicated. For example, many people come to the UK on working visas with NRPF as a part of that. People who come as investors can be very wealthy individuals who are unlikely to face destitution, but the fact is that in the event that people face destitution, local authorities have a duty to step in and to provide financial support. Clearly, we are kidding ourselves in this place if we think that NRPF status means that there is no cost to the British taxpayer in providing that support, and we need to consider whether it is in the interests of the welfare of families who may be facing destitution as a result of that status to allow time for a reconsideration in line with what the day-to-day real practice of the Home Office has been in supporting this particular group.

Moving on to the question of refugee children, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes is absolutely spot-on in identifying that the UK has a very honourable and long-standing record when it comes to supporting refugee children. Since 2015, the numbers coming into the care of local authorities in England has, on average, doubled. There has been a very significant rise. A lot of the political debate has focused on those referred to in the Dubs amendment, but of course the practical experience of local authorities that have been accommodating young people is that that status, clearly defined as it appears to be in the Westminster political debate, is often illusory. Young people are brought to the United Kingdom on the basis that they have a family connection here, but if that individual is not in a position to take parental responsibility under the terms of the Children Act 1989, we are moving that child from the care system of one country into the care system of the United Kingdom, so it is not in practice a process that is largely about family reunion. That is less than one in 10 of the children who are affected.

Hannah Bardell: The point the hon. Gentleman makes about taking children from one care system to another seems slightly inappropriate—more than slightly inappropriate—given that we are talking about countries, by and large, that are war-torn and do not even have the basic structures of health and social care, never mind a childcare system. I think it is important that we focus on the reality of the many families who are displaced and what they are leaving, and the fact that they are not necessarily coming to the UK or other western countries out of choice, but out of desperation.

David Simmonds: The hon. Member makes a very good point about the context of many refugee children who come to the United Kingdom, but of course it is not a point that is relevant in the context of Dubs, which is what I was speaking about. The point of the Dubs amendment is that it committed the Government of the UK to go to other countries in Europe and identify children in those countries who are unaccompanied and bring them into our care. They were already, in the terms of the Dublin agreement, in a country that was defined as safe, whatever the circumstances that may have pertained before they left the country that they had been in before that had led to their becoming a refugee.

I would like, however, to highlight a particular concern. The UK's response in respect of refugee children, commendably, has been the national transfer scheme. We recognise that, under the Children Act 1989, a child who is unaccompanied in the UK, by operation of law, becomes the responsibility of the local authority where they are. Local authorities such as Kent, my local authority of Hillingdon and Harrow next door have taken in significant numbers of children, and other local authorities around the country have stepped up to say that they would be willing to offer places to support those young people as well.

There has been a good deal of debate about the remarks made by some concerning activist lawyers, but it has been brought to my attention that a number of those young people awaiting transfer to other local authorities that are willing to take them in order to create more capacity for the United Kingdom to support refugee children are being advised—legally speaking this is absolutely correct—that they are within their rights to refuse to move. It would be really helpful if Ministers gave some attention to how we can ensure that the national transfer scheme can do its job effectively.

Additional funding has been provided so that young people can be supported by local authorities that are not the ports of entry, but if young people are being told that they should refuse to co-operate with the process, the system will gum up and we will lose the capacity we have to provide that support. That is a genuine concern. Those lawyers are acting entirely within their rights, but none the less it calls into question our ability to provide the most effective support we can and increase our capacity to take in more refugee children.

On the vulnerable persons relocation scheme and where it goes next as a global relocation scheme, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes made the robust point that many of us are waiting to hear what the new scheme will look like when it comes into operation. I heard an announcement that we were beginning plans to resume the VPRS—the Syrian resettlement scheme—because there are already a number of families identified for that safe, legal route to come to the United Kingdom who, because of covid, have not been able to make the journey here. I very much welcome the news that we will see those moves resuming. The UNHCR describes that resettlement scheme as the global “gold standard”, and two former Prime Ministers and the current one do deserve credit for maintaining a life-changing route into the United Kingdom that satisfies that standard of being safe and legal.

While the UK remains the biggest donor outside the United States on resettlement and aid efforts, access to that safe and legal route is incredibly important. Therefore,

[David Simmonds]

like my hon. Friend, I would welcome hearing from the Minister when we might expect that programme to commence to ensure that we continue our commendable and honourable efforts on refugee resettlement in the global covid crisis.

2.7 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this important debate. As she said at the outset, we are united in our common humanity in terms of how we treat refugees and asylum seekers, and we should always remember that refugees are people first. That should be the context for our policies and how we behave towards refugees. They are people who have lived through unimaginable horrors—stuff that many of us have absolutely no comprehension or understanding of. Quite frankly, who would uproot themselves, their lives and often their families and make perilous journeys across land and sea unless they had no other choice?

I have listened to some of my constituents, and quite frankly I do not know how they have survived what they have been through. When I hear some of the less positive things said about refugees and asylum seekers, it really strikes home how important it is that we all stand up, make these points and put them on the record. Among the Government's catalogue of cock-ups this year, their response to the refugee crisis, particularly with respect to those involved in the channel crossings, was one of their finest. Not only was it wholly incompetent, but it was devoid of compassion. I repeat what I have just said: I ask all of us to try to put ourselves in the shoes of a refugee or asylum seeker before passing judgment.

UNHCR estimates that there are nearly 80 million people displaced across the world, as my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) has already mentioned. The key drivers of displacement—conflict, famine and climate change—have continued during the pandemic. The importance of the international community, including the UK, working together to tackle these drivers cannot be understated. I hope that the Minister can provide reassurances that the assimilation of the Department for International Development into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will not lead, now or in the future, to international development and peace making being less of a priority than they need to be. Again, my hon. Friend also mentioned that.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The hon. Lady cites a figure of 80 million refugees. Having dealt with refugees and worked for the UNHCR myself, I know that there is a difference between a refugee and a displaced person. Does that 80 million include the category of displaced persons, which by definition means people who have been chucked out of their home or village but remain in the country? That is quite an important distinction. I wonder whether the 80 million includes displaced persons. If it does not, there are a damn sight more than 80 million.

Debbie Abrahams: I was citing statistics, for which I have a reference, that refer to them as displaced persons. I am very happy to provide those, which are actually from—

Bob Stewart: It is the same.

Debbie Abrahams: Yes.

Contrary to some of the disgusting racist rhetoric about refugees on social media platforms, most displaced people find refuge in countries neighbouring their homes. We know—it has already been said—that it is the poorest countries, including Aruba, Pakistan, Uganda and Sudan, that provide refuge for the majority of asylum seekers, hosting more than 90% worldwide.

Having fled their country and claimed asylum, refugees often end up in the densely packed camps that we have heard about. Of course, by its very nature, covid thrives in those environments. These displaced peoples, the world's most vulnerable, are forced to shelter with little in the way of healthcare or access to water, let alone PPE. At the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, where 76,000 Syrian refugees shelter, Médecins Sans Frontières has reported a covid outbreak in recent weeks. The head of mission there said that it is clear that the densely populated refugee camp can make it

“very difficult for people to follow simple preventive measures such as handwashing, wearing a mask and physical distancing.”

Self-isolation is another matter. In this country, we are rightly told to cover up, to wash our hands and to make space, but that simply is not possible for many refugees, at home and abroad. As I said, self-isolation is near impossible in the conditions in which many live.

At home, in response to the covid pandemic, the Government decided to pause the refugee resettlement scheme in March. I was interested in the comments made by the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on this matter. We know that other countries—France, Spain, Italy and Germany—have already had reinstated their schemes, so I would be grateful if the Minister could explain why we have not yet done so and when he expects us to.

In lieu of safe routes, we have seen thousands attempt the extraordinarily dangerous channel crossing—a crossing that recently claimed the lives of five members of an Iranian-Kurdish family. Without any form of safe route, more will attempt that dangerous journey. The Government say that most of these crossings are facilitated by criminal gangs seeking to exploit vulnerable migrants trying to reach the UK. According to the Immigration Minister, so far this year 24 people have been convicted and jailed for facilitating illegal immigration. I applaud that, but, again, without the implementation of safe routes to the UK, more people will make these journeys and risk their lives in an attempt to seek safety. As well as covid-19 having devastating impacts on refugee communities abroad, in our own country refugees are also suffering. My constituency is home to a number of refugee families, and I have had casework where those seeking asylum have had their asylum applications delayed as a result of the pandemic. My experience of the length of asylum applications is certainly not that it is the six months that the Government say it is; it is closer to two years, and I have some asylum seekers for whom it is stretching into years after that.

To add to this hiatus—this pause in people's lives; they cannot get on with living their lives—by having it extended by the pandemic must feel like purgatory, and it has had a huge emotional impact on the families involved. For asylum seekers in a house in multiple

occupation, not only is it difficult to socially distance, but with £5.39 a day to cover everything, buying PPE and hand sanitiser cuts deeply into their allowance—although I know some food banks, including my own in Oldham, have been providing them. In this environment, it is understandable that for many asylum seekers poor mental health is made even worse.

Other people have raised the difficulties they have faced after asylum has been granted. Many support services have been closed and some refugees do not have access to the internet or phones. Local authorities, as throughout this pandemic, have felt the brunt of the pandemic and faced difficulties in housing residents. I have had reports of refugees becoming homeless after receiving their legal status, as the Home Office has continued to remove people from Serco housing with nowhere left for them to go. One woman took 53 days to receive accommodation after being given leave to remain, relying on the kindness of strangers when the Government withdrew support without her having any accommodation whatsoever.

I know these hardships faced by my constituents will be replicated across the country. Refugee Action has spoken of the impact this has had on the physical and mental wellbeing of refugees. It has also highlighted its frustration about the ability for organisations to operate, citing difficulties with the co-ordination of services, remote learning and maintaining contact with those they are supporting. In Oldham, I have seen first-hand the extraordinary work performed by the food bank and other charities, such as the British Red Cross, Revive and the Boaz Trust in Manchester, who have supported the most vulnerable people in society throughout the pandemic, many of whom are from the refugee community. It has struck me throughout this pandemic that it is those who have the least who are doing the most, and I urge people: if you have the opportunity, please do participate. Before the covid pandemic, these charities used to organise meetings and I also urge that, where possible, these meetings be reinstated.

Asylum seekers and refugees want to work—they want to contribute—but we have a system that does not afford refugees the dignity and respect they deserve, and the pandemic has exposed these glaring issues. I know of medical professionals from Syria who want to work but who are not being allowed to, and I again urge the Minister to speak with his counterparts in the Home Office.

It was fantastic news at the beginning of the week when we heard about the success of the covid vaccine trials from the Pfizer and BioNTech partnership, but that provides a salutary lesson: it is a German couple who started out life as Turkish children and became migrants who have managed to do this. This is a fantastic good news story, and we should learn from it. The Government must help all people to use their abilities and to flourish in this great country of ours, including our refugees and asylum seekers.

2.18 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this important debate.

This year, especially during the first covid lockdown period, much has been said and written about people attempting to reach our UK shores by boat. That

treacherous crossing covers 18 miles of water between mainland Europe and Dover. We have heard the comments from pundits and politicians who want to build walls, either physical brick barriers as favoured by a former President or floating marine fencing ideas, allegedly investigated by our own Government.

Whether through increasing patrols of our waters, putting people in cages, prison cells or detention centres indefinitely, or leaving them statusless and unable to work, join family or simply make a home, the narrative is clear: they are unwanted and unwelcome here. They are detained, locked up, cut off and encamped in muddy, disease-ridden, ramshackle, makeshift and flimsy canvas or cardboard shelters that are not fit for purpose, and not fit for families, for children and for pregnant women—not even for animals.

To everyone who has ever shared anti-immigrant hatred and fear on social media, I would like to say, “Imagine it was you. Imagine it was your family. Imagine that you knew that staying in their place of birth was so dangerous that it was better, safer and a little less horrifying to attempt to cross an incredibly lethal stretch of water in an unsafe boat—overcrowded, ill-equipped and with the chance of drowning a very real possibility.”

In countries such as ours, we seek thrills and recreate fear by taking up certain pursuits. We set ourselves challenges and push ourselves to the limits of our endurance. We leave our comfort zones and get up off our sofas, run marathons and fling ourselves out of helicopters, mostly to raise money for those we want to help, those less fortunate than ourselves. Refugees are, of course, much less fortunate, and they do not get to go back to their sofas after an adrenalin rush as we can. Every hour of every day lived in a war-torn country, those dangerous thrills that we seek are an unavoidable way of life. Dodging bombs and bullets, persecution, torture, prison or death sentences are real-life everyday scenarios. Every single day, someone may not return home safely from school or work. Every day can simply be a fight to stay alive.

When those people—having spent months, decades or a lifetime living with everyday danger and risks as well as death, fear, terror, pain and loss—decide that they cannot endure another day of that and step up the danger to unimaginable next levels by seeking to trust a stranger who they have heard might help them to get out, how can we blame them? They sell what they can, get hold of whatever money they can and put their lives and their families’ lives in the hands of anyone offering a route out.

The Government rightly talk about the vile practices and lack of humanity of people traffickers, the criminals and gangs seeking to profit from people’s suffering, but what is the alternative for those desperate enough to risk their lives? When they do, what awaits them if they survive the journey here? The covid pandemic has greatly increased an already significant backlog in processing asylum applications. Charities such as the excellent Kent Refugee Action Network, or KRAN, do their best to support young, mostly unaccompanied asylum seekers. Kent County Council is struggling to meet the housing needs of those needing urgent accommodation as there is not enough affordable housing across east Kent. This is a particular problem for young people when they reach the age of 21. Young people are isolated, facing the lack of a college place, often of any decent

[Rosie Duffield]

accommodation at all and of any help with language, and they have no way to connect online to learn or access services or to find missing family members.

With the proper support, young refugees can and will contribute much to our society. They want desperately to work, become British citizens, pay taxes and raise families like several generations before them. We have many examples of those who have come to Britain seeking asylum, fleeing terror or war. To name just two, one of the best of people, as we have heard before, is Lord Alf Dubs, an incredible man who has dedicated his life to the safety of children who, like him, had to escape to a new place; and Gulwali Passarlay, a former asylum seeker, is the author of “The Lightless Sky”.

I urge the Government to pledge directly to help those countries in dire need of aid so that we create fewer refugees, fewer homeless and displaced desperate people, and less of a food, insecurity and climate emergency, and to allow the still relatively tiny numbers of the most desperate people to seek asylum here and a safe new start.

2.24 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), who is active in her community in supporting those groups that, in turn, support refugees. In certain counties such as Kent, more is asked of some of our coastal communities, and it is wonderful to see the help that comes forward, as she said, from many disadvantaged people, who perhaps see in those images on television something of their own past.

At a recent event in my constituency, to which I invited Lord Dubs, the audience were asked, “Who here has an experience of a refugee?” Nearly everybody put up their hand. Many of my constituents are either children of refugees or have a real heart for refugees.

As my hon. Friend said, a tiny number of people who migrate to the UK are refugees, which is why we must redouble our efforts to stamp out the terribly cruel scenes that we see on our television scenes. One such example is the tragic death of Mercy Baguma, a refugee woman who died on her own, apart from her young baby, who was found a day later, crying and malnourished. Tragically, that is how this woman was found, in a flat, which had been provided by the Home Office.

I am sure a lot of this comes down to the fact that covid has made people so much more isolated. Had this woman had someone to reach out to her and had there been a visitor, perhaps a member of a faith community from a church, mosque or temple, who popped in to see her, we would have known about her. In my constituency, the Muswell Hill Methodist church refugee group is being hampered in its efforts to keep up the visiting and a phone call just is not the same.

I pay tribute to the Centre for Survivors of Torture and War Trauma and the Helen Bamber Foundation, which look forensically at the various physical and mental tortures that individuals have experienced in their journey as refugees or in their war-torn countries. Those are the sensitive situations that people come from, which make them terribly lonely when they arrive in the UK.

I want briefly to mention the important work of the British Red Cross for those who seek family reunion. We are very aware that there is a safety issue for people seeking to regularise their status and join family here in the UK. Some people have to travel for days to have their paperwork stamped. Will the Home Office, together with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, look urgently at that, particularly when people are unsuccessful? They have often made a big, expensive and unsafe journey, perhaps with small children and other family members, only to be unsuccessful in their request for asylum or refugee status. I am sure that we can find an easier way, in this day and age, with the technology that we have, such that the recommendations from the British Red Cross could be urgently adopted, without further ado.

I want briefly to highlight two fantastic civic society campaigns, which have certainly seen the light of day here in the Commons, but which are definitely worth mentioning in the context of the debate. The first is Lift the Ban, which is about lifting the ban on asylum seekers working. Once people have requested asylum, they then have six months. The campaign requests that, in the period after that, people can apply for work. We in this House know that many refugees are over-qualified. Some of those who have had to escape are perhaps architects, university professors or engineers, and they bring a special skillset. Of course, those skills often are not recognised, but we are all aware of the wonderful refugee whose name escapes me, but who ended up as a cleaner in the NHS. He speaks like a BBC presenter; he is wonderful. He reminds us of the contribution to the NHS that so many refugees have made.

The amendment tabled by our own Lord Dubs has been the subject of discussion today. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) rightly mentioned the burden that falls on local authorities and the fact that they must be paid adequately to look after refugees. There is no point doing these programmes on the cheap, especially for younger refugees, who have particular mental health trauma. They need proper services and proper support. I hope that in his concluding remarks, the Minister will give us a response, even if just to confirm that he will speak to the Home Office about lifting the ban on asylum seekers working. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said, it is terrible that people have applied for work but are sitting around lonely, unable to work. Lifting the ban on asylum seekers working would not only assist our job market but assist those refugees to integrate much quicker, wherever they find themselves.

As we debate the new arrangements for refugees following Brexit, bearing in mind that they are a very small part of the total number who migrate to the UK each year, I hope we will look carefully at how we could implement the Lord Dubs amendment in a way that is fair and recognises the important work of local government, but provides for those who are most affected by war in their countries and have family members here. There is a way forward, and we must do it properly, in conjunction with local authorities and best practice.

2.30 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who speaks passionately and eloquently about this issue. I echo her request for

clarification on the ability of asylum seekers and refugees to work. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this much-needed debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting us the time to speak on this vital issue.

The world is undergoing a global pandemic, and although the measures are often not perfect and support does not always go far enough, for those with a roof over their head, support from covid economic packages sometimes means that there is a lifeline. We must remember that at the end of 2019, there were almost 80 million people displaced from their homes, of whom 40% were children, many fleeing bombs, bullets and persecution. For them, the pandemic is much more severe.

No mother or father ever dreams of fleeing bombs with their children, trying their utmost to ensure that their children can see another day, but that is the reality for so many refugee families. In recent times, we have seen the direct results of this from the Syrian crisis and those fleeing Burma, Sudan, Palestine and many other countries. I mention that because, when speaking about refugees, some have deliberately or ignorantly ignored the tragic reality of their background. Tragically, many have perpetuated rhetoric towards refugees that is not only misleading but hugely dangerous. It is important that we not only stand up to the hatred that is unfairly directed towards refugees but ensure that we provide them with clarity, support and kindness.

I hope that those who have been misled by racist stereotypes suggesting that refugees are some kind of uncivilised invaders of the west, coming here to steal their railway jobs, will take their time and listen to this debate. The reality is that 90% of refugees are not hosted in Europe or the United Kingdom. Nearly 90% of the world's refugees live in developing countries, which often struggle to provide basic services. The UK does not even come in the top 10 countries that host refugees. Additionally, according to the United Nations, there are more than 25 million refugees in camps around the world who are currently facing particularly acute obstacles in the fight against covid-19.

Refugees are not travelling on expensive airlines for a new role as expats in a new land. They are fleeing war. They are making perilous journeys across dangerous land and sea, often dying on the way. Just a few weeks ago, Rasoul Iran-Nejad, his wife Shiva Mohammad Panahi, and their two children Anita, nine years old, and Armin, six, drowned as they tried to reach Britain by boat—an entire family gone. Can we even begin to imagine the trauma, stress and fear for parents fleeing and taking such a dangerous journey? If we cannot extend to them the support they desperately need, the very least we can do is show some compassion and kindness and stop the dangerous anti-migrant rhetoric.

I am sorry to say that that goes for the Government too. In recent years, the Government have stepped up their anti-migrant rhetoric. This summer, the Home Secretary suggested that Navy warships should be deployed to tackle the rise in people crossing the English channel. Just over a month ago, news broke that Home Office officials had debated whether wave machines should be used to push back dinghies to France, and that the Home Secretary had considered relocating refugees to Ascension Island or St Helena—remote islands in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. Those plans were condemned by the UK's representative to the UN.

Added to this, the Home Secretary lashed out at “activist lawyers” giving legal support to those seeking asylum and refugee status in the UK, and attacked “do-gooders” advocating reform of the asylum process. Lord Dubs has already been mentioned today, as he came to the UK as a six-year-old refugee fleeing Nazi Germany. He has said that the comments made by the Home Secretary were

“so hostile and quite unworthy of a British home secretary.”

If we are going to be sincere in truly helping refugees, we have to challenge the hate-filled rhetoric about refugees that is unfortunately peddled. Sadly, this Government need to take a real, hard look at how they are adding fuel to the fire. As human beings, we should consider how we would like to be treated if we were one of the families desperately fleeing death.

At the height of this pandemic, the effects on refugees have been exacerbated. In my constituency of Bradford West and across the country, we have experienced refugees and asylum seekers in crisis over the covid-19 pandemic. The reality is that pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing destitution and poverty among the refugee and asylum seeker community. Internationally, conditions are much worse, so morally, the UK should play its part.

On 22 July, the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs tried to avoid parliamentary scrutiny by quietly announcing up to £2.9 billion of cuts to the aid budget as Parliament headed into recess. Given the scale of need for refugees, will the Minister confirm that the UK will not turn its back on people fleeing persecution, and outline whether his Department plans to cut funding for refugees in the 2020-2021 financial year?

I am very proud to come from Bradford, the city of sanctuary. I thank those who work hard to support asylum seekers and refugees across Bradford. Of course, the reality of the situation is not always tragic. From bringing fish and chips to the UK, to the chairman of my local synagogue in Bradford, Rudi Leavor—who published the memoirs of his own journey to the UK only a few weeks ago—the cultural contributions made by refugees here in the UK and around the world enhance our lives, and are to be remembered, celebrated and welcomed.

2.37 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank everyone for their contributions. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for initiating the debate and setting the scene so well. This issue is vitally important. As we have heard today, refugee communities are some of the most vulnerable groups in the world. That has also been highlighted in a number of debates over the last fortnight or three weeks in both the Chamber and Westminster Hall. Today is an opportunity to make that very point to the Minister in the main Chamber.

These refugees have lost their homes and their livelihoods, often due to horrific violence, and they face countless overwhelming challenges such as finding sources of income, adequate shelter, and healthcare and treatment, all of which are exacerbated by the global pandemic. Last week, there was a debate in the Chamber about the vaccine. At that stage we did not know that there was going to be an announcement, but we were asking whether the vaccine would be available across the world.

[Jim Shannon]

The last people to get any vaccines or any help throughout covid-19 are the refugees. It is those people who are at the end of the queue; very often, they are so far back that they are at the end of the end of the queue. As Refugees International has stated:

“For refugees, COVID-19 is a health crisis, a socio-economic crisis, and a protection crisis.”

To illustrate the incredibly stressful economic problem faced by refugees, let me quote Tearfund’s country director for Jordan and Lebanon, Karen Soerensen, who said:

“Many of the refugees we work with rely on cash in hand for informal work day-to-day.”

I am old enough to remember back to the ’60s, when money was not plentiful, and—let’s be honest—many of us lived hand to mouth. That was the way it was, because money was not available in the way that perhaps it is now. I can understand when people have to live day to day, and have to work to buy food for their family for the next day. These people can only buy a day’s food at a time and they do not have savings to fall back on. People are stuck indoors in cramped conditions. Deliveries of bread, water, gas and medicine are permitted but unaffordable. When I hear those prices on TV programmes and read about them in the papers, I find it impossible to believe that anybody can afford those things. The consequences of the restrictions people now face are overwhelming. Without work, their families will not be able to eat. It is a terrible situation for people who have already suffered so much. Our thoughts and prayers should be with all those families.

In addition to those challenges, many marginalised communities in countries around the world have faced intensified discrimination since the outbreak of covid-19. The UN Secretary-General has described this phenomenon as a “tsunami” of xenophobia. Refugees and migrants often already face significant stigmatisation from host communities, and this has been exacerbated by the covid-19 crisis. According to the UNHCR:

“Even though it has no scientific basis”—

but that does not stop people saying it—

“refugees and asylum seekers are held responsible for spreading the virus in many countries during the pandemic.”

That is absolutely outrageous and untrue, but when people are fearful they do and say things that are untrue.

That is also the case with certain Governments, who are using the virus to advance policies that harm refugee and migrant communities, under the banner of protecting public health. For example, Uganda has announced the suspension of reception of all new refugees and asylum seekers, which harms the rights and safety of those individuals. Compassion is sadly missing.

The hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) referred to Lord Dubs and the work he has done for refugees, particularly the Kindertransport children. My constituency of Strangford and my council area of Ards were recipients of some of the Kindertransport children back in the late ’30s and early ’40s. I never fail to be struck by the poignancy of TV programmes that show those children, who were separated from their parents, coming across and resettling in England, Northern Ireland and, in this particular case, Millisle and Carrowdore

in my constituency. Many of them stayed and never went home. Our relationship and historical ties with Germany are very important.

I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief. I am very pleased to see the co-chair, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), sitting on the Opposition Front Bench as the shadow Minister, and I know she will register some of our concerns as well.

I want to discuss the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. I said in a Westminster Hall debate last week that Rohingya Muslim refugees, who have already suffered extraordinary violence, are now suffering again in camps in Bangladesh due to covid-19. I put on the record my thanks to Bangladesh for what it is doing, but, while we can only do so much, we cannot abandon those people. The restrictions placed on humanitarian agencies by the Bangladeshi Government are isolating Rohingya refugees and having a devastating impact on their wellbeing. Those restrictions range from humanitarian organisations being permitted to do only certain types of work, or to do it in a certain way, to them being allowed into the camps for only a set number of hours or, in some cases, not being allowed in at all. Therefore, they do not even have the data about the help that people need.

The impact of the restrictions has been so great that in June many Rohingya perceived the secondary impacts of covid-19 containment measures to be a greater threat to their overall wellbeing than covid-19 itself. That shows the extreme conditions that some people are living under. While many acknowledge that covid-19 is a risk, it is seen as secondary to more immediate risks such as shelters collapsing, having safe and accessible toilets and being able to feed their families, which they are unable to do without the support of humanitarian agencies and, indeed, the NGOs.

Finally, although this does not just affect refugees, I want to make a point that I do not think has ever been made here before. I was thinking about it beforehand and want to put it on the record, because I do not think we can overlook this issue and right hon. and hon. Members may well not be aware of it. It would be remiss of this House if we failed to express our concern about the hundreds, possibly thousands, of African migrants who are being forcibly detained in horrifying covid-19 prisons in Saudi Arabia. According to a recent investigation by *The Sunday Telegraph*, the Saudi Arabian Government are keeping potentially thousands of African migrants in “heinous conditions” as part of a drive to stop the spread of the virus. Again, there is this perception of the virus where people think, “They’ve got the virus”. Well, no, they do not. What are you doing to help them? Absolutely nothing. Sorry, I am not talking about you there, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am talking about the Saudi Government.

These poor prisoners are kept in squalid, disease-ridden and dehumanising camps, in intense heat, with limited access to food, water and sanitation. They are often subject to beatings and ridicule from prison guards. The conditions are so terrible that at least one young boy, who had not even had a chance to see life, took his own life to escape the torment. Others have died from heatstroke and other afflictions. There is simply no reason for a country with the wealth and resources of Saudi Arabia, one of the richest countries in the world, to treat people

this way, especially people who have committed no crimes and whose labour Saudi Arabia has used and depended on for years.

I know the Minister may not be able to give me an answer on this today, but I would appreciate it if he would give me an answer in the near future, if at all possible. I urge him to investigate this issue as a matter of urgency, and I request an update about any discussions he may have or be able to have with his Saudi counterparts. I also urge him to do everything in his power to work with the international community to ensure that refugees are not forgotten in this time of crisis and that they have all the support they need.

It is truly tragic that these people, who have suffered unimaginably, more than we can ever have in our minds, are yet again facing such a severe threat. It is our duty in this House to speak up and speak out for all those people and do what we can to protect them.

2.46 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker,

“With the clothes on their backs, they came through a storm, And those that didn’t die want a better life. And they want it here.”

That quote is from the pilot episode of “The West Wing”, which I have been re-watching for inspiration and, in these strange and difficult times, comfort. They are the words of the poetic and prophetic writer Aaron Sorkin, as said by President Josiah Bartlet in the series. They sum up so well the plight and experience of so many refugees, which we have heard about in spades today.

Before covid-19, the plight of refugees across the world was of epic and catastrophic proportions. What they are now experiencing has, as we have heard, only exacerbated that horrific situation. So I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this debate and pay tribute to her for such a fantastic and passionate speech, because it is vital that we shine a light on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, now and always. I have a fear that the media saturation about what is happening domestically with covid-19 means we will lose sight of their plight.

I think often of the book “In Extremis” by Lindsey Hilsum, which was about the life of Marie Colvin, who was killed in Homs, in Syria. The hon. Lady talked about bearing witness, and how she has gone to Burma and to Syria, as Members of this place and journalists should, to bear witness to the experiences, report back and come home to do what is possible to make their lives better. We can all imagine that the restrictions on journalists travelling mean that we are not hearing the stories and experiences of those at the forefront of the refugee crisis and the covid-19 crisis, as we would like to.

I pay tribute to all the Members who have spoken today. I wish to share some reflections from my childhood. I grew up in Livingston, in West Lothian, and my mother had a friend who was Chilean. He had escaped the Pinochet regime in Chile on the underside of a lorry, with literally the clothes on his back, because his name had been added to a list of those targeted to disappear. My early experience as a child was of hearing those stories and experiences, but I would imagine that they are very different from the level of the experiences we have heard today of asylum seekers and refugees, who are having to fight for not only their lives, but their health.

As the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, we are an interconnected and global village. She spoke of the history of refugees coming to the UK, what they have brought and how they have enriched our society. She spoke of the Rohingya refugees and the way that the Myanmar Government and military have treated them, and I absolutely echo the concerns that she raises in that regard.

I may not have agreed with the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on everything that he spoke about, but he did say that we are all global citizens. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said that we know that covid does not respect borders, but urgent supplies are needed and the FCDO response is not enough. He also referenced the merging of DFID and the FCO, which is a major error. Many of us have raised concerns and would agree with that.

The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) spoke of the responsibility that local authorities feel and the resource that is needed. Again, I may not have agreed with everything he said, but he made a fair point.

We have heard about the £1 billion that the UK pledged to respond to covid-19. It includes support specifically targeted at forcibly displaced populations. Donating money to the situation is of course admirable, but as we have heard time and again, the UK is not taking its fair number and doing its bit in that regard. The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) summed that up when she said that the UK does not even come in the top 10 countries that accept refugees. She also spoke about the insidious and discriminatory immigration policies, Ascension Island and the concerns about the language being used by those in the UK Government around “activist lawyers”. We are in a very dangerous place as a family of nations in the UK when the Government of the day in the UK talk about those who uphold the rule of law and fight for people who are marginalised as “activist lawyers”, rather than as people who are trained and trying to do their best to hold the Government to account and make sure that the rule of law is adhered to. I would caution the Government and I ask the Minister to set the record straight on that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the vaccine and his concerns about that, which I share. I have a company in my constituency, Valneva, that has received UK Government funding, which I advocated for strongly. I was very pleased to hear that the UK Government were not going to put all their eggs in one basket. This is something that I discussed with the company when it was awarded that funding. It is making huge progress, but refugees are some of the most vulnerable, if not the most vulnerable, people in the world and we have to make sure that they are at the forefront of getting those vaccinations. Of course, everybody will need to get one and they will be prioritised appropriately, but it concerns me and the hon. Member that the people who are most hard to reach and most vulnerable will potentially be at the end of the queue.

I was shocked by what the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) said. I had a line in my speech about the experience of refugees and of asylum seekers—that we in this country have a host of programmes where very privileged folk are put through their paces in survival skills, such as “I’m A Celebrity...Get Me Out Of Here!” I mean no ill will to the programme or those

[Hannah Bardell]

endeavours, but there is something—I do not know what the words are—that does not sit well with me that we make those kinds of programmes when refugees are literally fighting for their lives to get across the world. It was Gandhi, was it not, who said that the measure of a civilisation is how it treats its weakest members, but refugees and asylum seekers are not weak. Arguably, they are some of the most tenacious, resilient, stoic folk on the planet, and I think there is an irony in the fact that these TV programmes are made.

It would not be a surprise to Scots that our First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has said that the UK Government

“can rest assured that any proposal to treat human beings like cattle in a holding pen will be met with the strongest possible opposition from me.”

That was in reference to the Home Secretary admitting to exploring plans to incarcerate refugees on an island off the west coast of Scotland while they were being “processed”. The inhumane language used by this Government is an absolute international disgrace. I do not know about anybody else, but when this Government’s policies start looking and sounding like a dystopian TV series that I think many of us have watched, then we have huge problems.

In Scotland, we have pursued a programme called the guardianship scheme, which one of my MSP colleagues, Angela Constance, has spoken about passionately and had a debate on just last week. For the past 10 years, Scotland has proudly run the guardianship service in conjunction with the Scottish Refugee Council and the Aberlour Child Care Trust. In those 10 years, 700 children from 38 countries, speaking 40 different languages, have been supported to rebuild their lives in Scotland across 29 local authority areas the length and breadth of Scotland.

The hon. Member for Bradford West talked, as did others, about the contribution that refugees make. In closing, I want to highlight the scheme that we have developed in Scotland that means refugees can come to work in our NHS and are literally at the forefront. We must remember, as another Member said, that we are all human beings, and refugees and asylum seekers have faced some of the worst conditions, but many have skills and want to come here and contribute. That this Government stop them doing that is a shambles and shames us all. So I call on this UK Government to put fairness, decency and humanity at the heart of their immigration policy, because at present it stands as an international disgrace.

2.56 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for her perseverance in securing this important debate and her continued commitment and passion to ensure the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalised in this country and around the world are heard. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed today: the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), for Bradford West (Naz Shah)

and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). They all made excellent speeches highlighting not just the plight of refugees, but their vital contribution not just here in the UK, but across the world.

What this debate and the numerous ones in recent weeks—whether on Rohingya, Syria or equitable access to covid-19-related tools—show is the depth of feeling and support for development from across this House. I am proud to be standing here and responding as the shadow Secretary of State for International Development. The importance of the International Development Committee in ensuring these topics continue to be highlighted cannot be overstated. Does the Minister agree with me and Members from across this House that a distinct Select Committee focused on the Government’s development work and use of UK official development assistance is vital to ensure that these important issues are raised and that constructive scrutiny, which actually all Governments should welcome and encourage, remains in place?

In the last decade, at least 100 million people have been forced to flee their homes due to insecurity either outside or within their country’s borders. They have fled conflict, famine, environmental disasters and persecution. Some 18 million people remained displaced in 2019, nearly double the number in 2010. That is more than 1% of the world’s population. Despite the scare stories that this Government and their allies have been known to tell, the overwhelming majority of those people forced to flee their homes and countries are hosted by poorer countries. I know Members also raised this, but almost three quarters of all refugees remain in a country neighbouring their own.

The reality of why people flee their homes is heartbreaking, and we should never allow the statistics to let us forget the stories behind each number. In 2018, I met a young boy in northern Uganda in a child-friendly space providing children with psychosocial, welfare and emotional wellbeing support. He had seen his father killed in front of him at only 12 years old, and had no knowledge of where his mother was. He took his four younger siblings and fled from South Sudan to safety in Uganda, making that journey on foot. People do not choose to flee their homes unless there is no alternative for them.

As the poet Warsan Shire put it in her moving poem, *Home*,

“no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well”.

The story of the boy from South Sudan is just one of myriad devastating situations that force people to flee their home.

Over the coming decades, we are likely to see a huge increase in climate refugees. The UN has estimated that there will be 200 million people fleeing environmental disasters by 2050. Those disasters include the cyclones that we have all seen, but also droughts, floods, land degradation, rising sea levels, and ocean acidification, which directly and indirectly impact lives and livelihoods. Despite that, over the past decade, the UK Government have directed billions of pounds of public money into fossil fuel projects around the world, through UK Export Finance and the aid budget, including CDC investments.

Some 90% of the £2 billion invested in energy deals after the UK-Africa investment summit last year went on fossil fuel projects, and the Minister's Government are funding fossil fuel projects in Mozambique using more than \$1 billion of public funds. COP26 has been delayed for a year; we are looking to build back better, and ensure a safer, fairer world after the pandemic, and there are still opportunities for the Government to act and show clear leadership before they host that meeting. Will the Minister today commit to ending support for fossil fuel projects overseas, both from the aid budget, including the CDC investments, and from UK Export Finance, as a matter of urgency?

It is not only climate change that impacts migration; so, too, does the destruction of the environment and biodiversity, which affects people's lives and livelihoods. From the Amazon to Borneo, habitats are being destroyed by legal and illegal deforestation and degradation, forest fires, over-grazing and cultivation. As well as working with those countries, we need to consider the impact that we have here. That is why I ask the Minister to support the amendment on due diligence that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) has tabled to the Environment Bill.

On food insecurity, more than 250 million people face extreme hunger—a situation that coronavirus has made even worse. Of those, about 30 million adults and children could be tipped into facing famine unless there is urgent additional support. No child should face growing up with famine or malnutrition, so can the Minister explain when his Government will make a pledge to the Nutrition for Growth summit?

Those are just a few of the drivers behind people fleeing their home. We have heard about a number of others today. When people flee, we have to make efforts to support them, especially in the interim before they can safely return home. That support includes immediate humanitarian assistance, and measures to ensure that they can live full, prosperous lives—measures on providing education, healthcare and job opportunities, so we are not faced with a lost generation of children in many refugee camps. Of course, in order to do this, we need access to those living in camps, and to those who are internally displaced.

During the global coronavirus crisis, the situation for people who have already lost so much has got even worse. Many live in camps where even basic amenities, such as soap, clean water and basic medical supplies, are often in short supply. Can the Minister explain what recent steps his Government have taken to support refugees' access to basic sanitation? In Syria, we have seen failure after failure to open up borders, or even retain existing border access. Can the Minister explain the UK Government's strategy for dealing with the veto by Russia and China at the Security Council on this issue?

The UK has a long, proud history of standing with refugees. We helped people fleeing Slobodan Milošević's genocide in the 1990s, and we helped 10,000 children flee the Nazis on the Kindertransport before world war two, enabling them to build new lives in our country. Despite the Government retreating from that proud history, today communities right across Britain have shown, by helping refugees from countries such as Syria, that their commitment continues to run deep. I am

lucky to have met a number of them who have started a new life in Birmingham, including one—her name is Nour—who came to Parliament last year to listen to a debate that I secured on English for speakers of other languages.

Refugees do not want to leave their homes. Their stories are tragic: leaving behind their homes and livelihoods and embarking on a journey of uncertainty. That is why the work that we do here, and with the multilateral institutions, is something of which we should all be immensely proud. It is something that should motivate us to support those who are seeking refuge and a safe place to call home. With the strategic direction and the size and shape of his Department still to be determined, will the Minister recommit his Government to supporting those who seek safety and sanctuary in another place or country, and can he tell the House what the overall overseas development assistance spend towards supporting refugee communities was in 2019 and the projected spend in 2020 and 2021?

Finally, as we have seen during the pandemic, when given the opportunity, refugees have made an enormous contribution in the effort to tackle the coronavirus crisis, including in our NHS in its hour of need. Will the Minister ensure that talk of the importance of helping refugees and displaced people to become productive equal partners in their communities is recognised and acted upon across the whole of Government?

3.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge):

It is good to be back at the Dispatch Box. We all worry about our own personal health and that of other families around us, so it is good to come together to discuss the health and fragility of people and refugees from around the world, most of whom, as the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) said, are outside this country, although the ones with whom we are more familiar as constituency MPs are within this country.

I thank the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this debate. Her regular parliamentary questions come from her travel throughout the area and from her advocacy. I recommend to the House her article in "Politics Home" entitled "Poor conditions in refugee camps make them a ticking time bomb for Covid". Although a small contribution by volume, it covers all of the major points.

Although, party politically, we always go backwards and forwards on these issues, I genuinely believe that we have more in common here than we disagree on. That is not to say that we should not debate the periphery rigorously, but the broad thrust of what we want to do is the same. I always like to distil things down into a few words, but the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) distilled this issue down into two words: people first. It is very easy to talk about internally displaced people, refugees, acronyms and numbers of 80 million, but this all boils down to one person, one family. As the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) said, we get up off the sofa to do ridiculous things by way of sport or endurance, but we are talking here about the lives of people who do not have any homes to go back to. Covid has made that situation a lot more complex.

[James Duddridge]

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, we have been deeply concerned about the impact specifically on refugees and forcibly displaced populations, and so it is hugely welcome to discuss this as an issue. The latest figure quoted is 80 million and that includes internally and externally displaced people and refugees—people who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations. As many Members have said in different ways, one does not leave one's home or flee across the border unless things are pretty dire. More people are internally displaced within their own countries. That is often less talked about. In fact, just to put a different number on it, one person is forcibly displaced every two seconds around the world, and that has happened for many, many years, rather than it being a temporary matter. In total, more than 1% of the world's population at any given time is forcibly displaced, which is clearly shocking and serves as a stark reminder of the derailment of normal humanitarian hopes and aspirations, and that is further magnified by covid.

Mention was made of the promises of money. We have diverted £1.3 billion of aid to covid-specific issues, a proportion of which is specifically to assist those in the most vulnerable areas. We should be proud as a House and as a country to be spending 0.7% of GNI on international aid. The good news that GDP has come up a bit faster domestically will have an impact on what we are able to spend in the international community going forwards. That is good news not just for the UK economy, but for what we can do in terms of international development.

The impact of covid is massively amplified for vulnerable and marginalised groups such as refugees and other displaced people. There are currently 28,000 reported cases of covid across 100 countries that UN refugee agencies have as people of concern. That gives a broad number, and I hope to put a little bit of context around that as I continue.

Many find themselves living in close quarters without access to healthcare or shelter. They are in crowded camps in urban settings, where social distancing and basic handwashing are a challenge, as is isolation, and the idea of shielding is just for the birds; it is unrealistic. Even the aspiration we have in terms of density is three times greater than the density in Sao Paolo, which is one of the most populated towns in the world. Even if we get the density we aspire to in camps, it is still very close quarters.

Refugees also have the problem of not being able to access essential services, whether those are linguistic or legal, or to have basic information. We are all concerned about the secondary impacts of covid around the world, and those are just as important for refugees, and potentially more important relative to the impacts on the UK. There is less opportunity to learn, earn a living, save money and access basic assistance, and they are much more likely to face eviction and school closures. They are much more likely to be blamed for covid. There is rising xenophobia, to paraphrase the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and other risks. That can lead to all sorts of additional problems.

We know that around the world there will be greater gender inequality. Girls' education in particular will be derailed. There is increased domestic violence and the

risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. That again, sadly, is particularly the case for refugees. There will be marginalisation, social exclusion and stigma, which may mean that health services are not prioritised for those most in need.

The areas where people are refugees are predominantly to be found in neighbouring countries, which already have weaker health systems, weaker water systems and weaker sanitation systems. They are already very much under pressure, so our aid budget is aiming to assist on covid overall, but British expertise is also working to stop the spread of covid.

Members mentioned vaccines, which we are delivering through Gavi and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. The Prime Minister was clear earlier this week that world leaders have a moral duty to ensure that vaccines, treatments and tests are truly available to all, and that will be the best defence to enable collective security and reduce the risk of outbreaks. It is in those people's interests, but also in the national interest.

Catherine West: May I briefly press the Minister on the question of the paperwork that needs to be done for certain people trying to reunite with family members in the UK? Given the covid restrictions across various parts of the world, will his Department look at eliminating the need for travelling to those places in person and do those things online, as per the request of the British Red Cross?

James Duddridge: We work very closely with the British Red Cross and fund a number of those pieces of work. The issue the hon. Member describes is not simple and is largely one for the Home Office team, but I will discuss it with them. Our ambassadors work closely with the Home Office in post. I recognise the difficulty. The reality is that very few people are travelling at all across the developing world, and that is probably right, because infection rates are higher in some of the countries where they would be going. We should reflect on that in terms of how we provide humanitarian support through local people and local mechanisms, rather than having people getting on planes and potentially spreading the virus.

Mention was made of providing ventilators. Often the most effective aid is very, very basic—providing water and soap, countering communications around covid and providing very basic PPE. We are not talking about full bodysuits, but a basic mask that people can use when they are getting out and about. That tends to be where we are focusing as an international community.

Jim Shannon: I understand that there are some 90,000 ventilators in the United Kingdom, of which only 4,000 have been used. Is there some possibility that the ventilators that we have could be used there?

James Duddridge: Theoretically yes, but in reality no, on the basis that most places also need oxygen; it is more complicated. I am conscious of the time, so with the permission of the House I will not take any more interventions and will rattle through some key points.

I was going to go through a number of examples on the African continent, which I deal with, but sadly I cannot. I will say, in response to the hon. Member for Strangford, that Uganda is one of the best countries at

taking in refugees. I have seen how it provides land and building materials. Clearly something is happening short term there, but I give credit for that.

We also have a crisis within a crisis, because there is the normal crisis of food, famine and drought, particularly in South Sudan, Yemen, north-east Nigeria and Burkina Faso. I recently travelled to South Sudan, where, sadly, there were many stories like that of the boy whom the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) met. That trip is an example of our not keeping up our development expertise—business as usual—but doing better than business as usual. I was able to go to Jonglei, meet the governor, see people and the agencies and then go back and do the political role, which is where the solution is long term. The World Food Programme has been in Jonglei state since 1963 in various ways, year after year, so in 2020 we must look back and say, “If we are still feeding people, what are we doing wrong?” What we have been doing wrong is not supporting the politicians, giving that FCO help alongside the DFID help. That is a good example of where we are being joined up. I am sure I will be held to account at the Dispatch Box in other areas where we are doing less well.

Cox’s Bazar and Bangladesh were mentioned several times. I will not repeat the million figures and the nuance of that, but as of 10 November there were 345 cases among Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar set against 5,000 cases in the wider host community. Owing to limitations in testing and information, there are solid suggestions that covid is worse in refugee camps than elsewhere. We are concerned about that trajectory. Early on in the developing countries, covid cases were largely in the diplomatic and economic districts from people coming back off flights, but there is an increased contagion that we should be worried about. While the formal data does not support it, there is some anecdotal data about deaths over and above the averages.

On the broader point, as my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) said, in defending the Government’s position, we are among the largest resettlers, specifically of unaccompanied children. The UK does more to support unaccompanied children than any EU member state. Last year we saw asylum claims from unaccompanied children accounting for about 20% of all claims made in the UK and EU. In the year to June, 5,800 vulnerable children came, and 44,000 children—both unaccompanied and accompanied—have come since 2010. As hon. Members consistently said, most refugees are in neighbouring countries or are internally displaced persons.

This has been an eclectic debate, from “The West Wing” to praying in aid Karl Marx and the Tesco brothers for different reasons. It shows the power of the House. Madam Deputy Speaker, you have been very good—as ever I would love to go on, but I have already overrun.

3.18 pm

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful to my hon. Friends and hon. Members across the House for their powerful speeches and to the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), and the Minister for their responses. Although the debate has exposed that we have much in common,

we also have differences of emphasis. I hope that, if we can focus on one thing, we can build common cause in forging a much more positive narrative about how we speak of refugees and asylum seekers in our own country and elsewhere.

Too often in recent years, the rhetoric—particularly in our political narrative—has been so cruel and so intolerant that it has been deeply painful to observe. That vicious rhetoric, which sometimes, sadly, has been encouraged by certain political figures, has dehumanised refugees and asylum seekers. The othering of refugees and asylum seekers, from wherever it comes—whether it is in sections of the media or in our political discourse—has to stop. I hope that we can all work on that together, to try to build a more positive image and narrative of the contributions of refugees in our country and elsewhere.

During this pandemic, we have all been exposed to the fragility of life by seeing people in our own communities and among our families and friends get sick and some, sadly, die. I hope that we remember not only that refugees have to deal with the spectre of coronavirus, but that many have endured conflict and, as we heard, have seen family members killed and experienced rape and torture. In many conflicts, rape has been used as a weapon of war against women. We also heard about the mental trauma suffered by all refugees, but particularly refugee children and women.

As others have said, it is imperative that we work together to tackle some of these issues. We have all highlighted what can be done domestically on the “no recourse to public funds” issue, on protecting refugees in our country, on allowing them to work in order to make a living and make a contribution, and on protecting children and revisiting the Dubs proposals. We also need greater ambition in our Government to look at the global challenge—to look at leadership together—and to invest what will be in the trillions to help economies recover and to protect the millions of refugees around the world. As others have said, we also need a proper, fair way of distributing the vaccine, which is a great source of optimism for us all.

Finally, the Minister did not address a couple of points that I felt he should have addressed and on which I hope he will work with his colleagues. One was my request for the UK Government to join the Netherlands and Canada on the Gambia case in the International Court of Justice—the genocide prevention case—so that we can redouble our efforts to prevent further atrocities and the further prosecution of genocide by the Myanmar Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis facing refugees across the globe; has considered the secondary effects of the covid-19 pandemic on refugees and displaced persons in fragile or low-income states; and calls on the Government to provide urgent support to the world’s poorest and most vulnerable countries and communities as they deal with the covid-19 pandemic.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will have a three-minute suspension for cleaning.

3.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

Smokefree England: Covid-19 and PHE Abolition

3.25 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Government's ambition for England to be smokefree by 2030; notes the increasing disparities in smoking rates between the richest and poorest in society; further notes the effect of the covid-19 outbreak and the opportunities and risks provided by the reorganisation of public health on the UK's ability to achieve this ambition; and calls on the Government to set out the further steps it plans to take to deliver a smokefree England by 2030.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I am also grateful to every Member who has given up their time to speak, especially the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I believe has already had two questions and a speech today—and I suspect that he still has an Adjournment debate ahead of him.

This debate is on an issue that is close to my heart. I must declare an interest as a former chair of the Gateshead tobacco control alliance. As the prevention Green Paper acknowledged, achieving the smokefree 2030 ambition will be challenging, especially in deprived communities where smoking rates are higher. On current progress, Cancer Research UK estimates that these communities will not reach the 5% ambition until the mid-2040s. This is simply not acceptable. Indeed, in County Durham, adult smoking prevalence is 17% compared with 13.9% nationally. This rises to 27% among people in routine and manual occupations. On top of that, 16.8% of mothers smoked during pregnancy compared with 10.4% in England.

Smokers in the north-east lose around £600 million because of unemployment and reduced income due to smoking. For working smokers, weekly earnings are on average 6.8% lower than for non-smokers, equivalent to £1,424 less per smoker annually—and this, of course, was prior to covid-19, which is disproportionately harming the health of local economies of already disadvantaged areas. Helping smokers to quit will benefit not just their health and wellbeing but their incomes, helping to level up disadvantaged communities. Smoking is also responsible for half the difference in life expectancy between the rich and the poor. For every person who dies from smoking, another 30 are suffering from serious smoking-related diseases. Disturbingly, every week in England, almost 2,000 children take up smoking, two thirds of whom will go on to become regular smokers.

With 1,500 people dying from smoking-related diseases every week, there is no time to waste. The tobacco control plan published in 2017 was for five years, which comes to an end in 2022. It has already been overtaken by events and is no longer fit for purpose in the light of the ambition for England to be smokefree by 2030, the decision to abolish Public Health England, and the Government's manifesto commitments to increase healthy life expectancy by five years by 2035 while narrowing inequalities. If a new tobacco control plan is to be put in place in a timely manner, it needs to be in development now. The Minister may remember that the last plan was published two years after its predecessor ran out of time. We need bold announcements from the Government on tough new measures, along the lines set out in the "Roadmap to a smokefree 2030", which has been endorsed by the all-party group on smoking and health, if we are

to achieve a smokefree 2030. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are developing a new tobacco control plan, and if not consider doing so urgently? Will he further commit to publishing a new tobacco control plan in 2021, setting out concrete measures for delivering on the smokefree 2030 ambition?

Britain is a world leader in tobacco control, having driven down smoking rates by 60% since the start of this century. However, the Government's decision to abolish Public Health England without a clear plan for the future risks undermining this hard-won progress. The success in tobacco control has been driven by combining national population level interventions with comprehensive actions at regional and local levels.

The national function is currently provided by a combination of the Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England; what is crucial is not where the function sits, but that it has protected funding and continues to exist. Furthermore, while inequalities in smoking rates remain, where regional tobacco control programmes have been in place there has been a significantly higher rate of decline. Regional programmes, such as those led by Fresh in the north-east, provide an effective bridge between national and local activity and between local authorities and the NHS. The Government must publish a clear plan setting out the future of Public Health England's health improvement and wider functions; that is crucial if we are to achieve the Government's interlocking pledges not just to achieve a smokefree 2030, but to increase disability-free life years, reduce inequalities, improve mental health and reduce obesity and alcohol harm.

The covid-19 pandemic makes action to reduce smoking prevalence all the more urgent. Chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory diseases and diabetes account for about 89% of all deaths in the UK and are also linked to higher rates of mortality from covid-19. A robust and sustainable approach to health improvement is vital if we are to tackle the leading causes of chronic diseases, namely smoking, obesity and alcohol and drug abuse.

However, the impact of smoking is not limited to the UK. It is estimated that at least 8 million deaths around the world every year are linked to tobacco, more than for AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. Over 80% of the more than 1 billion smokers in the world live in low and middle-income countries. In addition to the human cost, the impact on already overstretched health care systems puts a heavy economic burden on those countries, adding to the difficulties LMICs face in recovering from the global pandemic.

That is why we can all be proud that the UK, as a global leader in tobacco control, is providing funding via Official Development Assistance to support implementation of the framework convention on tobacco control in low and middle-income countries. The funding was £15 million over five years for the World Health Organisation's FCTC 2030 project to support low and middle-income countries to implement tobacco control measures. The FCTC 2030 project has been very well regarded; however, funding is due to come to an end. Extending this funding will accelerate progress in ending the global tobacco epidemic, support FCTC 2030 beneficiary countries to recover from covid-19 domestically, and as the UK leaves the EU maintain our position and as a global leader on tobacco control.

This is a matter of development funding so it requires broader support than just from the Department of Health and Social Care, but the Minister's support for the proposal would greatly facilitate the likelihood of success. Will the Minister therefore commit to supporting extending the UK's funding for the FCTC 2030 project beyond 2021?

Aside from our international commitments, it is important that there is a focus within the UK at regional and local authority level. Smokers from deprived communities with higher smoking rates tend to be more heavily addicted than those from more affluent communities. Deprived smokers are just as motivated to quit as other smokers, but it is harder to succeed when people are more addicted, when smoking is more commonplace and when cheap, illicit tobacco is widely available.

Regional tobacco control programmes have been effective in tackling these disparities, as shown most clearly by the example of Fresh in the north-east, which is the longest-running and only surviving regional office for tobacco control. When Fresh was founded in 2005, smoking prevalence in the north-east was much higher than the average for England, at 29% compared with 24%, and the disparity was growing. Since then, the north-east has seen the greatest decline in smoking prevalence of any region, and smoking prevalence is now only a little higher than the England average. Smoking rates have also fallen faster among routine and manual workers in the north-east compared with in England as a whole. As a result, although the differential between routine and manual and professional workers declined in the north-east between 2012 and 2017, it has increased in England as a whole. The success and value of Fresh's work is clear, and I commend it for its vital work in the region.

After the public health grant to local authorities was cut in 2015-16, the funding provided by local authorities for regional offices in the north-west and south-west was cut completely. Even in the north-east, funding has been significantly reduced. New funding streams are therefore needed. In addition, there are stop smoking services that act as a highly effective and cost-effective way of supporting smokers to quit. However, there is a stark inequity in the local authority offer to smokers across England. In some areas, stop smoking services have been scaled down or decommissioned altogether, whereas elsewhere local authorities have sustained or developed their services.

An Action on Smoking and Health and Cancer Research UK report published in January looked at the state of local stop smoking support and found that among the local authorities that still had a budget for stop smoking services, 35% had cut that budget between 2018-19 and 2019-20. That was the fifth successive year in which more than a third of local authorities had cut their stop smoking service budgets. Financial pressures caused by the cuts to public health funding and the wider pressures on local government finances are the major reason for that. The public health grant, which funds local authority tobacco control, has been cut by around a fifth in real terms since 2015-16, falling from £4 billion in '15-16 to £3.2 billion now.

Analysis by the King's Fund in 2018 found that wider tobacco control and stop smoking services were among the biggest losers in planned budget cuts and that these cuts have been accompanied by a 38% decline in the number of smokers setting quit dates at stop smoking

services since 2015. Among pregnant women, the number setting quit dates has fallen by a fifth. This is one of the many failures of austerity, so will the Minister confirm that the Government will reverse the cuts made to local public health budgets to ensure that local authorities can play their part in delivering a smokefree 2030?

We must also recognise the value of social marketing campaigns, which have immediate impact, can be targeted with precision at disadvantaged smokers and can be highly cost-effective if carried out at a regional and national level. Such campaigns play a particularly important role in motivating smokers to try to quit. In 2016, Fresh worked with Smoke Free Yorkshire and the Humber to implement a hard-hitting quit smoking campaign aimed at raising smokers' awareness of the links between smoking and 16 types of cancer and to trigger quit attempts, reaching millions of people. It is now thought to have been among the most successful quit campaigns to have ever been run in England in terms of awareness, attitudes and actions taken, with around 10% of people who saw it making a quit attempt—that is around 72,000 smokers. However, this regional activity is threatened by local authority budget cuts, which led to the decommissioning of the regional offices in the north-west and south-west. A smokefree 2030 fund imposed on the tobacco industry, as proposed in the Green Paper consultation, would provide vital funding for national and regional anti-smoking mass media campaigns.

Another important regional issue is the impact of illicit tobacco, which is concentrated in poorer communities. Cheap and illicit tobacco provides easier access to tobacco for children and reduces the incentive for adults to quit. In 2009, Fresh, along with colleagues in the north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber, established the North of England Tackling Illicit Tobacco for Better Health programme, originally with pump priming from a Department of Health grant. The aim was to increase the health of the population by reducing smoking prevalence; reducing the availability of illicit tobacco, therefore keeping real tobacco prices high; developing infrastructure to aid information sharing, identification of illicit markets and enforcement action; reducing the demand for illicit tobacco through campaigns raising awareness of the issue; engaging with relevant health and community workers; and finally, regularly monitoring smokers' attitudes and behaviour to measure the effectiveness of the programme.

Between 2009 and 2019, the illicit market share declined by a third in the north-east from 15% to 10%, and enforcement was enhanced. That compares with the national market share of illicit tobacco in 2018-19 and of manufactured cigarettes, with a share of 34% for hand-rolled tobacco. Elements of the original north of England programme have been sustained by Fresh in the north-east, including insight-led demand reduction programmes. Fresh now leads the national Illicit Tobacco Partnership, supported by ASH and other partners. However, the 2013 National Audit Office recommendation that this approach be rolled out nationally has not yet been adopted, while essential regional activity to tackle illicit tobacco and reduce smoking among children and young people has been put at risk by cuts to public health grants since 2015-16. Does the Minister agree that regional activity to get illicit tobacco off our streets should be sustainably funded?

[Mary Kelly Foy]

Finally, I would like to raise the regulation review. While we await the Government's response to the prevention Green Paper consultation, I hope the Minister can tell us what has happened to the Government's response to the consultation on the Nicotine Inhaling Products (Age of Sale and Proxy Purchasing) Regulations 2015, which closed in September last year. A response to that consultation was due last December, and almost a year on, there has been no word from the Government about when it will be published. The Government are also required to review the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 and the Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations 2015 by May 2021. They should set out the timetable for the consultation process for both sets of regulations as soon as possible. We are therefore awaiting the Government's response to two consultations and the launch of two more, which need to be reported by the end of the financial year. Can the Minister confirm when the Government will deliver on all four of those?

I recognise that I have posed a lot of questions, and I thank the Minister and the House for their time. However, those are questions that need to be asked and answered if we are to achieve the smokefree 2030 ambition that is shared right across the House.

3.44 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on securing this debate and on her introductory speech? I am going to start in time-honoured speaking fashion by telling you, Minister, what I am going to ask you, and then elucidating on that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Liz Twist: Sorry. I will start by telling you, Madam Deputy Speaker, what I am going to be asking the Minister and then perhaps expanding on that. First of all, Minister, I will be asking you about the tobacco control plan, which my hon. Friend has already referred to. If we are going to achieve the smokefree by 2030 ambition, that needs to happen quickly, and I will be asking you what you can do—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady really must refer to the Minister, because when she says "you", she is talking to me.

Liz Twist: Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am getting carried away.

I will be asking the Minister what he will be doing to ensure that vital maternity safety programmes, such as the saving babies' lives care bundle, can get back on track. I will be asking him what he will do to develop a national strategy for reducing rates of smoking in pregnancy among women from disadvantaged communities, learning the lessons from the areas where the greatest declines have been seen in smoking in pregnancy. I will be asking him how he will ensure that mental health trusts are required to implement National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance and that the Care Quality Commission is directed to assess that when it carries out its inspections. Finally, I will be asking him what

steps he will take to ensure that smokers with mental health conditions receive evidence-based advice about switching from smoking to vaping.

I want to elaborate a little further on those issues. As a result of comprehensive action at national, regional and local levels, significant progress has been made over the years on bringing down smoking rates in England. The 2019 prevention Green Paper's commitment to make England smokefree by 2030 was an appropriately ambitious and welcome commitment to continuing this important mission. However, a year on from the end of the Green Paper consultation, we have yet to see the Government's response or their promised and much-needed further proposals, which would enable us to meet the 2030 ambition.

Despite our national progress, smoking remains the leading cause of preventable illness and death in England. Each year, smoking kills more people than obesity, alcohol, drug misuse, HIV and traffic accidents combined. Smoking is a particular challenge in my constituency of Blaydon, where 17.4% of adults smoke, compared with 15.3% across the north-east and 13.9% nationally. Smoking costs Blaydon £1.8 million every year, largely as a result of NHS treatment costs, lost productivity due to ill health and premature death caused by smoking. For communities such as Blaydon, achieving the smokefree 2030 ambition will be tough, but it remains essential for the health and wellbeing of our community. However, analysis by Cancer Research UK finds that on current trends, disadvantaged communities such as my own will not become smokefree until the mid-2040s. This rate of progress is not acceptable and not affordable for our most deprived communities.

The last tobacco control plan was two years late, as we have heard. It should have been published in 2015, and it was delivered in the summer of 2017 only because of the commitment of the then Health Minister, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who I am pleased to say has just joined us. The tobacco control plan that he introduced included the ambition for a smokefree generation, and now that the Government have committed to deliver this by 2030, the pressure is on. Our current tobacco control plan is set to run out in 2022, leaving an eight-year gap in which, according to Cancer Research UK, the rate of smoking prevalence decline must be 40% faster than our current trajectory if our nation is to meet the 2030 tobacco control plan commensurate with the scale of the ambition to be smokefree by 2030.

I shall turn now to the NHS long-term plan. The successful delivery of the plan is essential to the achievement of the smokefree 2030 ambition. The plan published in January last year sets out welcome commitments to tackle smoking in the NHS. By 2023-24, NHS-funded tobacco dependence treatment will be offered to all hospital in-patients who smoke; all pregnant smokers and their partners, too, if they smoke; and all long-term users of specialist mental health and learning disability services who smoke.

The evidence is clear of the benefits this will bring, both to smokers and to the NHS. Smokers are 36% more likely to be admitted to hospital and smoking is responsible for almost 500,000 admissions each year in England. One hospital patient in four is estimated to smoke. The increased demand that smoking places on NHS treatment capacity translates into an enormous financial burden. Each year, smoking costs the NHS around £2.6 billion,

including avoidable secondary care costs estimated at £890 million a year. The cost in the north-east to the NHS is around £132.3 million a year, with smoking in Blaydon alone responsible for around £300,000 of that. Across the north-east, it is estimated that implementing the long-term plan commitments at just 40% coverage, as is aimed for by the end of 2021-22, would deliver net savings of nearly £12 million to the NHS in the north-east.

In the north-east, progress towards implementation of the long-term plan's commitments on smoking is well under way. Treating tobacco dependency is one of two key priorities for the north-east and north Cumbria integrated care system population health and prevention work stream. To focus efforts across the region, a dedicated north-east Smokefree NHS/Treating Tobacco Dependency Task Force was established in 2017. The taskforce has provided strategic direction, developing regional resources and facilitating partnership working with all stakeholders, including NHS trusts, local authority tobacco commissioners, Public Health England and primary care.

As of April 2020, all NHS trusts in the north-east had achieved smokefree NHS status by implementing updated smokefree NHS policies and pathways to identify and treat smokers from admission, in line with national guidance. Across the north-east, trusts have established good links between hospitals and community stop-smoking services funded by local authorities to ensure treatment started in hospital is continued after patients leave hospital. Trusts are training staff to build capacity. They have also signed the NHS smokefree pledge as a clear and visible way to show commitment to helping smokers to quit and to providing smokefree environments.

Elsewhere, progress has not been so heartening, and it is clear that the funding and focus promised by the long-term plan are much needed. An audit of smoking cessation advice and services in NHS acute hospitals, published earlier this year by the British Thoracic Society, concluded that there is poor adherence to national standards and slow progress in identifying and treating smokers. In fact, in many cases the situation is worse than at the time of the last audit in 2016. One smoker in two is not asked whether they would like help to quit. Only one hospital in three has a hospital-funded smoking cessation practitioner, compared to one in two in 2016. Referral to hospital smoking cessation services is available in only four out of 10 hospitals. In 2016, the figure was more than half.

Progress on the long-term plan's commitments has also not been immune from the impact of the covid-19 pandemic. Early implementation sites chosen to stress test the new tobacco dependency treatment pathways set out in the long-term plan were due to start in April, but this had to be delayed until last month. With winter approaching, and the risk of co-circulation of covid-19 and seasonal flu looming, there is a real risk that work to deliver the long-term plan's commitments on smoking could be derailed. If we are to achieve the smokefree 2030 ambition, addressing smoking where contact with smokers is greatest is an opportunity that must not be missed.

Let me turn to smoking in pregnancy. The Minister is as concerned as I am about this issue, on which there is too little progress. This needs to be a major focus of the next tobacco control plan. Ensuring that more pregnancies are smokefree not only protects the baby as it grows and reduces the risks of complications such as stillbirth and

miscarriage; it also gives children the best start in life. NHS England has included addressing smoking as a key part of the initiative to reduce stillbirth and neonatal deaths through its saving babies' lives care bundle, which is designed to encourage trusts to implement evidence-based measures to improve the safety of pregnancies. However, as with other aspects of NHS activity, this work has been undermined by the impact of covid-19, with a key aspect—carbon monoxide breath tests for all women—currently suspended. I understand that there are also reports from local authorities' stop-smoking services that fewer pregnant women are being referred for them for support by maternity services. What will the Minister do to ensure that those vital maternity services get back on track as a matter of urgency?

Despite work in the NHS, progress has not been made anywhere near swiftly enough. There are big variations in the performance of different parts of the country. In a soon-to-be published analysis, Action on Smoking and Health finds that rates of smoking in pregnancy have increased in the past five years in a third of clinical commissioning groups, while declines have been seen in less than half, or 44%. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Government seem so unlikely to achieve their ambition of reducing rates to 6% by 2022. In the north-east, we continue to have some of the highest rates of smoking in pregnancy in the country. These are driven by high levels of disadvantage in the region, but, unlike in some regions where rates have even increased, rates in the north-east have fallen in the past five years, from 17% in 2016 to 15% in 2020. Progress has been driven by the regional tobacco programme in the north-east and by the work of NHS England, Public Health England and local government.

The Minister might be interested to hear that a recent analysis by *The Times* found that areas of the country that were likely to have seen big drops in rates of smoking in pregnancy were also more likely to have implemented financial incentive schemes to support pregnant women to quit. Evidence on the effectiveness of these schemes has been accumulating for many years; they have been shown to increase quit rates when implemented alongside evidence-based quit support. Such incentive schemes are in place in Greater Manchester and South Tyneside. Madam Deputy Speaker, I can see you looking at the clock, so I shall press on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): For the sake of clarification, there are very few people present and the hon. Lady is making important points, so, just for once, I am not putting her under any time pressure.

Liz Twist: As you say, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is an important issue.

I return to my point about developing a national strategy for reducing rates of smoking in pregnancy among women and the disadvantaged communities they come from. What does the Minister plan to do to ensure that those reductions are seen and that there is a continued decline in smoking in pregnancy?

Let me turn to smoking and mental health. The last tobacco control plan for England was widely welcomed for including a specific focus on smoking and mental health. With such high rates of smoking in the community and such little progress in reducing rates, this focus was long overdue. Progress has been made since the plan

[Liz Twist]

was published, with mental health trusts being set a target: to implement smokefree settings, in line with NICE guidance on smoking, by 2018.

However, despite that, an ASH survey commissioned by Public Health England to look at trust implementation found the following:

“Staff behaviour often enables smoking, with staff accompanying patients on smoking breaks every day in 57% of trusts.

In 55% of trusts, patients were not always asked if they smoked on admission.

Only 47% of trusts offered the choice”

of stop smoking medications

“in line with NICE best practice”.

The impact of covid-19 is likely to have further hindered the implementation of NICE guidance. The Mental Health and Smoking Partnership, a coalition of leading mental health and physical health charities, has raised concerns that some trusts have been rolling back what smokefree policies they had put in place. There are concerns that the Care Quality Commission is not assessing the implementation of NICE guidance on smoking in a consistent way, with trusts receiving conflicting messages on implementation from different parts of the system. Another question I ask the Minister is whether he will ensure that mental health trusts are required to implement NICE guidance PH48 and that the CQC is directed to address this when it carries out inspections.

Action in mental health in-patient settings is only the tip of the iceberg; most smokers with a mental health condition will never have an in-patient stay. The NHS long-term plan has committed to implement a universal smoking cessation service in mental health settings. A promising area for support in the community, and via primary care, is improving access to psychological therapies services, which were established in 2008 with the ambition of scaling up access to talking therapies. About 1 million people with depression and anxiety access IAPT services each year. It is estimated that about 28% of people with depression and anxiety smoke. Quitting smoking has also been found to improve depression, with the same effect as taking antidepressants, so there is a major opportunity to improve both mental and physical health by integrating smoking cessation support into IAPT services. Research by the University of Bristol is under way to explore the integration of support for smokers with these talking therapies, and the early findings are positive. Individual local services, such as Talkworks in Devon, have also started to explore the potential of integration. However, smaller-scale pilots, although important, miss the big opportunity to reach many thousands each year with additional support.

E-cigarettes are a major opportunity to help more smokers to quit, particularly those with high levels of dependency, common among smokers with a mental health condition. E-cigarettes have been shown to help smokers successfully quit at greater rates than traditional nicotine replacement therapies and to be popular quitting aids. Despite the need among smokers with mental health conditions and the potential for e-cigarettes to save many lives, the attitude towards e-cigarettes within mental health services remains varied. Two excellent examples of good practice in mental health trusts can be found in my region, where the Cumbria, Northumberland,

Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust and the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust both offer e-cigarettes to their patients as a treatment option, alongside the provision of nicotine replacement therapies. Those trusts have shown not only leadership in treating tobacco dependency and implementing national guidance, but real pragmatism on vaping, which could save the lives of many smokers with mental health problems who may not otherwise be able to quit smoking.

Unfortunately, that pragmatism is not found nationwide, and in many trusts the restrictions placed on vaping are not dissimilar to those placed on smoking. Such inconsistency is also seen in staff attitudes towards e-cigarettes. New unpublished data gathered by ASH found that 46% of mental health nurses and 66% of psychiatrists had received no training on e-cigarettes. As a result, many are uncertain about the role of e-cigarettes in supporting smokers in their care. So I reiterate the last of my questions: what steps will the Minister take to ensure that smokers with mental health conditions receive evidence-based advice about switching to vaping? This is an important issue that requires persistence and detailed attention. I look forward to the Minister's positive responses to these proposals.

4.4 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who I have been questioned by many times. Thinking about today's debate, I remember in early summer 2017, when I was standing down there at the Dispatch Box answering Health questions, being pressed by my then shadow, the lovely lady the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), on when I was going to publish the long-awaited tobacco control plan, which, as the hon. Member for Blaydon reminds us, was due to be out in December 2015. Rather to the surprise of my shadow that day and my officials sitting in the box, I said that it would be out “before the summer recess” and, true to my word, it was.

That was an early lesson for me in how to focus minds in the civil service, because I have never seen them move so fast, but more importantly, it set out some of the key ambitions for us to hit by 2022. The prevention Green Paper a few years later then set the course for England to be smokefree by 2030. I stand by the ambitions, both in the plan and in the Green Paper, 100%, and I believe with all my heart that they are completely achievable, but we will have to get our skates on, as has been said by the first two speakers, the hon. Members for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and for Blaydon. We will have to be very bold and make the most of one of the rare opportunities afforded to us by the covid pandemic.

I want to make just a few points today. On public health reorganisation, I have previously raised my concerns in the House about the future of Public Health England's work to tackle issues such as smoking, obesity, inequality and air quality after the new National Institute for Health Protection comes online. I have no issue with the desire to take the health protection functions out and create the new institute based on the German model—it makes a lot of sense, and I have said so to the Health Secretary in public and in private. My concern is about the health prevention parts of Public Health England. On 1 September, I asked the Secretary of State whether

he was considering bringing Public Health England's expertise and significant experience in this area back into the Department. When I was travelling abroad representing the Government and I needed briefing on these issues, I always knew that there would be somebody who knew infinitely more than me inside Public Health England. I do not want to see that wasted.

I note that the Department has now established a programme of work to pick through this. The snappily titled population health improvement stakeholder advisory group has been formed and there are some notable names on there, such as Seema Kennedy, who was my successor as Public Health Minister; Professor Helen Stokes-Lampard, formerly of the Royal College of General Practitioners and now chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges; Professor John Newton from Public Health England; Dr Jenny Harries, whom many of the public will be familiar with as deputy chief medical officer; and Professor Paul Cosford, emeritus medical director of Public Health England and a truly excellent official—one of the best I ever worked with. There are some good people on there.

On balance, I would restate my call for the Department to recover these functions, and I refer the Minister to a pretty comprehensive piece of work published just this week by Policy Exchange, examining how a new deal for public health can build a healthier nation. It calls for the creation of a new institute for health improvement housed in the Department of Health and Social Care, reporting directly to Ministers and the chief medical officer, for a new funded national mission to improve the health of the nation. There is a lot of sense in that, and I recommend the report to the Minister.

Let me dwell for a moment on the word “funded”. I do not think—the record will show that I was always lukewarm at best on this idea—that the Government should proceed with the idea of ending the ring fence of the public health grant. I think it would be a mistake. That should be kept. It should be measured much more tightly and, if anything, I think it should be increased to help our directors of public health to do what works towards smokefree 2030. I am not making unfunded spending commitments. The prevention Green Paper, which I helped to draft and still think is a very credible piece of work, talks about the principle of making the polluter—that is, the tobacco firms—pay, as has been done in France and in the United States, and we should progress that to create a smokefree 2030 fund. I would be grateful if the Minister could reassure me that the Government are at least considering this option and what it might look like in practice.

The Government's ambition for what we call “smokefree” is for a smoking prevalence in England of 5% or less in the next 10 years, but, as we have heard, significant action is clearly needed if we are to achieve this. The rate in Winchester, which I represent, may be 8.3%, but the national average is 14.1%, so there is a way to go. Smoking remains the biggest single cause of preventable death in our country today, and it is a leading cause of health inequalities. The issue is also one of inequality. About one in four people in routine and manual occupations smoke—about two and a half times more than people in managerial and professional occupations—and this gap has widened significantly since 2012, according to the Office for National Statistics. The inequalities are also geographic, as we have heard.

As a Conservative Member, I see becoming smokefree as a vital step towards delivering our manifesto pledges on extending healthy life years by five by 2035, reducing inequalities across the board, and, as the Prime Minister calls it, levelling up every part of our country. However, as the Green Paper concluded, this is an extremely challenging ambition for any Government. The all-party group on smoking and health has recommended a new tobacco control plan focusing on delivering the 2030 ambition, and that is an eminently sensible suggestion. Given how long it takes to get a tobacco control plan, even when making promises at the Dispatch Box, has the Minister commissioned officials to start work on renewing the TCP to set a course for the smokefree ambition? I think that Ministers will be doing that, with smoking prevalence going in the right direction, albeit not fast enough to meet our agreed ambition, but also off the back of the opportunity afforded to us by the pandemic.

The University College London smoking toolkit indicates that the pandemic has been a driver of quitting among smokers across all social groups, with the highest rate of people stopping smoking seen in the past 30 years. That is the good news. However, we cannot be complacent. Although it is true that many people have quit, there are signs that some have relapsed into smoking. In particular, there are worrying signs among the 18 to 24-year-old group that smoking rates may be increasing again and have certainly stopped declining.

Turning to the alternatives, the UK has long been a leader in traditional tobacco control measures such as the use of taxation, as we hear at Budget time; the smoking ban, which was a great credit to the Blair Government; plain packaging; readily available smoking cessation services; and numerous tobacco harm reduction policies using less harmful alternatives to smoking. I was often criticised in office both for promoting e-cigarettes too much and for not promoting them enough as an alternative. That suggested to me that I may have had the balance about right, but I will go further. Data from the ONS tells us that over half of smokers in this country want to quit and that, on average, smokers try some 30 times or more before giving up successfully. Of those who are successful, only 2% quit through stop smoking services, and over 40% use an e-cigarette. However, while many have quit using vaping, the fact remains—we cannot deny this—that nearly half of smokers in Britain have tried vaping but did not stick with it. On top of that, the figures now show that the number of vapers is falling, while some 1.3 million vapers have not fully made the switch and still continue to smoke at the same time.

Since the early 2000s, tobacco policy in the UK has been driven by the European Union through the tobacco products directive. That is about to change. May I therefore ask the Minister to speculate, as I know Ministers love to do, on what opportunities Brexit brings to advance our leading role as a tobacco harm reduction advocate? We may be leaving the political structures of the European Union, but I sincerely hope that we are not leaving our leadership role in this area when many countries around the world look to see what the UK does.

Our prevention Green Paper pledged—as, indeed, did I when in office—to

“run a call for independent evidence to assess further how effective heated tobacco products are, or are not, in helping people quit smoking and reducing health harms from smoking.”

[Steve Brine]

The Government said that the call for evidence would be announced in summer 2020. Of course, we all understand why that has slipped, but I wonder if we might get a reaffirmation today, because recent word, including a parliamentary written answer on 21 September to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), who I know wanted to speak today, said that the Government would merely

“consider looking at this at a later date”.

It is imperative that the Government recommit to holding that call for independent evidence as soon as possible, so that the effectiveness of heated tobacco products can be assessed and smokers can have confidence that they are switching to a less harmful alternative.

I say that because there is growing evidence that adult smokers’ misperception of the risks surrounding vaping may be preventing them from transitioning to less harmful alternatives. Last month the excellent UK charity Action on Smoking and Health, otherwise known as ASH, which campaigns against smoking and is run by Deborah Arnott, published survey data showing that vaping in the UK had stagnated as a percentage of the total smoking population, after year-on-year growth. The charity blamed what it called

“unfounded concerns about the relative safety of e-cigarettes”

as a likely cause.

Given that public health authorities in the UK actively support and champion vaping as an alternative to smoking, that statistic shows how damaging inaccurate media coverage can be. To maximise the public health benefits of e-cigarettes, I think regulations should be risk-proportionate and reflect the scientific evidence base on the relative harms of cigarette alternatives and their potential for harm reduction. For example, when this Parliament’s Select Committee on Science and Technology, chaired so ably by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), reviewed the scientific evidence on e-cigarettes, it recommended that the Government should move to a

“risk-proportionate regulatory environment; where regulations, advertising rules and tax/duties reflect the evidence on the relative harms”

of vape products compared with combustible cigarettes.

The UK Government have invested a lot of resources to understand the science behind these products, which I think has informed the pragmatic and progressive approach that successive Governments have taken to vaping regulation over many years. The results have been impressive, suggesting that it would be a strong regulatory model for other countries to consider. Given competing public health priorities, of course I appreciate that it is not as simple as it sounds, but I believe we should dedicate sufficient time and resource to understanding the science around vape products and their potential to improve public health. That is why I would like us to recommit to what it says in the Green Paper that I partly wrote.

Will the Government consider increasing the age of sale from 16 to 21? That could be a useful tool in the toolbox. ASH has suggested that the Government should consult on that as a means of reducing youth uptake. The call has been backed by more than 70 organisations,

including Cancer Research UK, the British Heart Foundation and the Royal College of Physicians. I think it is well worth considering.

In conclusion, we should keep the ambition. We have never been short on the ambition, across the last Government, the coalition Government and this Government. We should tighten and update the plan, to bring it in line with the ambition in the Green Paper. We should stick to what we know works and be honest enough to say what does not. We should fund the directors of public health on what does work, and I have given a suggestion as to where I think that can happen. There is a lot riding on getting this right. A lot of people’s lives depend on us getting this right, and we need to do so for their benefit and for that of the next generation, so that another generation of young people is not weaned on to the damaging lifestyle that smoking can lead to. I have given a few ideas and look forward to hearing the Minister’s response at the end of the debate.

4.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): For the second time today, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), given the knowledge he has of all the subjects we have covered in this debate and the last one. I thank him for his contribution when he was Minister, too. It is always good to see him in his place.

I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on what I think may be the first debate she has led in the Chamber. If it is, I say to her, “Well done and congratulations.” We look forward to many more contributions from her in this place. I was glad to add my name to the request to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate, and to work alongside the hon. Lady to highlight some of these issues.

I believe that freeing smokers from the tyranny caused by their addiction, and the damage it causes to their health and wellbeing, is an issue not just of health but of human rights. I am my party’s spokesperson for health and human rights, and this debate covers both those issues.

This issue is close to my heart, as I know it is for speakers in all parts of the House. Public health policies, which are the responsibility of the devolved nations, have a key role to play in tackling smoking, but so do the Government in Westminster and this debate. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. He and I have been good friends for a long time, and I look forward to his response because I know it will be positive.

I want to refer quickly, if I may, to the Northern Ireland Department of Health tobacco control strategy, which was implemented in 2012. It was clear that the Northern Ireland Assembly was trying to direct its action at children and young people, disadvantaged people, and pregnant women and their partners who smoked. A review of that strategy undertaken earlier this year found that Northern Ireland has met its target of ensuring that a minimum of 5% of the smoking population accesses smoking cessation services annually, but there is still a group of people who continue to smoke. I am conscious that people have freedom of choice, but we hope that they take note when we present them with the health issues.

That target was achieved, but we are not hitting our targets at population level. There was a target to reduce the smoking rate among manual groups from 31% to 20% by 2020. That rate still lingers around 27%, so that target has not been met. There was also a target to reduce smoking during pregnancy from 15% in 2010 to 9% by 2020. To date, however, that rate has barely declined, so we have hit problems in Northern Ireland. At the time of speaking, the rate is 14%, so we have reduced it by only one percentage point. Let us be very clear: smoking when pregnant puts babies at risk of avoidable harm, including stillbirth, premature birth and birth defects.

We seem to have done better on the target for 11 to 16-year-olds. I am really quite encouraged by that. There has been a reduction from 8% in 2010 to 4%. The target was 3%, so we are one percentage point shy of it, but what we have done there has been quite dramatic. Children who live with smokers are almost three times more likely to take up smoking than children from non-smoking households, which creates a generational cycle of inequality, with smoking locked into disadvantaged communities.

Will the Minister make contact—he probably has—with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and particularly the Health Minister, Robin Swann, to see what has happened there? I feel that we can feed off each other regionally in Administrations, to our advantage. If something is being done right in England, we want to know about it in Northern Ireland, and the same applies in Scotland and Wales.

The disadvantaged communities worst affected by smoking have also been hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic. Smoking is a leading risk factor for all sorts of things, such as cardiovascular disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which have been identified by Public Health England as being associated with worse outcomes from coronavirus. When households stop spending money on tobacco, it can lift them out of poverty, and it increases the disposable income available to spend in local communities rather than lining the pockets of the transnational tobacco firms.

Those inequalities are a problem not just for Northern Ireland but in every part of the United Kingdom. The answer is more action at population level through Government interventions that support people, particularly in disadvantaged communities. I believe that the time is right for the Department of Health and Social Care to publish a new tobacco control plan that addresses UK-wide issues as well as those relating just to England—I believe that we should be doing this across the four regions—and provides solutions to the threats posed by Brexit as well as delivering on the opportunities.

Smoking on screen is an issue close to my heart; we have to find some way of addressing it. Smoking is rarely portrayed in an unattractive manner, or associated with negative consequences. Guidelines on smoking have been established by the communications regulator, Ofcom, but they are often not rigorously applied. The UK Government and Ofcom have committed to working with the British Board of Film Classification to ensure a consistent approach across the piece. On the tobacco control plan, I said in 2018:

“A clear causal link has been established between smoking initiation among young people and smoking on screen in the entertainment media. The impact is down to the amount of smoking that young people see, not whether it is glamorised or not.”

Young people may feel, sometimes unconsciously, that smoking is normal, and that we should all be doing it. However, its depiction is linked to greater risk of smoking uptake. In that earlier debate, I asked:

“Will the Minister ask his colleagues who are responsible for the regulation of film and TV in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to work with the Department of Health and Social Care, and press Ofcom and the British Board of Film Classification to ensure that their codes effectively tackle the portrayal of smoking in films and television programmes that are likely to be seen by children?”—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 685.]

At the time, the Minister briefed that Ofcom and the BBFC were dealing with the issue; quite clearly, Minister, that has not happened to the extent that we would like.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman promised me that he would no longer address the Minister, but would take to addressing the Chair, in the way one is supposed to in this place. He speaks in this Chamber more than any other Member, and he knows that he must not address the Minister. I cannot understand why he persists in doing it.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will certainly endeavour to get that right.

In 2018, there was an explosion of new video on demand services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, which are particularly popular among young people. Ofcom's on demand programme service rules, governing video on demand services such as Netflix, have no rules at all on smoking. The use of video on demand continues to grow, so this problem will only get worse. Is the Minister prepared to look at that issue and address it?

The licensing of tobacco retailers is another issue that I spoke about in 2018 that bears raising again. In Northern Ireland, since 6 April 2016, retailers have been obliged to register with the tobacco register of Northern Ireland; the deadline for doing so was 1 July 2016. It built on similar schemes in Scotland and Wales. In 2018, we implemented a track-and-trace scheme that required every retailer to have an economic operator identifier code. That system was required by the EU tobacco products directive, but the Government have confirmed that it will continue after we leave the EU. Can the Minister confirm that all nations in the UK will continue to implement a retail register scheme? Will he ensure that officials at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs talk to their opposite numbers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales about their experience of the retail register scheme, and the lessons to be learned about it from the devolved Administrations?

Are the tobacco control regulations on e-cigarettes delivering on the twin goals of helping smokers to quit and protecting children from taking up smoking—objectives supported by all parties and all nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

There is a concerning loophole in our regulations: while it is illegal for e-cigarettes to be sold to children under 18, according to advice from trading standards, it is not illegal to give them out as free samples to anyone of any age. Could the Minister give us direction on that? How can we ensure that things are done correctly? I hope the Minister is aware of the article in *The Observer* in October that highlighted that a supplier working on behalf of British American Tobacco was caught handing

[Jim Shannon]

out samples from BAT's popular e-cigarette brand to a 17-year-old without carrying out any kind of age check. That contravenes the spirit, if not the letter, of the regulations. Given the importance of balancing the needs of smokers against any impact on young people, it is vital that a review of these regulations is undertaken. Will the Minister set a timeline for just that?

4.29 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in such an important debate. I represent one of the less healthy constituencies in the country, but we could remove half of our health inequalities by being a smokefree community. That is what is at stake here. I therefore commend my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for securing the debate, which I understand is her first through the Backbench Business route, and congratulate her on her speech. She set out the challenge very well. The point she made about the current trajectory getting us there only by the mid-2040s was absolutely right. She also did the Minister an extraordinary favour in essentially laying down a tobacco control plan in her speech for you, Minister—sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will never do that again. The Minister could clip my hon. Friend's speech directly from *Hansard* and turn it into a tobacco control plan overnight. I think we are almost there, so I hope to hear positive noises from the Minister when it is his turn.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) also made a strong case. I was particularly struck by the points made about smoking in pregnancy and with regard to those with mental health issues. We know from Pareto's law that on any great journey the last 20% takes as much energy as the first 80%, and that is definitely the case with smoking cessation, so we will have to take a granular look at which groups are still disproportionately affected and target resources specifically in a way that works for them.

I was cheered when I saw the name of the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on the call list. As he is a former public health Minister, I knew he would have an awful lot of insight to share from his time developing the previous tobacco control plan. His story certainly made me laugh. I agree with him wholeheartedly on a number of issues, particularly when he said that we should get our skates on. I agreed with his points about Public Health England, which I will expand on soon. The case for keeping everything in one place is profound and compelling; I completely agree.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) seems to have perfected the art of being in multiple places at once, speaking in both Westminster Hall and here very quickly but with characteristic force and insight. I particularly liked the way he characterised this as a social justice issue, which is locked into communities. I relate to that from my home experience. I hope the Minister will address the point on e-cigarettes, which seems like a loophole that none of us would be particularly enthusiastic about.

Earlier this year, the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health invited me to speak at a roundtable to discuss the next steps to secure the ambition, which I share with the Government, for England to be smokefree

by 2030. Both the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill)—she is responding to the Westminster Hall debate—and I highlighted the importance of cross-party working if we are to deliver that ambition. I want to reiterate that sentiment today. I thank the chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for inviting me to that event and acknowledge his tireless work in this space. I think it is only the nature of proceedings that has stopped him from contributing; I have no doubt he will be watching.

As the Minister said in our exchanges relating to tobacco last Tuesday, we can all be proud of the shared record of successive Governments over the last two decades in reducing smoking. I say everything in that context. We have a high degree of consensus in wanting to be smokefree by 2030, with that ambition shared by all. That was featured in the Government's prevention Green Paper last year, which promised to build out a comprehensive approach. It has been a year since the consultation on the Green Paper closed, and we are still awaiting the Government's response and the further proposals they promised, which are expected in January. Given that each day nearly 300 children start smoking, we cannot afford further delay, so the Minister ought to lay out a commitment on the timing of that response when he has his opportunity today.

In my city of Nottingham—colleagues have drawn on their examples from around the country, so I hope they will allow me to do so as well—21% of adults smoke, compared with 14% nationally. The figure is 29% among those in routine and manual occupations. One in six mothers smoked during pregnancy, compared with one in 10 nationwide, and smoking costs the people of our city about 75 million quid, £11.5 million of which comes in the form of NHS spending, which of course is under such pressure due to covid.

This is a social justice issue. It does impact on all communities, but not on all communities equally, and then, within this pandemic, has a compounding and knock-on effect on pandemic outcomes. The prevalence of smoking-related diseases—whether heart disease, respiratory diseases or diabetes—has undoubtedly impacted on the severity of the impact of covid on communities, especially ones like mine. Public Health England has identified these diseases as being very strongly associated with worse outcomes from covid. Of course, as we go into winter, with normal winter pressures and covid-related winter pressures, smoking puts extra pressures on our NHS. Again, there is much at stake for us.

In the covid context, I think we would all be encouraged by the rise in quit attempts and the success rates during the pandemic so far. Again, however, we know that that is not distributed equally. It tends to be older smokers in disadvantaged communities who are quitting in high numbers, not so much younger smokers. It is impossible not to think about the fact that the feeling going into a second lockdown is very different from going into the first. In the first lockdown people talked about ways in which they might improve their lives. I think I was going to re-learn French—I never did—but whether it was banana bread or committing to quit smoking, lots of people used that time very constructively. I worry about the impact of this second one, because there is definitely not the same level of optimism, if optimism is the right word. There will be people who quit six or so months

ago who are feeling the pressure at this point, because quitting smoking is really hard. To those people, I think we would all send our solidarity and hope that they can keep going the course, because they are doing a brilliant thing for themselves and for their families.

I am greatly concerned by the Government's decision to axe Public Health England in the middle of a pandemic. It seems a very odd thing to do. Certainly, without a clear plan for what the future of the health improvement work of PHE is going to be, it risks undermining the progress we have made on smoking and across all other types of health promotion issues. The success on smoking has been driven by a robust national strategy, strong regional delivery and effective, evidence-based local action. I think that is a really good model for smoking cessation and for all other areas of health improvements. I would be very keen to hear the Minister address the issue of when we are going to see an options paper for the future of PHE—I hope he will do so—but I also hope that he will commit to that model and be clear about how public health stakeholders are going to be able to contribute their views and expertise.

I am slightly surprised to have to say this, but, again, it would be good to hear a clear commitment, much in line with what the hon. Member for Winchester said, that the Government believe that this a national-level leadership role and that these functions ought to be together in one place. Whether that is in the Department, as the hon. Gentleman says, or stand alone, as they are currently, they should be in one place, taking a national lead and then providing support for the regional delivery and the effective local action. That has really worked so far, and I do not know why we would not want to do that. I would say to the Minister, as I have said to the Minister for public health—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds—that if the Government come to a sensible place on this, we will not run political victory laps. There is no value in that to anybody. I think we just need to get it done.

It is impossible to talk about Public Health England without relating it to public health cuts, which both my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon and for City of Durham did. I know these very well; prior to this election, I was the custodian of Nottingham's public health budget for three years. Extraordinary cuts to local government, particularly in the poorest communities, have meant diminished public health services, but particularly smoking cessation services. After we have paid for demand-driven services such as drugs and alcohol or sexual health, there is not an awful lot left. I am not sure that the point the hon. Member for Winchester made about the public health grant ring fence is meaningful. I understood it and I agreed with it, but I think that, as a fence, it has a lot of holes. If we looked up and down the country, we would see a lot of public health spending by name that we would not necessarily consider to be public health by discipline. We need to reflect on the impact of those cuts, because they only create greater financial losses for us later, and I will come to that shortly.

Analysis by the Health Foundation shows that nearly £1 billion a year is required to reverse the real-terms per capita cuts, and that an extra £2 billion a year would be needed for adequate investment in the most deprived communities, and that is before the pandemic struck. I am very concerned that virtually all of our local

authorities will have to draw up some sort of in-year budget to deal with covid costs. The promise was made by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that those costs would be met. That is clearly now not going to happen, so, again, will those cuts come from public health budgets? That is something that we should all be very concerned about, because, as the King's Fund characterises them, they are the falsest of false economies. The cuts have damaged not only stop smoking service provision, but all sorts of other provisions, such as health visiting, sexual health clinics and others, and they are storing up problems for our future. I hope the Minister, when he has his opportunity to speak, will confirm whether the upcoming spending review will include an uplift to the public health grant given to local authorities.

Similarly, it would be good to hear a recommitment to national level quitting campaigns, because in their heyday—2008-09—public spending in this area was in the tens of millions. It is not anymore and PHE's budget for anti-smoking campaigns, including Stoptober, which was estimated in 2012 to have generated an additional 350,000 quit attempts in England—a fantastic figure—has fallen substantially now to £1.8 million, which is a quarter of what it was six years ago. Again, these things work. The Department clearly recognises that, and we should recognise the work that PHE did with Action on Smoking and Health during the pandemic on "Today is the Day" campaign, which was targeted at those communities where rates are the highest, including the City of Nottingham, and we are grateful for it. Therefore, those things work and I hope that we can hear a recommitment in due course.

Just to finish, how do we get to being smokefree by 2030? Following the prevention Green Paper, the Smokefree Action Coalition, which includes ASH, Cancer Research, the British Heart Foundation and the Royal College of Physicians, launched the roadmap to smokefree 2030, which is a really good read and was endorsed by all sorts of leading public health organisations and the all-party group. It also has some great recommendations that the Government should engage with, so will the Minister share his reflections on that important document? We do have to come to a position on the issue of the levy on tobacco companies. We should recognise the work that is being done by tobacco companies to reformulate to safer alternatives, but it is still a very profitable industry.

I was going to pull my punch on what I was going to say on this and leave it quite broad, but as other colleagues have been braver than me, I thought that I had better be a bit braver, too. I do not like hypothecated taxes. If we start opening the door to hypothecated taxation, we will never fund unpopular things ever again, as we will just increasingly create a tax regime that fits around that. Nevertheless, a smokefree fund is attractive and could be a way to try to improve funding for public health grant services. Therefore, again, if the Minister has a preferred way forward on that, I think that we could seek to find a political consensus on it, because we know that it would be a challenging thing to do, but it could also be a very important thing to do.

I am conscious that the sector has told us what it thinks it needs, so now it is time for us to reflect on that and that has to be through, as a matter of urgency, a new tobacco control plan. Again, I hope that we will

[Alex Norris]

hear from the Minister on that. There is no room now for flapping and no room for the two-year gap that we saw previously; we must get on with this because, on the current trajectory, we will not make it. I hope the Minister will commit to that as a matter of urgency.

In conclusion, this is a shared goal and it is a significant prize. There are weaknesses in our current approach that we must address now. If we do so and we act decisively, we will make one of the biggest public health breakthroughs that we have made in our nation's history, so let us grab this moment.

4.43 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure, as always, to appear opposite the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris). It is happening with regularity: three times on three different days last week and again today. Indeed, it is happening with a fair degree of regularity that I am speaking in front of you in this Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker, which is always a pleasure.

I thank all hon. Members for their participation in today's debate with typically well-informed and important speeches. As the shadow Minister has alluded to, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), within whose portfolio this matter would normally fall, has been taking a simultaneous debate in Westminster Hall, so it is a rare pleasure for me to be able to speak at the Dispatch Box on this matter.

I thank the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for securing this important debate. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, I think this is her first debate in her name in this Chamber, and, consistent with the principled approach that she adopts in this place to raising issues that she passionately cares about, she has done that today, and I pay tribute to her for doing that.

We should all recognise the significant achievements made on tobacco control over the past two decades through cross-party working. In that context, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) said, while I may not agree with everything that the former Prime Minister Tony Blair did, it is right that I recognise and pay tribute to him for his work in this space when he was leading the country. Smoking rates are now at their lowest ever level in England and the UK, and that is a great public health success story.

However, as Members have highlighted powerfully, there is no room for complacency. Smoking still causes more than 78,000 deaths each year, and there is much more still to do, which is why we announced our smokefree 2030 ambition. As Members will know, the UK is a global leader in tobacco control. Our commitment to tough tobacco control will continue after 1 January 2021. We laid the Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 on 28 September to reaffirm that commitment, which the hon. Member for Nottingham North and I debated recently.

The covid-19 pandemic, as we well know, has put a huge strain on our health and care system. The Government have published guidance regarding covid-19 and the risks from smoking, so this debate is very timely. The

message has been clear that quitting smoking will improve a person's health and recovery prospects if they are unfortunate enough to contract covid-19. It is important that we recognise the great work of local authorities—I will come to that later—and the NHS, along with the third sector, in their support to help smokers quit during these exceptionally challenging times. They have ensured that stop smoking services have continued and used the opportunity of the pandemic to reach out to more smokers to encourage them to quit. I thank them for the work they have done and continue to do.

Action on Smoking and Health has estimated that around 1 million smokers may have made a quit attempt during the pandemic, and that is good news. The Government have provided funding to support ASH's "Today is the Day" campaign, to enable the stop smoking message to reach as many smokers as possible in some of the most deprived areas, and I pay tribute to ASH for its work. Public Health England's Better Health Stoptober annual campaign has also continued at a national and local level to support people quitting during the pandemic.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for his speech, which brought an important perspective from Northern Ireland to this issue. He mentioned two things that I want to pick up on. He asked whether I would engage with the Health Minister in Northern Ireland, Robin Swann, on this issue. Although this comes under the portfolio of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds, I am due to talk to Robin Swann next week about other matters, so I will endeavour to shoehorn it into the conversation in the way that the hon. Gentleman so elegantly does with a number of topics in this Chamber in various debates. I thank and pay tribute to Robin Swann for all the work he is doing in partnership with us at this difficult time.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the role of Ofcom. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who is due to respond in the Adjournment debate, is very near to the Chamber, if not present at this moment, and I suspect he will have heard the points made by the hon. Gentleman and will reflect on those in his work.

The Government are committed to levelling up society to ensure that no communities get left behind. That is why we announced our bold ambition for England to be smokefree by 2030 in the prevention Green Paper consultation. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Nottingham North for rightly highlighting the importance of this being a cross-party issue, which typifies the approach that he takes to these matters in the House.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, who was an incredibly effective public health Minister. He is missed in that role and in Government, and I hope one day he will return to the Dispatch Box. He played a hugely important role in drawing up the current tobacco control plan for England. He also gave us some very good tips on how to speed up delivery within our excellent civil service if a Minister decides that he wants to accelerate clearance and implementation of a policy. The recent prevention Green Paper highlighted the urgency of tackling disproportionate smoking rate harms in deprived areas, which the hon. Members for City of Durham and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) highlighted. The Green Paper also highlighted the disproportionate

smoking harm rates among the LGBT community, pregnant women and those with mental health conditions, which again goes to points that hon. Members made. I will endeavour to address those in just a moment.

In terms of that tobacco control plan, the points made about what happened last time and the fear of a gap, I reassure Members who highlighted the need for no gaps and for continuity that it is something of which my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds is very much aware. I know she would want me to reassure the House that she is working extremely hard on ensuring that effective measures and effective planning continue to be in place to address the challenges of smoking. Smoking, as has been alluded to, is one of the biggest behavioural drivers of health inequality in England and reduces life expectancy by 10 years on average. That accounts for half the difference in life expectancy between the richest and the poorest, which again Members have made very clear.

Turning to some of the points made by the hon. Member for Blaydon, although rates for smoking in pregnancy are the lowest recorded, they remain around 10%. Clearly she is right to highlight that that must remain a concern for all of us in government, in this House and in this country. More needs to be done to reach our national ambition of a rate of 6% for smoking in pregnancy by the end of 2022.

Public Health England continues to work closely with NHS England and NHS Improvement on their long-term planning commitments to offer all patients NHS-funded treatment services over the coming years, including a new smokefree pathway for expectant mothers and their partners. I am confident that progress will continue to be made to hit that target, but I know from experience that the hon. Lady, in her typically courteous but firm way, will continue to hold Ministers to account in achieving that.

Steve Brine: While we are on the subject, as the song goes:

“The saddest thing that I’d ever seen / Were smokers outside the hospital doors”—

name the band. It is not a national problem, but it is a big problem in some areas, which is why I made the point to the Minister—will he convey this to the public health Minister?—that it has to be a regional and local approach through the directors of public health. It is a much bigger problem in some towns than it is in others.

Edward Argar: I will not seek to outdo my hon. Friend in his knowledge of music or, possibly, his expertise in this area, but I will certainly convey that point to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds.

Alongside tackling smoking in pregnancy, a big challenge is to reduce smoking rates in those with mental health problems, as the hon. Member for Blaydon said, which remain significantly higher than the general population at 42%. The NHS long-term plan will also offer a new universal smoking cessation offer, available as part of specialist mental health services for long-term users of those services and in learning disability services. The Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) will be looking into that, working in close partnership with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds, because it is important

that we have a joined-up approach. The hon. Member for Blaydon highlighted in her speech the excellent practice in some parts of the country and in some parts of the NHS and the fact that that is not replicated everywhere, which goes to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester. It is important that we level up, to coin a phrase, across the country in using and sharing that best practice.

The Government are committed to a smokefree 2030, and we are developing the plans to ensure that is a reality. The plans will build on the good work already under way in the tobacco control plan and the commitments being delivered in the NHS long-term plan, to which, while the pandemic has obviously impacted on the NHS, we remain committed.

I said in my introduction that the UK is a world leader in tobacco control. That is demonstrated by how seriously the Government take our obligations as a signatory and party to the World Health Organisation’s framework convention on tobacco control, the FCTC. Tackling the harms caused by smoking is a global effort, with 8 million deaths a year worldwide linked to tobacco, 80% of which are low and middle-income country deaths.

The Government have invested up to £15 million in official development assistance funding to support the WHO’s FCTC 2030 five-year project, supporting up to 24 countries to improve their tobacco control and improve their population’s health. The project has received considerable praise from global public health and development communities and helped to raise the UK’s profile and strengthen our global reach. I am proud to say that the Department recently received a UN Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases award for 2020 for the project. The project is in its final year and we are considering plans to extend it, depending on the Department’s spending review settlement for official development assistance. In a second, I shall address the point about the spending review raised by the hon. Member for City of Durham—I shall be very brief, as I am conscious that I need to leave a couple of minutes for her to reply at the end.

We continue to review the evidence on e-cigarettes, including their harms and usefulness in aiding smoking cessation. Although they are not risk-free, there is growing evidence that they can help people stop smoking, and they are particularly effective when combined with expert support from a local stop smoking service. The Government’s approach to the regulation of e-cigarettes has been and will remain pragmatic and evidence-based. The current regulatory framework aims to reduce the risk of harm to children, protect against the re-normalisation of tobacco use, provide assurance on relative safety for users and provide legal certainty for businesses. We will continue our work to appraise the evidence on new products, including e-cigarettes, and their role in helping smokers quit.

I note comments about proposals for future regulatory changes to help smokers quit smoking. Post transition period, this country will no longer have to comply with the EU’s tobacco products directive, and there will be opportunities to consider in the future regulatory changes that can help people quit smoking and address the harms from tobacco. Although there are no current plans for divergence, I would reassure the House that

[Edward Argar]

any future changes will be based on robust evidence in the interests of public health and will maintain this country's ambitious and world-leading approach in this area.

The Department will be carrying out a post-implementation review of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 and the standardised packaging of tobacco products by 20 May 2021 to see whether the regulations have met their objectives. Part of this review process will involve a public consultation to start before the end of the year for people to submit their views and evidence, and I hope that gives some greater clarity about timescales.

The Department has already conducted another post-implementation review and public consultation on various tobacco legislation, as the hon. Member for City of Durham mentioned, and we will publish a Government response shortly. I understand that the aim is to do so before the end of this year, although obviously a lot of work is being put into tackling the pandemic.

I hear what Members have said about the importance of public health grants and local authorities. Like the shadow Minister, I am a former cabinet member for public health. He would not, I suspect, like me to be tempted to try to fulfil the role of the Chancellor of the Exchequer by pre-empting the spending review. As for Public Health England and the future, we are engaging with stakeholders and will consider the best future arrangements for the wide range of non-health protection functions that currently sit in PHE. Our commitment to smokefree 2030 and to working collaboratively to maintain our ambitious agenda and our high standards in this area is undiminished; indeed, it is enhanced.

4.58 pm

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank every Member for their contribution to this important debate: my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the hon. Members for Winchester (Steve Brine) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) and the Minister. I am glad that there is consensus across the House on the need to reach the target of a smokefree England by 2030. If I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank Deborah Arnott from ASH and Ailsa Rutter from Fresh who have been a continued source of support and knowledge in all things smoking-harm related.

I am aware that, at the minute, a significant amount of public health focus is directed at tackling the coronavirus pandemic, and rightly so. However, I hope that this debate serves as a reminder that there remain significant health inequalities in society. In our most deprived communities, these inequalities pose a grave risk to the health of countless people. While this has been exacerbated by the pandemic, without action the threat to our most vulnerable communities will only become more grave. It is vital, therefore, that the issues raised today are addressed. As the hon. Member for Strangford highlighted, tackling and addressing health inequalities is a matter of urgency.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's ambition for England to be smokefree by 2030; notes the increasing disparities in smoking rates between the richest and poorest in society; further notes the effect of the covid-19 outbreak and the opportunities and risks provided by the reorganisation of public health on the UK's ability to achieve this ambition; and calls on the Government to set out the further steps it plans to take to deliver a smokefree England by 2030.

Peterborough United: Covid-19

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

5 pm

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to present my case today, on behalf of Peterborough United football club, to be able to have a limited number of supporters attending their home matches. Let me make it absolutely clear at the outset that in putting forward the case to allow spectators, I do so with the intention of that happening after the lifting of the present restrictions. I wish to inform the thinking of the Minister so that when the easing of restrictions does take place, serious consideration can be given to opening up football stadiums in a limited manner, provided that proper social distancing and safety measures are implemented.

Earlier this year, pubs, restaurants, clubs, cafés and other venues were opened up after the period of the lockdown, but football stadiums were not. This time round, I hope it will be different, and I would like to put forward some reasons as to why I believe that should be so, with specific reference to Peterborough United FC, affectionately known as the Posh. I have the privilege of having the club in my constituency of North West Cambridgeshire, which has in it some 40% of the total population covered by Peterborough City Council.

The club was formed in 1934, and after winning the Midland league title for five consecutive seasons, they were elected to the Football League in 1960. Currently, the club are at the top of league 1. The story behind the name “Posh” is an interesting one. Although the present club dates back to 1934, the Posh name first came to the fore over a decade earlier, almost certainly coming from Pat Tirrell, who was player manager of Fletton United, the previous users of the present club’s London Road ground. Pat announced at the end of the 1921 season that he was looking for “Posh players for a Posh team” to compete in Northamptonshire league, which subsequently became the United Counties league. Fletton United had previously been known as the “Brickies”. They reformed as Peterborough and Fletton United in 1923, and both nicknames were in use throughout the 1920s. Following the demise of Peterborough and Fletton United in 1932, the present club was formed two years later. There then followed a Midland league debut against Gainsborough Trinity on 1 September 1934, and this was greeted with shouts of “up the Posh” from the spectators.

The current owners of the club, Darragh MacAnthony, who is also chairman of the club, Jason Neale and Stewart Thompson, are totally committed to the Posh, as are the manager Darren Ferguson, chief executive officer Bob Symns and director of football Barry Fry. The city of Peterborough and surrounding area benefit economically and socially from the club’s continued success, drawing in millions of pounds of revenue every year, helping local tourism and making a huge contribution through the Peterborough United Foundation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the club enjoys the support of Peterborough City Council. Incidentally, the leader of Peterborough City Council, Councillor John Holdich, is retiring next year after over 40 years of public service. I thank Councillor Holdich for his outstanding dedication

and commitment to the city and the surrounding area. I wish him and his wife Barbara much happiness following his retirement.

The covid-19 pandemic has been a massive challenge for us all, and has resulted in an unprecedented challenge for all football clubs. Of course, many other sports have also been affected, but I am confining my comments today to football, and specifically to the Posh. As we move forwards, and in anticipation of an easing of restrictions, the Posh’s CEO Bob Symns and his team have put an enormous amount of work into making preparations for a return to socially distanced competition at the Weston Homes stadium, where the club plays. The plans are intensely thorough and detailed, covering all aspects of how the stadium would operate on match days, with a reduced crowd and working on the basis of ensuring maximum safety for all concerned.

The stadium covers some 5 acres and has a maximum capacity of 15,000 spectators, but the club seeks permission to make provision for only 4,000 of its followers, and they are all season ticket holders. In the event that any one of those individuals needs to be contacted—for example, for test and trace purposes—the club has everyone’s contact details, including mobile numbers, email addresses and so on.

As for the preparations, entry to and departure from the stadium would be staggered. Every seat and every space in and around the ground and the stadium has been accounted for on a socially distanced basis. There is provision for single spectators, those arriving in twos, threes and so on. There is plenty of signage and hand sanitiser stations, and there are unique protocols and procedures for the various different areas and facilities. These include the entrance and exit points, home and away dressing rooms, the players’ tunnel, areas for the media and catering, car parking areas, turnstiles, the ticket office—the list goes on. There will be full deep-cleaning of the stadium, including the benches, control room, staff areas, media places and the like. These deep cleans will take place prior to and at the end of each match day. There will also be ongoing cleaning of some areas, such as toilets, entrances, door handles and light switches, between fixtures.

As one would expect in such circumstances, the club has made risk assessments, put in place contingency plans, provided for the proper training of staff, and ensured that there is an effective communication procedure and system. No detail has been overlooked, and that point is clearly made when I say that during matches there will be eight people whose sole responsibility will be to ensure that the balls used during the match are properly sanitised. Of course, if the club is going to do a proper job, it almost goes without saying that the corner flags and goalposts will also be thoroughly sanitised. As well as all these safety measures, a crucial point that I very much hope the Minister will take on board is that, unlike many other types of venues that were previously allowed to open to the public, the Posh’s stadium, and football stadiums generally around the country, are in the open air. They are therefore that much safer for fans and for all others attending.

In its preparations, the club has also worked very closely with other stakeholders. These include the Sports Grounds Safety Authority, the safety advisory group, the local fire and police services and the medical providers, including the ambulance service. Having read and

[Mr Shailesh Vara]

considered the proposals, and after several conversations with Mr Symns, I can truly say that I believe that Peterborough United FC has provided a template that can be safely used by any club throughout the country. Let me add that when speaking with Mr Darragh MacAnthony, he assured me of his total determination to do whatever it takes to ensure that safety guidelines are adhered to, and said that the safety of everyone is of paramount importance on match days and more generally.

Moreover, Darren Ferguson, the club manager, also made it clear to me that he and all the players are totally committed to making this work. During training sessions rigorous measures are taken to ensure compliance with safety rules, and all the players are fully aware of their own responsibility in making sure that the message of health and safety and social distancing is effectively conveyed and adhered to by all the fans attending. My hon. Friend the Minister will also appreciate that currently there is no income for the Posh and many other clubs, and it is therefore absolutely vital that they are allowed to generate some much-needed revenue after such a long period without money coming in.

One aspect of the club's work that does not receive as much attention as it ought to is the work carried out by Peterborough United Foundation, which makes a real and positive difference to the wider community. The values of the foundation are to ensure opportunities for everyone regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or ability, and its activities are centred around four themes: sports participation, social inclusion and community cohesion, health, and education.

The foundation's activities include a school sports programme with after-school clubs and PE lessons, currently working with some 13 primary schools and delivering each week to around 1,000 children. Another programme involves going into schools and helping the development of teachers delivering PE, as well as helping children to gain important life skills, using four particular themes: to be ambitious, to be inspiring, to be fair, and to be connected.

There is, of course, a Peterborough United ladies' team, as well as opportunities for girls who have experience of playing football to gain even more training at the Peterborough United girls elite and development centre, and there is also a programme for girls aged 11-plus, the majority of whom have not played football or taken part in much physical activity before. These girls and women come from a variety of backgrounds and abilities, and the foundation seeks to provide them with as many opportunities as possible to participate in football. The disability coaching programme covers both school and out-of-school sessions, and the foundation supports an adult deaf team that competes in the English deaf league south division, as well as providing coaching sessions for children who are deaf and hearing-impaired.

There is more. There is support for an adult amputee team, which competes in the English amputee football league. There are "healthy kicking days", too; children take part in activities that teach them how to keep healthy and active and what foods to eat to maintain a healthy diet. Enterprise days are hugely popular, providing children with an opportunity to meet and work with many other children from different schools whom they would not normally see. A local organisation, Locate

Accommodation, helps refugees who come to Peterborough, and the foundation offers football sessions to them over the summer holidays. Let it not be said that there is not provision for all age groups, because there is. There is walking football. The sessions are for participants of any age and are ideal for those who wish to continue playing football, but in a more relaxed, non-competitive and non-contact manner.

Opening up the club to spectators, even in a limited way, would serve another important purpose. It would allow the club to celebrate the life of Tommy Robson and his contribution to the Posh and the city. Last month, very sadly, Tommy passed away. He was a much-loved and admired Posh legend, and the first player to be inducted into the club's hall of fame.

Tommy played for Northampton Town, Chelsea and Newcastle United before signing for the Posh in 1968 for a transfer fee of £20,000. He made 482 league appearances for the club and was twice named player of the season. Tommy later dedicated much of his working life to Peterborough and earlier this year was awarded the freedom of the city. Councillor Peter Hiller tabled a motion on Tommy's award and said:

"Tommy is without doubt one of if not the most loved players ever to grace the pitch at London Road."

The club has started a campaign to raise funds to erect a bronze statue of Tommy outside the club grounds. This would join a statue of Chris Turner, which stands outside the stadium. Chris was formerly a player, the manager and chairman of the club. Tommy's son, Ian, has said that his father

"had an awful lot of love for the city and clearly the people loved him."

Tommy's daughter, Anita, added:

"I always knew he was a special man but to realise he was special to everyone up and down the country has been absolutely amazing."

The chairman of the Posh supporters' trust, Marco Graziano, has spoken of the chance for fans to pay their respects to Tommy inside the stadium.

When the present restrictions are released and restaurants, pubs, cafes, theatres, shops and a whole variety of places are opened up again, I very much hope that the Minister—who is not only a colleague, but a very good friend of mine, and for whom I have a huge amount of respect—will give serious thought to the points that I have made, especially the fact that, unlike many other venues, football stadiums and the grounds where Posh play are in open areas without any closed roofs or ceilings. I hope, too, that he will appreciate that that helps towards enhancing safety measures.

I invite the Minister to come to the Posh stadium himself, and to bring along his advisers and civil servants, so he can see personally what measures have been put in place. He can challenge and ask Mr Symns and others if he has any concerns. Above all, he can come to see the enormous work that has been put in place to ensure that Posh players can play safely, and spectators can come to enjoy watching the matches.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) for introducing the debate and for the contributions he has made towards this important topic today.

Football clubs such as Peterborough United are vital parts of their communities. They have unique social value and enjoy rich histories. My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for his club. I know this well. We have spoken about football, and in particular Peterborough United, on many occasions. May I say immediately that I would be very keen indeed to take up his invitation to visit him in his constituency and the club? He outlined in incredibly forensic detail the many measures that his club and others across the country have taken to prepare for the safe opening of stadiums as soon as they are able to do so. I appreciate his attention to detail in outlining the case.

The Posh, as they are affectionately known, have been a mainstay of English football for more than 85 years. They have a very proud history, as my hon. Friend has articulated, and of course have very strong grounds to be optimistic about their future. Peterborough were, of course, unlucky to miss out on the play-offs last year, but given that they currently occupy the top position in league one, this season looks pretty positive for them. I hope that their good form continues and I wish them the very best of luck for the rest of the campaign.

As well as the team's success on the pitch, the Peterborough United Foundation, as my hon. Friend has said, has undertaken incredible work off the pitch for many years. I think it was first founded in 2009. My hon. Friend mentioned many of the foundation's activities. I was particularly impressed with all the work on access, including for the disabled and the elderly and, of course—this is a passion of mine—for women and girls, through its girls elite and development centre, and its support for the Premier League Primary Stars programme to create a healthier and more positive future for the country's children.

The club and the foundation have also stepped up to the plate during coronavirus, helping the city during these incredibly difficult times by sending care packages to vulnerable fans across Peterborough and the surrounding areas. This is yet another great example of football clubs demonstrating their importance to local communities. In this place over the past few weeks, we have talked a lot about the role of rugby in communities. Perhaps we should not overlook the important role that football and football clubs play as well.

The Government have provided unprecedented support to businesses throughout this difficult period, including a comprehensive and sizeable package of direct fiscal support. Many football clubs have benefited from these measures, such as the business rates relief and the furlough scheme. Sport England has also provided £210 million of national lottery and Government funding to support the sector through covid-19. That includes a £35 million community emergency fund, which is helping community clubs and exercise centres during the pandemic. The Football Foundation, a charity set up by the Government, the Football Association and the Premier League, has also introduced a number of funds to help clubs. The latest is a matchday support fund, helping clubs prepare for the resumption of football.

I completely understand the importance of getting fans back into sports stadiums. My hon. Friend talked passionately about this, as have many other Members

over the last few weeks. However, rising infection rates across the country meant that, unfortunately, it was not the right time to proceed with a wider reopening on 1 October, as we had planned. The Government understand the financial consequences of this decision and are focusing our support on those in the sector who are most in need as a result. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is working closely with the Treasury to confirm a support package, and we will set out further details in due course.

In addition, the Government recently brokered a unique deal with the National Lottery, which has provided £10 million in funding for the 66 clubs in the national league so that they can continue to play behind closed doors, and, of course, the English Football League is currently in discussions with the Premier League about a support package. I am hopeful and optimistic that those discussions will come to a positive conclusion very shortly.

We are absolutely committed to getting spectators back into stadia as soon as it is safe to do so. We will continue to work closely with a whole range of sports to understand the latest thinking that might allow spectators to return. The Government have invited the Sports Technology and Innovation Group—STIG for short—to analyse new technologies that might support the return of spectators. I spoke to the chair of the group this week, as did the Secretary of State, and we heard about the vital work that it is undertaking which will help to get spectators back in stadia as soon as possible.

We have made significant progress since the start of the pandemic. We worked closely with the sector to bring elite athletes back into training before returning competitive sport behind closed doors. We welcomed international athletes, with health protocols that helped to isolate the competitors, and set out detailed and stringent guidance for the safe return of spectators. The return of spectators was also successfully tested through the staging of pilot events over the summer, but these plans regrettably had to be paused as the virus was spreading. Rest assured, I understand the importance of pressing play on our plans and how unfortunate that was, but we will return to these plans as soon as we can. We pressed the pause button; we intend to return as soon as possible.

Before I conclude—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is strangely not in his place this evening—I would like to take the opportunity to wish Northern Ireland and Scotland good luck in their Euro 2020 play-off matches tonight—Northern Ireland versus Slovakia and Scotland versus Serbia, kick off at 7.45 pm. I am sure that many will be watching. I am grateful for today's wide-ranging discussion about a subject that is close to my heart, many hearts here and the hearts of many of our constituents. I conclude by confirming that the Government are absolutely committed to continuing to support the sport sector and getting spectators back into stadia as soon as it is safe to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 November 2020

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

Breast Cancer Diagnosis and Services: Covid-19

1.30 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new call list system and ensure that social distancing can be respected. Members should sanitise their microphones using the cleaning materials provided before they use them and then dispose of those materials and respect the one-way system around the room.

Members should only speak from the horseshoe and Members can only speak if they are on the call lists. That applies even if debates are undersubscribed. Members cannot join the debate if they are not on the call list. Members are not expected to remain for wind-ups. I remind hon. Members that there is less of an expectation that Members stay for the next two speeches once they have spoken. This is to help manage attendance in the room. Members may wish to stay beyond their speech, but they should be aware that doing so may prevent Members in the seats in the Public Gallery from moving forward to the seats on the horseshoe.

1.31 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on breast cancer diagnosis and the future of breast cancer services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer, I am delighted to raise these hugely important issues. It is great to see the Minister in her place; she brings great expertise and knowledge to this topic. This has all the hallmarks of an excellent debate.

To set the scene, as hon. Members will know, the pandemic has had a major impact on breast cancer services, with Breast Cancer Now estimating that almost 1 million women in the UK missed out on their screening appointment as a result of a pause in the programme. There was a worrying drop at the peak of the pandemic in referrals of suspected breast cancer and breast-related symptoms.

We also know that some breast cancer patients had their treatments changed or temporarily paused to protect their immune system, or had their surgery delayed. That caused, understandably, huge anxiety, particularly for patients with incurable cancers, such as secondary breast cancer, and that was passed on to their families. Recruitment to many clinical trials was paused. The sustained pressure on staff as a result of dealing with the covid-19 pandemic alongside the existing challenges for the breast cancer workforce, has the potential to overwhelm the system for the foreseeable future.

There is some good news. Despite a dip in August, referrals have been steadily recovering. Although there is some way to go before they reach pre-pandemic levels, breast screenings are restarting and the number of people beginning treatment is rising. I am sure hon. Members across the House will join me in thanking the NHS for its effort in treating people and finding ways to deal with cancer patients during the pandemic. I would particularly like to thank my local hospital, the George Eliot Hospital, and Kristy and her team in palliative care. They do such amazing work, in difficult circumstances.

The recovery plan set out how we will restore breast cancer services to pre-pandemic levels, but we also need to look to the future, to ensure that the progress we made in treating cancer is not allowed to stall or be forgotten. As I mentioned, the pandemic has raised several urgent issues in relation to cancer. It is fair to say that many of those needed tackling prior to the pandemic, and they still need addressing.

In 2018, a report by the APPG on breast cancer showed that while breast cancer outcomes were good and outperforming those of other cancers, inequalities in diagnosis, treatment and care across the country were being masked, impacting the experience and outcomes of patients. Our inquiry also found significant variations across England in the support that women with secondary breast cancer received, particularly in access to a clinical nurse specialist, patchy provision of information, psychosocial needs not being met, and a lack of prompt and timely access to specialist palliative care services.

I know that hon. Members will all have their own angles that they want to address in today's debate, and I take the opportunity to thank the many organisations that have been in touch with their views on what we could discuss. However, I want to focus my remaining remarks on secondary breast cancer, which is an issue that the APPG has had a particular focus on. For hon. Members who are not aware, secondary breast cancer occurs when breast cancer has spread to other parts of the body. Critically, it cannot be cured, but it can still be treated. To put that in context, about 1,000 women still die every month from breast cancer in this country, and pretty much all those deaths are from secondary breast cancer, so it is a considerable issue that we need to address.

Five years ago, in October 2015, I hosted my first ever Westminster Hall debate, which was on the subject of secondary breast cancer. I spoke about the inequalities in the system, and the fact that secondary breast cancer patients were often overlooked. It was in that debate that the present Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill)—then a Back Bencher—spoke so powerfully about her experiences and battles with cancer. I know this is an issue that she is really passionate about getting right, but sadly, for various different reasons, since my 2015 speech nothing much has changed. I know that that frustrates the Minister as much as it does me.

The research continues to show that although many secondary breast cancer patients receive inadequate care, it is all too often even worse than that which they received when they had their primary diagnosis. That cannot be right in this day and age. The 2015 debate noted how much of the current discussion and debate on cancer focuses on promoting early diagnosis of primary breast cancer and improving survival outcomes,

[Craig Tracey]

which is absolutely right; we should be dealing with that, but a crucial part of any strategy has to be that we do not forget about people who are living with incurable cancers. They should be given parity of care in our system.

There are many things that we could do, including focusing on earlier diagnosis of secondary breast cancer and increasing knowledge and understanding of the signs and symptoms of it. However, I want to focus on two areas; if we addressed them, it would make such a difference to patients who have secondary breast cancer. The first is around data, which is one of the key issues. One of our problems is that we have a real lack of understanding of the data on secondary breast cancer. At the moment, we do not know how many people are diagnosed with it each year, how long they are living for, how the disease spreads or what kind of treatment and support they are receiving.

Where data on secondary breast cancer is collected, there is variation in what is recorded and how that is done. That is despite its being mandatory since 2013 for hospitals to collect data on their new diagnoses of metastatic cancer. Research by Breast Cancer Now in 2016, repeated in 2018, showed that that is still routinely not happening. In the 2018 study, a staggering 40% of hospital trusts and health boards across the UK were still unable to tell Breast Cancer Now how many secondary breast cancer patients were under their care.

I brought up that issue in the 2015 debate on secondary breast cancer. I highlighted some of the practical barriers to data collection, which often include IT constraints, constraints of time within hospitals, their structures, a lack of awareness about what data is required, and confusion in the trusts and hospitals about who was responsible for inputting the various data items.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important and powerful point, and I hope the Minister is taking note. As he rightly says, many older people—particularly older women—with breast cancer were not prioritised to receive breast radiotherapy over the past six months. Data is available in the radiotherapy datasets that are held by Public Health England, but they have not been published so far. Does he agree that the Minister should seek to persuade NHS England to publish that data?

Craig Tracey: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, which I am sure the Minister will address. It makes perfect sense that we are seeing the lack of cohesion in data. We know that data is power in everything—without the data, how can we plan a strategy? Wherever we get it from, it should be imported into the system. In the 2015 debate, I asked the Minister to lead the way on ensuring that the data was collected uniformly in every hospital, and not just collected, but collected in a format that enables us to interpret it. We need that now more than ever.

I felt that we were making some headway at the start of the year. I had a productive meeting with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, where we brought in some secondary breast cancer patients and had a really good discussion on a number of topics. Data was one of the key things that we addressed. The Secretary of State made very positive

noises about the potential for a national secondary breast cancer audit. Unfortunately, shortly after that, we ended up in the grip of the pandemic and I appreciate that the Department's focus has been pulled into different areas.

To return to the point that I have made, without accurate figures for the number of people living with secondary breast cancer, it is nigh-on impossible for the NHS to plan and commission services effectively to meet patients' needs. Equally, without understanding the level of service and care that patients were accessing before the pandemic, it will be challenging to know how to improve outcomes when we get back to pre-pandemic levels. How can we hope to do that without knowing where we started?

Inadequate collection and sharing of data acts as a barrier to service improvement. We are missing out on an incredibly powerful tool that we should be using to spot variation and hold services to account, and to better understand the secondary breast cancer population and the service it requires. At a time when long-term local and national plans are being drawn up, we want to ensure that the NHS can fully deliver on its commitments, and that we have a clear understanding of the experiences of people with secondary breast cancer.

I ask the Minister to follow up on the delivery of a national secondary breast cancer audit, which would cover things such as diagnosis, treatment and access to support. That could transform our insight into this key area and provide the missing information that is desperately needed to ensure that the NHS can meet the needs of those living with secondary breast cancer.

The second point that I will touch on is the importance of increasing access to clinical nurse specialists. In the 2015 debate, I said that the cancer patient experience survey showed that when a clinical nurse specialist contributes to a patient's care, it is the biggest driver in improving their experience. That measure could save money in the long term, by keeping patients out of hospital and highlighting problems before they become crises in A&E. That is particularly true for secondary breast cancer patients, because they are on a lifelong treatment pathway and often have complex emotional and supportive care needs. A recent survey found that less than a third of secondary breast cancer patients had seen a CNS regularly. With the number of men and women developing breast cancer increasing, and people with secondary breast cancer living longer with the disease, there was already a high demand for CNSs. With covid-19 resulting in changes to people's treatment and care, however, while also having an impact on their emotional wellbeing, access to CNSs for secondary breast cancer patients has never been more urgent.

Yet Breast Cancer Now's most recent report said that 41% of breast cancer patients felt they had had less contact with their CNS during the lockdown period. That was partly down to the fact that, in common with other parts of the workforce, many CNSs were moved elsewhere in the NHS during the peak of the pandemic. As an example, 400 Macmillan NHS professionals, including Macmillan-funded CNSs, were among those redeployed.

I am sure all hon. Members agree that it is encouraging that the NHS long-term plan commits that everyone, including those with secondary cancers, should have access to a CNS. There was also an additional commitment

in the recent people plan 2020-21 to offer grants for 250 nurses to become cancer nurse specialists. That is another step in the right direction, which we really applaud, but the commitments made by the Government require investment in training and expanding of the CNS workforce to meet both the current and future challenges. I am sure we all want that to be addressed when the full NHS people plan is published, and I am sure we all want it to be matched in its intent by receiving the necessary funding in the upcoming spending review.

I realise many people want to speak. There is much more that I could talk about, but I will conclude and recap the asks, which are pretty straightforward. We need a secondary breast cancer audit and a fully funded long-term workforce plan to ensure that the Department of Health has the appropriate tools and structures to honour its commitments to deliver the best possible outcomes for all cancer patients, and to build back breast cancer services better following the pandemic.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): It might be helpful for colleagues to know that I intend to get to the Front-Bench speakers no later than 2.30 pm, so, to enable everybody to get in and speak, speeches will be limited to four minutes. Also, will the Front-Bench speakers be mindful of the time, because we want to hear Craig Tracey again?

1.46 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing this important debate. He has spoken incredibly passionately and covered a wide range of issues relating to breast cancer. I want to focus my remarks on two issues. First, I want to speak about the need for a cancer recovery plan to deal with the backlog in breast cancer screening tests and get cancer treatments up and running again. Secondly, I want to speak about the need for urgent action to prevent the widening health inequality gap in this country.

Over the past few months, we have seen spiralling wait lists, the longest since records began. That has had a direct and devastating impact on people's health. I have heard stories of frontline workers who have had their cancer screen test delayed, only to find out months later that their cancer has spread. It is a simple fact that the sooner someone has a cancer diagnosis, the more likely they are to survive. In March, breast cancer screening programmes were put on hold. One week into the second national lockdown, people are worried that that might happen again, and they fear for loved ones who might not get the care that they need.

In response to a parliamentary question that I asked, the Government revealed that nearly 10,000 women are waiting for a breast cancer screening in Barnsley alone, and more than 30,000 women in South Yorkshire. We have a postcode lottery in this country when it comes to breast cancer screening and mortality rates. Depending on where someone lives, they can be up to a third less likely to have attended a breast cancer screening in the last three years. Staffing pressures have directly impacted the capacity of the NHS to screen patients for suspected cancer, affecting the speed at which patients are diagnosed.

A Public Health England report found that the number of empty consultant breast radiologist posts in the country doubled between 2010 and 2016. The same report revealed that all breast radiologists in Yorkshire and the Humber are due to retire by 2025. Has the Minister's Department assessed the impact of the pandemic on recruitment, and will she outline the Department's plans to deal with the staffing crisis?

Health inequality in this country is not new. Life expectancy in Barnsley is five years lower than in Kensington and Chelsea. The pandemic threatens to widen existing health inequalities as areas such as mine face the double impact of more covid-19 cases and severe financial hardship because of the restrictions. As has already been mentioned in the debate, we need comprehensive, accurate data on patients and populations to map health inequalities across the country. This includes improving the cancer outcomes and services dataset so that patients and local providers can quickly and easily compare information on all cancers, including breast cancer. More needs to be done to support local providers to ensure they submit information to the dataset. It is the first step towards recognising the scale of health inequalities faced by this country and taking action to increase service improvement.

Covid-19 has not been a great leveller. Inequalities in care, treatment and diagnosis have come to light during the pandemic. At the same time, it is now widely recognised that societal inequalities have increased certain populations' likelihood of suffering complications from the virus. It is clear that unless the Government act now to reduce the unequal impact of covid-19, those inequalities will become further entrenched, directly impacting the health and wellbeing of people across the UK.

1.50 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I add to the tributes to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for calling this important debate and speaking so powerfully at the outset about this issue.

This subject is especially pertinent because cancer, sadly, will touch each of our lives in some form. If we are not personally diagnosed, we will know someone close to us who is. It is one of the biggest long-term health challenges we face as a country, notwithstanding the current pandemic. Coronavirus has impacted on breast cancer services, as it has impacted on every part of our lives. Breast Cancer Now has described coronavirus as "the biggest crisis" that breast cancer has faced in decades.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) outlined, the earlier breast cancer is diagnosed, the more likely treatment is to be successful. Earlier this year, the screening programme was officially paused in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and it was effectively paused in England from March. Screening has now restarted, but it is patchy across the country, with some having quicker access than others. With each month that passes, more women with breast cancer could be missing the chance of an early diagnosis, which is key to preventing deaths from the disease.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire pointed out, Breast Cancer Now estimates that nearly a million women who require screening are currently

[Elliot Colburn]

waiting across the United Kingdom, and around 8,600 of them could be living with undetected breast cancer. This has been exemplified in my Carshalton and Wallington constituency. As part of the London borough of Sutton, we are lucky to be home to the world-leading Royal Marsden Hospital. I want to put on record my thanks to Dame Cally Palmer and the amazing staff at the Royal Marsden whom I had the pleasure of visiting recently.

Sutton is also home to the Institute of Cancer Research, which is expanding in conjunction with the Royal Marsden to become the first cancer hub in London and, indeed, the UK—right on our doorstep. That will provide thousands of highly skilled jobs for the area, and it is massively exciting for the future of cancer research. Sutton could well be the site of a major breakthrough in cancer research. The ICR and the Royal Marsden do a fantastic job. The latter stepped up and played its role in tackling the pandemic, adapting to deal with coronavirus patients, but that meant, sadly, that cancer patients had their diagnosis delayed, as did so many others.

In the second national lockdown, it is most important to ensure that those services are not paused again. I am pleased that that has not happened in my part of London, but we must have a plan to deal with the backlog as soon as possible. The NHS long-term plan is ambitious when it comes to cancer. I worked on that when I was in the national health service. However, there were challenges in dealing with the cancer strategy even before covid-19.

We have already heard about the existing problems in the workforce, and we need a plan for the implementation of Professor Sir Mike Richards's review of the adult screening programme. I can see the Minister is nodding, so I hope she will add a few words on that. I hope she will tell us how we intend to deal with that backlog and return to the implementation of the ambitions in the long-term plan.

1.53 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you for calling me in this important debate, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing it. We are from the same part of the country, but from different tribes; I am red and white.

This is an important subject, and it is important that we address it. We are living through an unprecedented pandemic. I was saddened and alarmed to read yesterday that the UK had become one of only five countries to exceed 50,000 deaths from covid-19. In the fullness of time, no doubt, we will have a public inquiry into covid-19 that will examine the flaws in the Government's covid-19 response. I certainly believe that the Government will acknowledge that they were not properly prepared for a pandemic and did not have a proper and effective plan to manage infectious disease and routine day-to-day healthcare.

The impact on breast and other cancers has already cost lives and will continue to do so, but I want to focus on the cancer recovery plan. The Government can take steps to avoid unnecessary cancer deaths arising from the backlog of delayed diagnosis and treatment. I have met the Minister on several occasions in my capacity as

vice-chair of the all-party group for radiotherapy and the all-party group on cancer, and we have had constructive dialogue, so I am afraid she will not be able to argue that solutions were not put forward to address this issue and mitigate potential deaths arising from delayed treatment.

The Catch Up With Cancer campaign, which Radiotherapy4Life is supporting, has identified that the cancer backlog stands at more than 100,000 patients. I recently had a meeting via Zoom with Macmillan cancer support—I am one for badges; I am wearing Radiotherapy4Life's and Macmillan's—to discuss what needs to be done to address the cancer backlog. It estimates that there are 50,000 missing diagnoses for cancer across the UK—it calls them the forgotten C. An estimated 100 fewer women started treatment for breast cancer each working day in May and June, compared with last year. Breast cancer two-week wait referrals are down 25% in March to August this year, compared with 2019.

I was joined on the call by a representative from Macmillan's Joining the Dots campaign—a lady called Chloe Shaw, who is doing excellent work. That brilliant local service, which may be available in other parts of the country, offers practical help and support to people affected by cancer—in my case, those living in County Durham and my constituency of Easington. Joining the Dots has supported people in my constituency living with cancer throughout the pandemic. At the moment, it is having to work primarily through telephone and video calls.

Macmillan estimates that there are currently almost 18,000 people in County Durham living with and beyond cancer—people who have already been diagnosed may be fearful that there will be a recurrence. It is estimated that that figure could rise to almost 29,000 by 2030.

As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy, I am particularly interested in this issue. In the Chamber today we have a number of former Ministers who have been banging this drum for some time. The issue now is the impact of the pandemic on the availability of radiotherapy treatment. We really must do something for the many older women with breast cancer who have not been prioritised to receive radiotherapy over the past six months. The data is available and should be acted upon. Will the Minister publish those datasets? We certainly need smart solutions and investment, but they must be reflected in a comprehensive spending review, so I hope the Minister will make the necessary representations to the Treasury.

1.58 pm

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing this timely and important debate. I pay tribute to the work that he and the all-party parliamentary group have done on this issue over a number of years. It has been really important.

We have come a long way in this country on breast cancer survival rates over the past few years, but about 11,500 women still die every year from the disease. We know that early diagnosis is absolutely vital when it comes to survival rates, so I am very concerned about the impact that the pandemic has had and continues to have.

In my constituency in the High Peak, a commissioning decision was recently taken by NHS Midlands to withdraw the breast cancer mobile screening units from three towns—Buxton, Chapel-en-le-Frith and New Mills—and to move that service outside the High Peak to Bakewell. This is no slight at all on Newholme Hospital in Bakewell and the fantastic staff there—I pay tribute to them and to all the NHS staff working in breast cancer screening services—but there is a question of accessibility. The Peak district does not have the best roads; we are heading into winter, when those roads become even more inaccessible. Public transport is patchy at best, and I am incredibly concerned about how many women will feel unable to make appointments if they have to go all the way to Bakewell. I am alarmed about this decision, and it is one that I disagree with. I really hope that we can reinstate the mobile screening units in the High Peak as soon as possible. My message to the Minister is clear: we desperately need to get those units reinstated, and I hope that I can meet her to talk about this in the near future.

2.1 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing this important debate.

This year has been incredibly difficult and challenging for everyone working in our national health service, for the patients they serve and for the staff and volunteers at the many charities and community organisations that help to support patients and carry out critical research, including Breast Cancer Now, Breast Cancer UK, Macmillan Cancer Support and Cancer Research UK. I pay tribute to them, and to every one of the staff who work in King's College Hospital in my constituency for their incredibly hard work since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Our nurses, doctors, care assistants, allied health professionals, porters, cleaners and admin staff have all worked with extraordinary commitment in exceptionally challenging times.

Breast cancer is a devastating condition, and every year across the UK more than 50,000 women, as well as approximately 400 men, receive their first diagnosis of it. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and to my friend Paula Sherriff, the former Member for Dewsbury, for speaking publicly about their recent experience of diagnosis and treatment during coronavirus—an experience that is made all the more difficult by the restrictions on contact with friends and family, who are often so vital in providing comfort during a difficult time.

Although our NHS staff have worked so incredibly hard this year, as always, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the impact of 10 years of austerity on our healthcare system. In many parts of the country, including my constituency, our NHS was not able simultaneously to care for patients impacted by coronavirus and to maintain the array of other critical services, including cancer screening. Our local hospital worked extraordinarily hard to maintain cancer treatment, but across the NHS the need to cope with the huge influx of coronavirus patients and prevent further infection spread, particularly among clinically vulnerable people, caused significant disruption to surgery pathways.

Many people also became concerned that GP surgeries and accident and emergency departments were not safe environments, and therefore they put off reporting concerning symptoms that might have been the first sign of cancer, including breast cancer. The breast screening programme was officially paused in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and effectively paused in England, in March. At the peak of the pandemic, there was a drop of approximately 70% in the number of cases of cancer being reported across the UK, with Breast Cancer Now estimating a drop of more than 100,000 referrals for breast cancer.

As we know, early diagnosis is key to obtaining the best possible outcomes for patients who are eventually diagnosed with cancer. As MPs, unfortunately I am sure that we are all aware of constituents whose diagnosis came much later than it should have done, because the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. However, even for those constituents who managed to receive a diagnosis, there have often been unacceptable waiting times for treatment that was urgently needed. The stress of knowing that urgent surgery is needed to remove breast cancer, but not having a firm appointment or timescale for such surgery, has been unbearable for a number of my constituents.

Exercise Cygnus clearly showed that the UK was hugely underprepared for a pandemic such as covid-19, but instead of learning the lessons from 2016, this Government buried them. That has resulted in unbearable strain on many parts of our NHS. Just a few days before the second national lockdown, I visited King's College Hospital to thank the staff for their tremendous hard work and to discuss the preparations for the second wave of coronavirus. It was reassuring to hear about the detailed planning that has been carried out for the second wave, and about the focus on keeping non-coronavirus treatments and care going at this time, but we know that there is a backlog.

I want to end by highlighting the inequalities that already exist in gaining access to breast cancer treatment and screening, with black, Asian and minority ethnic residents far less likely to access screening and far more likely to end up with a late diagnosis. We urgently need a proactive programme to ensure that there is equal access to screening services, that this pandemic does not result in a further deepening of unequal access and that all breast cancer patients get access as soon as possible to the treatment and care they need.

2.5 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Another debate about breast cancer. There have been many—too many. For my first five years in this place, I was proud to lead the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer, and it is in good hands now with my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). For more than two years, it was the privilege of my life to serve as the cancer Minister and to be part of what I call team cancer. Heaven knows, I spent my fair share of time sitting in the Minister's seat in Westminster Hall, as she—the current Public Health Minister—now knows.

For each of the 10 years that I have been an MP, we have lost around 11,500 women a year in the UK to this menace, as has been said. That number has come down thanks to advances that we have made and investments that all Governments have put in, but we have to do so

[Steve Brine]

much better. That is 115,000 mums, sisters, grans, aunties and friends over the decade that I have served in this place. I have never spoken before about which one of them it was for me, and I do not think I will go there today, but I will say this: I have fought and lost to breast cancer more than I have won.

And let us not forget the guys. I was glad that the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), mentioned them. Yes, breast cancer is rare in men, but around 370 men a year are diagnosed in the UK. It still kills, so I welcome the Male Breast Cancer Study that was established to pinpoint some genetic and environmental lifetime causes in men.

Going back to the title of today's debate, it is true that covid has not helped, but the breast cancer toll goes on regardless. That is as true today as it was pre-pandemic. Breast cancer remains a largely beatable and treatable cancer if it is detected early. Primary breast cancer can be fatal, but we know that almost all deaths are attributable to the development of metastatic, or secondary, breast cancer. As Breast Cancer Now puts it so well—this has been quoted before, but it is worth saying it again—coronavirus is the biggest crisis secondary breast cancer has faced in decades.

We know that some patients with breast cancer had their treatments changed or paused to protect their immune systems. We wait with nothing but fear for the impact of those periods on keeping the disease stable. Let us stop for a moment to consider the reality of those pauses. There is that sinking feeling in a person's stomach every morning when they wake up and remember that they have breast cancer but they cannot take any action to beat back the disease, because of the pandemic. When they are busy doing something else—maybe enjoying a child or a grandchild being super-cute—it rushes back in, like a punch to the stomach, and they realise they cannot take any action to beat the disease, because of the pandemic. For the children of breast cancer patients who call up on Zoom because they cannot meet, things look and sound the same, but mum cannot take any action to beat back the disease.

Many of these covid delays have had a negative impact on the emotional wellbeing of patients and their families. Never before has the clinical nurse specialist role been more important. We have heard from research undertaken by Breast Cancer Now, an excellent charity, that patients feel they have had less contact with their CNS during the pandemic. When the Minister sums up, could she update us on that? I know she will.

The flip side to that emotional support is the third sector. Many charities, including Wessex Cancer Trust and the Winchester and Eastleigh Cancer Support Group in my area, have switched from physical to virtual, and I thank them for their work. However, there are other charities that have had to pull back just when we need them most, including Breast Cancer Haven, Wessex, which opened only a few years ago, and Breast Cancer Haven, West Midlands, in Solihull. They have closed permanently, and the charity is now operating only online services out of its London base.

Breast cancer incidence in my area, Wessex, is significantly higher than the England average. The rate is 184 per 10,000, compared with 168 across the country. Our

mortality rate is spot on the average, but that still has us losing 118 people every year, almost all from secondary cancer.

I was alarmed that my trust had to cease the local breast screening programme in March, because of “did not attends” and cancelled appointments in the first lockdown. Three weeks later, the trust got formal guidance, and the service was suspended for 17 weeks. I fear that this is going to be one of the terrible legacies of lockdown.

The good news is that the restoration of the screening service is well under way, and I thank the team at Hampshire Hospitals for that. The tragedy for us is that, pre-covid, Winchester had a very high uptake of screening in the local population. We have to get back to that.

We have a battle royal on our hands with breast cancer; that was the case before the pandemic, and it is after. When I sat in the Minister's seat, many hated me describing cancer and breast cancer as a fight, but they are just that. They always were. We needed to up our game pre-covid, and we certainly need to up our game post-covid, if we are not to be here in another 10 years having exactly the same conversations.

2.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome you to your new role in Westminster Hall, Ms McVey. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). He and I have sparred many times—never sparred; we have worked together, which is a better way of putting it—in many debates in Westminster Hall and the Chamber. I very much value those times, and I thank him. It is also nice to see the Minister and shadow Ministers in their places.

Every person in this place, including myself, is probably intimately acquainted with someone who has suffered from breast cancer. The statistics stick in your mind. I will focus on my own area; I know it is not the Minister's responsibility, but I will give a few stats from Northern Ireland and my own constituency.

Some 129.4 people per 10,000 develop breast cancer in Strangford, compared with 165.2 right across Northern Ireland—a significantly better incidence rate in Strangford. But when we compare the stats with England, we are worse off. The incidence rates for Northern Ireland and Strangford are 62 per year, and 38 people per 10,000 die from breast cancer in Strangford, compared with a rate of 36.1 across England. We in Northern Ireland, and in my constituency in particular, have some rates that are very scary. People are also dying from secondary breast cancer. Northern Ireland has the highest mortality rate from breast cancer in the UK, compared with 33.97 in England, 34.2 in Scotland and 33.9 in Wales.

A freedom of information request by Breast Cancer Now found that 40% of hospital trusts and health boards across the UK were unable to tell how many secondary breast cancer patients were under their care, including my local South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

As the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) did, I want to focus on secondary breast cancer. I congratulate him on bringing the issue forward for debate. He set the scene well. Clinical trials provide a vital opportunity for patients to access potential new treatments at an early stage of their development. That

is particularly important for women with secondary breast cancer, who often have limited treatment options available to them and for whom clinical trials provide precious hope to have more time with loved ones. Recruitment to the many clinical trials was paused during the pandemic. While there was relatively little disruption for breast cancer patients already on clinical trials, the pause in recruitment to many trials will have made it difficult for other patients to access them.

In March, the National Institute of Health Research suggested that many NIHR-funded or supported studies might have to be paused as healthcare professionals were asked to prioritise frontline care and make research facilities available if asked to do so by their employer. Of 92 breast cancer trials that the NIHR clinical research network was supporting in March 2020, 50% were paused for recruitment, 45% continue and 5% were closed.

Research clinical trials are so important. Of the 118 respondents to the Breast Cancer Now survey who were receiving or expecting to receive treatment as part of a clinical trial during this time, just under a quarter said they had experienced disruption. The pause in recruitment will have made it more difficult to access trials, and 59% of all respondents were concerned about it.

I know that the Minister always answers with knowledge and understanding. I ask her what lessons can be learned from the speed with which trials for coronavirus have been set up. How can we apply that to setting up clinical trials for other health conditions such as secondary breast cancer? Perhaps coronavirus gives us an opportunity to look at trials—breast cancer trials in particular—in a different way. What good can we take from all of this?

Members of the Association for Medical Research Charities account for 66% of research on cancer. Shop closures and the suspension of many fundraising activities because of covid-19 have had an immediate and severe effect on those charities' incomes, and their investment in research will drop by £310 million. Breast Cancer Now will see a 34% drop in its income as a result of the pandemic. I support the AMRC's call for a life sciences charity partnership fund to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and ensure the continuity of charity-funded research.

I welcome the Government's commitment to the £750 million charity support package, but the medical research charities have not had any help. I thank the hon. Member for North Warwickshire for leading the debate and all those who contributed. I spoke at about 100 mph there.

2.15 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): It is not just a pleasure but a delight to serve under your chairmanship for the very first time, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing this important debate at a critical time. It is a great pleasure to follow my indefatigable friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I believe this is the first time, as he usually follows me.

The lockdown order and the ensuing restrictions that we presently endure have had a seismic impact on the services that the NHS can provide, including, crucially, cancer services. NHS figures show a 60% drop in urgent cancer referrals from the initial days of the March lockdown, compared with the same time last year.

Breast Cancer Now, which has been mentioned by a number of colleagues, has raised concerns that almost 1 million women in the UK have missed NHS breast cancer screenings as a direct consequence of the pandemic, because they were paused during the first lockdown before being gradually resumed. Mammograms have the potential to detect cancer in its early stages and, ultimately, to save lives.

Treatment for those with other cancers has been significantly disrupted. The national guidelines may well have stated that urgent and essential cancer treatment must continue, but that has not been the case in every hospital. Not everyone who has required urgent surgery has been able to access it, whether because of a lack of intensive care units or because it is too great a risk to patient or staff.

Similarly, those who have required major surgery have not always been fortunate enough to receive it. That, again, has been a consequence of a lack of recovery beds with ventilation or of there being no ICU beds, if the surgery encountered complications, or because the surgery was simply too risky. Aftercare—whether palliative care or chemotherapy—has also been disrupted by the lockdown.

The reality of those delays not only puts women under a great deal of stress and anxiety, but risks making the cancers diagnosed harder to treat if they are caught at later stages. I truly understand that pain: an inordinate number of my family members have suffered from cancer.

Those who suffer from breast cancer should not be collateral damage in the battle against covid. Worryingly, that has been the case for virtually all forms of cancer treatment. The Health Data Research hub for cancer has warned that, as a result of the pandemic, there could be an additional 18,000 deaths of people with cancer.

In Wakefield, the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust has been proactive in its attempts to ensure that cancer diagnoses occur and cancer patients are treated. Prior to the pandemic, cancer was sadly already the biggest single cause of early death in the district. Breast cancer was the second most prevalent form, with about 250 new cases diagnosed each year.

In May, Pontefract Hospital was temporarily developed into a dedicated cancer centre to care for the people of Wakefield and North Kirklees who need diagnosis for surgery and suspected cancer during the covid-19 outbreak. Here, I have similar concerns to my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Robert Langan), because the move from Pinderfields Hospital to neighbouring Pontefract was undertaken on the basis that exposure to covid-19 in Pontefract was significantly lower than in Pinderfields, which is the regional hub for covid-19 patients.

However, while I concur with the chief executive of the NHS trust, Martin Barkley, that we are “fortunate that we have excellent modern facilities at Pontefract Hospital”,

which is relatively close to Wakefield, having to travel significantly further afield will likely be a behavioural impediment on attendance for constituents scheduled for diagnosis and treatment. That adds to the existing fear about patients entering hospitals, evidenced by Abdul Mustafa, GP lead for cancer care at NHS Wakefield CCG, who said:

[Imran Ahmad Khan]

“Clinicians working in cancer services know that patients are choosing not to have time-critical cancer treatment because of fear of exposure”.

In closing, I simply say that we must ensure that, however well meaning the policies, the antidote does not become worse than the disease we seek to cure.

2.21 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of a fellow Cheshire Member, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing the debate.

I think we all agree that the NHS is facing probably the most challenging period in its history. During the previous lockdown, the Government and the NHS leadership were dealing with enormous levels of uncertainty and, like all of us, had in their minds the images of what happened in Italy, with parts of its health service totally overwhelmed by covid cases. Enormous effort was put into preparing the NHS for that possibility: wards were reorganised, whole new systems for moving patients through hospitals were instigated and staff were redeployed. I pay tribute to the hard work, commitment and flexibility shown by so many NHS staff as part of all this. The changes made and the approach taken can only be described as a success, in terms of the NHS managing the wave of covid cases as it did. Our NHS was not overwhelmed, and no patient with covid who needed more intensive treatment was prevented from getting it.

However, we are here to talk about the wider picture of healthcare for our constituents during the pandemic. Colleagues of mine noticed almost immediately enormous drop-offs in patient attendance that simply could not be explained away by the lockdown. The first time I went to help in A&E, the department was quite simply the quietest I had ever seen it. It seems clear that there were people at home experiencing things such as heart attacks and strokes, which do not always present in a calamitous way that would cause one to definitely seek help.

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

Of course, the debate is specifically on cancer diagnosis, and even in the best and most proactive health systems in the world, the journey often consists of experiencing a wide range of minor symptoms that only over time become apparent as something more serious. That is why it matters that, over the last few months, there has been an inevitable downturn in people seeing doctors and nurses, because people think they can put off seeing them about these symptoms.

In discussing breast cancer, we can at least take some comfort from our relative success in educating people about the symptoms to watch out for, which by comparison with other cancers are a little bit more specific. We have a proactive screening programme, because we know that we can spot cancers earlier and save more lives if people are screened, rather than waiting for symptoms. Most breast screening services were suspended due to the coronavirus, and Breast Cancer Now estimates that, while screening was paused, almost 1 million women missed out on their mammogram, and that around 8,600 women caught up in the screening appointment backlog could be living with undetected breast cancer. Thankfully, screening has now restarted across the UK, and I understand that more than 400,000 women were

invited for breast cancer screening between June and August, with thousands more invitations being sent every month.

I will finish by focusing on two points. First, backlogs—I just described them for breast cancer; we have all described them today—affect a wide range of treatments. We must ensure that the NHS gets the additional resources that will be vital for it to catch up on the backlog of care and treatment built up during the lockdown, and which I am afraid is still building up in some areas. The record numbers of nurses and doctors now working for the NHS will be needed, and we will have to deliver on our manifesto commitments to keep building that workforce in primary and secondary care.

Secondly, we must make it clear to the public that the choice is not between tackling coronavirus or tackling the other healthcare needs of our constituents. Tackling coronavirus will allow us to carry on meeting the wider healthcare needs of our constituents. Any hospital faced with a choice between providing critical care for patients very sick with covid, who are at risk of dying there and then, and providing screening and non-urgent treatments will have to prioritise that immediate and critical healthcare need. That is why keeping the coronavirus suppressed is absolutely vital.

The NHS has moved on from where it was at the start of lockdown and every week is getting better and better at doing both things at the same time. We must all carry on giving it the room to manoeuvre that it needs to build on that further, enabling it to look after patients with and without covid, patients with urgent healthcare needs and planned healthcare needs, and patients requiring things such as screening. We will only stand a chance of being able to do that if we can continue to keep coronavirus suppressed, following the guidance that we have all been given—hands, face and space. Let us ensure that it is clear to constituents: this is not a choice between one or the other, but about supporting both groups of patients.

2.25 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): It is a great honour for me to make my maiden speech from the Opposition side of the Chamber, although it seems a little strange.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing the debate. I agreed with everything he said. Yes, I am reminded of my hon. Friends the Members for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), and of the redoubtable Paula Sherriff. We are all thinking of them at the moment, as they battle cancer. As far as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) was concerned, I empathise with his remarks, because I was once on the Health Committee for 10 years. We had inquiries into many of the issues raised today.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer of all. At any time, about 600,000 people in the UK are living with or recovering from breast cancer. My wife had breast cancer. She was stage 2 and her treatment was absolutely wonderful. She, dare I say, got away with radiotherapy, but a number of her friends were stage 3 and had to have chemotherapy. Through early detection, however, more and more women are surviving as a result.

Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will write to me about this: Southend breast cancer service has been way up there at the top, but I was slightly concerned to be told that, in my constituency, 42 per 10,000, or 152 people, develop breast cancer every year; and I am really concerned that the uptake of breast cancer screening is below the national average, at only 65.3% of women invited to attend. Only 76.7% of women are diagnosed at stage 1 or 2, compared with nearly 80% across England. I am concerned by that, and I feel a responsibility as a local Member of Parliament to do something about the issue.

As we have heard from other colleagues, covid-19 has caused many regular services to be cancelled or delayed. In order to clear the backlog and ensure attendance at screening centres, women are sent—again, I say this to my hon. Friend the Minister—open invitations, rather than timed appointments. That may lead to fewer women making appointments and so reduce the uptake of breast screening, which has been happening consistently in recent years. If open invitations are issued, measures such as appointment reminders and letters from GPs must be put in place, urging women to attend.

Colleagues have mentioned Professor Michael Richards and his recommendations last autumn. The review found that screening capacity in the NHS needs urgent investment to increase the workforce and provide adequate equipment and facilities. Following the plan to extend the upper age for testing from 65 to 70, additional pressure was placed on existing staff, many of whom are near retirement age. About half of all mammographers are aged 50 and are likely to retire in the next 10 to 15 years.

I also hope that, now the Chancellor has discovered a money tree—which I am certainly going to get hold of—additional funding will be found for investment in clinical nurse specialists, to support those with incurable secondary breast cancer. Yes, the Macmillan nurses do an absolutely fantastic job—but more needs to be done.

In conclusion, the coronavirus pandemic has changed the way in which the NHS offers its services beyond recognition—we all salute that—with new technology, such as virtual appointments, being offered to patients. However, we must not lose sight of the importance of physical screening and consultations, in particular for breast cancer diagnosis. With the sobering statistic that one in seven women in the UK—my wife and three of our colleagues, whom we know about—will develop breast cancer at some point in their lives, it is more important than ever that this service is funded and resourced to allow the best chance of survival and recovery for those women.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): We have 30 minutes now for the Front Benchers to respond and to allow a little time for Mr Tracey at the end.

2.30 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing this very important debate, and I congratulate him on his compassion and lucidity in presenting his case. I start by paying tribute to all the NHS, research and charity staff who have been working on the frontline in their respective disciplines to ensure that we move through this challenging time and continue to meet the challenges of breast cancer.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer, with one in seven women affected, and the impact of covid-19 is most keenly felt by those women and has the greatest potential to affect the lives of so many because of its prevalence. Covid has had an impact on almost every aspect of our lives. We have heard that 1 million women have missed their breast cancer screenings, but the covid pandemic has affected all aspects of the cancer pathway, from screening and diagnosis to treatment and follow-up care.

The reasons are varied, and include concern and fear over attending, cancellations due to re-deployment and the impact on the wider NHS services, radiology, surgical, medical and clinical oncology. All of those aspects of the treatment pathway have felt the impact, including, as I mentioned earlier, the capacity for clinical trials and research. In that spirit, I led a cross-party letter to the Chancellor asking for the Government to consider the establishment of the life sciences charity partnership fund to support the charities that have been significantly affected by the covid pandemic.

The design and success of cancer treatment is absolutely reliant on early diagnosis, as it allows rapid progress to treatment, prompt surgical intervention in the case of breast cancer, and onward to radiotherapy or chemotherapy, or indeed both. As such, it maximises the efficacy of those interventions, whilst allowing tissue and immune systems to recover. However, there are challenges.

The Royal College of Radiologists has highlighted that there has been a reduction in referrals for symptomatic breast cancer within the two-week wait standard and a reduction of clinical capacity. There have been some innovative moves, where appropriate, for a hyperfractionation of radiotherapy treatment schedules. The royal college also noted that radiologists are having to deal with attendance anxiety. It has, however, also noted innovative changes to the configuration of services, which have enabled some of the softer aspects of cancer care to continue where possible.

The impact on the challenges that were already present prior to covid also needs to be considered. I remember—more years ago than I would like to mention—when I was involved in peer reviews with a London cancer network there was already a shortage of radiologists within the cancer pathway. That problem has, sadly, not gone away. It is not a problem unique to the English system at all. There is at least one consultant vacancy in clinical oncology. Another important issue to consider is that the attrition rate for consultant posts is greater than the ability to recruit. Thus, there is a pressing need to move these challenges forward.

The new ways of working—telemedicine, Hospital at Home, and other innovations—need investment. There is also a need to reassess the skill base of the workforce and acknowledge chronic excessive workload, which has been highlighted by The King's Fund. According to Macmillan, there is a need more generally to recruit around 2,500 cancer nurses alone—of course, other disciplines, from GPs to radiographers, also need consideration for recruitment.

The post-covid recovery plan must include significant investment in diagnostics and treatment, radiology, recruitment and training in specialist allied disciplines. Effectively, the covid pandemic has landed a narrow aperture at the point of diagnosis for many cancers and, because of its prevalence, breast cancer is a

[Neale Hanvey]

significant cohort. To widen that aperture, there is a real and pressing need for funding to come forward in the comprehensive spending review; it must deliver an expansion of service to support innovation, fund the NHS plan and support social care.

It is important to acknowledge that staff in hospitals have been working incredibly hard throughout the pandemic, but there is only so much that we can squeeze out of them, and we cannot rely on a never-ending supply of goodwill and extraordinary resilience. My suggestion echoes a plea from my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is a breast cancer specialist herself: clinical audit and quality improvement standards need to be at the heart of the drive forward. That work has been commended by the Nuffield Trust in its “Learning from Scotland’s NHS” paper.

We need to support getting it right first time, while making great strides to enable clinical outcome data to be captured and the impact to be fully understood. In short, substantial investment is no longer optional, and I hope that in the spending review the Government make the necessary investments, as called for by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire, to ensure that that is brought forward.

2.37 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I start by thanking the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing this important and timely debate and for his excellent introductory speech. He made a number of important points, some of which I hope to return to, and I hope he gets a positive response to his very helpful suggestion on the gathering of data. I also thank all the other hon. Members for their contributions today, and I will go through some of the highlights of those.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) spoke about the need for a cancer recovery plan, which I think we all agree on, and addressed the important point about widening health inequalities and the startling differences in the availability of screening depending on where people live. I agree with her that improvements to the cancer outcomes datasets are an important part of beginning to understand how those disparities work out.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris); I pay tribute to the work he does on the all-party parliamentary groups in this area. He mentioned the Catch Up With Cancer campaign and drew attention to the backlog, which, of course, many hon. Members have raised today. He also raised the availability of radiotherapy, which, in his own words, he bangs the drum on consistently in this place, and we pay tribute to his persistence.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Robert Lorgan) made an important point about the availability of mobile screening units and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who always speaks with such knowledge on this subject, made some important points about clinical trials and charities, which I hope to be able to return to if time allows.

It was a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) find his spiritual home at last; it is the equivalent of Gary Neville turning out to play for Liverpool, but he is welcome all the same. We have a vacancy in the shadow health team for a Parliamentary Private Secretary at the moment and, if he shows the promise that he demonstrated in his speech today, I think we may be able to find a role for him on this side of the House.

The hon. Gentleman made, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) did, an important point about some of the people who are not here today, including the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who we heard this morning in business questions speaking about her frustration at not being able to participate in this debate. I am sure it would have been enhanced by her presence, given her current battle, alongside the former Member—still our friend—for Dewsbury, Paula Sherriff. I am sure the whole House sends both of them our very best wishes.

I want to speak about the impact the pandemic has had on the early diagnosis of cancer in general, as many Members have referred to already. We know how important early diagnosis is to improving chances of survival and in successful treatment. As we heard, Cancer Research UK estimates around 3 million people are waiting for breast, bowel or cervical screening, and there were over 1.2 million patients waiting for a key diagnostic test by the end of August this year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington mentioned, we know from Macmillan’s latest report that there are currently around 50,000 missing diagnoses; that compares to a similar timeframe for this time last year, and means 50,000 fewer people have potentially not been diagnosed with cancer.

We know significant amounts of capacity had to be created during this pandemic, and that meant the cancelling of planned operations, large numbers of patients being discharged back into the community, and staff and patients having to be protected from the transmission of covid-19. What those changes also meant is that, thankfully, intensive care did not have to be rationed so that only covid-19 patients were treated. However, it also caused the shutdown or reduction in many other non-covid services, which, combined with drastic changes in patient behaviour, has led to us facing this huge backlog today. We know that stricter infection control measures—which are absolutely necessary—mean that the backlog of care will probably take much longer to clear than we would like.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood and other hon. Members referred to the Breast Cancer Now report, and how the number of people referred to see a specialist declined dramatically from April. There is an estimate that across the UK, there have been 107,000 fewer breast cancer referrals, and a backlog of almost 1 million women requiring screening has built up during this time. Some of those women may well have been living with undetected breast cancer, and some may still be. Every month that that situation continues, more women could be missing out on the best chance of getting an early diagnosis and the best chance of beating the disease. It is vital—and something that we have been pushing for for a long time—that we get a clear sense of how we are going to tackle that backlog, because it is so important.

The hon. Members for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) mentioned the importance of mammograms. As we know, they are a key tool in early detection. There is a plan to send open invitations for screening from September to March of next year. That has caused some concern among cancer charities, because some of the research shows that the number of women who make appointments is significantly lower than those who actually attend timed appointments. There is a fear, sadly, that this could actually worsen the persistent decline we have seen in recent years of the uptake of breast cancer screening. We are particularly concerned about the impact that will have on some groups where uptake is already low, such as those living in deprived communities and some BAME groups. We heard a little bit about the impact on BAME groups from my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, and both she and the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) very powerfully put into words the additional mental toll that this disease has during this time, on top of everything else that people ordinarily face when they have received such a diagnosis.

Several hon. Members mentioned the impact of covid-19 on secondary breast cancer patients. It is still, sadly, the case that around 11,500 people—women, mainly—die from breast cancer each year. Most of those are to do with secondary breast cancer, and as we have heard, it is not something that there is a cure for at the moment. It is estimated that around 35,000 people in the UK are living with secondary breast cancer. As the general population ages and people live longer, numbers will continue to increase, so it is really important that we get a better understanding and response to secondary breast cancer. We also need to look at this issue from the patient's perspective.

I want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who wanted to speak in today's debate but could not. She wanted to pay tribute to one of her constituents, Jo Taylor, and to METUP UK, which focuses on making positive changes for everyone with metastatic breast cancer. Its "busy living with mets" campaign calls for increased awareness of secondary breast cancer, because catching it earlier leads to better outcomes. It is also campaigning for better access to drugs, clinical trials, radiotherapies and surgical pathways.

As the hon. Member for North Warwickshire mentioned in his opening comments, the national cancer patient experience survey tells us that the experiences of patients with secondary cancer differ greatly. It has identified gaps through the taskforce in the support and services offered to people, including variation in access to clinical nurse specialists, patchy provision of information, patients' psycho-social needs not being met, and a lack of prompt and timely access to palliative care services.

As we have heard from several hon. Members, clinical nurse specialists play a critical role in co-ordinating care, providing information and helping people to manage their diagnosis and treatment better. In fact, Breast Cancer Now reports that the support of a clinical nurse specialist is the single most important contributing factor to people's positive experience of care. That is particularly important for secondary cancer patients, who are often on lifelong treatments and have complex needs as a result. Its importance was acknowledged in the long-term

plan, with a commitment that by 2021—it is only six weeks away now—all patients, including those with secondary cancers, will have access to a clinical nurse specialist or support worker.

It is very important that we get to a point where everyone is able to take advantage of the expertise that a clinical nurse specialist provides. Prior to the pandemic, the workforce was already overstretched and under pressure due to increased demand and persistent shortages across the workforce. A report by the Public Accounts Committee was highly critical of the Government's approach to the workforce, finding that the long-term plan was not supported by a detailed workforce plan. Of course, the removal of the NHS bursary in 2017

"signally failed to achieve its ambition to increase student nursing numbers."

Before I conclude, I want to echo what the hon. Member for Strangford said about the importance of charities in this sector. We know there is a great deal of concern in the sector. I know that some support was announced by the Government back in April, but it falls well short of what was suggested by the associations involved, and only a few have been able to benefit from it. I hope the Government will listen to the sector and look again at what additional financial support can be provided, because we know that clinical trials provide a vital opportunity for patients to access new treatments, which are always in development. We know it is particularly important for patients with secondary breast cancer. We hope that is something the Minister can take on board today, and I look forward to hearing her response.

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I have an awful lot to cover and less than 10 minutes to respond, if I am going to give my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) time to sum up. I congratulate him on securing the debate and on the important work he does running the APPG on breast cancer with his co-chair. I know that he has been a fundraiser for breast cancer and that, like me, he came to this place with tackling this issue as one of his key ambitions. We will get there.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) said, everyone with breast cancer is a mum, a sister, a daughter or a friend. Some 3% of them are now fathers, sons and brothers. I am grateful for the contributions to the debate. A debate such as this allows us to park much of the politics but talk about what is really important here: the patients, and the outcomes for them.

Early diagnosis is key, and hon. Members have outlined the challenge that covid has brought. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), and indeed the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for outlining just how challenging covid-19 has been for the NHS and how it has responded to an unprecedented event in an unprecedented way. I reassure all hon. Members that in the second wave, we have made sure, as we have heard from many hon. Members, that cancer services are prioritised and remain.

I pay my own tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who has written to me because she would have liked to be here today and who is currently in treatment, as well as to

[Jo Churchill]

my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who is currently having treatment, the former Member for Dewsbury, who has been mentioned, and the former Member for Eddisbury, who is having her own challenge living with cancer. It is around us all. I will remember the emotional tsunami that diagnosis brings. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford said in her letter, because she is always the same with language, “Cancer sucks”. I could not agree more. I wish them all the best on their journey, as I do every patient through their treatment.

I am really aware of how covid-19 has upended our lives, but clinical decisions had to be made in March. We were dealing with the unknown and we had to protect people and highlight priorities. For those who have had their cancer treatment or surgery changed or delayed, I understand the uncertainty and anxiety they have had on top of that diagnosis of cancer. For patients and their families, this is a really tough time. We must have a laser focus on early diagnosis, as was laid out in the manifesto, and we must not veer from that. I do not want covid-19 to be the derail; I want us to seize some opportunities that have come about.

Although it makes it no less bearable for those affected, the decision to pause some patients’ treatment in the first wave was taken on clinical advice that factored in the risk to the most vulnerable. As soon as it was possible, however, the NHS was charged with restoring cancer services as quickly as possible, and it has risen to that challenge. I meet with Cally Palmer, who was mentioned earlier, and Professor Peter Johnson often—at points weekly—to make sure that we are doing everything we can.

Across the country, there are 21 cancer alliances and their cancer hubs. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) outlined the amazing work done at the Royal Marsden to bring hospitals across the capital together to optimise safe theatre space to deliver treatments and so on. We have asked for that approach to happen across the country to ensure that we optimise treatment. I hear my hon. Friends the Members for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) and for High Peak (Robert Langan), but it cannot always be on the doorstep at this time; we have to have a bit of flex. I will happily meet my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak to talk about his particular concerns.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and other hon. Members in recognising the tremendous efforts of the cancer workforce. In forming those cancer hubs and the rapid diagnostic centres, people have moved mountains to care for the patients they look after every day. Ultimately, they are the ones on the frontline to ensure that breast cancer services are there when we need them, and our thanks go to them.

The latest official data for September, which was published only this morning, shows that urgent two-week GP referrals across the entire spectrum of cancers are 2% higher than last year and they continue to rise for all cancers. In breast cancer, we have seen a month-on-month rise of more than 15% from August to September, but we still have work to do; I am not going to stand here

and say that we do not. There is still a way to go to meet current demand and improve on that rise for those who are waiting for treatment.

More than 86% of people saw a cancer specialist in September within two weeks of their referral from a GP, and nearly 95% of patients received treatment within 31 days of a decision to treat. I know precisely how long every day feels when people have had a diagnosis. I have had tumours in both breasts and other primary sites. The wait is anxious. It is terrifying. Your mind asks, “Who will pick the children up?”, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester said, a million other unanswerable questions every single day.

There have been some bright spots and some innovative treatments that have moved the profile of the disease further forward. I personally—this is an ambition of Breast Cancer Now—want to see the eradication of breast cancer by 2050. We must work to that, because it is possible. As we have a 98% ability to treat testicular cancer, we can do better. Breast cancer should not claim the lives of over 11,000 women a year. I want to see it put back in its box.

Breast cancer treatments are advancing. This year has been no exception, with advances in radiotherapy and chemotherapy. We have seen oral chemotherapies that are easier to deliver and better for the patient. We have seen the publication of the FAST trial, which looks at five-fraction radiotherapy to treat early breast cancer. I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who is no longer in his place, and the other members of the APPG on breast cancer who came to see me. That treatment enables individuals to be treated quicker with fewer hospital visits. When we are fighting covid-19 and we are trying to keep people out of hospitals, it is better to minimise visits. All radiotherapy providers in England are adopting this approach. Yes, we have challenges with the workforce, but radiotherapy did remarkably well at keeping itself going through the pandemic.

I will try to cover as many of the different issues as I can, but I barely have any time left. They will drag me out of here with my nails pulling on the carpet. Clinical nurse specialists are important, valued and flipping marvellous—we all need one. Some 350 extra clinical cancer nurse specialists were allocated in the long-term plan, but we need to work together. I am working with Andrew Strauss and my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire).

Cancer nurse specialists need to come from the existing workforce. They must be encouraged to do further training. We need to ensure that it is seen as a career path that really does have that purpose. Boy, oh boy, when one needs a cancer nurse specialist—they save the oncologist and one can phone them to ask about one’s niggles—they do amazing things. I want to see everyone come together, including the charities, to encourage nurses to come forward and help the community.

I met with the secondary breast cancer women before the pandemic. The situation is variable, and that is not good enough. The journey of a woman who has a cancer nurse specialist by her side is not an easier journey, but it is one where they feel supported. They have someone there. My cancer nurse specialist helped me to get some of the psychological counselling that colleagues have spoken of. I was angry and ticked off

that I had that disease again. We need to encourage people to sign up to do that additional training. The money is there.

Data needs to be better. I could go on about data, screening and clinical trials, but I am aware that I have such little time. The majority of clinical trials are open for registration. I am urging local decisions to be made to get people reinstated and on to clinical trials. We have opened up screening with open invitations to try to get more women through. We know we have an issue with women not attending their appointments. We need to make people feel safe when they go to have their screening test in a hospital. Unless they feel safe, they will not go. We must work together to say, "It is open, but you have to go. Our NHS is a really precious resource. If you have an invitation, take it up and go to see the professionals who are there to help you."

I wish I could say more, but I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire a second or two to sum up. I thank everyone working on the frontline. Advances are happening; there is more to do. I am happy to work with my hon. Friend on an audit. We need to get better data. It is collected, but not in a good enough format. I want to see us do better in all those areas.

2.59 pm

Craig Tracey: I thank the Minister. It is far better that we heard from her than from me. She has tackled this issue in the forthright way we have come to expect. Coming into this debate, I knew that we were in the right hands and I am even more sure of that now. I also thank other colleagues who participated in the debate, not just for their contributions but for the way the debate has been conducted. That is the message—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Dementia: Covid-19

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): It has come to my attention that the Order Paper states that the debate will start at 3.30 pm. I am advised that that is a mistake. I will work on the assumption that most people know it is 3 and they are here. If anyone inadvertently turns up later, we will make allowances for them on that basis.

3.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on people affected by dementia.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I am really happy to have been able to secure this debate with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on a topic that is important to so many of us.

I am proud to be the co-chair of the all-party group on dementia and to work closely with the Alzheimer's Society, which supports people living with dementia and their carers. We campaign on the issues that matter most to them. This debate is about the effects of covid on people with dementia and their carers. I will focus my remarks on the Alzheimer's Society's September report, "Worst hit: dementia during coronavirus". The society undertook that collated work to assess the impact of the first wave of covid. I shall also discuss briefly the impact of covid on dementia research, particularly in view of the fact that we are approaching the comprehensive spending review statement later this month.

What has been the impact of covid on people living with dementia? People with dementia have unfortunately been among the worst hit by covid: they have experienced disproportionate loss of life, and those who live in care settings have been separated from their loved ones for many months. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said in relation to older people, including those with dementia, that

"There is evidence that human rights standards may have not been upheld in the response to the pandemic...We are further concerned that equality considerations were not effectively and transparently built into decision-making at the national, regional and local level, both in terms of the immediate risks from coronavirus and the wider impact of restrictions. This may have resulted in failures to comply with the public sector equality duty."

That is damning indeed, but on top of that, since March there has been a worrying decline in diagnosis rates for dementia, which were already low. There is some evidence that covid affects the brain and nervous system, as well as other systems in the body, and this needs to be monitored, particularly in relation to covid's longer-term impacts.

In addition, we must not forget the family and friends who are carers, in my constituency and across the country, who have provided millions of additional hours of care during and between lockdowns. With no shielding support whatsoever, they have been feeling the strain from that lack of support during the pandemic.

To understand the scale of the problem facing people affected by dementia, I thought it would be helpful to share with colleagues information about the scale of dementia itself—of course, many colleagues will already be familiar with this information. In my local authority

[Debbie Abrahams]

in Oldham, there are approximately 2,250 people who are currently living with dementia; across the UK, there are approximately 850,000 people living with dementia; and globally there are more people living with dementia than the entire population of Spain. A third of people born in the UK will develop dementia during their lifetime.

I know that most—if not all—of us here today have been touched by dementia in some way, as I was when my mum was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia, at the age of 64. I want to highlight the fact that, contrary to popular belief, the majority of people with dementia—more than 60% of the total number—live well and live in the community. However, people with dementia account for over 70% of residents in care homes. This pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated inequalities across our country, and that is particularly true for people living with dementia and their carers.

Colleagues will be as horrified as I was to hear about the disproportionate death rates among people with dementia. Between March and June, over a quarter of the people who died with covid-19 in England and Wales had dementia. Dementia was the most common pre-existing condition in deaths involving covid, although it was never identified as a condition that made people clinically vulnerable. That is the reality we are presented with today, and it prompts the question whether people with dementia and their carers will now be given the proper support to be shielded. The miserly £14.60 per person that has been provided to local authorities to support the clinically vulnerable for the entirety of this second lockdown is, quite frankly, derisory.

In addition to those deaths from covid, there has been a sharp rise in excess deaths of people affected by dementia. Between January and July, 5,049 such deaths were recorded, and during the early peak of the pandemic excess deaths were double the five-year average. These excess deaths happened not only in care homes but among people living at home, with a rate 79% above the five-year average between the middle of March and the middle of September. We must ensure prompt and safe access to health and care services for people with dementia throughout the pandemic.

Why have people with dementia been dying in such high numbers? Various factors appear to be involved, with some undoubtedly contributing more than others. The risk of severe covid outcomes rises steeply with age; 94% of covid deaths between March and June were of people over the age of 60, and we know that people are more likely to develop dementia as they grow old. Evidence is emerging that suggests having dementia may increase the risk of severe covid symptoms and death when age and other conditions are taken into account.

Importantly, coronavirus can present itself differently in care home residents. A sizeable proportion—nearly one in five—of nursing home residents who tested positive for covid were either asymptomatic or had only atypical symptoms. They had no fever or cough, but often had a change in mental health status or behaviour, anorexia or digestive problems. That might also have contributed to the challenge of detecting and preventing the spread of covid in that population.

Perhaps the biggest contributor to the high death rate is where a person lives, whether in a care home or in the community. All of us here today have heard from local care homes and constituents about the serious challenges that have been faced in care homes, from unsafe discharges through to the lack of personal protective equipment and sporadic testing. Although we have made leaps forward in care home safety, I hope the Minister will commit today to ensuring that social care is on an equal footing with the NHS in terms of PPE and testing, and will respond to the issues raised by the EHRC. Looking forward, will she also ensure that the social care sector, including social care providers and experts in the third sector, as well as service users and their families, are involved in long-term developments for the sector?

I also want to speak up for the hundreds of thousands of informal carers across the UK, who are too often forgotten. It is unclear whether the lack of access to friends and families is affecting the progress of dementia, but one thing is clear: the emotional distress of not being able to see or touch our loved ones is very real. One of my Saddleworth constituents wrote to me:

"As the country pays its respects to those who fought and died for our freedom, let's not forget that some of our war veterans, like my father, are still alive today. He like many others is locked away in a care home, having endured 8 months of separation from his family with no end in sight."

Another constituent told me:

"My mother has been in a care home with worsening dementia for over three years. She is 96. I cannot see her and can't even speak to her on the phone as she is almost deaf. It is heartbreaking to know that there is a very real possibility that I may never see my mother again, as visitors are barred from the care home. My mother probably believes her family have abandoned her."

That is a dreadful thing to feel. With the roll-out of lateral flow testing, will the Minister commit to ensuring that family carers are given key worker status, are included in the care home testing protocols and have access to PPE, so that they can visit their relatives and provide the loving family care that is so desperately needed?

As I mentioned, most people with dementia live in the community, and one third live alone. I have already mentioned the amazing job that more than 700,000 carers do. Without them we know that the social care system would collapse. The pandemic has taken a significant and additional toll on many. The Alzheimer's Society found that families and friends of people with dementia have spent an extra 92 million hours caring for loved ones with dementia during the pandemic; that is on top of the 100 hours or more a week of care that more than 40% of family and friend carers reported providing for their loved ones. For some that was on top of a full-time job. That dedicated group of people deserve more support as they struggle to care for their loved ones among their myriad other responsibilities.

Will the Minister today guarantee that where home care for someone with dementia has been stopped owing to coronavirus, it will be reinstated without any formal assessment? Will she also ensure that carers' assessments are carried out; that short breaks are provided for people with caring responsibilities; that local authority data is collected on the provision of those services; and that the Government fulfil their commitment to do whatever it takes by properly reimbursing local authorities for the additional work that they are doing and the additional funding that they have spent during the pandemic?

I have already mentioned that people with dementia were not included in the Government's formally shielded group in the spring. However, given what we know now about dementia being a significant clinical risk for covid morbidity and mortality, I am pleased that the Government have recognised that and are introducing a risk stratification for covid similar to that used for assessing heart attack and stroke risk. Will the Minister provide an outline of how that tool will work, including when she expects it to be available for use, and in particular what support will be available for those considered at risk?

As I also mentioned, the impact of covid had an impact on the diagnosis rate. It is well below the already low target of 66.7%; it now stands at 63%. That means more people are living without a diagnosis of dementia and are unable to access emotional, practical, legal or financial advice, as well as the therapies associated with diagnosis. Memory services are adapting to open virtually, which is a welcome interim measure, but there is urgent need for a catch-up on waiting lists to ensure that the freefall in dementia diagnosis rates does not continue, and a virtual appointment is not the place to deliver a life-changing diagnosis. I will be grateful if the Minister can do all that she can to ensure that memory assessment services reopen in person at the earliest opportunity.

Finally, I want to raise the issue of dementia research as we look through and beyond the pandemic. The Conservative general election manifesto last winter pledged an extra £800 million over 10 years for dementia research—the “Dementia Moonshot”. I support that. The UK's exceptional research into dementia prevention, therapies and care is already well under way. We have the second biggest research network on dementia in the world. We must not let that go. There are always new challenges. As I said, recent research has found that the neurological complications of covid can include brain inflammation, delirium and nerve damage. We need to be monitoring those types of effects on a long-term basis.

Unfortunately, much of the research that had been under way has been delayed during covid, with medical research charities, which do vital work to support early-career researchers, facing a 40% shortfall this year. A third of dementia researchers are already considering leaving the field. Losing that research talent would have a severe long-term consequence for dementia research, and ultimately for people with dementia. We cannot lose that innovative work. Let me give an example: the UK Dementia Research Institute's care, research and technology centre has been developing tools and technologies to enable people to live in their homes as long as they can, reducing isolation and minimising the impact on the NHS and beds. Will the Minister confirm that the spending review later this month will fulfil the commitment to dementia research and provide the financial support that such organisations need? Research provides hope of a cure in the future, as well as developments in social care, technological innovation and public health advances to address the care needs of today.

Dementia is often an overlooked condition, but it is a condition that affects so many. People with dementia have been among the worst affected by this pandemic, and I hope the Minister will do all she can to ensure that we do not see such loss of life, strain on carers, and loneliness again as the pandemic progresses. I also hope that we see a long-term and fair funding solution for social care soon, which has the needs of people with dementia at its heart.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): The call list is quite long. We can get everyone in if people stick to about four minutes. I do not want to impose a time limit, but that would be helpful.

3.18 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams).

At the end of September, more than 812 patients over the age of 65 were recorded as having dementia across GP practices in Tatton. Many of those patients' family and friends, and people who work with them, have asked me to speak, including Lorraine Albiston, Simon Brazendale and Suzanne Jeans from Knutsford, and Victoria Caruana and Sue Kisloff from Wilmslow.

Like others, I have heard truly harrowing stories about how those with dementia have not been able to see family members. They feel abandoned, at a loss and confused, not having contact, conversation or physical affection. The Alzheimer's Society says that for people with dementia, lack of social contact is not only bad for their mental health, but has a significantly negative effect on the progression of their dementia.

That was the case for Sue Jeans' mum, Jackie. Sue has only been able to see her mum three times since February, when the home stopped all visits, meaning she has seen her mum for 50 minutes since February. While she supported the decision to stop visits in February, she does not now. Nine months later, there must be better ways of doing things. Sadly, this lack of contact has led many people to die sooner than they would have been expected to. Between January and July this year, 5,000 more people than usual died of dementia—that is 52% higher than normal.

Sue is not alone. Lorraine Albiston lives in Knutsford, but her mother lives two hours away in a care home in Worcestershire. The home allows a 20-minute visit once a week, in a gazebo with no heating, meaning that visits are often cancelled due to bad weather and only one or two people can visit at a time. As Lorraine has four siblings, that means she cannot see her mother as regularly as she would like to.

I know that in Tatton and across the country care workers, family members and helpers have worked tirelessly, and I put on record my thanks and appreciation to all those people. Oliver Stirk, director of Carefound Home Care in Wilmslow, told me that their carers have adapted to the situation. Their patients are no longer now allowed to go to the pub to have a Sunday lunch, so his carers are cooking for them at home, so they can have some kind of enjoyment. They have also done much to support the families to get online.

Lisa Burrows, the general manager of Sunrise of Mobberley, told me how her team have implemented an enhanced infection control programme. Furthermore, they are doing their best to do numerous social distanced garden visits and are in the process of introducing dedicated visiting rooms. I also want to mention the members of Knutsford Methodist Church, who provide valuable support for carers through their Friendship Café, run by volunteers led by Paula Lambe and Eve James. However, that has not been able to happen, as it usually does every Friday.

There are grave concerns about the Government's decision to ban almost all visits and about the lack of input from Public Health England to guide care homes'

[*Esther McVey*]

approach to this pandemic. I have these questions for the Minister: first, what are the Government doing to address the needs of people affected by dementia and of their family and friends? Secondly, someone's experience may differ greatly depending on the home they are in, so what are the Government doing to facilitate and encourage a common approach between care homes and to ensure that lessons learned at one care home are shared among others? Thirdly, what is being done by the Government to rebuild trust in the vital social care sector?

Finally, I commend the *Daily Mail* on its Christmas campaign. I will conclude with the words of an elderly constituent who said to me, "I want to live before I die, and at the moment, with all these confusing lockdown rules, I can't."

3.22 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing today's debate. It is obviously an immensely important and sensitive topic, and it is right that it should be brought to the attention of the House.

We all know that the pandemic has caused great heartbreak across our country, nowhere more than in our care sector. Our care homes do vital work looking after the elderly and infirm and we owe them and their dedicated managers and staff a great debt of gratitude after all the challenges they have faced over the past year. I have had several very productive meetings with them in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. They want to do their best for the people in their care and their families, and some have shown great ingenuity in seeking to ensure that visits from loved ones are still possible.

None the less, as we have just heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), we know there is a real issue with family access for many sufferers with conditions such as Alzheimer's and dementia, and that it is taking a devastating toll. That pain is not measured simply in mortality numbers; for many of the families of the sufferers with those conditions, it is the deterioration in their loved ones' capabilities during the isolation they have endured this year that is particularly concerning.

We know that many residents in care homes have had hardly any visits, and some have had no visits, since the crisis began in the spring. How deeply sad that can be has been brought home to me by a number of moving messages from constituents such as Kelly Holmes from Coulby Newham. Her dad was diagnosed with dementia in February last year, and he does not understand why it is not possible for Kelly and her mum to visit. He regularly rings them, distressed and confused about why they have not visited and worrying that no one cares about him. The repetition of that conversation is obviously deeply distressing for the family.

Rebecca Skelton from Nunthorpe has spent 90 minutes in the past eight months with her mum, Ann, who suffers from dementia. She said:

"Before Covid my mother could not converse with me and my family but there was always a smile of recognition when going to visit her, as though she still knew who we were. The thought of

not having this when I do get to see her is breaking my heart and causing me severe depression. The thought of her feeling that we have abandoned her by not visiting is causing more anxiety, I only hope that the smile is still there when I do get to see her."

I have received so many other messages. I thank Mr Malcolm Guest, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), who raised the case of his mum Annie; and Lesley Turnbull, who contacted me on behalf of her husband Tim, who has Lewy body dementia. Her words have really stayed with me:

"I have begged him not to give up and I got a reaction, I always get a reaction when I say I will be with you soon."

In the limited time available, I will make a simple plea: some of the new lateral flow tests—it is great news that they are being rolled out across large parts of the country, including to all authorities in the north-east—ought to be prioritised so that relatives can have access to their loved ones in care home settings. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar and I have already written to the director of public health for Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland with precisely that request, and I hope that the Minister might offer her thoughts on it. More broadly, I welcome the Minister's commitment a few weeks ago to explore giving family carers key worker status. I hope that can be actioned, because it could make a real practical difference.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the real upsurge in hope brought about by this week's news of the Pfizer vaccine, which is obviously fantastic. I strongly support the Government's proposed prioritisation of those who will receive the vaccine as soon as the necessary checks have been finalised and roll-out can begin. We must resist the toxic anti-vaccination propaganda that is circulating alarmingly widely on social media and state the truth that effective vaccination will be the end of covid-19 and will pave the way to ending the suffering of so many of our constituents living with Alzheimer's, dementia and so many other conditions, and the suffering of their families. It can and will restore the love, company and sense of belonging that we all wish to experience at the sunset of our lives. It cannot come too soon. I commend the efforts of the Minister and her colleagues in helping to make sure that we are ready, as a society, as soon as the vaccine is ready to be given to the public.

3.27 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this important and time-sensitive debate. It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke).

I am sure that hon. Members will recognise similar letters to this one from my mailbox:

"I have only been able to see my lovely Mum twice since 15th March...(241 days.) We have seen her through the window from the garden. The staff are very good and have usually moved Mum's bed closer to the window so that we can see each other more easily. But we can't hold her hand."

That is just one of the heartbreaking messages that I have been sent ahead of the debate. Those words ring with the sound of sacrifice and emotional distress, and of the forbearance asked of those with Alzheimer's and their families and friends in this crisis.

People live with Alzheimer's in a number of settings. My constituency has a significant cluster of excellent care homes—69, in fact, which I know because my team and I have called them several times, first regarding food supplies, then PPE, and then testing. We have always known that they would be at the epicentre of this health crisis, and that their residents would be the most vulnerable. I take this opportunity to commend local carers and to pay heartfelt tribute to their work during this time. Our higher-than-national rate of covid diagnosis is testament to their dedication and means swifter care.

Out of the present crisis, I am pleased to say that new, stronger relationships and communications have been forged between our care homes and our local hospital and its community teams. That can only be good for more joined-up thinking and more joined-up work, with a new named lead now for each setting. In the summer, at a “spade in the ground” ceremony, I met the family directors of Hallmark Care Homes at their new project in Kings Drive. We spoke about their concerns, with their request to Government being: “Hear us, recognise the centre, bring us in to shape the future.”

It was interesting to hear how—even then, back in July—the covid crisis was already influencing the design of this new building, where we stood in the footings. Swift design changes will mean new safe, green routes through the home, creating all-weather visiting spaces. It also means a whole new level of tech to provide residents with a digital window on the world.

For people who are living with Alzheimer's at home and are reliant on support from day care centres, such as the excellent Ivy House in Eastbourne, forced closure and severed connection has been especially hard for all parties. In more extreme cases, it has been dangerous for the sufferer, and almost unbearable for those who care for them. We cannot find ourselves in this situation again. Individual risk assessment is key, and an essential service designation vital, so that the work of day care centres for the dementia community in my home town is safeguarded.

In 2015, the then Prime Minister set an ambitious 2020 dementia challenge. Funding for vital research has been increased, and diagnosis rates have increased. With programmes such as Dementia Friends, awareness has increased too. There is change and there has been progress, but we must continue with new urgency to take up the deeper, wider reform of social care. Let us dare to reimagine it. There will be a wealth of learning from this pandemic about the solutions that we need to put in place to better protect people affected by dementia during the pandemic and beyond. That is the view of the Alzheimer's Society.

I know that all hon. Members are concerned for their constituents, as am I. I am keen to hear further from the Minister, and I do not underestimate the challenge. Good work is being done, and I know she is committed to getting it right.

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

3.31 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and the hon. Member

for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate, and I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell).

I want to start by talking about my constituent Tracy Gothard. Tracy released a video of what happened when she visited her mum Doreen, who has dementia, in a nursing home in Bradford. In the clip, we see what so many of our families are currently going through. Hon. Members might have seen the footage. In it, Tracy and her sisters stand outside and speak to their mum in the car park through a closed window. Doreen asks Tracy to come inside and motions with her hand, to which her daughter replies “I can't come in. We are not allowed yet because of that nasty bug.” Doreen's face crumples, and she breaks into tears. It is a heartbreaking video, and I do not think that anybody can watch it and not be moved to tears.

The window meeting between Tracy and her mum was the first one that they had since August, when Bradford was placed under local restrictions. I asked Tracy what she would like me to say to the Minister on her behalf in this debate. She said:

“I'm begging from the bottom of my heart to give key worker status to just one family member, to help us see loved ones in care homes. This has now been ongoing for too long, and in my 51 years of life, I have never not seen my mum, especially at Christmas. I appeal to your better nature, on behalf of myself and thousands more, to not let this continue.”

Tracy speaks on behalf of everyone who has a loved one with dementia in a care home. Anyone who has cared for someone living with dementia knows that regular contact with family members keeps that spark inside alight. Digital visits are simply not appropriate, as people with dementia view the world differently. Memory clinics must reopen, and they need to be in person. As virtual memory clinics, they cannot simply replicate the quality and appropriateness of a face-to-face appointment for anybody living with dementia.

The Government need to recognise that family carers play an essential part in caring for people with dementia who live in care homes. When family carers are unable to visit and provide that care, the health and wellbeing of people with dementia can seriously decline at a rapid pace. I fully support the call by the Alzheimer's Society and others to designate at least one informal carer per care home resident as a key worker, with access to testing, training, PPE and, when they come, vaccinations. The Government must urgently speed up their action on this issue, as time is not on our side. Will the Minister clarify whether an adult caring for an adult with dementia can form a support bubble with another household? The regulations are not explicit on that, and our carers need that support.

Finally, I want to quote from the hard-hitting report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. It states:

“There is evidence that human rights standards may have not been upheld in the response to the pandemic, including in key decisions about hospital discharges, care home admissions, visits, access to critical care and prioritisation of testing, putting people with dementia and other care home residents at greater risk of harm.”

That should be a wake-up call to us all: inaction is not an option.

3.35 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this debate. Its importance is exemplified by the fact that my postbag has also been full of requests from constituents asking me to come along—I am therefore very grateful to her for securing it—and by the fact that, based on recent trends, it is estimated that well over 3,000 residents over the age of 65 in the London Borough of Sutton, where Carshalton and Wallington is situated, will be living with dementia by 2030. That is 38% higher than it is today.

Living with dementia can be incredibly scary and worrying, and it also has an effect on family and friends as they watch someone they love slowly deteriorate. My family had to go through that with my grandfather, Derek—it was one of the toughest times we went through. The family and friends of somebody living with dementia suddenly find that they are carers first, and family and friends second. As time passes and they start to recognise less of the person they love, that person sadly also recognises less of them.

The situation with dementia care was already incredibly challenging prior to the pandemic, which has only exacerbated the problem. As other hon. Members said, the Alzheimer's Society has produced a hard-hitting report, entitled "Worst hit: dementia during coronavirus". I want to highlight and repeat some of its stark findings, not least of which is the fact that 27.5% of all those who died from covid-19 between March and June had dementia. For the same period, dementia was the most common pre-existing condition for covid-related deaths. For people who survived the crisis, the effects of social isolation were severe. The survey shows that 46% of people with dementia reported that it had a negative impact on their mental health and 82% reported a deterioration of the symptoms of dementia. As has already been highlighted, 92 million extra hours have been spent by families and friends caring for a loved one with dementia, and 95% of carers have reported a negative impact on their physical or mental health.

The Alzheimer's Society has two key asks for the Government—one for the short term as we continue to deal with the pandemic, and one for the longer term. The shorter-term ask is that we recognise the role that informal carers play in the lives of people living with dementia, as the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) outlined well. I am repeating what other hon. Members have said, but this is important. The asks are for at least one informal carer per care home resident to be allowed to be designated as a key worker, with access to training, testing and PPE. The Alzheimer's Society asks that the Government ensure the delivery of carers' assessments, provide short-term breaks for carers, and collect local authority and health authority data on carer assessments and respite care.

I do not think it will be surprising to hear that the second recommendation is about the long-term future of social care. I have a background in the national health service, so this is something that I am incredibly passionate about. I genuinely believe that, alongside the long-term plan for the NHS, there has to be a long-term plan for social care, and the two must be integrated. We

need to tackle not just the cost of care but problems with the care workforce, including career pathways, recruitment and retention.

Change is often unnerving, but to a person living with dementia an upheaval of the likes that the pandemic has brought is nothing short of terrifying. Indeed, if my grandfather was still alive today, I am genuinely not sure how either he or the family would have got through the last couple of months. I hope the Minister will look carefully at the Alzheimer's Society's report and its recommendations.

3.39 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): How the mind sits within the brain is still one of the great mysteries, I guess. I do not know whether Members have seen the ballerina Marta González listening to the music from "Swan Lake" and just beginning to be able to remember the choreography from years before. That inspired in so many a deep sense of that complicated relationship, where there is clearly a mind that has memories, but it cannot quite make the brain do what it wants it to do.

I wanted to speak in this debate because my family has been through quite a lot of that this year. I will talk not about that specifically, but about some of the things that have been common to many people in the country this year. Because many families have been isolated from other parts of their families, they have often not been able to check up on the elderly as frequently as they might want. They may not have been allowed to visit, especially if they are in different parts of the country, and they will not have been able to see the oncoming early signs of dementia. Doctors have sometimes simply been unable to diagnose, because they could not be in the physical presence of the person about whom there are concerns—diagnoses are a third down on normal, as we heard earlier.

The virus itself has, of course, added considerably to levels of anxiety, depression and a sense of paranoia in many people, with a growth in conspiracy theories. That has all added to the complications for families dealing with people who have early-onset dementia or other forms. The virus has direct neurocognitive effects that we are only just beginning to understand.

People have also had dietary issues, because they have not had access to the same kind of food as they might normally. That may well have added to their delirium, which, on top of dementia, can make it more difficult for people to go into care homes. They may need psychiatric support rather than care home support. Yet again, families are finding it terribly difficult during this time.

Families have found it very difficult to get help. The immediate instinct, once the diagnosis has come in, is for people to think about whether they can bring their family member into their own home. If that is not possible, they think about the other support there will be. Care homes have been up against it. There have been terrible anxieties about whether people have other comorbidities that will make it more difficult for them. Many families feel as though they have been bashing their head against a wall.

On top of that, of course, although lots of people had sorted out lasting power of attorney long before, which I would encourage everybody to do if they can, when I rang the Court of Protection, the emergency

officer told me that emergency cases might be seen in nine months' time. Sorting that out for an individual family member may make the difference between whether it is possible to get them into a care home and get them the support they need or not. Nine months—we cannot have that kind of backlog. That is a kind legal misery of the state on top of everything else.

I have done a lot of work on brain injury and some of the things are very aligned. It was terribly depressing to see the family of Bobby Charlton announce the other day that he has dementia, probably from concussion from heading the ball. I am sick and tired of people saying, "Oh well, the ball's not as heavy as it used to be." Did nobody do physics at school? It is about the speed of the ball, not the weight of the ball.

There is a lack of neuro-rehabilitation. A quarter of all major trauma centres still do not have a neuro-rehabilitation consultant. Some 57% of patients who have acquired brain injuries still complain that they are unable to get their full support. There is a massive funding crisis for all the organisations that work in that field, such as Headway, the UK Acquired Brain Injury Forum and many others.

My heart goes out to everybody, and my heart sort of goes out to the Minister, because there is a lot to deal with, but I do not think we will be able to do that unless we look at all these issues in the round. The one thing that I beg her to do is to set up a cross-departmental ministerial team that looks at it from Defence, Work and Pensions, Treasury, Health and Social Care—all the different Departments—so that we can really turn this around.

3.44 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her very impressive speech. As she said, it is a desperately important and overlooked subject, as has been eloquently expressed by many right hon. and hon. Members.

I come to this debate with two points of view. First, I want to give voice to my constituents in Clwyd South who have asked me to speak this afternoon. Secondly, I have a personal point of view, as my mother-in-law Alina had Alzheimer's and my wife Maggie and I set up the Concertina charity about 25 years ago, which provides live music for the elderly in care homes and day centres across Wales and England. This not only brightens up their lives, but provides vital therapy for those suffering from dementia.

With regard to my constituents, I would like to comment on a letter I received from Gillian Molloy, who wrote to me about her experiences. She said:

"My husband has been in a care home suffering vascular dementia since November 2017. Before Covid-19 I visited him 4 times a week staying with him for 3-4 hours, mostly holding his hand, talking and playing the music he likes. Since March of this year I have only been able to see him for a period of half an hour 4 times, supervised by a carer. The lack of this stimulus, knowing my voice, smell and reassurance I am sure has been a contributing factor to his withdrawal and decline. He no longer makes eye contact or speaks to me. I find this very upsetting and stressful".

I applaud the One Dementia Voice partnership in raising awareness of this vital matter with its five key points, which the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth outlined and which I support. I am encouraged

that the Government have been taking this issue seriously. That has been touched on, and I am sure the Minister will comment further on it. There have been a number of initiatives and policies, such as the "Challenge on Dementia 2020" strategy, under which the Government's commitment to spend over £300 million on dementia research between 2015 and 2020 was met a year early, with £341 million being spent by March 2019.

As others have mentioned, this debate is also about supporting the 5.4 million unpaid carers, for whom I know, from our own experience of caring for my mother-in-law Alina for three years at home, it is at times very challenging. When we set up our charity, Concertina music for the elderly, some 25 years ago there was much less understanding of Alzheimer's and dementia. I am pleased that there is now much greater public awareness of dementia, which is vital in ensuring that people are supported to live well with the condition. I am very encouraged that there are over 3 million dementia friends.

I would like to return to the fifth point made by the One Dementia Voice partnership, which is how we will rehabilitate people after the crisis. I would like to add music to the mention of speech and language therapy. I have seen for myself at concerts we have organised how people who had not communicated for a long period of time suddenly came to life as they heard the songs and tunes of their youth, bringing back many happy memories from the past. Music in Hospitals & Care reported back to us a while ago after a concert:

"One of our patients has recently been bereaved and critically ill herself and at times lost the will to live. At the end of a concert she whispered to me, 'I wouldn't have missed this for the world.'"

3.48 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for the way she set out so many of the complexities in this debate. We know that the intersection between dementia and covid is complex and that there are multifaceted challenges. I am sure we will not touch on them all in today's debate.

I thank the Alzheimer's Society, which is supporting people with dementia day and night through this crisis. I echo its call, and that of the Association of Medical Research Charities, for a significant and separate fund to be set up—a life sciences-charity partnership fund—to continue medical research through this time. We know that those charities' funding has been massively hit and that they need support. I trust that the Minister will feed that back to the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement that we are expecting.

We know that 27% of the people who have died had dementia. There is a correlation with older people, because of the resilience they have, but the figure is also disproportionate within that age population. Research is therefore absolutely necessary in order to understand what is happening. From my own clinical background, I have considered the impacts that dementia has on people with respiratory conditions, and there are certainly issues that need to be looked at in greater detail. I believe that that has mitigated against opportunity for people with dementia and created inequality. For instance, people with respiratory conditions often find it hard to comply with some of the treatment processes: positioning, secretion clearance from the lungs, and the ability to follow

[*Rachael Maskell*]

complex instructions such as huffing, coughing and taking deep breaths. When not under instruction, they are certainly not able to do that.

We have also seen environmental challenges to healthcare. At the beginning, we saw no PPE and barrier nursing, which have been well debated. As was said in this Chamber yesterday, 39% of people with dementia live in care homes, and 70% of care home residents have dementia. That environment, in itself, has become unsafe, but it has also become a place of isolation, which has a real impact.

There is a big question around the efficacy of access to healthcare. We know that there was a reduction in referrals to healthcare, which meant drugs not being administered, as well as no therapy, physio or secretion clearance, as I indicated. That could well have raised the number of people who had covid and who died from covid. We therefore need to look at the human rights of individuals with dementia.

When we consider the psychological, emotional and cognitive impacts of separation and isolation, which have been articulated so well in this debate, we know that harm has been caused. I therefore ask the Minister to look at the report of the all-party parliamentary group on ageing and older people, which looks at a commission on the human rights of older people, and to look at the work that has been done in Wales on having a commission and a commissioner to look at those issues. That is a way of ensuring that older people are part of the debate. That will include many people with dementia, although I appreciate that some people with dementia are younger.

That would be a way of putting protections in place, and of ensuring that we care for the carers. This is the point that I want to end on. We know that the majority of carers are saying that they are exhausted, they are anxious, they are having sleeping problems, they are depressed. They are not part of the conversation at the moment, and we need to bring them into it. Many are lonely and struggling at this time. We need to care for those carers as they not only take on more and more responsibilities, but provide vital care day in, day out.

3.52 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham.

The human consequences of this horrific pandemic have been the most painful to bear. As we have heard from all Members here today, we share a common bond forged in the fire of this pandemic. As Members of Parliament who serve our constituents, we are witness to stories of dread suffering caused by the circumstances created by our response to this virus. However, I have found that when constituents have written to me or met me to ask for help and support, and shared the circumstances that define their lives and the lives of their dementia-affected family members, it is then that one's heart truly bleeds and one struggles to keep strong for them. When one finishes reading their letter or bids them farewell at the door, on considering their cases, one invariably finds one's cheeks a little wet.

There is no gilding the lily. These have been, and continue to be, bruising, brutal days for all of us in the country. The impact that covid has brought upon dementia

care patients and their immediate professional and familial carers is one of immeasurable emotional anguish. In my Wakefield constituency, 1,197 people have been diagnosed with dementia. The representations I have received from their carers and families through this pandemic have highlighted immense suffering above and beyond the explicit death count that the pandemic has brought.

I will raise two important points: the increased vulnerability of dementia patients during the pandemic and the irreplaceable nature of human contact. While we, as legislators, continue to interrogate and evaluate the data presented to us, we can say with certainty that age is a strong determinant in both the development of dementia and serious illness and fatality as a result of covid-19. Those with dementia are often susceptible to further underlying health conditions that affect their status of vulnerability. A joint study published by University College London and the London School of Economics in August found that people with dementia accounted for 25% of covid-related deaths in England and Wales, and for 31% in Scotland. As such, it is both rational and morally right to put dementia patients at the very front of the queue to receive the vaccine, to mitigate as far as possible the immense double distress caused by having dementia and a pervasive fear of catching coronavirus.

My second point is perhaps more poignant. We often speak of the pandemic's disruptive capacity in bringing forward years of technological change in a matter of months. Dementia lays bare the irreplaceable nature of meaningful human-to-human contact in care provision. The very condition of dementia degrades people and, over time, deprives them of memories of their loved ones. In many cases, when only frail muscle memory remains, the only thing that provides a sense of recognisable comfort is the faint recognition of a family member or regular carer in an increasingly confusing and scary environment.

With the myriad rules and regulations that have been imposed upon us, that necessity becomes ever more critical. I am sure that many of us in this House have seen the distressing videos of a retired nurse being taken from her residential home by her daughter, a trained nurse. That was not only deeply distressing, but painful, and a sorrowful metaphor for the anguish that many care providers face when making decisions relating to their nearest and dearest.

As I said about breast cancer in the earlier debate in this Chamber, we must ensure that the cure is not worse than the disease. When imposing measures on the freedom of the individual, the state and its representatives must retain human kindness, compassion and decency at their very core.

3.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I am very pleased to have sponsored this debate alongside the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). Everyone here has a purpose and something to say about this issue.

We know from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency that of the 475 deaths in March and April—just two months—in Northern Ireland, a third were attributed to dementia on the death certificate. The impact on those who have dementia is clearly greater

than elsewhere. In addition to thousands of tragic deaths in care homes, the effects of social isolation are a big issue: 70% of care home residents have some form of dementia, and the prevention of visits to care homes is having a hugely detrimental impact on their lives.

Contact with family and friends is vital to the wellbeing of people with dementia. Some 82% of participants in an Alzheimer's Society survey reported a deterioration in the symptoms of people with dementia. People with dementia deserve better. The contribution of loved ones to their care and wellbeing should be acknowledged by the Government and reflected in the guidance to care homes on safe visiting.

I will mention one family, whose story is very real. They wrote to me:

"Our mum sadly passed away in September. We were not with her when she died. We had not been inside her home for over six months. In all that time, we saw her through a window. She didn't understand why we were stood outside and kept telling us to come in. We were unable to hold her hand and unable to kiss goodbye."

I understand that advice given to the Government by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies in September stated that the transmission risk from visitors was low. That SAGE advice, which says that people could visit homes and there was less chance of infection from visitors, must be implemented and released by the Government. Why not give the family and the person in the home a wee bit of compassion in their time of need? The Government do not allow for loved ones to provide the personal care that the residents so desperately need.

I urge the Minister to implement the Alzheimer's Society's recommendations for ensuring that care homes are safe and adequate for the needs of people with dementia. The Alzheimer's Society study on this put forward recommendations. We should follow its knowledge and the science. There have been some innovations, for example the initiative led by HammondCare. During its pilot service, funded by Innovate UK, HammondCare recorded highly positive outcomes for people living with dementia and care teams, such as reducing certain behaviours and carer stress, building capacity in the sector and reducing the use of statutory services. Plans are being explored to offer a subscription service across the UK to support care teams. The Minister may wish to explore that. The innovation in that pilot scheme has shown a way of doing this.

I ask the Minister to outline the scope of the key worker pilot in England. How will it be rolled out, and when and how will it be evaluated? Given the updated implementation of the care partner model that we have in Northern Ireland—it is always good to learn from each other—will the Minister ensure that the emotional and physical care needs of people with dementia living in care homes will be met, and confirm that it will not be another eight months before people with dementia and their loved ones are reunited?

Dementia is a subject close to my heart. I hope the Minister will listen to the experts and the families, and do all she can better to connect people affected by dementia.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Before we move on to the wind-ups, I remind hon. Members that the debate will end at 4.33 pm and we hope to give the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) a couple of minutes at the end to wind up.

4.1 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I echo the congratulations and thanks to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her comprehensive and wide-ranging exposition of the effect of covid-19 on the those affected by dementia.

Yesterday, I participated in a debate—alongside several others here this afternoon—on family visit access in health and social care settings during the covid-19 outbreak. The two debates, though different, have significant overlap. I will try not to repeat myself. These matters are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but as we face common challenges, it is appropriate for Members representing Scottish constituencies to take an interest and contribute to this important debate.

There are real concerns about how covid-19 has affected our constituents living with dementia. As we have heard, that effect has been deeply distressing and the consequences have been far-reaching and profound. I want to say more than I did yesterday about my own personal experience and insight into this. My mother-in-law, Iris, is in a care home in Saltcoats in my constituency. She has dementia and lockdown has caused a dramatic decline in her condition. I am no medical expert, but I do not believe her decline can be halted now. It is so bad that I do not think it will be reversed. I appreciate that might not apply in every case.

Even without the health pandemic, dementia is extremely distressing. Those who live with it lose a lifetime of memories and their sense of who they are vanishes. Just a few short years ago, my mother-in-law, Iris, was a long-serving Glasgow city councillor. She was a marathon runner and had run marathons all over the world. She thought nothing of travelling to the other side of the world simply for the joy of sight-seeing on her own. She was independent. She raised a family. She was always on the go, driven by a desire to improve her community. She was respected by all who knew her. Now Iris lives in a care home. She is unable to look after herself. She is confused. She is unable to recognise those dearest and nearest to her. She is a shell of her former self.

However, the speed of Iris's decline since lockdown has been stark. Before lockdown, despite the dementia, she could have a chat and follow a simple conversation. Now she is barely able to speak. The isolation of covid-19 and the lack of stimulation has taken away her desire to live and she barely eats at all. I mention that because what has happened to Iris in the course of the covid-19 restrictions is not unique.

The lack of social contact with family, loved ones and even other care home residents, and the lack of stimulation that the restrictions have brought, have caused real distress for older people. They are locked in a world that is silent, solitary, confusing and bleak. It is a world that they do not understand, as the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) has reminded us elsewhere—a world from which they and their loved ones fear they will never return.

We all want a return to normality. For people with elderly relatives, the fear is that their time left on Earth is so short that a wait for normality is distressing and frustrating. Some older people might not survive until normality returns, so they might never enjoy close contact again with their family. However, there are no easy or risk-free solutions to this problem—I said that in the

[Patricia Gibson]

debate yesterday. There is a very difficult balance between keeping our older people safe from covid and losing to them despair, and it is not easy to strike. I do not envy the Minister or anybody who is in charge of making those decisions.

It is important to remember that the average age of a person who dies with covid is 83. Many of the people who work in care homes will say that the older people dreadfully miss social interaction with other residents and their family, and it also takes a toll on those who work in care settings. Although we know that many people are keen to have contact with their elderly relatives who are suffering from dementia, people will also say—on the other side of the coin—that they are desperately keen to ensure that their elderly relatives are kept as safe as possible until we have a vaccine or the virus subsides with time. Whatever restrictions around care homes are lifted—I know that a number of hon. Members have called for that—they cannot be lifted without some risk to the elderly people who live in those care homes.

Let us not forget that older people living with dementia who are not in care homes need to be part of the conversation. Some older people with dementia are being cared for by close family relatives in their own home setting. As we have heard, carers will have faced their own difficulties since covid-19 restrictions were introduced. They, too, will be cut off and left on their own to manage as best they can with their caring responsibilities. Respite will be difficult to find, and shielding and covid-19 precautions shrink their world as they cope with a state of limbo in a world that has become much smaller for them.

The Scottish Government have been in regular touch with care representatives to ensure that their concerns are fully understood, and supporting unpaid carers has always been a priority for the Scottish Government—much more so now, in these difficult circumstances. The Scottish Government have established rights for all carers to have support and advice under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016. The local implementation of those rights is backed by additional investment, which now stands at £39.5 million per year. That is so important, given the additional pressure that carers face due to covid-19. The carer's allowance supplement increases carer's allowance in Scotland by 13%, and it was one of the Scottish Government's first priorities with its reserved social security powers, with an additional covid payment of £230.10 in June. That means eligible carers in Scotland will receive up to £690.30 more than those in the rest of the UK this year, with an additional £500,000 for carer organisations.

With all the uncertainty for our older people and their loved ones during covid-19, there is great distress. If someone is in their advanced years, they fear that they will never get to the other side of the pandemic and resume normality, which is what everyone wants. We have some prospect of a vaccine before too much longer. We are all keeping our fingers crossed for that, but we need to continue to look for creative ways to help combat the despair that we know so many older people with dementia feel and are confused about.

I said yesterday, and it is worth repeating, that for the large part we are talking about a generation whose youth was blighted by war and its aftermath, and now, in their twilight years, they are being blighted by this

cruel virus in their old age. We need to protect and look after them. For many, the cost of doing that is the despair we have heard about today. The balance is very difficult to strike and there are no easy answers. I know the Minister feels the impossible weight of the task of trying to get the balance right. I hope she will be able to set out today what specific additional support may be available to those living with dementia, and those who care for those living with dementia, as this virus continues to blight their lives.

4.10 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I am so pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has secured this important debate. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken so powerfully on behalf of their constituents.

The pandemic has taken an unimaginable toll on people living with dementia, the staff who care for them and the families who love and do so much to support them. There have been a staggering 23,000 excess deaths in care homes in England during the pandemic so far, more than 15,000 due to covid-19. When we consider that, as others have said, 70% of all care home residents have dementia, the sheer scale of the impact of this awful virus is brutally clear.

We must remember that people with dementia do not just live in care homes and nursing homes. Some 60% are cared for in the community and their own homes, and they have too often been overlooked.

We need to learn the lessons from what has happened so far. We desperately need long-term reforms that transform all care services, whether that is care homes or care in people's own homes, so that we have a system truly fit for the future. The virus has brutally exposed the fundamental flaws in our care system that many of us have been talking about for a long while. The most obvious is that, for too long, frontline care workers, who are so essential in caring for people with dementia, have not been properly valued or supported and they have not been properly paid.

We can see that in the way that at the start of the pandemic, many frontline care workers just did not get the personal protective equipment they needed. I heard many stories of care homes saying that their masks and other equipment had been requisitioned by the NHS. I want NHS staff to have proper PPE, but that shows that, on the ground, social care is still not seen as equally important. We also saw that in testing. It took a very long while to get the regular testing that care home workers need. Domiciliary care workers are still not getting weekly tests. That is a real issue, as we see how much this virus is spreading in the community.

The third issue is—let us be honest—around the pay, terms and conditions of frontline care staff. They do some of the most important work in this society, which is looking after the people that we love most, but many of them barely even make the minimum wage, because they are not paid for travel times. The key thing that stands out for me is that the Office for National Statistics has clearly found that care homes that pay full pay when people are off sick, that are not so reliant on agency staff and that do not have such high turnover rates because of low pay, have lower infection rates. We really need to learn the lesson from that for the future.

I hope that the Minister will set out what she plans to do about these issues. Where are we now at with tests for domiciliary care staff? We have heard that NHS and care workers will be a priority for vaccines. Can she tell us whether that will include domiciliary care workers as well?

All hon. Members have spoken about the importance of families in caring for people with dementia. We cannot deliver good quality care for people with dementia without not just the involvement of families, but their active participation and support. That is not just because we all want our families to be there for us when we get sick and frail; it is because when someone has Alzheimer's or dementia, their family is their memory. They are the ones who really know that person—the music they like, the songs they used to sing, the books they read, the films they love. No matter how hard paid care staff work, which they do, they just cannot know the person to the same degree, but the families get precious little help and support and they are too often ignored in the debate.

We know that, even before the virus struck, there were 9 million unpaid family carers in the UK. Since the virus began, 4.5 million more people have taken on caring responsibilities, which is three times the size of the NHS workforce. Many carers were already being pushed absolutely to breaking point before covid-19. One of the worst statistics that I have ever seen from Carers UK is that about half of unpaid family carers had not had a break from caring for five years, and yet those very people are on average taking on an extra 10 hours of caring a week, which is having a really bad impact on their physical and mental health.

So, I hope the Minister will set out what action the Government will take to help family carers. Will there be more funding for them to have breaks? How can we get day-care services back? And how will we actually identify all these new unpaid family carers, because, quite frankly, most people who are carers do not think that they are carers; they are just a son, daughter, husband or wife who looks after the person they love. But they desperately need information, advice and support.

Also, as practically every single hon. Member has said, we need to do more to help families who have loved ones in care homes. We had a big debate about this in Westminster Hall yesterday. I will repeat myself a little bit, because it is such a massively important issue. Indeed, in my 10 years as an MP, I have never been contacted by people who are not in politics about any issue as much as I have been about this one. It really is so important, because for eight months people have not been able to see their mums, dads, husbands or wives. What they do know is that those loved ones are fading fast, which causes enormous anguish, because if someone feels that they are letting down their mum, dad, husband or their wife, it will scar them for life. I know that that is what I would feel if I could not see my mum or dad.

I understand why Ministers are really worried about the risk that covid-19 will come back into care homes after the catastrophic loss of life we saw during the first wave of the virus, but we need to understand the situation. The Government's own independent scientific advisers—the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, or SAGE—said in a report published on 21 September that the risk of family members transmitting the virus in care homes is low. And 60 organisations, including the Social Care

Institute for Excellence, the British Geriatrics Society, the National Care Forum, Alzheimer's Society and Age UK, all agree, saying that there is no evidence that a blanket ban or the current restrictions are the right way forward.

All those groups support calls, as does Labour—and indeed many hon. Members who have spoken today—for at least a single family member to be designated as a key worker, so that they can get the testing they need and we can safely start visits again. We first called for this in mid-June and again in September. I hope that the Government really take action. Their latest guidelines—about floor-to-ceiling screens, or having visits outside—are not good enough. Also, they will not work; a screen does not work for someone with dementia. In case anybody had not realised, it is also now dark, cold and wet outside, so outside visits will not work.

Yesterday, the Minister for Care said that a pilot will start on Monday in four local authority areas, with 30 care homes, to test family members. I had a lot of calls about that overnight. Where are these local authority areas? How long will the pilot last? The bottom line is that I do not think a pilot is good enough. The average length of stay of someone in a care home before they die is two years. We have had eight months of lockdown. This is the last Christmas for some people. We must get everybody—all families—getting those regular tests, so that visits can start again.

In conclusion, I have argued for almost two decades now for the desperate need for long-term reforms to social care. In July 2019, in his first speech on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister said:

"I am announcing now that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all, with a clear plan we have prepared"—

I emphasise those words, "we have prepared"—

"to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve."

Yet more than 15 months later, that "plan" is nowhere to be seen; in fact, we seem to be going backwards.

The Health Minister in the House of Lords, Lord Bethell, said on 28 October:

"I have to be realistic. We are in the midst of a Covid winter, when there are enormous challenges in keeping the show on the road...It just would not be right to launch an important and industry-changing reform process when the focus of everyone in social care is the protection of the vulnerable and our loved ones."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 28 October 2020; Vol. 807, c. 226.]

The opposite is true; this is precisely the time when we need those reforms to give people, families and care workers hope that there will be a better system, and that when we have come through this awful pandemic we will not go back to the same stretched, miserable, awful system that too many people have had to cope with. Families, care workers and the system as a whole are at breaking point. In the 21st century, in one of the richest countries in the world, that is not good enough. It is the challenge of our generation to sort this problem, and I hope that when the Minister responds, she will set out how we will do so.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I thank the hon. Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. I commend the many personal and powerful contributions from hon. Members, but I pay particular tribute to the work of the hon. Member

[Helen Whately]

for Oldham East and Saddleworth, who is the co-chair of the all-party group on dementia, and to the charities that she and I both work with, such as the Alzheimer's Society.

It has not been easy to listen to hon. Members' stories today. They are painful to hear, let alone for those who have lived them. Hon. Members have brought great knowledge to the debate, from the clinical challenges of diagnosing covid in those with dementia to the understanding of what makes a difference for those living with dementia, from physical contact to music. Hon. Members have brought to the debate a real understanding of the burden borne by informal carers across our constituencies. If anyone needed reminding about how lives are being blighted by the cruel combination of covid and dementia, they have been reminded. Even before the pandemic, people with dementia were some of the most vulnerable in our society; they were usually older and living with other health conditions alongside this terrible progressive disease, for which we still have no cure. Dementia was already the No. 1 cause of death in this country and, tragically, more than 12,000 people with dementia have lost their lives to covid—people who still had life left to live.

Many of my conversations over the past few months have been about how much worse the pandemic has made life for people with dementia, their families and their carers. For instance, restrictions that are hard for us can make life almost impossible for them. People with dementia can find it really hard to follow instructions or the rules and guidance on social distancing and hand washing. Being made to stay at home means that they may lose the independence that they used to have, and which they might never get back. For those living in care homes, there is confusion about why their families no longer come to see them. Although the care staff are often wonderful, how can they know someone's needs as well as their partner, son or daughter, who perhaps used to visit several times a week or even every day?

Equally heartbreaking has been the experience of families who have been unable to see the person they love for many weeks, knowing that that person might be confused and lonely, and then, tragically, finding out that their health has declined. For carers, it has been extra tough without the usual support and respite care. I thank families and carers for their incredible resilience and for what they have done, day in and day out, for the people who so need their love and care. There are more than 5.4 million informal carers in England, from children to older people who themselves might be in need of support. That is why, as we bear down on coronavirus, the Government are doing all they can to support those who are living with the consequences of this cruel disease. I will briefly set out some of those things now. As I do so, I will pick up on the questions that hon. Members have asked during the debate.

First, I will outline the overall support that we are providing, as set out in the adult social care winter plan, which specifically drew on the expertise of those who are involved in dementia care. It sets out the Government's commitments and our expectations of local authorities, the NHS and care providers. It includes our commitments to PPE for social care, to testing and to an investment of more than £546 million, bringing our funding for infection control in social care to £1.1 billion.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth asked me about parity of PPE and testing between social care and the NHS. We are now providing PPE for social care to meet all its covid PPE needs. Like the NHS, social care is getting the PPE that it needs for covid. In addition, we are providing regular testing—weekly for care home staff and every 28 days for residents—and social care has been at the front of the queue. We have also learned from and adjusted some of the restrictions from the first lockdown to take account of the difficulties for those with dementia and their carers. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) asked, on behalf of her constituent Tracy, if an adult caring for another adult can form a support bubble with another household. As she probably knows, an adult can form a support bubble with another household as long as that household is a single person. The restrictions allow somebody entry into the house of a person who requires care to give care, and to give the carer respite. I will take away the question of a larger bubble—I have been asked about it by other colleagues, and she and I have spoken about it—and whether I can do anything further to help on that.

The hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) spoke about day services. I know how important they are, particularly for people with dementia and those who care for them. That is why I worked with the Social Care Institute for Excellence to provide guidance to services on how they can operate in a covid-secure way. I have said that the infection control fund can be used to help with extra costs for day services, and I have urged them to reopen in a covid-secure way. I have also been working with the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services to find out about the provision of day services—how much provision is there, where are the gaps and what more can be done to increase it?

Many hon. Members spoke about visiting in care homes. I want people to be able safely to visit their loved ones in care homes, but this is hard. Covid has taken the lives of 15,400 people living in care homes, and we know that when covid gets into a care home, particularly one that is looking after people with dementia, it is hard to control. Anyone can bring it in, particularly since many people have covid without any symptoms, so they do not know they have it. That is why we have advised care homes to restrict visiting, particularly during this national lockdown when covid rates are high in much of the country; in some areas, as many as one in four people have covid.

I did not want care homes to be closed up again during this lockdown, as they were in the first time around. We are advising care homes to do things that many have already put in place, such as allowing visits through screens and windows, but I know that that is not the answer, particularly for those with advanced dementia. That is why we are launching our trial of visitor testing on 16 November in 30 care homes. We are trialling both PCR and lateral flow tests to find the best way of doing this, with the intention of rolling out testing for visitors across the country as fast we can in December. I want people to be able to touch, hold hands and hug again. I cannot say when that will be possible, but, believe me, I want to make it possible again.

I turn briefly to access to diagnosis. At the start of the pandemic, many memory assessment services were closed and dementia diagnosis rates fell below our

national ambition for the first time in four years. While we have supported remote or virtual memory assessment services, I recognise their shortcomings. I want to see in-person services fully functional as soon as possible, because a diagnosis can make such a difference so that people can access the treatment and support they need. I know the hon. Member for Leicester West, who raised this point, will understand.

I want briefly to mention the important role of charities such as the Alzheimer's Society and the Race Equality Foundation, which are doing particular work to support black, Asian and minority ethnic people with dementia. We have supported those charities with extra funding, but I know they have gone above and beyond in their work during this pandemic.

I conclude by saying that as we navigate these challenging times, we must never lose sight of what is important. Our efforts must not just be to save lives, but also to make life worth living for everyone—thinking hardest and trying hardest for those who live with the greatest of challenges. That means doing our utmost for those with dementia and their families.

4.29 pm

Debbie Abrahams: I start with heartfelt thanks to everybody who has contributed to the debate. It is so nice to be in such a high-quality debate where we all work together, and where we see and agree on the issues. Now, it is about moving forward on the solutions. There was much consensus, particularly on how we make sure that families can visit their loved ones in care homes. I have huge regard for the Minister. She has real empathy, and I am grateful to her for turning it into action, but I ask her to make a commitment. If the trial is starting next week, will she come to the House and make a statement at the end of this month, so that we know the results of that trial and when in December it will be rolled out? My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) makes an excellent point that this may be some people's last Christmas. For everybody concerned, please can we do our utmost to make sure that this happens?

4.31 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 12 November 2020

TREASURY

Tax Policy

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

In line with the tax policy-making framework, the Government consulted on a number of tax policies announced at spring Budget 2020. Today, the Government are publishing responses to some of the consultations that were extended due to covid-19, alongside draft legislation which will need to be introduced.

The Government are also publishing responses to calls for evidence in the market for tax advice, as well as a consultation on making tax digital for corporation tax.

Finally, the Government are making some tax policy announcements for tobacco and vehicle excise duties, measures to tackle promoters of tax avoidance, a small change to off-payroll legislation, and delays to other measures and reviews.

Previously announced publications

The Government are publishing a summary of responses and draft legislation for each of the following measures, as announced at the spring Budget:

- Plastic packaging tax
- Tackling construction industry scheme abuse
- R&D SME tax credit PAYE cap
- Tax implications of the withdrawal of the London inter-bank offered rate (LIBOR)
- Hybrid and other mismatches

The Government had extended the policy consultation response deadlines for these measures in April, in response to the covid-19 outbreak.

Draft legislation is accompanied by a tax information and impact note (TIIN), an explanatory note (EN) and, where applicable, a summary of responses to consultation document. All publications can be found on the gov.uk website. The Government's tax consultation tracker has also been updated.

Raising standards for tax advice

The Government are publishing a summary of responses and next steps from the call for evidence on raising standards in the market for tax advice. As a first step towards raising standards, the Government will consult on requiring tax advisers to hold professional indemnity insurance and how to define tax advice. The majority of respondents supported Government action to raise standards.

Tackling promoters of tax avoidance

In line with the Government's strategy to tackle promoters of tax avoidance schemes, published in March, the Government are today announcing that they will consult in the new year on further measures to tackle promoters. These proposals will build on the proposals announced earlier this year and will:

- disrupt the business model of offshore promoters by making it harder for such promoters to access the UK by making their onshore partners equally responsible for the anti-avoidance regime penalties that the offshore promoter generates.
- directly tackle the secrecy on which promoters rely; the proposals here would ensure that taxpayers are fully informed of the reality of what is being sold to them.

disrupt the economics of tax avoidance by ensuring that, without delay, promoters face financial consequences for continuing to promote tax avoidance so that promoters cannot continue to profit from avoidance while HMRC investigates them.

give HMRC additional powers to act against companies that continue to promote schemes and who sidestep the rules designed to restrict their activities. The proposals would see such promoters shut down and restricted from setting up similar businesses.

The Government continue to recognise that the many tax advisers who adhere to high professional standards are an important source of support for taxpayers. The proposals are aimed at targeting those promoters who exploit every opportunity to personally profit by sidestepping the rules and whose unscrupulous actions often leave taxpayers with significant tax bills.

The Government continue to recognise that strengthening HMRC powers in the way described must be done in a carefully constrained way. HMRC will again work with stakeholders, and in particular those tax advisers who adhere to high professional standards, to ensure that these proposals are both effective and proportionate.

Making tax digital for corporation tax

The Government are publishing a consultation on the design of making tax digital for corporation tax, as announced on 21 July. This will allow stakeholders to inform the early stage design of making tax digital for corporation tax and to provide businesses with time to prepare.

Further policy announcements:

The Government have made a number of further policy decisions which are being announced today, relating to:

Extending the annual investment allowance provisional £1 million cap

The Government are today announcing a year-long extension to the temporary increase of the annual investment allowance (AIA). The AIA provides firms 100% same year tax relief on qualifying capital expenditure, up to a fixed limit. Instead of allowing the AIA to revert to £200,000 from 1 January 2021, the Government are extending the temporary £1 million cap set at Budget 2018 until 31 December 2021. This announcement:

- Responds to the needs of business, giving enhanced tax relief on plant and machinery expenditure;
- Provides businesses with upfront support during continuing covid-related uncertainty;
- Simplifies taxes for the 99% of businesses investing up to £1 million on plant and machinery assets each year.

Tobacco duty uprating

The Government are announcing the uprating of tobacco duties to protect the public finances, continue the drive to reduce smoking prevalence, and support the Government's target for a smoke-free England by 2030. In line with the existing escalator, duty rates on all tobacco products will increase by RPI + 2%. In order to narrow the gap between hand-rolling tobacco (HRT) and cigarette duty rates and ensure the Minimum Excise Tax (MET) continues to be effective in the current market, HRT will increase by RPI + 6% and the MET by RPI + 4%. The Treasury is laying an order before the House to enact these changes, which will take effect on 16 November.

Van vehicle excise duty

The Government will not now introduce a new graduated system of vehicle excise duty for light goods vehicles or motorhomes from April 2021, to avoid distracting the automotive sector and businesses more widely from the challenges they currently face in light of the covid-19 pandemic. Motorhomes will continue to be placed in the private/light goods class.

Off-payroll working—technical change to ensure legislation operates as intended

A technical change to the off-payroll working rules will be made in the next Finance Bill. This will ensure the legislation operates as intended from 6 April 2021 for engagements where an intermediary is a company. The change will correct an unintended widening of the definition of an intermediary, which went beyond the intended scope of the policy.

Notification of uncertain tax treatment by large businesses

The Government are announcing the implementation of the new requirement for large businesses to notify HMRC of uncertain tax treatments will be delayed until April 2022. This will allow more time to get the policy and legislation right following the recent consultation, including through further engagement with stakeholders, and will give affected businesses more time to prepare for the change.

Timely tax payments and review of tax administration framework

On 21 July, the Government committed to publishing calls for evidence on timely tax payments and a review of the tax administration framework. Given the continued pressures of the covid-19 outbreak, and with other consultations in progress, the Government will now publish these documents in spring 2021.

Soft drinks industry levy (SDIL) milk review

In 2017, the Government made a commitment to review the exemption for sugary milk and milk-substitute drinks from the soft drinks industry levy (SDIL) by 2020. The Government have been clear that if industry does not make enough progress on voluntarily reformulating these drinks, the Government may extend the SDIL to include them. In light of Public Health England's latest reformulation report (published earlier this month) that shows good progress has been made in sugar reduction of milk-based drinks, the Government will next consider the exemption for sugary milk and milk-substitute drinks in 2022 after the full reformulation programme completes.

[HCWS572]

DEFENCE**Service Justice System****The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):**

I am today informing the House that, after further and full consideration of an earlier decision announced in February 2020 in response to the service justice system (SJS) review, I have taken a decision to maintain jurisdictional concurrency when dealing with cases of murder, manslaughter and rape when committed by service personnel in the UK.

Currently, decisions on which jurisdiction should deal with criminal offences in the UK by service personnel are made by the SJS and civilian justice system (CJS) policing and prosecutorial authorities on a case-by-case

basis. My intent is to seek views on what improvements can be made to the protocols which guide those decisions and which have developed since Parliament last expressed its view on this subject.

In considering the recommendations made by the service justice system review, I have come to the conclusion that, having agreed to take forward 79 other recommendations, including assurance around the quality of investigations, the SJS is capable of dealing with these offences when they occur in the UK, as well as overseas. The service justice system review strongly supported the continued existence of the SJS and sets out a sound roadmap for its future.

I am not, therefore, content to accept the first recommendation in the review which would undermine the principle of concurrency between the SJS and CJS which is set out in the current legislation. While there will not be a presumption that either system takes primacy over the other, I plan to retain the current role of the Director of Public Prosecutions (in relation to cases in England and Wales) of having the final say of where a case is tried in the unlikely event of disagreement about where the case should be handled.

In light of this decision, my Department will lead an exercise with SJS and CJS policing and prosecutorial authorities to revise all current guidance around jurisdiction for criminal offending by service personnel in the UK. That exercise will include public engagement on factors to be considered relevant in guiding the case-by-case allocation decisions. Parliament will have an opportunity to consider these matters when parliamentary time allows, and I intend to bring forward proposals to place the arrangements for allocating cases between the SJS and CJS on a statutory basis.

My Department will be engaging with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland to consider the corresponding arrangements that should exist there.

[HCWS577]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**Avian Influenza: Kept Birds**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): High pathogenicity H5N8 avian influenza has been circulating in Europe in recent weeks. There have now been two diagnosed cases in poultry in the UK, in Cheshire and Herefordshire, as well as several findings in wild birds in south-west England. The risk of further H5N8 incursion in wild birds across the UK remains high and has recently been raised to medium for poultry. We will continue to undertake comprehensive disease surveillance over the coming weeks and months.

Public Health England advises that the risk to public health is very low and the Food Standards Agency has said there is no food safety risk for UK consumers.

In response to the risk to poultry and other captive birds, the Department has put in place a statutory avian influenza prevention zone. The zone requires keepers across the country to take additional steps to introduce enhanced biosecurity measures and to protect poultry

and other captive birds from contact with wild birds. Some of these measures apply to all keepers, including those with small flocks or pet birds. They include:

- cleansing and disinfection of equipment, vehicles and footwear when moving between bird premises;
- effective vermin control;
- reducing movements of people to the essentials for the birds' welfare, collecting eggs and feeding;
- keeping records of poultry, captive birds and egg movements;
- ensuring that buildings are maintained and that repairs are carried out without delay where
- water or other contamination may penetrate.

The zone will remain in place indefinitely but will be kept under review and amended as necessary in the light of any changes in circumstances. We have also made changes to licensing arrangements to prohibit events such as bird shows.

Given that the disease is spreading across Europe, the introduction of this zone has been co-ordinated with the devolved Administrations and Scottish and Welsh Governments are introducing similar measures. Northern Ireland officials, who have been in the discussions, are reviewing their risk assessment which will inform their next steps.

We have tried and tested procedures for dealing with such animal disease outbreaks and a strong track record of controlling and eliminating previous outbreaks of avian flu in the UK. Our actions are in line with established practice and with the processes followed in previous years. Avian influenza prevention zones, for example, were introduced in England, Scotland and Wales in 2018. We are working closely with operational partners, devolved Administration colleagues and the industry.

The detections of H5N8 in poultry or captive birds have been dealt with effectively by the Animal and Plant Health Agency. We have taken robust action, imposing zones of up to 10 km (six miles) around infected premises to limit the risk of disease spreading, and culling birds humanely and to high biosecurity standards.

Looking forward, the Department will keep the avian influenza prevention zone under review and will consider amendments to reflect any changes to the level of risk of incursion to wild birds and poultry as well as any further scientific, veterinary and ornithological advice.

We have not yet required mandatory housing of all poultry and captive birds as part of our response to the disease risk. However, such a measure remains under active review as a potentially important step.

We continue to urge bird keepers to be vigilant for any signs of disease, ensure they are maintaining good biosecurity on their premises, seek prompt advice from their vet and report suspect disease to APHA (as they must do by law).

We strongly advise keepers to register on the poultry register so as to receive notifications and disease alerts. This is mandatory for all those with flocks of over 50 birds. Registration is easy and can be found at: www.gov.uk/guidance/bird-gatherings-licences.

[HCWS576]

HOME DEPARTMENT

HMICFRS's Report: National Crime Agency and Regional Organised Crime Units

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The National Crime Agency (NCA) leads the fight against serious and organised crime (SOC). It has the power to task other law enforcement partners and a capability, with local to international reach, to disrupt the impact of SOC on the UK.

This is the seventh HMICFRS inspection of the NCA and examines the relationship between the agency and the regional organised crime units (ROCU). The focus is specifically on the collaboration arrangements, the role of the NCA's regional organised crime co-ordinators (RCCs), co-ordination and support of operational activity, threat prioritisation and integration and co-location.

I have asked HMICFRS to publish the report. It will be published today and will be available online at www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk. I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inspection found that NCA and ROCUs are working well in a number of areas of law enforcement. The NCA's provision of specialist capabilities to the network, such as protected persons and kidnap and extortion is seen as a positive example. Meeting structures for tasking and co-ordinating operational activity work well, with ROCUs and the NCA represented at regional and national level. National tasking of regional cyber and undercover online (UCOL) assets is judged as mature and efficient. The report also emphasises a number of areas for improvement including the need for greater interoperability and a more systematic approach to joint working; a clearer understanding within ROCUs of the roles and responsibilities of the NCA; and more effective duty management within the NCA's control room to ensure monitoring of the location and availability of its operational resources.

It is for the NCA's director-general to respond to these recommendations.

The inspection also identified a need to review current funding arrangements for ROCUs; consider changes to legislation that would allow NCA to task ROCUs directly; and as part of the review of the strategic policing requirement, consider how greater emphasis is placed on national threats such as SOC by police and crime commissioners and chief constables. These recommendations are being taken forward by my officials.

[HCWS574]

PRIME MINISTER

Justifying Authority for New Nuclear Power: Departmental Responsibility

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Responsibility for the justifying authority for new nuclear power transferred from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 6 October 2020.

[HCWS573]

TRANSPORT

Planning Act 2008 Applications: A303

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns two applications made under the Planning Act 2008 relating to the A303.

The first application concerns the proposed construction by Highways England of a new two-lane dual carriageway for the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down in Wiltshire (also known as the “A303 Stonehenge” application), which the Secretary of State has today approved.

The second application concerns the proposed construction by Highways England of a continuous dual carriageway on the A303 linking the Podimore roundabout and the Sparkford bypass.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority’s report

unless exercising the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the House of Parliament announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the examining authority’s report on the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester Development Consent Order application on 12 September 2019 and the deadline for a decision was previously extended from 12 December 2019 to 17 July 2020, and then further extended until 20 November 2020 to allow for further work to be carried out.

The deadline for the decision is to be further extended to 29 January 2021 (an extension of just over two months) to enable further information to be provided by the applicant and the defence infrastructure organisation regarding outstanding concerns pertaining to the issue of bird strike.

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to give development consent.

[HCWS575]

Petitions

Thursday 12 November 2020

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Restoration of Hammersmith Bridge

The petition of residents of the constituency of Richmond Park,

Declares that Hammersmith Bridge is an essential transport route for South West London and its closure to walkers, cyclists and boats since 13 August has caused major problems for residents; notes that its closure has caused journeys for school children that used to be a 10 minute walk, now take 90 minutes across unsafe tow paths; further declares that elderly and disabled residents are now having to pay upwards of £40 in taxi fares to access vital services in Hammersmith; further declares that there has been a damaging effect on business owners who relied on footfall across the bridge; further declares that redirected transport has created traffic jams and increased pollution; further declares that people are now cut off from hospitals, schools and work; and further declares that the Transport Minister said he would fund repairs to the bridge before the election however the cracks in the bridge have only worsened.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and support the Council to build a temporary walking and cycling bridge so people can cross the river; and take action to restore the Hammersmith Bridge with urgency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sarah Olney, *Official Report*, 3 November 2020, Vol. 683, c. 284.]

[P002620]

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Hammersmith Bridge is an essential transport route for South West London and its closure to walkers, cyclists and boats since 13 August has caused major problems for residents; notes that its closure has caused bus journeys to Roehampton to take up to an hour extra and led to thousands of additional vehicles using Putney High Street; further declares that redirected transport has created traffic jams and increased pollution; further declares that people are now cut off from hospitals,

schools and work; and further declares that the Transport Minister said he would fund repairs to the bridge before the election however the cracks in the bridge have only worsened.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and support the Council to build a temporary walking and cycling bridge so people can cross the river; and take action to restore the Hammersmith Bridge with urgency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Fleur Anderson, *Official Report*, 3 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 285.]

[P002621]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton):

The Government want to see Hammersmith Bridge opened as soon as safely possible, so that—at a minimum—people can cycle and walk across the river, and in time return the bridge and river to full use.

To help find a speedy resolution to the situation, the Government have established a task force—led by Baroness Vere—to bring together London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Council, London Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames Council, Transport for London (TfL) and the Port of London Authority to assess and determine next steps. The Department for Transport (DfT) has commissioned its own engineering advice on the bridge's state to help rapidly bring forward a solution.

The task force has determined that a temporary ferry service would be the most appropriate—and quickest to implement—alternative measure to enable residents to cross the river whilst work continues on the bridge itself. As part of our £1.7 billion Extraordinary Funding Agreement with TfL, the Government have ensured that funding is committed to the Hammersmith Bridge project in the immediate term. The Government have required TfL to establish and run the temporary Hammersmith Ferry service; TfL has now commenced the procurement process for this ferry service.

In addition to the requirement to operate the ferry service, the funding deal also requires TfL to contribute £4 million to the stabilisation and repair this financial year, to ensure that activities can start as soon as possible.

The Government continue to have discussions with all stakeholders on all relevant matters concerning the bridge including on funding the bridge's repair—recognising that the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham is responsible for upkeep and maintenance of the Bridge—to enable the re-opening of the Bridge and river as soon as is safely possible.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 12 November 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme

The following is an extract from the debate on the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme on 5 November 2020.

Nadhim Zahawi: 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.

[Official Report, 5 November 2020, Vol. 683, c. 559.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson).

The correct response should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: 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 **£8.2 billion**, to the Welsh Government **£5 billion**, and to Northern Ireland **£2.8 billion**.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Thursday 12 November 2020

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**not later than
Thursday 19 November 2020**

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