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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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House of Commons

Thursday 26 November 2020

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

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

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

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

The Life and Death of Elizabeth Dixon: A Catalyst for Change

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Paper, entitled The Life and Death of Elizabeth Dixon: A Catalyst for Change, dated 26 November 2020.—*(James Morris.)*

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was asked—

Fishing Industry: Tariffs

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): What discussions he has had with representatives from (a) fishing communities and (b) the fish processing sector on the potential effect on the viability of the UK fishing industry of the imposition of tariffs after the transition period. [909294]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Before I turn to the question, the tragic loss of the Joanna C on Saturday is a sad reminder of the dangers that our fishermen face every time they go out to sea. We are all incredibly grateful for the bravery and dedication of the Coastguard, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and all those involved in the search. Our thoughts are with the families of Adam Harper and Robert Morley, and all the families and those affected.

The Government have offered the European Union a free trade agreement along the lines of the EU-Canada one, which would involve zero tariffs on all goods, including fish and fish products. We hold regular discussions with both the catching sector and the fish processing sector to discuss the great opportunities that will arise at the end of the transition period.

Richard Thomson: I associate my group with the comments of the Minister. It is a timely reminder of the high price that is sometimes paid for putting food on our plates at home.

Non-tariff barriers are also a concern for the fishing industry, as are tariffs. This week's test run for post-border transition procedures demonstrated the severe chaos that might be expected in the new year. I am sure that the Minister appreciates fully that seafood products need to be delivered to markets timeously. So what assurances can he give to the catching and processing sectors that delays will not equal ruined produce and ruined businesses?

George Eustice: We have been working with the fishing industry and local authorities to ensure that they have the capacity in place to employ the environmental health officers necessary to issue both the catch certificates and the environmental health certificates. We have about 1,000 officers now who can issue export health certificates for fish. It is the case that there are some concerns in Scotland, where the Scottish Government potentially have a gap in capacity of 100. We are working with them to try to offer our help to ensure that that gap can be filled.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I, too, associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks. That reminds us why this industry is so important to us and why it tugs at our hearts when we hear of such sad events.

Tariffs are a great worry for many other sectors as well. Tariffs of a possible 48% are a huge concern for the sheep sector, so the Secretary of State's suggestion that sheep farmers could simply switch to beef production if punitive lamb tariffs cause their business models to crash has angered many Scottish farmers and crofters, who have spent many years building up the high reputation that Scotch lamb enjoys for quality. The National Sheep Association Scotland has called for assurances that a compensation scheme will be ready and waiting. What details can he outline today of such a scheme?

George Eustice: I always advise people to look at what I actually said, rather than at the Twitter attacks on what I might have said. I never said that specialist sheep farmers and crofters should diversify into beef; I explicitly said that some of the 7,000 mixed beef and sheep enterprises might choose to produce more beef and less lamb if the price signal suggested that they should.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The Scottish Seafood Association has joined other food and drink leaders with a recent letter to the Prime Minister. The message is clear: tariffs mean enormous damage to our industry, and that is on top of covid losses of an estimated £3 billion. When will the Minister reveal details of the financial support that is so clearly desperately needed?

George Eustice: Tariffs on fish, particularly the fish that we export, are typically far lower than on many agrifoods. The average tariff on the shellfish that we export is about 8%. Obviously, we would prefer there to be zero tariffs on all goods, and that is the offer that the Government have made to the European Union—in both directions—but the fishing sector generally recognises that, if it needed to pay tariffs, it could pay those tariffs, and the European Union would have to face higher prices.

Food Security

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn. If the substantive question cannot be answered, do not worry. I call the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): May I associate those on this side of the House with the Secretary of State's comments on the appalling loss of the Joanna C?

Twenty-six per cent. of our food comes from the European Union, and it is reported that last week DEFRA's head of food security warned industry reps to expect just 40% flow rates. I am sure the Secretary of State will want to provide reassurance on that, but as we have already heard, his attempts to placate livestock farmers recently led to some pretty dreadful headlines in the farming press. "Laughable" was the comment from the *Farmers Guardian.* Can he do better today and explain the plans he has in place to keep our food supplies flowing in just 35 days' time?

George Eustice: We have worked with industry to ensure that the capacity is in place to issue export health certificates, and we have been contacting meat processors, fish processors and others in the sector to ensure that they are prepared for the new administration that will be required, and of course we continue to work on plans to ensure that goods flow at the border.

Plastic Pollution

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce plastic pollution. [909297]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Government have banned the use of microbeads in cosmetics and banned the use of plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds, and the 5p charge for single-use plastic bags has reduced their use by 95% in the main supermarkets. We are increasing the charge to 10p and extending it to all retailers. In addition, we are seeking powers in the Environment Bill to require similar charges for single-use plastic items, to make recycling collections more consistent and to reform packaging producer waste responsibility schemes.

Laura Trott: Earlier this year, I was written to by year 6 pupils in the Chevening and St Lawrence primary schools. They were asking me to protect the environment, and reducing plastic pollution was top of their list. I am sure they will have been reassured by the Secretary of State's answer, but can he reassure them further that we will act to stop this attack on our environment and that they will see change in their lifetime?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I congratulate the Chevening and St Lawrence primary schools on their interest in this. All hon. Members cannot but have noticed the rising awareness within all our schools of the scourge of plastics in particular and the action that must be taken. In my own constituency, I have been contacted by schools such as Lanner, Troon, Treleigh, Rosemellin and Roskear on this very matter just in the past year. We are working very hard to address the concerns raised by pupils in my hon. Friend's primary schools.

Pollinators

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reverse the decline in the population of pollinators. [909298]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The national pollinator strategy sets out the actions we are taking with partners to protect pollinators. It includes dealing with habitat loss and the potential harm from pesticide use, invasive species and climate change. Our future agriculture policies will help to improve biodiversity and support habitats for pollinators, building on existing agri-environment measures to enable many more farmers and land managers to take positive action.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to North Thanet and Sir Roger Gale.

Sir Roger Gale [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, from the garden of England. My right hon. Friend will know that the value to the economy of pollinators is estimated at about £691 million. Some 60% of our native pollinators are in decline, and we have lost 75% of them over the past 25 years. Will he support me in backing Kent's Plan Bee, which is seeking to establish 5,000 miles of B-lines across the United Kingdom?

George Eustice: That sounds like a very interesting project, and I would certainly be willing to meet my right hon. Friend and representatives in Kent to discuss it. Our future environmental land management scheme will encourage the creation of habitats for pollinators, and our local nature recovery plans, to be advanced by local authorities, will also have a role to play.

Covid-19: Zoos

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support zoos during the covid-19 outbreak. [909299]

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): What steps he is taking to support zoos during the covid-19 outbreak. [909308]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): In addition to the full range of financial support available to all businesses and employers, we have established an extra £100 million support fund for those who are facing severe financial difficulty, and the deadline for applications to the fund has been extended to the end of January.

Sir David Amess: On a recent visit to Chester zoo, I saw its excellent conservation work and learned at first hand about the remarkable way it is coping with the coronavirus pandemic. However, the zoo animals fund criteria for access seem to be very peculiar, because zoos seem to have to be on the verge of closure before they can get any money. Surely that is wrong. Will my hon. Friend look at those criteria again, please?

Victoria Prentis: We listened to concerns following the roll-out of the initial support scheme and we have made changes to reflect that. The zoo animals fund, which is simpler to apply for, is now open to zoos that have up to 12 weeks of reserves left. It can be applied for in advance of that and can include applications for essential planned maintenance.

Mark Jenkinson: As we have just heard, zoos have an important conservation role to play. The white-tailed eagle is listed in our 25-year environment plan as a species whose reintroduction we could support as we develop our nature recovery network. Cumbria is at the forefront of nature recovery, as we have a local nature recovery strategy pilot and, separately, we are in a group that has submitted a bid for feasibility work on the white-tailed eagle's reintroduction. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss how her Department might assist with that proposal?

Victoria Prentis: The 25-year environment plan encourages the reintroduction of species such as the white-tailed eagle. I know that my hon. Friend is aware of the funding pots on offer, and officials from the Department would be very pleased to meet him and the project scheme to discuss what further action could be taken.

Mr Speaker: We go now to David Mundell, but I found that a very strange grouping.

Sheep Farmers

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): What steps he is taking to support sheep farmers. [909300]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Lamb producers have enjoyed a very good year in 2020. A significant increase in lamb imports by China, combined with tighter supply globally, has contributed to high prices and confidence in the sector, with prevailing market prices typically 10% to 15% higher than last year. However, we recognise that historically the lamb sector has been more reliant on the EU market than most other farming sectors, so we stand ready to help it identify new markets in future.

David Mundell: I hope you did not find me very strange, Mr Speaker. Upland sheep farming is hugely important to my constituency, which is why I, like those farmers, very much welcomed the Secretary of State's comments yesterday at the Scottish Parliament's Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee that he does have well-developed plans in place to support upland sheep farming in the event that a deal is not possible with the EU. Perhaps he could set out some further reassurance for those farmers today, because many of them have to take decisions right now about their forward planning and what would be in place if there is no deal with the EU.

George Eustice: I can say that 18 months ago, in preparation for the first potential no-deal, the Government, working with the Rural Payments Agency, had developed detailed plans to be able to support the sector in the short term. Those plans are still there and still ready to be activated, but in the medium term, in the event of there being no further negotiated outcome, we will be helping the sector to identify new markets.

Air Quality

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve air quality. [909301]

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve air quality. [909318]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Our clean air strategy sets out an ambitious programme of action to reduce air pollution from a wide range of sources. We have also put in place a £3.8 billion plan to tackle roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations, and our Environment Bill, which I am pleased to say is making huge progress in Committee, makes a clear commitment to set a legally binding target to reduce fine particulate matter and enables local authorities to take more effective action to tackle air pollution in these areas.

Mark Logan: How can Bolton avoid a future of £15 congestion taxes? How can Bolton deal with being in a clean air zone akin to the distance between Westminster, where we are standing, and Watford, of almost 500 square miles?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend has engaged continuously on this issue and is really standing up for his Bolton North East constituency. I assure him that only the most polluting older vehicles are charged in a clean air zone, and it is not a congestion charge; the Greater Manchester plan does not include charging private cars, and the evidence provided by Manchester authorities to date shows that this is not needed. We have provided £41 million in advance of the zone to help drivers and businesses in Greater Manchester that are least able to upgrade their vehicles, with further funding to be allocated. Manchester authorities are consulting on their plan until 3 December, and I encourage people to engage with the consultation.

Andrew Jones: In Harrogate and Knaresborough there are three air-quality management areas. The one at Bond End in Knaresborough saw junction improvements a couple of years ago that improved the situation, but another, at Woodlands junction in Harrogate, continues to break NOx levels, and that must change. What help is my hon. Friend giving to local authorities to help them to reduce NOx levels?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for putting the case for those roads. Local authorities have a range of tools that they can use to reduce air pollution, and we are building on them through the Environment Bill to ensure that local authorities have a clear framework and simple-to-use powers to tackle air pollution issues in their areas. We are also broadening the range of bodies required to take action to improve air quality. As a former Transport Minister, my hon. Friend will understand what I mean by getting other bodies involved—we want them to work closely on the air quality management plans. We will also continue to provide support through the air quality grant.

Air Pollution from Motor Vehicles

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the easing of covid-19 lockdown restrictions in August 2020 on the level of air pollution from motor vehicles. [909302]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Average roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations remain below levels observed in the previous three years, despite some increases as the March lockdown measures were eased. Working closely

with Ministers in the Department for Transport, we continue to drive forward our ambitious plans to improve air quality, and we are delivering our clean air strategy and working in partnership with local authorities to deliver measures to tackle nitrogen dioxide pollution. The Environment Bill will enable greater local action to tackle air pollution.

Dr Huq: As we hopefully exit a respiratory pandemic, technology grants for home working, public transport vouchers and the cutting of staff parking permits could all be part of a joined-up strategy for employers to make driving into the office a thing of the past in the new normal, or at least radically reduced, with things such as vehicle scrappage, all-electric fleets and a proper charging network for those who cannot avoid driving. Will the Government adopt a proper, joined-up, cross-governmental strategy, rather than the piecemeal, far-off future targets that they have now?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady gives some examples, but she is somewhat aggressive in her approach. I work closely with the Department for Transport and the Department of Health and Social Care so that we do have a joined-up approach on air quality, and our clean air strategy goes across all Departments. Some £1.2 billion from the Department for Transport is being devoted to cycling and walking investment, and the bike vouchers went like hot cakes in the summer. We do work closely together. The hon. Lady raises some important points, however, and we are looking into all the options because we know that times are changing and work patterns are changing.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): We are one United Kingdom, so I know that the Minister will have paid keen attention to the work happening, albeit devolved, in other parts of the country to tackle toxic air quality and pollution. Will the Minister confirm that she has read the Welsh Government's clean air plan, and share with the House some of the tips she has picked up?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing Wales into the discussion, but of course air quality is a devolved matter—she serves on the Environment Bill Committee, in which we have said so many times that it is a devolved matter. I hope that she and the Welsh Ministers have read our clean air strategy, because it is considered a global leader, but I am always open to ideas. If we can pick up tips from other places, I am all for it.

Poor Air Quality: BAME Communities

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the extent to which poor air quality may disproportionately affect BAME communities. [909304]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Air pollution can be harmful to everyone; however, some people are more affected than others. My Department has commissioned research on inequalities of exposure to air pollution, and monitors emerging evidence investigating air-quality impacts on BAME communities. That research has shown that those BAME groups are disproportionately affected by poor air quality, partly because larger numbers of BAME people live in urban areas where air pollution tends to be worse.

Fleur Anderson: I am the MP for one of those urban areas where black and ethnic minority constituents are disproportionately affected by both covid-19 and air quality. Has the Secretary of State held recent discussions with his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care? Will he make a statement about specific actions that will be taken on this issue?

George Eustice: Of course we talk with our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on all matters relating to air quality in some urban areas. We intend to take action through the Environment Bill by setting new targets on air quality. One of the targets that we are investigating relates to the impact on particular populations in particular areas.

Flood Defences

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that local authorities have the resources to build adequate flood defences. [909305]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Government are currently investing £2.6 billion between 2015 and 2021, approximately £650 million of which will be allocated to local authorities. Between 2021 and 2027, we will invest £5.2 billion in flood and coastal defences, in addition to a £200 million resilience innovation fund, which were all mentioned yesterday in the spending review. In July 2020, we announced an additional £170 million to accelerate shovel-ready flood defence schemes. Funding for projects is allocated according to the rules governing DEFRA's existing six-year capital programme.

Dr Mullan: Maw Green Road in my constituency has been hit by severe flooding. In fact, residents have been seen canoeing their way out. Cheshire East local authority has not been successful in its applications for financial support to tackle this issue. Will the Minister agree to meet me to look at its proposals to see what we can do to support it financially so that it can tackle this matter?

Rebecca Pow: We all understand the difficulties that flooding can bring and my hon. Friend is right to raise it. I understand that the Environment Agency recently attended a meeting with the Lead Local Flood Authority to address the surface water flooding in Maw Green Road, and that the LLFA is pursuing specific actions to address the situation, including seeking Department for Transport funding to alleviate flooding under the railway bridge upstream. Therefore, no DEFRA floods funding has been applied for in this location, but, obviously, I am happy to have a chat with him and look into this matter.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Neil Parish.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): The environmental land management scheme could do much to help stop flooding, especially flash flooding. How advanced is the ELM scheme, and when will we hear about it? In the future, can we ensure that the payments are enough, so that people can farm water as part of their farming practice?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend, I know, speaks from experience as he has a farm right by a lot of water, so he raises a very important point. May I just say, Mr Speaker, that we have tremendous support on the Conservative Benches today, which I think demonstrates the understanding of these issues. My hon. Friend was right to raise the ELM scheme. Our future farming policy will be centred on support aimed at incentivising sustainable farming practice; creating habitats for nature recovery; and establishing new woodland ecosystem services to help tackle climate change. We will help farmers to deliver environmental public goods, which, of course, bring in things such as natural flood management, which he has mentioned. They will be an important part of our new future, with things such as leaky dams, slowing the flow and, of course mixed in there, good soil management, which is something that is very dear to my heart.

Raw Sewage and Storm Water: Discharge into Waterways

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to reduce the discharge into waterways of raw sewage and storm water by water companies. [909306]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Water companies are committed over the next five years to a significant programme of improvements and to the monitoring and management of storm overflows, costing around £1.2 billion. However, there is more to do, and I met the chief executive officers of water companies in September and made it clear that sewage discharges must be reduced. To achieve that, I have set up a taskforce bringing together the Government, the water industry, regulators and environmental non-governmental organisations to develop actions to address the issue.

Dame Diana Johnson [V]**:** It is good to hear that a taskforce has been set up. In 2019, Yorkshire Water spent 616,643 hours discharging raw sewage into local rivers, which is the worst figure in England. It posted profits of more than £212 million in 2018-19—very much a case of private affluence and public effluence. We need to raise standards, and the Environmental Audit Committee Chair has proposed measures to do that. Will the Government be supporting the proposals of the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne)?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady touches on an issue to which the Department is giving a great deal of attention. As I said, I have recently met water companies to say that that is not good enough and that they need to improve. The Environment Agency carries out a lot of monitoring on the issue, but the situation is not good enough. The taskforce that I mentioned will be developing short and long-term actions to increase water company investment in tackling storm overflows. The Government are very supportive of the aims of the private Member's Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne); some measures in the Bill could be helpful in reducing storm overflows, and I have asked the taskforce to look at some of those measures. I thank the hon. Lady for her question.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Whiston in Rother Valley has repeatedly been flooded, most recently last year; and people are still out of their homes. In part, this has caused overflow of sewage into Whiston brook. Indeed, raw sewage went into Whiston brook 43 times last year. However, Rotherham Council has just granted planning permission for 450 homes off Worrygoose Lane, which is directly above the brook. That is going to have a huge impact on Whiston brook. Will my hon. Friend speak to Rotherham Council to convince it that building an extra 450 homes in Whiston is going to flood the brook and bring misery to so many people's lives?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for his impassioned question. The national planning policy framework makes it very clear that new developments should be made safe and resilient without increasing the risk of floods elsewhere. The Environment Agency and Rotherham Council have been working together in partnership to find a solution to flood risk in the area. Early studies of the proposed Whiston flood alleviation scheme indicate that the scheme could better protect about 60 houses.

Topical Questions

[909254] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Since the last session of DEFRA oral questions, Royal Assent has been granted to both the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill. The Agriculture Act 2020 gives us powers to transform the way in which we support farmers and build back nature in the farmed landscape, while the Fisheries Act 2020 gives us powers to become an independent coastal state, and decide who can fish in our waters and on what terms. We will be bringing forward new policies under both Acts in the weeks and months ahead.

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend's Department is a very busy one right now, but may I ask him to look at the issue of animal cruelty sentences? I know that the Government are looking to legislate to increase sentencing. Animals feel pain and emotion, and all of us in this House have probably had terrible cases of animal cruelty in our constituencies, which can be upsetting for all our communities. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that there is a good level of enforcement for animal cruelty offences?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Government support extending maximum penalties and offences for animal cruelty. We are supporting a private Member's Bill currently going through this House to achieve that. Should that not go through, we will introduce legislation in a later Session in this Parliament. in order to do that. We are also working with local authorities and others to improve the enforcement of the current animal welfare legislation.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Following the "News at Ten" exposé of foxhunters discussing how to put up the smokescreen of trail hunting when foxhunts break the law—exemptions that they describe as a "good wheeze"—is the Environment Secretary satisfied that the Hunting Act 2004 is as strong as it needs to be to stop illegal hunting? I am not.

George Eustice: The Hunting Act was introduced by the Labour party, and there is now a consensus across the House that it should remain. Where there is a breach of that legislation, obviously the police can investigate, and they do.

Luke Pollard: No, that is not a good enough answer. We support the strengthening of that Act, and I hope that the Environment Secretary will too. Forestry England has just announced a ban on hunts using its land in response to the exposé. Should not other landowners now follow this lead and ban trail hunters from their land as well?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): No!

Mr Speaker: Sorry, is someone shouting at the back? Sir Edward, silence a little more—come on.

Sir Edward Leigh: I apologise, Mr Speaker.

George Eustice: The Government believe that the Hunting Act is sufficient. Where there are breaches, it should be enforced. It is for individual landowners to choose, as they always have done, whether they would like hunts on their land.

[909255] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Ahead of 1 January, the Renaissance of the East Anglian Fisheries is stepping up its plans to revitalise the East Anglian fishing industry. Investment in port and processing infrastructure is vital, and I would be grateful if the Minister could outline the role of fishing in the national infrastructure strategy, what funds will be available and when they will be announced.

George Eustice: For now, the residual bit of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund continues to be something that fishing communities can access, but we will be replacing the EMFF with a domestic fund, and we will say more about this in due course. I am aware of the REAF project in my hon. Friend's constituency. There are great opportunities for fishing communities along the east coast to benefit from our departure from the EU.

[909256] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Air pollution is estimated to lead to 40,000 early deaths per year, and here in London, in normal circumstances, some 2 million people are living with illegal levels of air pollution. Will the Secretary of State please commit today to accepting the Environment Bill amendment which would require him to produce an annual report on air quality that includes the work of public authorities and Government Departments in tackling air pollution?

George Eustice: Under the Environment Bill, we will have a 25-year environment improvement plan that addresses issues such as air quality. There will also be targets set for air quality under the Bill.

[909257] **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): First, I very much associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks regarding the tragic loss of the Joanna C.

The brilliant fishermen who come out of St Mawes and Falmouth and along the whole Fal estuary—indeed, around the entire Cornish coast—are delighted that the Fisheries Bill finally got its Royal Assent this week. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that this landmark Act will better the lives of chose fishermen, as well as ensuring that our seas are sustainably managed to allow future generations of fishing families to prosper?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend and neighbour in Cornwall makes a very good point. As a fellow Cornish MP, of course I want to see the interests of the Cornish fishing industry prosper in the future. In many cases, we have had a profoundly unfair share of stocks in the Celtic sea, and that will now change.

[909258] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): [V] After the 2007 floods in Hull, I campaigned for many years to get the Flood Re scheme introduced. However, there are problems with Flood Re, and I wonder whether the Government need to consider again their message about encouraging house building through schemes such as Help to Buy on areas that are prone to flooding at the same time as saying that house building should not take place in those areas.

George Eustice: We are in discussions on this matter with ministerial colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The hon. Lady will be aware that a planning Bill is coming forward, and one of the things we have already said we would like to do is strengthen the role of the Environment Agency as a statutory consultee on future planning developments.

[909261] **Miss Sarah Dines** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Many of my constituents farm some of the most visited countryside in the UK. Much of Derbyshire Dales lies in the Peak District national park. Those farmers understand that future Government support will be based on public money for public good. They view producing high-quality food such as milk for Stilton, beef and high-quality lamb as a public good. This goes hand in hand with delivering access to clean air and water, biodiversity, and soils that store carbon. It is a case, is it not, of how food production sits alongside the environment—a case not of either/or, but of both? Can I please have reassurance—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have got to get through these questions.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Our future policy will be about incentivising, encouraging and supporting sustainable agriculture so that we have sustainable food production but also environmental improvement.

[909259] **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): The Chancellor did not pledge a single extra penny yesterday towards a green economic recovery, while wasting tens of billions on polluting new roads. Will the Secretary of State explain how that fits with the Government's so-called green industrial revolution and net zero strategy?

George Eustice: Last week the Prime Minister announced a new round for the green recovery challenge fund—an additional £40 million—and the Chancellor yesterday confirmed the spending that we intend to put through the nature for climate fund as well.

[909262] **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Con): This Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to maintain

agricultural funding across all four nations. Despite the disingenuous political games being played by the Welsh Government and the farming unions in Wales, can my right hon. Friend confirm that yesterday's statement from the Chancellor delivers on that commitment and safeguards funding levels for all our farmers in Wales?

George Eustice: Yes.

[909260] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), primary schoolchildren across my constituency have I can tell the Secretary of State that raised the issue of plastic. Why is the Government's plan to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042 years behind schedule, and why does it contain such weak proposals? Is the Minister kicking Britain's plastic waste crisis into the long grass?

George Eustice: I do not accept the point that the hon. Lady makes. We have recently banned plastic stirrers, plastic straws and plastic cotton buds. We are considering other bans on single-use items, and the Environment Bill brings forward extended producer responsibility.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Covid-19 Lockdown: Public Worship

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What representations the Church of England has made to the Government on the importance of public worship during periods of covid-19 lockdown. [909344]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Both archbishops joined other faith leaders earlier this month in writing to the Prime Minister to highlight the importance of public worship. The worship of Jesus is the spiritual fuel that keeps the engine of the Church running.

Sir Edward Leigh: Over the past 1,000 years, we have had a fair proportion of saints and sinners as Archbishop of Canterbury, but one thing that we demand of our established Church is that it provides robust leadership against arbitrary government. I do not know whether my hon. Friend noticed that 90 colleagues and I wrote to the Prime Minister on the subject of the closure of churches, but can he assure me, as a voice of the established Church in this place, that if there is any future proposal to prevent public worship, the Church of England will demand evidence—there has never been a shred of evidence—and we will try to save this very important part of public life?

Andrew Selous: I not only noted my right hon. Friend's letter, but was one of the signatories to it. Like him, I know that clergy have worked extraordinarily hard to provide covid-secure services. I felt safer in church than in any other public space I have been in during the pandemic. My right hon. Friend makes a very valid point. I have registered that point very strongly, and I will absolutely feed it through to the leadership of the Church of England.

High-quality Grade 1 and 2 Farmland

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What proportion of agricultural land owned by the Church of England is high-quality grade 1 and 2 farmland. [909345]

Andrew Selous: Approximately 35,000 acres of land owned by the Church Commissioners is high-quality grade 1 and 2 farmland, representing 39% of the overall agricultural portfolio. Information on diocesan land holdings is not held by the Church Commissioners.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the hon. Member for that answer. At the last Church Commissioners questions, he said to me that he strongly wanted to see more trees planted on the Church estate, but that most of the rural estate is high-quality agricultural land and is therefore not suitable. He has just said that 39% is high-grade agricultural land. Does that not mean there is an awful lot of other land on which the Church could plant trees and help meet the Government's commitment to increasing woodland cover?

Andrew Selous: As I think I said at the last questions, I commend the hon. Lady for raising this issue and, indeed, for returning to it today, and I genuinely welcome her scrutiny. More than 60% of our farmland is let on secure agricultural tenancies, with the rest on tenancies under the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. Both of those limit our ability to intervene directly. However, we do encourage our tenants to farm sustainably and join environmental stewardship schemes to plant trees and hedgerows wherever possible. In addition, we are undertaking a natural capital assessment, which will provide a baseline and trajectory of progress towards achieving lower carbon outputs.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Digital Campaigning: Regulation

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps the commission is taking to strengthen the regulation of digital campaigning. [909346]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The Electoral Commission works proactively to regulate digital campaigning under the rules currently set out in law. It publishes data on digital spending by campaigners to provide transparency for voters, monitors online campaigning activity and supports campaigners with targeted advice. In 2018, it published a comprehensive package of recommendations that would increase transparency for voters, and it continues to recommend changes that would help voters have confidence about online campaigning.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Member for that answer. The reality is that we know that Vote Leave did all sorts of myth-spreading using digital campaigning. The same people then moved and masterminded the Tory 2019 general election campaign, so it is no wonder that the UK Government have not done anything yet to change

the rules. Does the commission agree that there has to be not only better regulation, but fines that go beyond business-as-usual amounts, so that they are a real deterrent to myth-spreading online?

Christian Matheson: The commission has recommended that its current maximum fine of £20,000 per offence should be reviewed to ensure that it is proportionate to the income and expenditure of parties and campaigners. As a Member from Scotland, the hon. Gentleman may have noticed that the Scottish Parliament recently increased the commission's maximum fine in relation to Scottish referendums to £500,000. The commission continues to recommend that its sanctioning powers should be updated by other Governments and for other polls, to provide a more proportionate regime.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Christmas Services: Covid-19

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support churches to conduct Christmas services during the covid-19 outbreak. [909347]

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to help ensure that people can safely celebrate Advent and Christmas during the covid-19 outbreak. [909352]

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to help ensure that people can safely celebrate Advent and Christmas during the covid-19 outbreak. [909353]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): From 2 December, places of worship can reopen for public worship, and churches and cathedrals can now approach Advent and Christmas with certainty. Clergy have already demonstrated that they have made their buildings covid-secure, and many cathedrals and churches are planning to have multiple services to accommodate more people as fewer are allowed in each service. The further good news is that, while indoor singing is limited to performance only, we can all take part in outdoor and door-to-door singing, staying 2 metres apart or away from the threshold, and nativity plays for under-18s are permitted in accordance with the performing arts guidance.

Dr Evans [V]: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments on services, but at Christmas time, the Church does a lot more—it provides support for our communities through financial advice, fuel and food poverty advice and, of course, the social support that is at the heart of it all. With that in mind, what discussions has he had with local and national Government and the Churches to ensure that they can continue to provide that support in a covid-secure way at Christmas?

Andrew Selous: I know that my hon. Friend takes a close interest in this area of the Church's work. The Church continues to work with the Government through the places of worship taskforce to advise parishes on how to continue providing critical assistance locally, which they have done wonderfully well. For example, St Peter's in Market Bosworth, in his constituency, is supporting the local women's refuge with food and toiletries.

Dr Hudson [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. Once again, churches have done amazingly through this pandemic, continuing with outreach to their communities. I pay tribute to the churches in Penrith and The Border and across the country that enabled remembrance ceremonies to go ahead this year in challenging circumstances. Does he agree that, as churches look to reopen for worship and other activities in the months ahead, targeted Government financial support for them would be a great way to ensure that their vital community work and support can carry on?

Andrew Selous: Churches did indeed organise very respectful and safe remembrance services. The National Churches Trust estimates that the economic value of our social action is worth around £12.4 billion. I can tell my hon. Friend that 227 churches and cathedrals have been supported by the culture recovery fund, for which I thank the Government.

Jacob Young [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. Churches in Redcar and Cleveland, such as St Mark's in Marske and St Cuthbert's in Ormesby, have gone above and beyond to ensure that the risk of transmission in churches is low. They are a place for people of all faiths and none to find peace in what has been an incredibly difficult eight months. Unfortunately, Advent Sunday this year will fall inside the lockdown, but I am grateful that the Government have said that churches can reopen for the rest of Advent from 2 December. What message does the Church Commissioner have for those churches in Redcar and Cleveland in the approach to Christmas?

Andrew Selous: I am delighted to learn of the important role that churches in Redcar and Cleveland have played in helping people to find peace during this dreadful pandemic. The closure of churches is not something that any of us ever wants to see again. I hope that my hon. Friend's constituents will follow the advice of the Archbishop of Canterbury: to come to church in person or virtually and to spend time with their wider families in a safe and responsible way.

Consistory Courts: Appeals Process

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): What recent assessment the commissioners have made of the effectiveness of the process of appeal against consistory court decisions to the provincial court of the archbishop. [909348]

Andrew Selous: The decision of a consistory court can, with permission, be appealed against to the relevant provincial court, provided that the appeal does not relate to a question of doctrine, ritual or ceremonial. As in the temporal courts, an appeal must have a real prospect of success, or there should be some other compelling reason why the appeal should be heard.

Conor McGinn: I want to pay tribute to the family of Margaret Keane, whose grief at the loss of their mother has been compounded by their still not having a headstone on her grave to visit this Christmas, two and a half years on from her death. The family have said that Margaret is "In our hearts forever"—"In ár gcroíthe go deo"—and that sentiment is shared now by the Irish community in Britain. May I ask the commissioner—I thank him and the Church for their engagement with me and the work they do in Saint Helens in the diocese of Liverpool—if a review can take place of the current appeals system in ecclesiastical courts, whereby even successful appellants are liable potentially for huge court costs to an unlimited amount? This is an access to justice issue and one of fairness that should be looked at.

Andrew Selous: I am sure that the whole House would want to extend their sympathies to the Keane family, and I am hopeful that change is on the way. The Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2020, which was recently passed by this House, provides for exemptions from and reductions in court fees in the ecclesiastical courts to be made in secondary legislation. The Fees Advisory Commission will be asked to consider these provisions and, following that, an Order in General Synod will be made next year and will be laid before Parliament.

Parish Church Network: Covid-19

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to secure the long-term financial stability of the parish church network following the covid-19 outbreak. [909349]

Andrew Selous: The Church has provided £35 million of sustainability funding to help dioceses that have been the hardest hit financially as a result of the pandemic. This is focused on dioceses in lower income areas and with fewer historic resources. Advice has been given on encouraging joyful giving and tithing as the cornerstone of parish finances, both by direct debit and card readers, as well as traditional giving in the plate.

Karl McCartney [V]: Good morning, Mr Speaker, and I look forward to seeing you later.

I thank my hon. Friend for his response on behalf of the Church Commissioners—*[Inaudible]*—it is pleasing to hear. We look forward to a quick return to daily and weekly services for primary worship as soon as we are able, but also to the collections taken at these services along with the extra-curricular activities in the annual calendar of parish churches to fundraise and generate income for churches and their parishioners, which we hope can be reinstated as soon as is practicable, too.

Andrew Selous: Public worship can start again from next Wednesday, but it may take a while for church hall income, fundraising events and visitor income to pick up. Twelve churches in the Lincoln diocese have received £1.8 million from the Government's culture recovery fund, and Lincoln cathedral has received £1.2 million from that fund.

Local Communities: Covid-19

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps the Church of England has taken to support local communities throughout the covid-19 outbreak. [909350]

Andrew Selous: As the Archbishop of York has pointed out, the Church has been "astonishingly present" throughout the pandemic, with over 35,000 active community projects. The GRA:CE Project report by Theos and the Church Urban Fund documents the enormous range and depth of this involvement, and the National Churches Trust's "The House of Good" report recently estimated that parishes contribute around £12.4 billion of social good to the English economy.

Sir David Amess: I know that my hon. Friend would agree with me that at this particular time our churches are more important than ever. Certainly in my constituency, they do remarkable work—for instance, with the Southend night shelters—and during the coronavirus pandemic, they have been delivering food and medicines to vulnerable people. Will my hon. Friend please tell the House what the Church is doing to thank local churches and to celebrate their work?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and he is absolutely right: all owe a huge debt of gratitude to clergy and parish workers, who have worked extraordinarily hard throughout the pandemic. In Southend West, for example, at Saint Saviour's Westcliff, the congregation host a food bank and are collecting prescriptions and delivering food to those who are unable to leave their homes in my hon. Friend's constituency. The Church of England is encouraging all congregations to continue with this kind of neighbourliness over the Christmas period to support vulnerable and lonely people.

Persecution of Christians

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to prevent the persecution of Christians throughout the world. [909351]

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for the enormous dedication and energy he put into this issue as the Prime Minister's special envoy for religious freedom. The Church of England continues to press for the implementation of all the Truro report recommendations and, challenges Governments and other faith leaders around the world who do not respect freedom of religion or belief.

Rehman Chishti [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. Recently around the world, including in Nice and Vienna, evil acts have been committed in the name of religion. Pope Francis said in 2018:

> "Every religious leader is called to unmask any attempt to manipulate God for ends that have nothing to do with him or his glory."

The Archbishop of Canterbury expressed similar views in 2016 on tackling extremism through theological dialogue. Can my hon. Friend confirm what steps are being taken by the Church to work with other faith leaders around the world to further address the issue of persecutions of Christians, who are the largest persecuted faith in the world, and to address the issue of other individuals of all faiths being persecuted for their faith through theological and inter-faith dialogue?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend will know that there is a debate later today on this very subject, and he is absolutely right about the importance of inter-faith dialogue, which is why three years ago the Anglican

primates launched an inter-faith commission to build mutual understanding and trust between different faiths. The Archbishop of Canterbury, who has a particular heart for reconciliation, said it

"will bring together the wisest people across the Communion to work on this area in the places of highest tension with the aim of replacing diversity in conflict with diversity in collaboration."

Christmastide Services

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What discussions the commissioners have had with the chairman of the Association of English Cathedrals on services during Christmastide; and if he will make a statement. [909354]

Andrew Selous: The Church Commissioners have regular discussions with the Association of English Cathedrals, and cathedrals have made huge efforts to reach out to people in their areas. Lichfield cathedral, which I know is close to my hon. Friend's heart—I think that he lives within its shadow—will be having an illuminations show and will hold as many services as possible, including some outside if necessary.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the shadows of Lichfield cathedral, with Michael Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I am indeed very close to Lichfield cathedral, and the dean of Lichfield cathedral is the chairman of the Association of English Cathedrals. We are all delighted that we are going to have services this year, and he has sent me a question, and I am going to read it, because he only lives a few doors down, and I have given my hon. Friend prior notice of the question. The dean asks, "What additional support can be given to cathedrals in the first quarter of 2021 to ensure they remain open and responsive to public need?"

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I will be leaving these questions to go into a governors meeting of the Church Commissioners, so I will pass that on very directly. I can tell him that Lichfield cathedral has received £140,000 from the national lottery heritage emergency fund, but I know it needs extra funding for urgent building projects, including a buttress that is causing structural concern. I can also tell him that conversations with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Treasury about the Government's own Taylor review of church and cathedral building sustainability are ongoing.

Sexuality and LGBT Communities: Parish Discussion

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): With reference to the publication of the November 2020 Church of England report entitled "Living in Love and Faith", what steps the Church is taking to encourage parishes to discuss sexuality and methods of supporting their own LGBT communities. [909357]

Andrew Selous: The "Living in Love and Faith" report is a teaching and learning resource for the Church on marriage, sexuality and relationships. We hope it will enable parishes to learn together over the next year as we engage graciously, respectfully and compassionately with each other.

Ruth Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that equality cannot just be about words, but also needs to be about actions, so what is actually being done to reach out to support LGBTQ+ members of the Church at a local level?

Andrew Selous: The Church recognises that we are all created in the image of God and should all be treated with dignity, which is why we have also created an anti-racism taskforce. With "Living in Love and Faith", we will move towards a period of discernment and decision making in 2022, and we want to ensure that differences of view are expressed courteously and kindly—something we could do rather better on in this Chamber from time to time.

Gender-based Violence

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): What recent steps the Anglican Communion has taken to help tackle gender-based violence throughout the world. [909367]

Andrew Selous: The Anglican communion is supporting yesterday's White Ribbon Day, the United Nations day for the eradication of all forms of violence against women and girls, with 16 days of online panel discussions and social media campaigns to spot and eradicate gender-based violence. The resources are available in seven languages in over 165 countries, and this is as essential for economic development as it is for the promotion of fundamental human dignity.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's and Church Commissioners' support for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Sexual violence in conflict remains far too common a tactic of warfare. Can the Church Commissioners report on the steps being taken by the Anglican communion to stop the dreadful stigmatisation of survivors of sexual violence in conflict and the important role that the Church can play around the world?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this completely horrific practice. I can tell her that the Bishop of Gloucester has led discussions with Ministers about the role of faith communities, which are often the first point of call for people in need. Parishes are often willing to scale up support for people suffering from gender-based violence and domestic abuse. It is important that there is a level playing field for all providers of support and advice services, including church ones. That is what we are doing in the UK, but I take her point about the global nature of this issue and the important role that the Anglican communion has in engaging with it.

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

10.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

10.34 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 30 November will include:

Monday 30 November—Second Reading of the Telecommunications (Security) Bill.

Tuesday 1 December—Motion to approve regulations related to public health.

Wednesday 2 December—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve the draft Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (Amendment) Order 2020, the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 and the draft World Trade Organisation Agreement on Agriculture (Domestic Support) Regulations 2020, followed by a motion to approve the draft Plant Health (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 and the draft Plant Health (Phytosanitary Conditions) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.

Thursday3 December—General debate on the future of coal in the United Kingdom, followed by debate on a motion relating to digital infrastructure, connectivity and accessibility. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 4 December—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: May I thank the Leader of the House for the business and ask again about the end of the Session? Obviously, that is not going to be in November. I can only assume it will be May, but it would be helpful to know, particularly as we would quite like another Opposition day. I think ours was taken away last time.

May I ask for a statement, again, on the progress of the EU talks from the Prime Minister? I think he has stopped shielding, or hiding from the ERG or CRG or whichever group we have now. We may be in lockdown, but we are not in a Government news lockdown.

The Department for International Development has been abolished and we know that it has gone into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Could the Leader of the House set out what plans the Government have for re-establishing that Department in are form or another, or maybe keeping the Select Committee as it is, given that it needs to look at overseas development aid?

I hope that the Leader of the House will bring back the motion on virtual participation. We all want a much longer debate than we had on Tuesday. Let us remember: it is the Government who prevented participation of our colleagues, pitting one colleague against another through a restrictive and discriminatory definition. It is that stubbornness that is preventing our colleagues from taking part.

Let me quote something that I did not have time to quote on Tuesday. It states that

"the broadcasting hub on the Estate had been substantially improved and augmented"—

that means made better and bigger—

"with additional offsite capacity."

The House staff think that this can be done. Why do the Government and the Leader of the House not think so?

Let us turn to the spending review. The Chancellor has made available £4 billion of a levelling-up fund. It is a bit like a gameshow now, pitting one community against another—"I'm a levelling-up project, gimme the money!" Last week, I raised the NAO report and the possible misuse of public money whereby one Minister gives money to another Minister in the constituency. I am sure the Leader of the House will know—I know the Government have issues with the Electoral Commission, an independent body—that the shadow Minister for voter engagement and young people, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), has asked the Electoral Commission about the misuse of public funds in relation to ads in targeted seats just before the election, with majorities of less than 5,000. Votes were told, "You're going to get £25 million of investment in your town."

If this is going to continue, will the Leader of the House ensure that proper criteria are published? We need to know which Department will be responsible for it, because there are three involved—the Treasury, Transport, and Housing, Communities and Local Government. Better still, why do the Government not just give the money to the local authorities on proper criteria, as they have done for years? Those authorities are all in deficit; they have all been struggling. Even better, give the money to key workers. Public sector workers have had a slap in the face in not getting an increase in their salaries, which is just levelling up after 10 years of Tory austerity.

Under the spending review, the Chancellor has set out funds to support getting people back to work—the Restart scheme. On Tuesday, there was a joint press release with Ministers and Scottish Ministers saying that a really important company, Burntisland, is going to lose highly skilled, specialist jobs that are here in Scotland. Hundreds of employees do not know whether they have a job or not. Could we have an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to continue these discussions, so that we do not lose those vital jobs?

This is not a party of law and order; this is not a Government of law and order. On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Education was found to have acted unlawfully in watering down safeguards for protecting children. He excluded the Children's Commissioner, among others, from his decision making, and 65 separate legal protections were watered down. Can we have an urgent statement?

The Equality and Human Rights Commission found on Wednesday that the hostile environment referred to by the shadow Lord Chancellor breached equalities law. What about the Secretary of State who gave a job to his friend, who was first unpaid—an unpaid lobbyist—then became a non-exec director, paid with public money, and then received an access all areas pass from another Minister? Could we have an urgent statement? I know the Leader of the House does not like to have people who are overqualified for jobs if they have been members of the Labour party, but having someone who is a friend, who does not go through normal employment practices, is not right.

Parliament Week has been a great success. David Clark and the team have undertaken 8,700 activities and reached over 980,000 people. All of them have done

[Valerie Vaz]

a fantastic job explaining our democracy. On behalf of everyone, I thank David Clark and wish him well in his new post. I understand that he is popping up in an office near you, Mr Speaker—literally near you.

Kylie has been released. Daren Nair of Amnesty International thanked the Australian Parliament and our Parliament for making sure that Kylie's name was never forgotten, and we want to do the same for Nazanin, Anoosheh, and of course Luke Symons. We want them home before Christmas.

Finally, we remember Bruce Boynton of Boynton *v.* Virginia, one of the first Freedom Riders. May he rest in peace.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Indeed, may he and all the souls of the faithful departed—especially in November, of course, the month of the holy souls—rest in peace.

I agree that we should congratulate David Clark on what he has done for Parliament Week. May I say also that the thanks being given to the British Parliament for Kylie's release should fall particularly to the right hon. Lady? It is not usual for the Leader of the House to say that his shadow is the person who has really highlighted a cause, fought for it and raised it week after week, but I think the thanks should go much more to her than to me. I hope she will continue to raise these issues, because I think it is an area in which the whole House is in agreement.

However, I am sorry to tell you, Mr Speaker, that we do not agree about everything. The end of the Session will of course come in accordance with the process of successive Government business, in the normal way, and will be announced in the normal way. We will have Opposition days in accordance with the requirements of Standing Orders—I know that everyone waits with bated breath for future Opposition days.

As regards EU talks and when statements will come, I think we will see from what comes after me how good and strong the Government have been in keeping this House up to date, with two important statements coming. I can reassure the House that statements will come when there is something to say, but it is not beneficial for the House to have statements until that time.

The right hon. Lady asked about DFID and the processes with the Select Committee. This is under discussion between the Chairman of the Select Committee and other interested parties, and the Government are looking upon suggestions about it with benignity.

On virtual participation, the right hon. Lady puts herself forward as Gladstone. Mr Gladstone used to think that speaking for four hours was a mere bagatelle; he had hardly cleared his throat in the first four hours. The right hon. Lady spoke for over an hour on Tuesday—with great distinction and panache, it has to be said, and a great deal of support from her right hon. and hon. Friends. I fail to see how sufficient time was not provided when another hon. Member managed to talk out his own amendment, which is Gladstonian in a different way; a way that Disraeli might have noted and commented upon.

It is a great shame that that debate was not allowed to come to a conclusion. The reason it did not was that Opposition Members—the Labour party and the Scottish National party—decided that it should not. It is unusual for an hon. Member to talk out his own amendment. Some may even consider it eccentric, and it is a pity because we had hoped that we could ensure participation for the extremely clinically vulnerable. There was an amendment tabled that would have broadened it, but the House was not allowed the opportunity to express its will by the actions of Opposition Members. That was a choice that they made, rather than allowing a vote in this House that would have settled the issue. It is to my mind a great shame that that is the situation we find ourselves in.

As regards the levelling-up fund, I would have thought that the right hon. Lady would welcome £4 billion to help places that have been left behind to improve, to increase opportunity and prosperity across the country, and to ensure that the House is properly involved so that it is a national programme helping locally. It is a really admirable programme and has widespread support, as does the towns fund. It is really important to understand that Ministers should neither be advantaged nor disadvantaged by the fact that they are Ministers, so the fund was completely properly allocated, and it is right that that should happen to help town centres do better in what are extremely difficult circumstances.

As regards the hostile environment, I was, I am glad to say, on the Back Benches when that was Government policy: it is not Government policy and the hostile environment is not something I have ever been comfortable with. I think someone is either a British citizen or they are not, and if someone is a British citizen they have exact equality and parity with all other British citizens and should not be asked, even in this House, to prove their identity.

Mr Speaker: We might disagree on that.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I am sure that Members across the House have been approached, as I have, by local NHS leaders who are looking for venues that they can use to carry out what will be the Herculean effort of vaccinating our population, should a vaccine be approved. Will the Leader of the House encourage businesses and property owners in constituencies across the country to step forward and make venues available where they can to help in that national effort?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Throughout the pandemic, one of the most heartening signs was the huge national effort by so many people across the country to rise to the challenge. The NHS does have a tried and tested track record for delivering vaccination programmes and will work with existing partners across the healthcare system to ensure a covid-19 vaccine can be deployed both safely and effectively. Detailed planning is under way, building on the NHS's expertise in delivering immunisation programmes, and that includes consideration of the settings required to vaccinate the public against covid-19. We are grateful for the support that businesses have offered. My hon. Friend cites Hercules, and this will be one of the 12 labours of Hercules as it is rolled out.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: I ask again: can we have a proper debate in which Members discuss and decide, on a free vote, the nature and extent of virtual participation in the proceedings of this Parliament while the pandemic lasts? The procedural shenanigans

displayed by the Government on Tuesday, when they engineered call lists to conjure up a debate where none had been planned, were an affront to democracy. The attempt by the Leader of the House to suggest that those of us who argue for every Member to have the right to remote participation were in fact trying to deny that right to colleagues who are clinically vulnerable is offensive. I say to him in all sincerity that he is in grave danger of losing the confidence of the House, which he needs to perform his constitutional role. I hope that, rather than producing a glib response or a puerile putdown, he will demonstrate thoughtfulness and leadership, and allow elected Members to decide this matter.

The Leader of the House has made much of the need for democratic debate and scrutiny to continue, but yesterday the biggest change in public policy in a decade was announced in the spending review, with no opportunity to debate, amend or agree. We must debate public sector pay if the Government intend to cut the wages of those key workers they applauded from the steps of Downing Street. We must debate overseas aid if the Government are to slash support for the world's poor, severely damaging the UK's global reputation in a manner that would make Trump proud. These are not manifesto promises. The Government have no mandate for them, and they ought not to become the policy of the land without a vote in Parliament.

Finally, I come to the tragedy of Brexit—just five weeks to go and no deal in sight. Last week, I got no answer about the shared prosperity fund. Today, I want to ask for a debate on plugging the £170 million black hole left in Scotland's rural economy as payments under the LEADER scheme end following withdrawal from the common agricultural policy. The silence on this is reckless and damaging to Scotland's rural economy.

Mr Rees-Mogg: To misquote P.G. Wodehouse, it is never difficult to tell the difference between a member of the SNP with a grievance and a ray of sunshine. It seems to me that the cloud across any ray of sunshine can always be provided by the hon. Gentleman. What does he say to us today? He says that a debate of over two hours is undemocratic. It was undemocratic to have a debate—that, I think, is an unusual view to hold—and then he thinks that a democratic vote, of 52% of the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, is a disaster. He seems only to like the votes that he wins, but the SNP, fortunately, does not win votes across the United Kingdom at large and lost a very important vote in 2014.

Why I think the hon. Gentleman should be a ray of sunshine is that he should be asking for a debate on the £2.4 billion extra announced in the spending review yesterday that is going to Scotland. He should be celebrating the fact that £1,633 extra is attributed to public spending per capita in Scotland against the United Kingdom average, and he should celebrate the fact that £8.2 billion of UK taxpayer money has gone to Scotland to help it fight the coronavirus. The evidence is that the United Kingdom is extraordinarily strong as a single United Kingdom, with taxpayers coming together to help one another.

I notice that the hon. Gentleman carefully avoided the fact, when he talked about the House's confidence, that in Scotland, confidence may be ebbing away. I noticed that the SNP lost a vote in the Scottish Parliament yesterday over publishing the legal advice given to the Scottish Government on the judicial review brought by Alex Salmond. They were very happy to vote for the Attorney General to release his advice here under an Humble Address—sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander, or are they just turkeys waiting for Christmas?

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The week before lockdown, I had the privilege of meeting Sam Edwards and David Bruce, two serving Royal Marines, and Junior McIlhiney and Will Schweppes, two marine veterans. They were training in my constituency, in Hamble, to row the Atlantic unaided next week in aid of the Royal Marines Charity as part of the Cockleshell Endeavour. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing them well in their endeavours next week, and encourage people to donate to their worthwhile campaign? Can we have a debate on services for veterans, where we still need to make much more progress?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I indeed wish them well in the work they are doing to raise funds for the Royal Marines benevolent fund? I think it is a terrific effort. Do we not all admire the Royal Marines in this country, I perhaps most particularly, because my campaign manager in every election since 2010 has been a former Royal Marine? I know what fine members of the community they remain, even when they have left military service.

Veterans' mental health is of great importance, and the Veterans' Mental Health Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service is for serving personnel approaching discharge from the military, reservists and veterans with mental health difficulties. The veterans' mental health complex treatment service provides intensive care and treatment that may include

"support for drug and alcohol misuse, physical health, employment, housing, relationships and finances, as well as occupational and trauma focused therapies."

It is very important that this is supported. It had £16 million of spending last year and over 10,000 referrals up to the end of 2019, but my hon. Friend is right to raise this important issue.

Mr Speaker: It is important that the whole House supports the Royal Marines and their endeavours to raise money, not least in memory of one of the most courageous events of the second world war, and the Cockleshell heroes.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for his statement, and also for writing to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on my behalf and on behalf of my constituents following last week's exchanges. I also thank him for announcing the Backbench Business for next Thursday, the first item of which will be a debate promoted by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) on the future of coal in the United Kingdom, and the second a debate promoted by the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on digital infrastructure connectivity and accessibility.

Can we have an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the offshoring of British jobs by companies that this Government have supported through the pandemic? In particularly, I am thinking of Rolls-Royce transferring jobs overseas from its aero-engine plant in Lancashire.

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. May I just add a point on correspondence? I have made it very clear in this House that I will do everything I can to help Members get replies from Ministers, whether to written questions or to letters or emails that are sent in. It may be worth reminding Members of the courtesy the other way round: it is customary for Members to sign letters to Ministers themselves, not to get them sent by their members of staff. Members cannot expect ministerial responses to letters that are not sent by them personally. In my role as representing both the House to the Government and the Government to the House, I hope that both sides of that will be followed through.

As regards a statement by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Gentleman raises an issue that is obviously important—if the Government are supporting businesses, one would expect them to be very committed to being active in this country, rather than taking jobs overseas—and I will raise it on his behalf with my right hon. Friend.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future management of c2c rail services in my constituency? The service used to be known as the "misery line". It then became the "happy line", but unfortunately it has now become the misery line again, because, inexplicably, timetable changes have been made, with trains cancelled, but the trains and platforms are overcrowded. That is totally unacceptable during this coronavirus pandemic.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We always want happiness rather than misery, so I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I note the c2c has announced recently that it is

"introducing a more sustainable and resilient timetable, which should result in fewer short-notice cancellations."

That sounds like one of those pieces of verbiage we sometimes get from bureaucracies, but we await this with interest, and I am sure my hon. Friend will remind the House if it is not delivered upon. In the meantime, I will raise his point with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Yesterday, the Chancellor told me that the Government grants to councils to use to support their local economies could be used "as they see fit", but that was not true, because many freelancers and self-employed people do not qualify for schemes such as the one announced by the Liverpool City Region Mayor, Steve Rotheram. These people do not qualify for the national schemes, they do not qualify for the local schemes, and they do not quality for universal credit either. So will the Leader of the House confirm that the Chancellor was wrong yesterday? Will the Leader of the House admit that it is time the Government stepped up and dealt with the burning injustice facing so many of our working people who have been left behind in this crisis?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think this has to be put in the context of the overall support provided by the Government, with the amount of money now running into the hundreds of billions of pounds. Specifically for councils, £4.6 billion of unring-fenced support for councils has been paid, and there has been £1.1 billion to support local businesses and £10 billion in business rates relief. I absolutely accept that not everybody is able to get all the support that is available and that is a fair point for the hon. Gentleman to make, but the Chancellor is absolutely right to say that there is £4.6 billion of additional unring-fenced funding for councils.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): May I ask for a debate on residential landlords in the private rented sector, as the sector is very unhappy? It provides valuable property for people, but throughout this crisis landlords have been prevented from managing their properties and evicting people, even those with arrears from well before the crisis. I know of landlords who have not been able to evict people exhibiting antisocial behaviour and causing distress to other tenants because of restrictions the Government have imposed. Some people who could pay rent are not paying rent, but some of the residential landlords are still having to pay mortgages. This is a troubled sector, and we should explore all the issues and have a full debate.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not unsympathetic to what my hon. Friend is saying. The package of Government covid measures in the private rented sector seeks to strike the right balance between prioritising public health and supporting the most vulnerable renters, and ensuring that landlords can get access, and exercise their rights, to justice. The stay on possession proceedings was lifted on 21 September, and landlords can now take action on possession claims through the courts. Although we have laid regulations to require bailiffs not to enforce evictions until 11 January, there are exemptions—this is important—for the most serious cases, such as antisocial behaviour and illegal occupation.

We are grateful to landlords for their forbearance during this unprecedented time. Some may have been able to benefit from postponements of mortgage payments, which have been made available, but in all relevant Government guidance we strongly encourage tenants to pay their rent or to have an early conversation with their landlord if they have any difficulty doing so. The mortgage holiday has been extended, with the application process open until 31 January 2021.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Carers across the UK do a remarkable and difficult job on a daily basis. Some 900,000 full-time unpaid carers rely on carer's allowance, but at just £67.25 per week it is not nearly enough, and many families face severe hardship. Today, on Carers Rights Day, the Liberal Democrats have launched their Stand Up for Carers campaign, calling for the allowance to be raised by £20, in line with universal credit. Can we have a debate on the challenges that unpaid carers face, recognising the amazing jobs they do and looking at what more the Government can do to support our wonderful carers across the country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, my neighbour, for raising that point and for allowing us to pay tribute to carers on Carers Rights Day. It is a remarkably selfless thing that they do; it is incredibly difficult and hard work, and sometimes—particularly during lockdown—it has been very lonely work for carers who are members of the family and who are doing it out of love, rather than because they are employed.

In terms of finding extra funding, I am sure the hon. Lady listened to the Chancellor's statement yesterday. The public finances are not in a situation, I fear, where it is possible to find additional funding for things that it would be very nice to do if we were in a different financial situation.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): My mother bids me to wish you a good morning, Mr Speaker. When will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House find time for a debate with the purpose of examining, and an eye to correcting, the constitutional vandalism inflicted upon this country by the Labour Government of 1997 to 2010 regarding the roles and scope of the Supreme Court and the Lord Chancellor?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I send my felicitations to my hon. Friend's distinguished mother? I appreciate her message. I also appreciate my hon. Friend's point, because the last Labour Government decided to take a wrecking ball to our constitution and made a bit of a muddle with it. Some of their most foolish interventions were their constitutional blunders, which were out of step with many centuries of our parliamentary democracy. Blairite constitutional tinkering has weakened our Parliament and has helped to divide the United Kingdom, and I hope that this Government find an effective way of restoring our constitution to its proper form.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My constituent Paul Goose, a former member of the 1st Battalion of the Light Infantry, has played the last post on his doorstep since the first UK lockdown began. In doing so, he has raised £10,000 for Barnsley Hospital's intensive care unit. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating him and thanking him for his efforts, and in calling on "The Guinness Book of Records" to consider recognising his achievement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What a wonderful tale the hon. Lady has brought to the House. Ten thousand pounds raised for the Barnsley ICU is a terrific achievement. I hope "The Guinness Book of Records" will recognise her constituent for playing the last post every day. It is always such a moving tune, and hearing it must be very important for the residents nearby and a pleasure for them, so I absolutely congratulate her constituent. I have no influence with the editors of "The Guinness Book of Records", but I hope they will hear her plea.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]: All the polling out there suggests that the vast majority of the British public will welcome plans to divert foreign aid spending into UK priorities at this difficult time, when we know there is lots of support needed here at home. Turning the £4 billion sent abroad into a £4 billion levelling-up fund for our most disadvantaged communities is the right move—in fact, it is long overdue. Will my right hon. Friend make time available for us to discuss this funding and where and how it might best be used, and can I be the first to say to him and the Government that we will have some of it up in Mansfield, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend's plea is noted, and I absolutely agree with him. I think that people will very much welcome the announcement made by the Government yesterday—other, possibly, than a few Islingtonians. The Government take their responsibility for the people of the north and the midlands very seriously, millions of whom placed their trust in the Conservatives for the first time last December. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in the spending review yesterday that the Government are launching a new levelling up fund worth £4 billion in England, which will attract £800 million in the usual way through the Barnett formula for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our new fund will build infrastructure for everyday life, such as new bypasses, upgraded railway stations and better high streets and town centres. The Chancellor answered lots of questions on this yesterday, and it is important that this subject is properly scrutinised.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: On Wednesday 2 December, the Government plan to deport dozens of people, including one of my constituents, to Jamaica. He has lived in the UK since childhood and is being denied the chance to see his loved ones before being placed on that flight. Not only should this not be happening, but how can this level of cruelty take place? Can we please have an urgent debate on this terrifying situation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be wrong of me to comment on an individual case when I obviously do not know the details. This is a matter for the Home Secretary, and I am sure that the hon. Lady has used the usual means to raise her point with the Home Secretary. We have a very fair immigration system that tries to ensure that the people who are entitled to be here are here, and that those who are not entitled to be here have to go back to the places from which they came. That is a perfectly reasonable immigration policy, but individual cases can sometimes be much harder than the broad principles.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con) [V]: The whole House knows that the Leader of the House is a thoroughly decent chap, but, like all of us, he has the occasional blind spot. I have more than my fair share. His, though, relates to forbidding those colleagues with proxy votes who are not clinically extremely vulnerable from participating virtually in debates. May I suggest that he reconsiders and allows a proper debate and vote on the issue? The technology works, and the Government advice is that people should work from home when they are able to do so. There really should not be two classes of MP. All MPs should be able to represent their constituents in debate.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises the point about proxy votes. Proxy votes are available to all Members and were widened to reduce the numbers going through the Division Lobbies, and this does not have any effect on people's ability to appear in debates, or indeed for them to appear virtually in interrogative sessions. I would point out to my hon. Friend that, had he not tabled his amendment earlier this week, we would have extended this to the extremely clinically vulnerable for debates, and I am sorry that that did not happen.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: Yesterday was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. In the UK, two women a week will die at the hands of their partner or ex-partner, and unfortunately the pandemic has made this worse. I welcome the Government's announcement of £125 million to go to local authorities for accommodation for women fleeing abuse, but this falls well short of the

[Debbie Abrahams]

£2.3 billion that the sector has calculated that they need, so can we have a debate on how we can better support the women and children affected by this abuse, and about how we can prevent the abuse in the first place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is sometimes in the ability of the Leader of the House to grant something almost immediately, although by serendipity rather than by any action of my own, because there is a debate in Westminster Hall today in recognition of yesterday being the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, which will be an opportunity to raise those issues. I would also point out that the Domestic Abuse Bill is in the House of Lords. This is an important contribution to reducing domestic violence, and I think the whole House, and certainly the Government, takes this issue extremely seriously.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Two days ago, the Government tried to bounce the House of Commons into agreeing to their position on how hon. Members scrutinise the Government during debate. They deliberately pulled three items at the last minute to bring forward a motion that no one expected to be debated. There were no call lists and there was no advance knowledge for Members.

What is more, had there been a vote, the Deputy Chief Whip on the Government side would have cast hundreds of proxy votes in support of the Government motion in what was clearly a free vote, and many of those Members would not even have known that the vote was taking place. It was definitely a farce and probably a contempt of Parliament. Could the Leader of the House explain why on earth next week we do not have a proper scheduled debate on virtual participation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a very experienced parliamentarian and knows the Order Paper very well. If he looked at the Order Paper on Tuesday and at the debates on offer, he will have seen that it was extremely likely that we would, reach under all normal circumstances, the debate on virtual appearances in debates. My expectation was that we would have had between three quarters of an hour and an hour for it, had the previous debates gone in the normally expected way.

For reasons best known to themselves, the Opposition decided to spend the full 90 minutes—which they are entitled to do—on the statutory instrument that came earlier in the day. Because we had been asked for a debate, we decided that it was sensible to allow full time for the debate on virtual appearances. Therefore, we moved the remaining business from Tuesday to Wednesday, so that it could be completed. It is not unusual for debates to be changed or motions to be pulled.

The Opposition, joined by the SNP, then decided not to allow this to go to a vote by the House, or indeed to have the amendment which they supported put to a vote. So if anyone was playing ducks and drakes with parliamentary procedures, it was the Opposition.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: I want to take this opportunity to raise with and update the Leader of the House on the "DIY SOS" build we had for the wonderful Surfability, a community interest company at Caswell bay, Gower, and the new building for its users. The generosity of people across the UK in these difficult times has really shone through. Will he join me in highlighting Surfability, and call on potential donors and benefactors to take a look at its brilliant work and support its inclusive ethos that everyone should experience the joy of surfing?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As long as I do not have to enjoy the joy of surfing, very much so. I do not think that it is an act I will be joining in with, but I thank the hon. Lady. It is so important that she brings to the House's attention organisations such as Surfability and their good work. She is also right to praise the generosity of people across the whole of the United Kingdom, but also of course in her constituency of Gower, in these difficult times. I wish Surfability every success, and hope that the publicity it will get from the many millions who watch the Parliament channel will lead to its receiving more donations.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): [V] High coronavirus transmission rates across Greater Manchester have impacted on schools and on students' education. Schools such as the Kingsway, Bramhall High, Hazel Grove and Cheadle Hulme High are trying to prepare year 11 pupils for next year's exams or assessments, but covid has meant that many pupils have had fewer than 30 days in school since September. Does my right hon. Friend agree that covid-19 must not entrench educational disadvantage, and will he allow a debate in Government time to address the regional impact of coronavirus on education?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, yes, of course the coronavirus must not entrench disadvantage. That is why there is a £1 billion fund to help education to recover from this period, £350 million of which is allocated for the most disadvantaged to have special tutoring. We know that examinations and assessments are the best and fairest way of judging students' performance, and the Secretary of State for Education has confirmed that next year's GCSE, AS-level and A-level examination series will go ahead, but it is a priority to ensure that there is a consistent approach to what is taught and what will be assessed across schools. The Government are working with Ofqual and engaging widely with the education sector to identify any risks to examinations at a national, local and individual student level, and to consider measures needed to address any potential disruption.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: Yesterday's spending review was disappointing for many, including public sector workers and the Scottish Government, whose capital budget was cut while other such budgets were increased elsewhere. It was also yet another fiscal event without any help for the Women Against State Pension Inequality. Although there is not much hope that this Government will do the right thing, there remains hope that the parliamentary ombudsman's investigation of the issue will bear fruit. My constituent is one of the test cases, but they have been delayed again and again by the Department for Work and Pensions. Will the Leader of the House please speak to his Cabinet colleague from the DWP to grease the skids and allow the ombudsman to do their work?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I remind the hon. Gentleman that yesterday's announcement meant an extra £2.4 billion of funding for Scotland and shows the strength of the United Kingdom and its ability, as a United Kingdom,

to weather these extraordinary economic conditions. As regards the WASPI women, although there was a lot of sympathy with them in this House, the Court found that what was done was done properly and that it is fair to have unified the retirement age among men and women.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Would it be possible for us to have an urgent debate on the manner in which the Department of Health and Social Care is determining which tiers apply for local coronavirus restrictions? We are told by the Department that our local health and local authority leaders have been consulted and have given their views on local data and trends, but the consultations I have had with my local leaders in East Sussex reveal that not to be the case, which is a worry. My right hon. Friend was always a doughty defender of transparency when he spoke from the Back Benches; will he ensure that we get the same from Government Departments?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend undoubtedly raises an important point. It is vital that the Government make and implement all their coronavirus measures with public consent. Indeed, one of the remarkable things has been the extent to which the British people have voluntarily accepted the restraints and have not found it necessary to have them onerously imposed upon them. We will debate the statutory instruments next week, as I announced in my statement, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be making a statement shortly. It is important to have the right balance between acting quickly and decisively while managing also to consult the necessary bodies.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: The Leader of the House will, I am sure, share my opposition to and abhorrence of the glorification of terrorism in our society. Sadly, in Northern Ireland this happens on a daily basis. Indeed, the hon. Member for South Down (Chris Hazzard) has a constituency office named after two members of the Provisional IRA. Mr Sammy Heenan, a South Down constituent, was 12 when he watched as his father died outside their family home near Castlewellan following an IRA attack. He has described the signage as "repugnant", "obscene" and "deeply, deeply offensive". Does the Leader of the House agree that it would send a strong message to victims of terror in Northern Ireland and, indeed, across this United Kingdom, if the House took a stand against MPs who glorify terrorists? Does he agree that a debate to allow Members to express their opposition to the glorification of terrorism would send a strong message to constituents that it is wrong and that we stand united against it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises a point of fundamental importance. In this Chamber we have the shields of people such as Airey Neave and Ian Gow who were murdered by terrorists. We should remember and commemorate those who were killed and honour their memory; we should not honour and commemorate murderers—people who are wicked and evil and deserve condemnation, not commemoration.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con) [V]: First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on making many of us on the Conservative side of the House happy with his responses to the earlier question from the Scottish Member, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who was certainly not very happy.

Many Members, like my right hon. Friend and me, will have received a vast amount of correspondence from those who are part of the ExcludedUK campaign group. Certainly in Lincoln's case, these individuals are good people who have fallen through the cracks of Government support this year, so will my right hon. Friend make Government time available, perhaps with our right hon. Friend the Chancellor, to debate their situation and this critical issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a point also raised by an hon. Gentleman on the Opposition Benches, and it is something that the House is concerned about. Throughout the crisis, the Government have made huge efforts to support the economy's structures and maintain as many people's livelihoods as possible in an exceptional crisis. Unprecedented has been support offered to businesses, the employed, the self-employed and the unemployed through the benefits system. Throughout this crisis, the Government have sought to protect people's jobs and livelihoods and to support businesses and public services across the United Kingdom. The Government have spent over £280 billion of taxpayers' money to do so this year. Our package will remain the same as we move out of the national lockdown and into a tiering system, and we will continue to provide a comprehensive economic support package to support jobs and businesses. We have prioritised helping the greatest possible number of people as quickly as possible, but I do accept that there are some businesses that have not benefited and that is an exceptional difficulty for them.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I have asked a number of times, both in the Chamber and in letters, if the Government will amend bereavement support legislation to cover cohabitees with children. This is important to help families to get through the worst of times. I am glad to say that it has been confirmed that a remedial order will be brought forward. Will the Leader of the House please tell me when we can expect to see that order, which has been long awaited by many families?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his campaign? It shows the House at its best when issues that are very important to individual families are taken up by an individual MP and the Government then move to put things right. I do not have a specific date for him at the moment, but as soon as I do, I will notify him.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The kickstart scheme is an excellent Government proposal. Cheshire Learning Partnership, with the support of the East Cheshire chamber of commerce, both of which are based in my constituency, is keen to become a gateway into the scheme, with 40 local employers offering over 100 immediately available work placements for young people. Will the Leader of the House please press this with his ministerial colleagues at the DWP to ensure that it can be facilitated as quickly as possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all she is doing to help the kickstart scheme, and the East Cheshire chamber of commerce on its enthusiasm, and the answer to her question is yes.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: Yesterday the Chancellor failed to clarify whether the emergency weekly uplift of £20 on universal credit would continue past March. As the Resolution Foundation highlighted in September, emergency support has reduced, but not stemmed, a major rise in unemployment. Those relying on support from universal credit will experience another shock to their household income if this uplift is not extended past March. Can we have a debate in Government time on making the uplift to universal credit permanent?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not want to be unhelpful, but I have nothing to add to what the Chancellor said yesterday.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I have heard first-hand from pubs across Luton South, including the Bricklayers Arms, the Castle, the Globe and the Chequers, about how the economic impact of the pandemic is destroying their businesses. So far, the economic support has not been sufficient to safeguard their future, and many are very frustrated that the scientific evidence has not been published to justify the extra restrictions on pubs, particularly those that do not serve food. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a specific debate on support for the pub industry so that we can protect our pubs' future at the heart of our communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know this is a matter of concern to many hon. and right hon. Members, as we all value the pubs in our own constituencies, and in these very difficult times, the closures have fallen very heavily upon them. There is support available of £3,000 a month for pubs that are forced to close or only to serve takeaways, and there is other support for pubs in the different tiers. The £3,000 has been set at the median level of rent that they would have to pay, so the figure is based on an assessment. There will be time to discuss this because there will be a whole day's debate on the covid regulations next week, and I encourage the hon. Lady to raise her point again then.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: The Leader of the House may have seen that the European Parliament is planning to sit between Christmas and the new year to approve, hopefully, any Brexit deal. Can he update the House on what plans the Government have for this House to scrutinise the potential deal, and how long Select Committees will have before the House votes to consider the full details if we do get a deal?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House last sat on Christmas day, I understand, in 1656, and it is not the intention of Her Majesty's Government, or my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip, to ask us to sit on Christmas day, or indeed the feast of St Stephen, this year. I will give updates on Government business and plans for recesses in the normal way, but at the moment I have no further information to give.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Leader of the House spent more time on Twitter defending his decision not to allow virtual participation in debates than he did at the Dispatch Box on Tuesday, despite his claims of a debate. As the Leader of the House he should be the servant of the House—the servus servorum populi, perhaps. Unlike the Pope, however, he is not infallible. He needs to stop digging. He has to admit the he misread the will of the House. He has misunderstood what Members want. If he is so convinced of the strength of his arguments, he should schedule a debate in Government time. Let us have a proper call list. Let us have a full airing of the issues and a free vote, and see what the House wants to do on virtual participation.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought the hon. Gentleman was Scottish. It turns out he is a Gaul, or at any rate he has a great deal of gall to say what he has just said when there were two hours of debate. The House could have come to a decision, but he, with his friends the socialists, decided not to allow that vote to happen. One hon. Member managed to talk out his own amendment. This is a most unusual way of carrying on, but the Government have done everything they can to facilitate the ability of the House to come to a decision. As I said earlier, looking at the schedule of business for Tuesday and the matters that were under discussion, it was extremely likely, that the matter would come to a debate. That we did not do so is actually down to the Opposition Members who decided to talk at length early on. We tried to facilitate matters for the House. That opportunity was not taken advantage of. I am deeply sorry about that, because I was hoping that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), for example, would be able to appear remotely. The hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) managed to stop that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering and Corby citizens advice bureau has just published its latest customer satisfaction survey, which shows that it has helped local people with 25,000 issues and helped them to access over £4 million of financial help. It also states that, of its customers 98% said it was easy to access the service; 99% said they were happy with the advice received; and 100% said they would recommend the CAB to others. Can we have a Government statement praising CABs for the wonderful work they do, and highlighting the Kettering and Corby CAB, led by Debbie Egan, as a shining example?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The only organisation or individual in Kettering who would reach similar levels of satisfaction is my hon. Friend, who I think would probably achieve even higher levels of satisfaction than the 98% achieved by the citizens advice bureau. I would very much like to place on record, on my own behalf and on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, our thanks to the citizens advice bureau, which has offered support and advice to the British people for 80 years. It does a fantastic job in Bath and North East Somerset, and I am very glad to hear that it does a fantastic job in Kettering and Corby as well.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): As we have heard, today it is Carers Rights Day. Our unpaid carers do an amazing job at any time, but during the covid-19 pandemic the pressures on them have been immense. I would like to thank those unpaid carers in my constituency, as well as Gateshead Carers and the Carers Trust Tyne and Wear which offer them support. Carer's allowance is still only £67.25 a week, which is nothing. May we have a debate in Government time on carers' rights and the need to increase the benefit allowance?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating Gateshead Carers and the other organisations in her constituency that do such fine work to support carers in this difficult period. I reiterate what I said in answer to an earlier question. It is really important work, a labour of love, literally, and a very lonely labour, probably, in the lockdown circumstance. I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but I think to have a debate, in Backbench Business time or in Westminster Hall, in celebration of carers is a very worthy thing to do.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will not want to prejudge the regional tierings, but does he agree that it is critical that we get our great capital city, London, back into the lowest tier as quickly as possible, and will he countenance a debate on how we can restore our great capital city to its former glory?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, I am not sure that it is in order for me to cede the Dispatch Box to my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, who is standing by your side, but my hon. Friend has timed her question to perfection, because just before my right hon. Friend comes in to make his statement, she has called for our great bustling metropolis to be able to bustle. Although London does have lower rates than some of the other regions in England, it is still at a higher level than before. The Government will monitor the information from a variety of sources, so that the decisions made are on an evidence basis. I, like my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, am one of the House's many optimists. I believe that, as we make progress with considerable speed to mass testing, and get closer and closer to a roll-out of mass vaccinations, London's economy will soon be fighting fit again, and I hope to see our black taxis as full, busy and bustling as they were before the contagion hit.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab) [V]: Can we have a debate in Government time on the morale of workers across Government Departments in the wake of their real-terms pay cut announced yesterday, and with civil servants living in fear that, thanks to the Prime Minister, they now have no redress against bullying and harassment?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I completely reject the premise of the last part of the hon. Lady's question. It is a misrepresentation—an inaccurate representation—of what was found by the Prime Minister earlier in the week. As for what the Chancellor announced yesterday, it is worth pointing out that private sector wages have fallen by 1% while wages in the public sector have risen by 4% over the last year, and that ultimately, without the private sector, we have no money to afford the public sector. Therefore, there needs to be some degree of parity between the two. Most importantly the least well-off—those on below the median wage of £24,000 a year—will receive an increase of at least £250 a year, which, with inflation running at 0.5%, is an above-inflation increase.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Yet again yesterday the Chancellor completely overlooked the 3 million people who have been left out of any financial support during the pandemic. The Leader of the House will be aware that the gaps in support all-party parliamentary group is one of the largest APPGs, with 262 MPs, yet the Chancellor has refused to answer many of our letters, to meet us or to engage with representatives of the groups that he has forgotten about. My request to the Leader of the House is very simple: will he ask his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to meet representatives of the APPG and the groups that he has neglected?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not, again, accept that representation of what the Chancellor has done. The Government have provided £280 billion of support. There is support available in different forms for many people across the country, and every effort has been made to support the economy as widely as possible. However, I have always viewed it as my role as Leader of the House to try to facilitate meetings between Members and Ministers. I cannot promise a meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but I will do my best to try to facilitate a meeting with Ministers in due course for the hon. Lady.

Valerie Vaz: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it relevant to business questions?

Valerie Vaz: No, but it is very important.

Mr Speaker: Okay.

Valerie Vaz: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I know that it is unusual to take points of order before statements, but this is a matter of extreme importance. At 11.14 am, it was announced that people could find out which tier they were in via a journalist, rather than the statement to the House. I know that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is standing outside the Chamber. This is an appalling way to treat Parliament. Could I have your advice on whether that was an appropriate thing to do? The website has crashed because everybody is on it. There is no point in our being in the Chamber, where we should hear the announcement first—we might as well be sitting remotely, which the Leader of the House is not allowing. Could I have your advice on whether this was an appropriate way to deal with important information about the tiers?

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair, but I do have an opinion. This House—and I am sure the Leader of the House totally agrees with me—should be informed first. We keep telling the Government that that is the way that a good Government should treat and respect this Chamber. It is not acceptable to put the information online first. The only good thing is that the website has crashed, so it is not helpful, and we might get the statement first, but it is not acceptable. I say once again in the strongest terms—and I know that the Leader of the House will pass this on—that the House should hear it first. We are elected to hear it first, and the Government should give the House the respect that it deserves. Let us leave it at that.

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

11.35 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

11.39 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, I will make a statement on coronavirus. We are approaching the end of a year in which we have asked so much of the British people. In response to this unprecedented threat to lives and to livelihoods, the British people have well and truly risen to the challenge by coming together to slow the spread and support each other. I know how difficult this has been, especially for those areas that have been in restrictions for so long. The national measures have successfully turned the curve and begun to ease pressure on the NHS. Cases are down by 19% from a week ago, and daily hospital admissions have fallen 7% in the last week.

January and February are always difficult months for the NHS, so it is vital that we safeguard the gains we have made. We must protect our NHS this winter. We have invested in expanded capacity, not just in the Nightingales, but in hospitals across the land, and we have welcomed thousands of new staff. This morning's figures show that the number of nurses in the NHS is up 14,800 compared with just a year ago, so we are well on our way to delivering on our manifesto commitment of 50,000 more nurses. Together, while we invest in our NHS, we must also protect our NHS, so that it will always be there for all of us during this pandemic and beyond.

I am so grateful for the resolve that people have shown throughout the crisis. Thanks to this shared sacrifice, we have been able to announce that we will not be renewing our national restrictions in England, and we have been able to announce UK-wide arrangements for Christmas, allowing friends and loved ones to reunite and form a five-day Christmas bubble. I know that this news provides hope for so many, but we must remain vigilant. There are still today 16,570 people in hospital with coronavirus across the UK, and 696 deaths were reported yesterday. That means 696 more families mourning the loss of a loved one, and the House mourns with them.

Tempting as it may be, we cannot simply flick a switch and try to return life straight back to normal, because if we did that, we would undo the hard work of so many and see the NHS overwhelmed, with all that that would entail. We must keep suppressing the virus, while supporting education, the economy and the NHS until a vaccine can make us safe. That is our plan. We will do that by returning to a tiered approach, applying the toughest measures to the parts of the country where cases and pressure on the NHS are highest and allowing greater freedom in areas where prevalence is lower.

While the strategy remains the same, the current epidemiological evidence and clinical advice shows that we must make the tiers tougher than they were before to protect the NHS through the winter and avert another national lockdown. We have looked at each of the tiers afresh and strengthened them, as the Prime Minister set out on Monday. In tier 1, if you can work from home, you should do so. In tier 2, alcohol may only be served in hospitality settings as part of a substantial meal. In tier 3, indoor entertainment, hotels and other accommodation will have to close, along with all forms of hospitality except for delivery and takeaway.

I know that people want certainty about the rules they need to follow in their area. These decisions are not easy, but they are necessary. We have listened to local experts and been guided by the best public health advice, including advice from the Joint Biosecurity Centre. We set out the criteria in the covid-19 winter plan, and we publish the data on which the decisions are made. As the winter plan sets out, the five indicators are the case rate in all age groups; in particular, cases among the over-60s; the rate at which cases are rising or falling; the positivity rate; and the pressures on the local NHS.

When setting the boundaries for these tiers, we have looked at not just geographical areas but the human geographies that influence how the virus spreads, such as travel patterns and the epidemiological situation in neighbouring areas. Although all three tiers are less stringent than the national lockdown we are all living in now, to keep people safe and to keep the gains that are being made, more areas than before will be in the top two tiers. That is necessary to protect our NHS and keep the virus under control.

Turning to the tiers specifically, the lowest case rates are in Cornwall, the Isle of Wight and the Isles of Scilly, which will go into tier 1. All three areas have had very low case rates throughout, and I want to thank residents for being so vigilant during the pandemic. I know that many other areas would want to be in tier 1, and I understand that.

My constituency of West Suffolk has the lowest case rate for over-60s in the whole country, and I wish to thank Matthew Hicks and John Griffiths, the leaders of Suffolk County Council and West Suffolk Council, and their teams for this achievement. However, despite that, and despite the fact that Suffolk overall has the lowest case rate outside Cornwall and the Isle of Wight, our judgment, looking at all the indicators, and based on the public health advice, is that Suffolk needs to be in tier 2 to get the virus further under control. I hope that Suffolk and so many other parts of the country can get to tier 1 soon, and the more people stick to the rules, the more quickly that will happen.

We must make the right judgments, guided by the science. The majority of England will be in tier 2, but I am afraid that a significant number of areas need to be in tier 3 to bring case rates down. I know how tough this is, both for areas that have been under restrictions for a long time, such as Leicester and Greater Manchester, and for areas where cases have risen sharply recently, such as Bristol, the west midlands and Kent. The full allocations were published this morning and laid as a written ministerial statement just before this statement began. I understand the impact that these measures will have, but they are necessary given the scale of the threat we face.

We will review the measures in a fortnight and keep them regularly under review after that. I want to thank everybody in the tier 3 areas for the sacrifices they are making to protect not just themselves and their families, but their whole community. Regardless of their tier, I ask everyone to think of their own responsibilities to keep the virus under control. We should see these restrictions not as a boundary to push but as a limit on what the public health advice says we can safely do in any area. Frankly, the less any one person passes on this disease, the faster we can get the disease under control together—and that is on all of us.

We must all play our part while we work so hard to deliver the new technologies that will help us get out of this—in particular, vaccines and testing. The past fortnight has been illuminated by news of encouraging clinical trials for vaccines, first from Pfizer-BioNTech, then from Moderna and then, earlier this week, from the Oxford-AstraZeneca team. If these vaccines are approved, the NHS stands ready to roll them out as soon as safely possible.

Alongside vaccines, we have made huge strides in the deployment of testing. Our roll-out of community testing has been successful, because it means we can identify more people who have the virus but do not have symptoms and help them isolate, breaking the connections that the virus needs in order to spread. As part of our covid-19 winter plan, we will use these tests on a regular basis, for instance to allow visitors safely to see loved ones in care homes, to protect our frontline NHS and social care colleagues, and to allow vital industries and public services to keep running safely.

We have seen in Liverpool, where more than 300,000 people have now been tested, how successful this community testing can be. I pay tribute to the people of Liverpool, both for following the restrictions and for embracing community testing. It has been a big team effort across the whole city, and the result is that in the Liverpool city region the number of cases has fallen by more than two thirds. In the borough of Liverpool itself, where the mass testing took place, cases have fallen by three quarters. It has not been easy and, sadly, many people in Liverpool have lost their lives to covid, but thanks to people sticking to the rules and to the huge effort of community testing, Liverpool's cases are now low enough for the whole Liverpool city region to go into tier 2. This shows what we can do when we work together. We can beat the virus. I want to pay tribute to the people of Liverpool, NHS Test and Trace, the university, the hospital trust, Mayor Joe Anderson and so many others who have demonstrated such impressive leadership and responsibility, and a true sense of public service.

We are expanding this community testing programme even further to launch a major community testing programme, homing in on the areas with the greatest rates of infection. This programme is open to all local authorities in tier 3 areas in the first instance and offers help to get out of the toughest restrictions as fast as possible. We will work with local authorities on a plan to get tests where they are needed most, and on how we can get as many people as possible to come forward and get certainty about their condition. The more people who are tested, the more quickly a local area can move down through the tiers and get life closer to normal.

Viruses can take a short time to spread but a long time to vanquish. Sadly, there is no quick fix. They call upon our determination to make sacrifices that will bring them to heel and upon our ingenuity to make scientific advances that will get us through. Hope is on the horizon, but we still have further to go, so we must all dig deep. The end is in sight. We must not give up now. We must follow these new rules and make sure that our actions today will save lives in future and help get our country through this. I commend the statement to the House.

11.51 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I suppose that we should all thank him for advance sight of the website, but sadly, it crashed before we could check what tiers we were in.

The news of a vaccine is indeed light at the end of the tunnel, but we are still in the tunnel and we have a significant way to go to drive infection rates down and keep our constituents safe. We understand why tough restrictions are still needed, but let us be clear: today, millions of people trying to survive in the second lockdown will soon be forced to endure further local lockdown restrictions. Does the Secretary of State accept that these interventions succeed when made in tandem with local communities?

I remember that when areas such as Bury and Trafford went into lockdowns in the summer, the Secretary of State promised that MPs would be involved in the decision. Has that commitment been abandoned? Then, Ministers agreed to involve regional leaders, but took exception to being challenged by Andy Burnham. What role do regional leaders now have in these decisions, or is the position really that the Prime Minister imposes from Downing Street restrictions on communities across the midlands and the north—restrictions that will have a huge impact on the livelihoods of families and small businesses?

Christmas, the Secretary of State will know, is vital to pubs, restaurants and entertainment venues across those areas. They will need substantial financial support to get through this period. Will those areas that went into tier 3 lockdowns before the national lockdown, such as Greater Manchester and South Yorkshire, get backdated economic support for their local small businesses?

Parts of the country, such as my own city of Leicester and Bury, Leigh and Heywood, have been under a form of lockdown for months, with families forced apart and grandparents not seeing their grandchildren. Those families today will want to know what the exit strategy is and what voice they will have in that strategy. The Secretary of State has outlined five criteria by which local lockdowns will be judged. Will he publish clear, transparent rules for areas entering and leaving tiers—a score card for every area, assessing its covid progress against its criteria, so everyone can judge this publicly?

The Secretary of State talks of mass lateral flow testing, and we welcome the advances, but over two weeks ago he announced he was sending, I think, 930,000 of those tests to local authorities, yet only around 8,500 are being used a day. Can he explain why that is? He will also be aware—I am sure he will have studied this—that Slovakia recently tested more than 3 million people over a weekend using those tests. The Slovaks incentivised people to get tested by offering greater freedoms. Is that part of the Government's thinking on how those tests could be used?

Evidence from Liverpool suggests that there is a lower take-up of tests in poorer, harder-to-reach communities. Is not the problem that if people and their contacts feel they will be financially penalised for a positive test, they will avoid a test, they will switch off the app and they will not answer their phone to unrecognised call centre numbers? The reason people soldier on when ill is not a stiff upper lip: it is that they

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cannot afford to feed their families otherwise. Surely, after months and months, it is now obvious that low-paid people such as care workers on zero-hours contracts need better support to isolate. Why did the Chancellor not increase statutory sick pay in the spending review yesterday?

The test and trace budget has now increased to £22 billion, more than the annual budget for the police and the fire service combined, yet the Office for Budget Responsibility yesterday confirmed that its forecasts are based on the fact that

"a less effective TTI"—

test, trace and isolate—

"system necessitates keeping a more stringent set of public health restrictions in place over the winter."

At what point will the Secretary of State accept that the current Serco model has failed? I am not against using the private sector, but I am against throwing shedloads of taxpayers' money at failing private sector contracts. Local authorities, especially those now in tier 3, should be leading this retrospective contact-tracing work, and they should be given the data from day one, so they can get on with it. By the way, why was there no uplift yesterday in the public health grant? Surely, this is a time when we should be investing in public health, not freezing the grant.

On the easements for Christmas, there will indeed be relief in families across the country, but the Secretary of State will understand that there will also be nervousness across the NHS. We need a clear public health message: asking people to be "jolly careful" is not good enough. He will know that January is an immensely busy and pressured time for our NHS. It is not just the patients filling up covid beds; it is the emergency pathways that are already running at hot and it is the immense elective backlog. We know there are fewer beds because of social distancing. We know staff are exhausted. One in seven hospitals have restricted elective surgery or planned operations so far this winter. What plans are in place to protect the NHS through January, especially if there is a long cold snap? How many elective operations does he anticipate will be cancelled in January? Nobody in this House wants to see a third lockdown, so can he guarantee that the measures he has announced today will be enough to bring the R down and sustain it below 1 for the coming months until a vaccine allows life to return to normal?

Matt Hancock: The goal of the Government is to bring R to below 1 to suppress the virus until a vaccine can keep us safe. That is the strategy.

I shall take the precise points that the hon. Gentleman raised. He asked for an exit strategy. The statement I outlined is the exit strategy: it is to keep the virus suppressed with the minimum damage possible to the economy and, indeed, to education, while we work as fast and as hard as we can towards a vaccine and with the widespread use of community testing across the piece to help to keep the virus under control.

I would have expected the hon. Gentleman to welcome the massive progress in Liverpool which has shown that a combination of sticking by the rules and community testing on a very large scale can help to bring this virus right under control. Instead, he criticised it for not getting into harder-to-reach communities. That is exactly where we need to get into, and that is why we do it in combination and hand in hand with the local authority.

I praise Joe Anderson, and I also praise other local leaders, such as Ben Houchen in Tees Valley, who is working with us on this; Andy Street and leaders across the west midlands; and the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) in South Yorkshire, who we are working with to get a community testing system up and running in places such as Doncaster. I want to see the community testing that has been successful in Liverpool rolled out across the tier 3 areas as much as is possible, and I invite all councils to engage.

We invited councils to engage ahead of the decisions today, and we also invited all colleagues in the House to have an input, but it is important that we have clear public health messaging, because unfortunately we did see the number of cases going up and continuing to go up in those areas where local leaders were not working alongside us. It was a sharp contrast with what happened, for instance, in Liverpool, but also in other areas where the local leadership was so constructive and positive.

The hon. Gentleman asked for a scorecard for the exit strategy. We publish the data, and if we can make it into an even more accessible format, I think that is a good idea. He asked about supporting the NHS—absolutely. I am delighted that, yesterday, my right hon Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with the support of the Prime Minister, put another £3 billion into the NHS, on top of the £6.6 billion that is already being invested. That money starts flowing in this financial year, for this winter, and then runs into next year.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the need to support people who have tested positive. We have put in place a £500 support payment. On NHS Test and Trace, I thought from the figures this morning that he would welcome the fact that the majority of in-person tests are now turned around within 24 hours. That is significant progress on the speed of turnaround in testing, for which I am very grateful to my team. There will be further support for local councils that find themselves in tiers 3 and 2 to support the action that is needed. But all in all, let us come together and work together to get this virus under control and keep it under control, so that we can get life back to normal as soon as possible.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister back from his splendid isolation to the place that he has no doubt been itching to get back to more than any other—this House of Commons—and say how wonderful it is to see him here?

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): It is great to see you.

Jeremy Hunt: From a sedentary position, I think the Prime Minister said that he was delighted to see me here. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, he is delighted to see me here—on the Back Benches. *[Laughter.]*

Turning to more serious matters, these are very difficult decisions, and part of the leadership we have to show in a pandemic is telling people unwelcome news. I want to salute the Health Secretary's cautious approach to Christmas, because, much as we all want Christmas to be as normal as possible, nothing would be more crazy

than to take our feet off the accelerator at this moment and then see a spike in deaths in February, so I think this is the right approach.

There is one bit of further good news—on top of the news about vaccines and on top of the news about mass testing—that I know the Health Secretary would like to be able to give and that would be enormously welcome: that every single person living in a care home could be sure that they could be visited by a close relative before Christmas. I know he wants to do that, but there are huge logistical challenges in getting that mass testing technology to work in time. May I urge him to do everything he can, because that would make such a big difference to the nearly 400,000 people in care homes?

Matt Hancock: I hesitate to interrupt the love-in between the Prime Minister and my predecessor, but I am grateful for his support—for their support. This is a set of difficult measures, but I think the public understand why we have to take them and why they are necessary.

On the point about getting visiting going in care homes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Sometimes we talk about these tests and this new technology in an abstract way or from a scientific point of view, but it really matters and it really improves people's lives. Where we can use testing to make visiting safe in care homes, that is an example of the way in which these new technologies can help to get life a little bit back towards normal. Of course, it must be done in a safe way and carefully, but we are now developing the protocols for exactly how that can happen and working hard with the goal that everyone should have the opportunity to visit a loved one in a care home before Christmas.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Many scientists have expressed concern that the easing of restrictions at Christmas could lead to another surge of covid cases in January. With cases still over 80% of the level at the start of lockdown, is the Secretary of State not worried that allowing outdoor events of 2,000 participants and indoor events of 1,000 in level 2 high-risk areas could drive up infection rates ahead of Christmas? Although lateral flow testing is very welcome, given how it increases capacity, the Secretary of State previously stated that the mass testing in Liverpool was a pilot and would be evaluated before being rolled out elsewhere. As the city has also been under tight restrictions and then lockdown, how will the impact of mass testing alone be evaluated? How does he plan to counter the lower uptake among deprived communities—the very ones at highest risk, as seen in Liverpool—and, with no clinical evaluation yet published, how can he justify putting out contract tenders for an eye-watering £43 billion and rolling out this approach to 67 other areas? Should this strategy not be compared with investing money and energy in getting the traditional test, trace and isolate system working properly? Currently, over 40% of contacts in England are still not even informed that they should be isolating.

Finally, the Secretary of State knows that it is not testing, but isolation, that stops the spread of the virus. If people who are infected or could be carriers are not isolating, no amount of testing will stop viral spread. A study by King's College London that suggested that fewer than a quarter were isolating when advised to do so was incredibly worrying, so what assessment are the Government doing to clarify current isolation rates and understand the reasons why people may not follow the advice they are given?

Matt Hancock: Of course, we are constantly evaluating the impact of people isolating, and how many people isolate when asked to. I would encourage the hon. Lady to look at a broader range of studies than just that one from King's College, especially those dealing with the self-isolation of those who test positive, for whom the rate tends to be higher.

The hon. Lady asked about the use of lateral flow tests to have a negative impact on the number of cases in an area. Of course, we have been evaluating this through out the study in Liverpool, which is why we can have confidence in rolling it out more broadly across tier 3 areas. I included in my statement a high-level assessment. The number of cases in the Liverpool city region is down by two thirds, but in the city itself, where the testing took place—the testing was of people who live in the city, and of people who work in the city and live largely in the wider city region—the number of cases is down by over three quarters. That is one piece of evidence. It is clear that it is the combination of people following the rules and community testing, with appropriate incentives to get people to take up that mass community testing, that can help to make this work. We want to work with local directors of public health to understand how this can work effectively in their areas, precisely to reach those hard-to-reach people whom the hon. Lady mentioned.

Finally, I echo the hon. Lady's request that we be cautious this Christmas. However, I am delighted that we have agreed an approach across the whole UK, including the SNP Administration in Edinburgh, the Welsh Labour Administration and the cross-party Administration in Northern Ireland, because there are so many ties that bind us together and mean that we are stronger as one United Kingdom, working together to tackle this virus.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is incredibly disappointing news that Buckinghamshire, having entered the national lockdown in tier 1, will emerge from that lockdown into the more punitive restrictions of tier 2 —a decision that will be hard to understand in the rural communities of north Buckinghamshire which have relatively low infection rates, and one that is hard to understand given that there has been zero consultation between central Government, Buckinghamshire Council and our local NHS. I appreciate that my right hon. Friend has impossible choices to make in order to control this virus, but will he commit to ensuring that Buckinghamshire Council and our local NHS are fully consulted as these tiers are reviewed going forward?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Along with my hon. Friend, the director of public health in Buckinghamshire was invited to engage with the team as we were looking at the indicators and making this decision. These are difficult decisions; he is right about that. The case rate in Buckinghamshire is 138 per 100,000, and positivity is above 5%. We will review these allocations in a fortnight and then regularly thereafter. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and supporting the people of Buckinghamshire to do what is right, to get the case rate down and to get Buckinghamshire—if at all possible,

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and if it is safe—into tier 1, with the lighter restrictions. But it is critical, to keep people safe, that we take the action we need to today.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): A recent University College London study found that less than half the public understood what the rules were in the previous tier system. Today we have a new tier system. We have a five-day relaxation at Christmas. We have a Government website that has crashed this morning. The written ministerial statement published this morning has a number of question marks against different areas. There are inconsistencies between what the Prime Minister has said, what the OBR has said and what the Secretary of State has told MPs about the length of restrictions. I have a simple request: will the Secretary of State ensure that there is a clear, consistent and honest communications campaign to ensure public trust and compliance and so that we do not overly raise expectations?

Matt Hancock: Yes, there will be a widespread public information campaign about these new tiers. It is on all of us to follow the rules in our local area. Notwithstanding the rules, we all need to behave in a responsible way, because we all have a role in controlling the spread of the virus.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) [V]: As the Government continue to impose further unprecedented restrictions on people's freedoms, it is important to give people hope and justification. As York's covid rate continues to fall and is the lowest in Yorkshire, can the Secretary of State outline how we can get to tier 1 as fast as possible? Will he publish the assessment and the data based on which York was placed in tier 2, so that we can best judge how to get to tier 1? He talks about regular reviews, but a weekly review would be much more desirable.

Matt Hancock: Yes; I can answer positively on all counts. We have a regular weekly session to go through all these. I am committing to regular reviews rather than weekly ones simply because we sometimes have to do it more than weekly, especially if cases are shooting up in an area. On my hon. Friend's point about publication, we have published today not only the data—and we will publish more data on each area—but an explanation of the reason for the decision taken in each area. I know that he and colleagues across York have worked hard, because there was quite a serious spike in York, and it is coming down at the moment. Overall, we still require the whole of North Yorkshire to go into tier 2 because the case rates are still elevated right across it, and we all need to work together to get them down.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I share the concern of my neighbouring colleague, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), about clarity over tiers and messages. One message and rule that is clear but unwelcome is the 11 pm curfew for pubs and restaurants. Curfews fail to address the issue of crowds in the streets and on public transport, which risk spreading infection. Will the Secretary of State commit to meet London government, including the Mayor of London, as soon as possible to discuss this and agree the criteria that London needs to meet to de-escalate as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: Of course we have been engaging with the team who work across London. There is a lot of work to do in London. There are parts of London where cases continue to rise, and we need to get that under control, but there are also parts where they are falling and things are very much going in the right direction. Likewise, there is pressure in some parts of the NHS, but there is a lot of mutual aid within the NHS across London. There is a lot of work to do in London to keep it in tier 2, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and other London colleagues on that.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): People living in Runnymede and Weybridge often ask me on what basis we are subject to local tiers and to restrictions, and it is clear that, alongside the data, other factors are taken into account in the two decisions. I thank my right hon. Friend for his response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) that the reasons and the data will be published. Will local hospital bed utilisation be part of the reasons published?

Matt Hancock: Yes. There are five indicators that we take into account in deciding on which tier. One is pressure and anticipated pressure on the local NHS, and bed occupancy rates are of course a critical part of that assessment. I know that people are looking for a clear numerical boundary between the different tiers, but because we are looking at five different indicators rather than a single one, there is no automatic figure at which a different tier is triggered. We have to look at all the circumstances, including, for instance, outbreaks. Some cities, on their pure numbers, would be in tier 3, but because an outbreak is specific—for instance, in a school or care home—it is appropriate that they are in tier 2. We have to look at these very localised issues as well, and that is why the engagement with local directors of public health is so important.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): There will be bitter disappointment in Dorset, in both the urban and rural areas, that we are in tier 2 even though our infection rates are now falling quite rapidly. My main interest today is finding out how we get out of tier 2 and into tier 1. If we are going to have regular—that is, weekly—reviews, that is great and fine, but if we are not, and we are stuck in that tier for two or three weeks, would the Secretary consider some kind of appeals process, and might his admirable Minister for Health be the appeals process?

Matt Hancock: We work as a very cohesive team of Ministers in the Department, and we all work on covid-related issues. I take it from my hon. Friend's gentle chiding that he would rather my No. 2 took these decisions, but I am afraid he is stuck with me for the time being.

On the serious point that my hon. Friend raises, we will review the tiers in a fortnight and then regularly, which he can reasonably take to be weekly. We have a weekly cycle of meetings, with the chief medical officer chairing a meeting, typically on a Tuesday. I then chair a meeting on a Wednesday for an announcement on Thursday of any change to the tiers.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Secretary of State knows that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on air pollution, so he will not be

surprised if I point out that tier 3 areas tend to be the areas with the highest pollution. Every microgram of PM2.5 per cubic metre increases covid deaths by between 14% and 18%, and that is on top of the 40,000 deaths annually from air pollution. Does he agree that we need cross-Government activity and an all-Government report annually—from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport—on what they are doing individually and collectively to combat air pollution and, in so doing, to reduce the covid death rate and the overall death rate? I can see the Prime Minister nodding sagely. Would the Secretary of State agree to an annual report?

Matt Hancock: It is very impressive that the hon. Gentleman can see the Prime Minister, since he has just left the Chamber, but I am sure the Prime Minister is nodding sagely, wherever he is. The hon. Gentleman makes a very serious and important point, on which we agree. Air pollution is a very serious issue. In lockdowns, air pollution has been reduced; that is one upside to what are otherwise very damaging things to have to do, although they are necessary to keep the virus under control. I hope we can continue to work together on tackling air pollution long after this pandemic is over.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): With Gloucestershire in tier 2, next to South Gloucestershire, in tier 3, and the Welsh border, will the Secretary of State confirm that there will be no travel restrictions between different tiers or across the Welsh border? Since the Government can change tiers without debate, which has a huge impact, especially on the hospitality sector in terms of moving from tier 2 to tier 3, will he also confirm when the tier decisions will be published?

Matt Hancock: I am afraid that I cannot confirm that with respect to the Welsh border, because the legal restrictions on travel were a decision by the Welsh Administration, rather than by the UK Government for England. We have taken the view that travel restrictions should be in guidance, because there are all sorts of complicated circumstances in which people might need to travel. We have done that when we have been in national lockdown across England, as well as locally. I am sorry that I cannot be clearer than that. On the point about renewal and when we review these matters, we are proposing to review first on 16 December and then regularly thereafter to ensure that we keep the tiered restrictions as up to date as possible.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: The Health Secretary will know the pressure that Pinderfields Hospital, especially, has been under. The staff there have been doing an incredible job. It is welcome that the number of covid patients in hospital is starting to fall and that the number of infections locally has fallen by around 30% in the last week, but he will also know that our NHS, social care and public health staff have had a really difficult year and that the winter is going to carry on being tough, with many operations to catch up on. Will he now look swiftly at the case for added support and pay for NHS, public health and social care staff this winter, in recognition of the incredible job they have been doing to care for all of us?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted that we have a significant increase in the number of NHS staff. The figures published this morning show that there are 14,800 more nurses than there were this time last year in the NHS. I am really pleased about that. The right hon. Lady will no doubt have seen yesterday that the pause on pay increases across the public sector announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor does not apply to nurses and doctors. That is, in part, in recognition of the incredible work that they have done during this pandemic.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): As the economic damage the pandemic is doing becomes increasingly apparent, it is clearly right that businesses of all types are reopened as soon as it is safe to do so. This will take longer than it needs to if the restrictions on those businesses are calculated on the basis of virus information for places a long way away or as a geographical average for a wide area encompassing urban and rural parts. That is exactly what is going to happen to the businesses in my constituency, which will not be able to open next week if they are hospitality businesses, not because of the rates where they are, but because of the rates somewhere else. Surely it is more sensible to calculate restrictions on the smallest geographical area where data is reliable, which is largely boroughs and districts. Will my right hon. Friend commit in his review in two weeks' time to look not just at whether individual areas are in the right tier but at whether the areas are properly constructed?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right about the importance of this. We have to balance the need for an area to reflect the human geography in which people live and effectively communicate the tiering decisions across that geography, with precisely the concerns that he mentions. For instance, Slough is in tier 3, despite the fact that Berkshire, of which it is a part, is in tier 2, so we are prepared to take those decisions at a lower-tier local authority area level. That is the exception rather than the norm, but we look at this every single week.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: Covid-19 is a world pandemic and it needs to be tackled on a global basis. International travel will expose the UK to future outbreaks, particularly if the virus mutates, so on both humanitarian and public health grounds, does the Secretary of State not agree that it is indefensible to cut the international aid budget, just as a global vaccine roll-out begins?

Matt Hancock: Of course, we have been hugely supportive. In fact, the UK is the biggest supporter internationally of providing vaccines in countries that would not be able to afford them themselves. I am sure that that will continue, because we will continue to have one of the largest international aid budgets in the world.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will thank everyone in both East and West Suffolk for bringing down the level of infections, and that it is with a heavy heart that he has concluded that the county cannot exit to tier 1. Will he ensure that there are clear indicators as to what else needs to be done so that Suffolk may move to tier 1 as quickly as possible, and will he liaise with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to put in place additional support for the hard-hit hospitality sector?

Matt Hancock: I have constant discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the support needed. My hon. Friend is right to raise that, especially in Suffolk. It is with a heavy heart that we took the decision on Suffolk. Its case rate is higher than those in the Isle of Wight and Cornwall, which are the two areas in tier 1, but that gives an indication of where we need to get to. I am sure that if we all work together, we will be able to get there.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): We are stuck in an endless cycle of lockdowns that are simply not working. The Government have again wasted the opportunity over the past few weeks to get a handle on testing, tracing and isolating. Once again, hospitality in South Shields will be absolutely battered, and my constituents' liberty impacted on. Will the Secretary of State tell us exactly what will be different this time that will make our sacrifices yield a reduction in the infection rates?

Matt Hancock: First, I urge the hon. Lady to look at the figures published this morning, which show that the majority of tests when done in person are now turned around within 24 hours across the country, and capacity has increased radically. What I would ask of her for the future, to help the north-east get out of tier 3, is to work with her local councils, with the directors of public health, to embrace the community testing that has been effective in Liverpool. If they are up for doing that—it has to be in consultation and conjunction with the local councils, because they know the area—I very much hope that they will come forward to pick up the baton and make that happen.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con) [V]: This is not an easy question, but how will the Health Secretary take into account the wider mental and physical health implications for people who are prevented from living their lives as they would wish to live them?

Matt Hancock: We look as much as we can at taking the impacts into account. For instance, the mental health of people under lockdown is of course more challenged than in normal circumstances. We balance that against the impact of covid both directly and, in filling up the hospitals, on the healthcare that we all get for all the other conditions that exist. It is a difficult balance to strike. On the particular impact on mental health, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has done very interesting work to understand the nuanced balance between the impact of covid on people's mental health and the impact of lockdown. Both are significant and I commend its work to him.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab) [V]: It is devastating that after all its efforts, the north-east will be in tier 3. Across the whole country, obesity remains a serious factor in covid-19. Yesterday, the all-party parliamentary group on obesity launched its report to build on the Government's obesity strategy. Will the Minister meet officers of the group to discuss the report's recommendations and work with us to ensure a focus on the prevention and treatment of obesity in the fight against covid-19?

Matt Hancock: Yes. the hon. Member and I share an enthusiasm for this agenda with the Prime Minister, who is a personal convert to the need to tackle obesity. In fact, this crisis shows how important it is, because people who are obese are more likely to have a more serious impact from covid, if they catch it.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): We have consistently been told that we must accept restrictions to protect the NHS, and Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust has done an amazing job in dealing with the pandemic from the very beginning. Can my right hon. Friend therefore explain the weighting that he puts on the pressures on the local NHS as one of the five indicators in the decision-making process over tiers? It will be very difficult for people in Aylesbury to accept stringent controls on our lives and livelihoods if, in fact, there is plenty of capacity in hospitals for both covid and non-covid cases.

Matt Hancock: We look at all five indicators essentially equally. The point about pressure on the NHS is a more sensitive indicator on the decision to go into tier 3. If an area is in the situation of Buckinghamshire, for instance, where the case rate is elevated, but not as high as in many other parts of the country, the key thing to do is to keep that case rate where it is or lower. We could not make the decision to put Buckinghamshire into tier 1 because, if it went up from where it is, it would not be long until Buckinghamshire was in trouble. Therefore, the decision was to put it into tier 2.

I very much hope that the cases can continue to go down until they are very low—like they are in Cornwall and on the Isle of Wight, for instance. We will then be able to review and consider tier 1. I hope that that is a reasonable explanation. We need to continue to debate this matter as we try to ensure that we get the judgments around these geographies exactly right.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The good people of Luton will want to get out of tier 2 as soon as possible, but the current resources provided to Luton Borough Council for the lateral flow rapid testing pilot are insufficient to enable it to provide the level of mass testing that is being described nationally. The contained funding—£8 per person—just will not cover tests for 10% of Luton's population, as the funding also needs to be used for the wider covid response, including wellbeing support for vulnerable residents. Can the Secretary of State confirm that there are national plans to provide additional support and resources to expand testing if the intention to test close contacts daily is pursued?

Matt Hancock: Yes, there will be further funding for those areas that go into tier 2 and yet more funding for the areas that go into tier 3. That funding will go to the councils for the extra support that is needed.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the flexibility that the Government are providing so that we can all have a family Christmas, but what consideration has been given to Hanukkah, which starts two weeks today, regarding family gatherings and public menorah lightings? Does my right hon. Friend think it is fair if no flexibility is shown to the Jewish community?

Matt Hancock: We carefully considered this issue, consulted on it and discussed it widely. Christmas is a national holiday, as well as being very much a Christian celebration. That is reflected, for instance, in the fact that we have two days of bank holidays. We consulted

members of different faiths around precisely the question that my hon. Friend rightly raises, and there was a strong degree of support for having something special in place for Christmas for everybody, even though we have not been able to put that in place for Hanukkah or for other celebrations of other faiths.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): May I start by assuring the Secretary of State that directors of public health and local authorities in the LA7 area and the wider north-east are certainly very focused on getting that figure down and have had some success? I would like to make that absolutely clear. The second point I would like to make is that my constituents and others across the north-east will be hugely disappointed to find they are in tier 3, particularly those businesses in hospitality and leisure which are going to be so desperately hit by this. The real point I want to make, however, is about public health. Nothing has shown more than this pandemic that public health should be at the heart of what we do. We know it affects outcomes in covid-19, and we know it affects health inequalities and the rate of transmission. Will the Secretary of State ensure that he impresses that on the Chancellor, and ask him for more funding for public health services, both now and in the future?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I agree with every word of what the hon. Lady said.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My constituency of Beckenham is very relieved to be in tier 2. Very kind of you, Secretary of State. I have had a couple of constituents ask me whether they have to have a vaccination. I have said that no, they do not, as far as I know. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House what percentage of the population is required to be vaccinated in order for the measures to be effective, so we can get back to normal?

Matt Hancock: I would urge everybody to get a vaccination, if we manage to get a vaccine that is approved by the authorities, because the regulator will only approve a vaccine if it is safe and effective. Having said that, we are not planning to make it mandatory, because we hope that the vast majority of people will take it up, not least because it will help to protect them and their community, and get the whole country and indeed the world out of the mess we are in.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: The winter plan confirms that the Government will be taking action to restrict the movement of care staff between care homes. On the face of it, that is a perfectly sensible infection control measure. However, many care staff are forced to work between multiple homes because of low hourly wages. Can the Secretary of State therefore give a commitment that care workers will suffer no loss of income as a result of the policy? Can he set out what he will do to ensure that no care staff lose any of their jobs because they are being forced to choose between the different homes they work in?

Matt Hancock: I hope that, partly through this measure and the increase in the national living wage that the Chancellor confirmed yesterday, we can improve the pay and conditions of staff across social care. The proportion of people in social care who work in a number of settings and work in agency and less secure work is, in my view, something we should tackle together. I hope we can use what has obviously been put in place, as the hon. Lady rightly says, for public health infection control reasons also to improve employment standards across social care. That is, of course, directly contracted by local authorities, rather than by central Government. Nevertheless, this is an area that I think we all know we need to work to improve as a nation.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Ind): I am sure my right hon. Friend appreciates that many elderly people die with serious illnesses, such as prostate cancer, but not from those illnesses. How certain is he that statistics showing the number of people dying with covid-19 are not being presented or misinterpreted as people dying from covid-19?

Matt Hancock: The statistics on the number of people dying with covid-19 are the best estimate that the statistics authorities, both in Public Health England and the Office for National Statistics, come up with. It is one of the widest definitions, which countries use internationally. Therefore, as my right hon. Friend implies in his question, it does include people who may have died of something else, but with covid. Nevertheless, each of these deaths we should work to avoid. The best measure, according to the chief medical officer, is the total number of excess deaths compared with this time of year last year. That is elevated now and we need to get it down.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: May I first thank the Secretary of State for listening to local leaders, who have been pushing for a one-Oxfordshire approach to coronavirus as we go into tier 2? I am sure many residents understand the need to be careful for Christmas. Although Oxfordshire's data is better than that of surrounding counties, we cannot risk any further damaging lockdowns. The reason we have done so well is superb team working and a county-wide systems approach, involving all councils, the NHS and businesses. In particular, we were quick off the mark to implement a local test, trace and isolate system, which is paying dividends. Does the Secretary of State agree that the key to beating this virus is to treat local areas as partners, and when they say they should be moving up and down tiers, will he give their voice considerable weight?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do give considerable weight to the voice of local leaders when they make a case for a particular tier for their area, and in the hon. Member's case I would like to pay tribute to Ian Hudspeth, who has worked incredibly hard during this crisis for the benefit of people right across Oxfordshire. I talk to him regularly about the situation in Oxfordshire, which has made great strides in tackling this virus, including tackling the student outbreak at the universities in Oxford. I hope those local leaders can work to get Oxfordshire appropriately down into tier 1 as soon as possible, but there is some work still to do.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Today's decision will be disappointing to businesses and residents across Burnley, who have had extra restrictions on their lives and their businesses for longer than most. Can my right hon. Friend set out exactly what support go to Burnley and the wider Lancashire area, and when it will be delivered, so we are able to end these restrictions as soon as we possibly can?

Matt Hancock: Yes, Burnley has been in restrictions for a long time now. It has brought its case rate down by about half since the peak in late September. My hon. Friend has played a dutiful and impressive role in his public leadership within Burnley. I hope that we can work with Burnley Borough Council and Lancashire County Council to get the case rate down and get Lancashire down into tier 2, in the same way as Liverpool has managed to come down into tier 2: a combination of people following the rules and community testing. That is available to people in Lancashire, and I very much hope to be able to work with the team in Burnley and across Lancashire to make this happen.

The final thing I would say is that these are tough measures; I get that. I understand the impact on hospitality, but they are done for the right reasons, which is to keep people safe and stop the local NHS being overwhelmed.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Warrington will be breathing a sigh of relief that we are emerging from national lockdown into tier 2, but while I welcome the return of fans to stadiums, I cannot support the extension of the substantial meal requirement to tier 2, which will leave many pubs across my constituency closed. The pub sector faces an existential threat and it flies in the face of logic and fairness that thousands can congregate at the rugby but wet pubs that are at the heart of our community must stay closed. Will the Secretary of State commit to publishing the specific evidence that underpinned the substantial meal requirement extension and, if he cannot, to removing this requirement?

Matt Hancock: Unfortunately, we will not be removing that requirement from tier 2. It is incredibly important that we keep the cases under control. The local team in Warrington has worked very hard along with the Liverpool city region to get the case rate down. They went into national lockdown in tier 3 and have come out in tier 2, and the people of Warrington should be commended for that, but the measures of tier 2 are necessary to keep the virus under control because, unfortunately, the virus thrives when people get together. The hon. Member mentioned the point about events on a larger scale. They will only be held where there is very stringent social distancing, so there will not be congregations, as she said, of thousands of people—I would like to reassure her of that—because these events will only take place when the capacity in normal times of any venue is much, much bigger than the number of people who are there.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): First, I want to thank residents in my constituency for their hard work and sacrifice; their borough has been hard hit by the virus. With my constituency being in one of the worst affected areas, will my right hon. Friend consider rolling out the vaccine as a priority when it is ready to the country's worst affected areas, which have been not only blighted by this virus, but hard hit economically? These are the areas that will be in much need of assistance to get back on their feet following prolonged lockdown of the local economy. The vaccine would provide much needed respite in these worst affected areas.

Matt Hancock: We have taken the decision to roll out the vaccine UK-wide at the same pace. I want to get it as soon as possible to the west midlands and to everywhere else, but it is fair to the areas that have had a low, or relatively low, incidence of the disease to make sure that they also have access to the vaccine. Also, the incidence in different parts of the country changes, and the vaccine roll-out programme is very complicated. It does not speed up the delivery of the vaccine in one area to have slowed it down in another. That is why we have taken a UK-wide approach.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): In keeping with my right hon. Friend's spirit of working together, I stand not only to represent Wealden, but to speak on behalf of my hon. Friends the Members for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) and for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart). We wish to collectively thank the CEOs of the clinical commissioning group and East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust, our county leader, Keith Glazier, and our local department for public health for working with us day in, day out to understand the data and the reason for the infection rates.

We are deeply disappointed that—considering all the five indicators, where we mark extremely low—we are in tier 2, and we are disappointed that central Government have not consulted local leaders, because they would then have been able to investigate the data and, hopefully, show us how we could move into tier 1 from tier 2. Will my right hon. Friend provide some assurances that these conversations will take place with local leaders and confirm that transparent objective criteria will be published for each tier, and explain how we can slide between each tier?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely—I can give both those assurances. Across Sussex, case rates are at 120. They do need to come down. Like my hon. Friend, I would like to see Sussex go into tier 1 as soon as possible, and we will keep talking to the local area. As I said earlier, all directors of public health have been invited to discussions and consultations with the public health team. That feedback fed into these decisions, but we have to make sure that those conversations continue. The key message to everybody across Sussex and in the Weald, in particular, is that if we all stick together and follow the rules, we know that we can get this virus under control, and that will then lead directly to the lifting of restrictions, which we will regularly review.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State will be aware of reports on the Oxford vaccine that the sub-group that suggested 90% effectiveness was due to a manufacturing error, rather than being a planned protocol. It included fewer than 3,000 people and did not have any participants over 55. Does he agree, therefore, that further research is required to verify the efficacy of the lower dose in all age groups before it can be adopted as a standard regimen?

Matt Hancock: Questions over the interpretation of the data in the clinical trials are rightly for the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which will assess these clinical trials and will only approve a vaccine for use if it is effective and safe.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: The first review of Kirklees being in tier 3 will be on 16 December. Will the Secretary of State please confirm that his Department will consult local MPs, council leaders and the local director of public health? Will he publish the

full numerical criteria so that we know what we need to achieve to get out of tier 3? Will the Government support Kirklees in delivering mass testing? Finally, will the Secretary of State have a conversation with the Chancellor about delivering extra financial support for our hospitality businesses?

Matt Hancock: I will absolutely take up all those suggestions. We are in discussions with Kirklees about what more we can do, including in the area of large-scale community testing and the other considerations necessary to make that happen.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: The Secretary of State is to be commended for the initiative that he and the Minister for Care have spearheaded to allow close-contact visits between relatives and residents in care home settings. Will the proposed access vary depending on what tier a home is located in? I acknowledge that care is a devolved issue, but with little progress being made in this regard in Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State undertake to share the experiences of his pilot with the Health Minister in Northern Ireland so that my constituents can also look forward to visiting loved ones as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: Subject to the results of the pilots, which are ongoing, we hope to enable testing in England to allow for visiting in care homes before Christmas. I will certainly have another conversation with my opposite number Robin Swann, who is the Health Minister for Northern Ireland. Robin Swann is an excellent Health Minister, we work very closely together, and I am absolutely sure that together we will be able to make progress on testing and other matters. He and I are constantly in touch about how we can best serve the communities of Northern Ireland, from the position of the UK Government's role in procuring tests around the world and, of course, his vital role in keeping people safe right across the Province.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Secretary of State; we have completed our exchanges on the statement.

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 item of business, I will now the House.

12.51 pm

Sitting suspended.

Official Development Assistance

12.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): With Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement permission on official development assistance. The House will know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor updated the House yesterday on the economic challenges posed by covid-19. It is a truly sobering assessment. The UK is facing the worst economic contraction in almost 300 years and a budget deficit of close to £400 billion—double what we faced in the last financial crisis. Britain is responding to a health emergency, but also an economic emergency, and every penny of public spending will rightly come under intense scrutiny by our constituents.

Given the impact of the global pandemic on the economy and, as a result, the public finances, we have concluded after extensive consideration—and, I have to say, with regret—that we cannot for the moment meet our target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on ODA, and we will move to a target of 0.5% next year. Let me reassure the House that this is a temporary measure. It is a measure we have taken as a matter of necessity, and we will return to 0.7% when the fiscal situation permits.

The relevant legislation, the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015, envisages circumstances in which the 0.7% target may not be met, in particular in the context of economic pressures. The Act provides for accountability to Parliament in that event, and I will of course report to the House in the proper way. Equally, given the requirements of the Act, the fact that we cannot at this moment predict with certainty when the current fiscal circumstances will have sufficiently improved and our need to plan accordingly, we will need to bring forward legislation in due course.

We are not alone in facing these painful choices. All countries are reconciling themselves not just to the health impact of the pandemic, but to the economic impact of covid-19. It is worth saying that on the 2019 OECD data, only one other G20 member allocated 0.5% or more of GNI to development spending, and that was before the pandemic. Many countries are reappraising their spending plans, as we have been forced to do. As a result, we nevertheless expect our development spending next year to total around £10 billion, maintaining our status as one of the leading countries in the world in ODA spend.

I can reassure the House that we will retain our position as a leader in the global fight against poverty. We will remain committed to following the rules set by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee, and we will ensure the maximum impact from our aid through the strategic integration we are driving as a result of the merger at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the strategic thinking that is informed by the integrated review, and the further changes we are now making on how we allocate ODA to support a more integrated and overarching approach.

Let me say a little more on that integrated approach. Our starting point is the integrated review, with which we are setting the long-term strategic aims of our international work, based on our values and grounded

[Dominic Raab]

in the British national interest. To achieve this, we will be taking a far more joined-up approach right across the breadth of government. That is why the Prime Minister created the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, bringing diplomacy and development together, in lockstep with the work of our other Departments. ODA is a vital, central and absolutely indispensable element of that strategic approach, but to maximise its effectiveness it must be used in combination with our development policy expertise, our security deployments and support abroad, and the strengthened global co-operation that we drive through our diplomatic network. We make our aid go further by bringing it together with all these other elements, and by making sure that they are all aligned and pushing in the same direction.

Last week, the Prime Minister set out how we are strengthening our defence and security capabilities. That will boost our standing in the world, while also contributing to our development efforts, including our soft power abroad. The clearest illustration of that is the peacekeeping that we do. We have British troop deployments in Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere, which work hand in hand with our development and diplomatic efforts. Indeed, we are demonstrating that with our latest deployment of 300 UK troops to Mali. Our security and defence budget also helps countries to deal with new, emerging and evolving threats, for example in supporting Nigeria and Kenya to assess and strengthen their cyber-security resilience. We will set out the full detail of the integrated review early in the new year, as we launch our presidencies of the G7 and COP26, with 2021 a year of leadership for global Britain as a force for good in the world.

This new strategic approach will allow us to drive greater impact from our £10 billion of ODA spending next year, notwithstanding the very difficult financial pressures we face. I will prioritise that £10 billion of spending in five particular ways. First, we will prioritise measures to tackle climate change, protect biodiversity and finance low-carbon and climate-resilient technologies, such as solar and wind, in poor and emerging economies. I can reassure the House that we will maintain our commitment to double international climate finance, which is vital to maintaining our ambitions in this area as we host COP26. We will leverage our aid support through our diplomatic network, to galvanise global action and to make sure that countries come forward with ambitious, game-changing commitments in the lead-up to November next year.

Secondly, we will prioritise measures to tackle covid, and promote wider international health security. We will maintain our position as a world leader, investing in Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, COVAX, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the International Finance Facility for Immunisation. We will continue to support and strengthen the World Health Organisation, as the second largest state donor; I spoke to Dr Tedros just yesterday about our efforts in that regard. We will also use all our other levers to maximise British impact. For example, we have magnified our COVAX contribution through our diplomatic efforts, which helped to convince the board of the World Bank to announce additional funding last month of up to $12 billion for covid vaccines, tests and treatments. Again, I spoke to World Bank president David Malpass just last night about our important collaboration in that area.

Thirdly, we continue to prioritise girls' education, because it is the right thing to do and because the fortunes of so many of the poorest countries depend on tapping the full potential of all their people, which must include women and girls in education. Our global target, working with our partners, is to get 40 million girls into education and have 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10. It is a major priority for global Britain as a leading supporter of the Global Partnership for Education, and just next year we will raise $4 billion globally, including through our UK-Kenya summit.

Fourthly, we will focus ODA on resolving conflicts, alleviating humanitarian crises, defending open societies, and promoting trade and investment, including by increasing UK partnerships in science research and technology, because these are the building blocks of development and they require a long-term strategic commitment.

Finally, at all times we will look to improve our delivery of aid in order to increase the impact that our policy interventions have on the ground, in the countries and the communities that they are designed to benefit and help. We will strengthen accountability and value for money, reducing reliance on expensive consultants for project management and strengthening our in-house capability to give us more direct oversight and control, including by removing the total operating cost limits that were introduced when the Department for International Development was established—a limit that applied only to DFID.

As a result of this spending review, the FCDO will take on a greater role in ensuring the coherence and co-ordination of development-related spending right across Whitehall. To maximise the strategic focus that I have talked about, I will run a short cross-Government process to review, appraise and finalise all the UK's ODA allocations for next year in the lead-up to Christmas.

This is a moment of unprecedented challenge. In all parts of the House, we are defined by our willingness to make the difficult choices, not just the easy ones. With the approach that I have set out, we will maintain our international ambition. We will deliver greater impact from our aid budget at a time of unparalleled financial pressure.

Like many in the House, I am proud of our aid spend. I am proud of the big-hearted generosity of the British public, which we amplify with our diplomatic energy on the world stage. I am proud of the huge amount we do to support the poorest and the most vulnerable, right around the world. The United Kingdom is out there every single day—our people on the ground in the disaster zones, in the refugee camps, tackling famine and drought, helping lift people out of poverty, striving to resolve conflicts and striving to build a more hopeful future for the millions of people struggling and striving against the odds. Even in the toughest economic times, we will continue that mission. We will continue to lead. I commend this statement to the House.

1.7 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Last week the Prime Minister promised to end an era of retreat, yet today signals the biggest retreat by a

British Government from our global role in decades. They have removed any credibility the UK has as a force for good in the world, and made it harder for us to pursue our national interest and create a safer, healthier, fairer and better world for us all. Make no mistake, our traditional allies and our detractors will take note of this move.

This Government have destroyed the long-standing cross-party support for spending 0.7% of GNI to eradicate global poverty and reneged on their promise to the British people, breaking a manifesto commitment and turning their back on all those they promised to champion: mothers, newborn babies and children who are dying from preventable causes, the tens of millions of girls who are out of school, and those whose lives and livelihoods have been destroyed by Ebola and malaria.

Britain and the world deserve better than a Foreign Secretary who has allowed the aid budget to be slashed, leaving our global reputation lying in tatters ahead of a year when the UK hosts the G7 and COP26. We know that we need a dramatic acceleration in the pace and scale of global climate action, and we all want the UN climate conference to be a success, but for that to happen we must harness the political will of other countries. It falls to the UK, as host, to lead by example, not withdraw, yet cutting the aid budget does exactly that and has already attracted outspoken criticism from vital partners. I pity the Foreign Secretary, having to explain to his counterparts that this is all part of his and the Prime Minister's idea of "Global Britain".

This Government have repeatedly delayed their review of foreign policy, with announcements being made on a whim. It is a disintegrated review. Do the Government actually have a strategy, a plan or even a vague idea? I have lost track of the number of times the Secretary of State has announced new development priorities, so perhaps he can confirm how long he will stick with these. Under the Conservatives, foreign aid has been diverted away from the world's poorest. Will he now ensure that it is not squandered on vanity projects but instead focused on eradicating poverty and inequality?

In the year since the Conservatives pledged in their manifesto to "proudly" uphold the law to spend 0.7% of GNI on aid, we have been told by the Prime Minister that spending 0.7% of GNI is

"a goal…that remains our commitment."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 667.]

The Secretary of State has said that the commitment "is written in law," and will be

"the beating heart of our foreign policy".—[*Official Report*, 18 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 945.]

His Ministers, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) and the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), have told us, respectively, that

"the Government are completely committed to the 0.7% target…because it is the right thing to do."—[*Official Report*, 9 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 1198-1200.]

and:

"We are bound by law to spend 0.7%, so it is not a choice; it is in the law, and we will obey the law."—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2020; Vol. 678, c. 147.]

Now they have decided they do not actually like obeying the law.

This Government are developing a reputation, and many within the Secretary of State's own party do not like what they see. Yesterday, his own Minister, Baroness Sugg, resigned because abandoning our commitment

"risks undermining…efforts to promote a Global Britain".

I stand ready to work with her, and with the hon. Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), the right hon. Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), for Ashford (Damian Green) and for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), the Chairs of the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees—the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) and the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat)—the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and many more who I do not have time to list, to stop this retreat. Can the Secretary of State tell us when the necessary legislation will be brought forward? Can he confirm that he will spend 0.7% of GNI on aid this year, and what the estimated value of ODA will be?

This Government love to blame others for their shortcomings, especially when they cannot answer back. Rather than taking responsibility for their incompetence, spending £12 billion on a covid test and trace scheme that still is not working and wasting taxpayers' money on over 184 million items of unusable PPE, this Government have chosen to make the world's poorest pay for their failures.

The British people are extremely compassionate. They have seen a global health crisis cause devastation around the world and push millions of people into poverty, costing lives and livelihoods. They know that this is not a necessity but a political choice that this Government have made. We stand with them and oppose this ill-conceived, short-sighted decision.

Dominic Raab: Well, where to start with that?

The hon. Lady referred to a range of different issues. She referred to the UK's work on disease and girls' education. We entirely agree. These are total priorities, and that is why I set out the priorities—I appreciate that her response was written before she listened to what I said—so that I could give her and the House the reassurance that actually those are two areas that we will safeguard and prioritise. *[Interruption.]* No, we said we would safeguard those priorities.

The hon. Lady asked about climate change. As I made clear, our first priority will be measures to tackle climate change and protect biodiversity, and we will maintain our commitment to double the international climate finance, which I agree is very important as we go into COP26.

The hon. Lady asked about our international partners. Of course our international partners, whether they are non-governmental organisations or the heads of the international organisations, will want as much generosity as possible. We understand that. I spoke to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the president of the World Bank, and Dr Tedros at the World Health Organisation yesterday. They understand the financial challenges and the health challenges, and they know that we will be a stalwart, leading member of the international community as a force for good in the world, notwithstanding the pressure that we and many others will now face.

[Dominic Raab]

The hon. Lady asked about the legislation. We will bring that forward in due course. Obviously we want to make sure that it is as well prepared and carefully thought through as possible. *[Interruption.]* She says that we do not have to. On the one hand, she has said that we are breaking the law and changing our mind on the law—*[Interruption.]* It is very clear under the legislation. She should go and check—

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is temporary.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman says that it is temporary. That is not what the legislation says: he should go and look at it very carefully. *[Interruption.]* Well, he has not got this quite right. We have taken advice very carefully on this, and it is very clear that if we cannot see a path back to 0.7% in the foreseeable, immediate future, and we cannot plan for that, then the legislation would require us to change it. We would almost certainly face legal challenge if we do not very carefully follow it.

On the hon. Lady's question about the 0.7%, it will still apply this year.

The hon. Lady criticises the Government for the choices that we have had to make in the face of a global pandemic and a financial emergency. It is not clear to me what choices Labour would make, that she would make. *[Interruption.]* Was she suggesting that we cut the money—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Members are talking over the Secretary of State.

Dominic Raab: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Was the hon. Lady suggesting that we divert money from test and trace at this pivotal moment in the pandemic to meet 0.7%? Is she suggesting that any of the extra investment in schools, hospitals and policing announced yesterday should be cut in order to meet 0.7%? *[Interruption.]* She is shaking her head. In fairness to her, she has previously said that ODA should be cut because of the impact on the economy. She said it in the context of the GNI review that we conducted. Because she is shaking her head, I will quote her verbatim, to be accurate:

"we recognise that there has got to be cuts made…we've had a drop in GNI…those cuts shouldn't come from DFID"

but should come from

"other government departments'"

spending on ODA. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady says, "Yes, yes, yes"—so does she advocate cutting the amount of ODA that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs spend on climate change? *[Interruption.]* Again, we come back to the basic point that, given the financial pressures we face, difficult decisions need to be made. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is fine for the Secretary of State to ask a rhetorical question. It is not in order to have a dialogue from a sedentary position. A rhetorical question does not require an immediate answer.

Dominic Raab: The truth is that, in this spending review, the Labour party is defined by its total inertia in the face of the difficult decisions we have had to make. I am afraid that that gives it very little credibility when it comes to the SR.

When it comes to 0.7%, the House should recall that the Labour party has history on this. Members across the House, particularly the more long-standing ones, will remember that it was a Labour Government under Harold Wilson back in 1974—the year I was born—who first set the target of 0.7%. In the 46 years since—the whole of my lifetime—no Labour Government have ever hit 0.7%; not in a single year.

The hon. Lady talked in hyperbolic language about the damage that we will do with a shift to 0.5% and a £10 billion ODA budget. May I remind her that in the 13 years of the last Labour Government, not only did they never once hit 0.7% in any year—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) does not like it. I will come to him in a second. The last Labour Government only ever hit 0.5% in two years out of 13.

The House need not take my word for it. The shadow Africa Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, was a Spad in DFID under the last Labour Government—

Stephen Doughty: And it went up.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman says that it went up. That Government spent, on average, 0.36% of GNI on ODA. With a record like that, the hon. Gentleman, rather than chuntering from a sedentary position, should stay quiet on this subject. On the Government Benches, with our record, we will take no lectures from the Labour party when it comes to ODA.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It feels almost rude to interrupt a private dialogue. I understand the pain that this economic collapse is causing all of us. I have just received the appalling news that the whole of Kent has gone into tier 3, and I am aware of the pain that this will cause communities across my constituency.

I supported the Foreign Secretary taking over the DFID portfolio because I knew that the rigour he would bring to ODA spending would mean that it was always in the British national interest. Indeed, the way he has spoken about it this morning reassures me of that. He has spoken quite rightly about girls' education, not just because it is good for girls in other parts of the world but because it is good for Britain. He has spoken about climate change, not just because it is good for the poorest and most low-lying countries around the world but because it is good for Britain. He has spoken about vaccination, not just because it is most important for the most vulnerable in the world, but again, because it is good for Britain. So does he understand why so many of us are disappointed that, knowing how well he will spend this money, not only in the interests of others but in the British national interest, we hear that it has been cut? I am sure that he feels that, too.

Could I perhaps ask the Foreign Secretary to look at a slightly different way of counting, because we all know that the 1970s DAC rules need to be reformed? I am not alone in saying this. The French Government

have said it; the Netherlands Government have said it; and the German Government have said it. In fact, I think that I am right in saying that everybody, except the Swedish Government, has said it. Could we not count the enormous sums that the Foreign Secretary is already spending on vaccination programmes through the vaccine taskforce and the enormous money he is spending on UN duties—not just the 15% that the DAC allows him to count—and could we not count that stability as our ODA capability and reinforce what he has done? Then perhaps we can look at the Bill he may be forced to introduce, and make sure that it is not an open-ended Bill but has a sunset clause in black and white that we can vote on, too.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. He is absolutely right, and he said it at the outset: we make this decision with regret. I do not want to be in a position of having to change any of the ODA spend. I know how valuable it can be, and, notwithstanding our absolute commitment to strategically focus it on the places and people who need it the most and the areas of maximum UK interest, of course this is something we do with regret. We do it as a matter of necessity, given the economic situation we face, and it will be temporary, in that we will revert to 0.7% as soon as the fiscal position allows.

My hon. Friend asked a range of questions about whether we could reconfigure money. We are not going to unilaterally pull out of the DAC rules, but he makes a good case for reform of the DAC rules. For example, some of the military spend, particularly on such matters as peacekeeping, is not counted. Clearly, it is not just good for military security in the countries where it is focused but an important element of soft power, and it is something we should do. However, I think that the right thing to do is to work on that reform from within DAC, rather than pulling out unilaterally, and that will take some time, but I take on board his comments.

My hon. Friend asked how we will make sure we get back to the target, and I am very happy to keep talking to him about that. The No. 1 thing in my view, and I would gently suggest this to him, is that we are still spending £10 billion next year on ODA. When I think of what he said about his constituents and how they will feel about the latest measures—we are all challenged by this—I think that they will think that we are making difficult decisions, but the right ones and the justifiable ones, in the very exacting situation in which we find ourselves.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): To govern is to choose. As one Government to another—of course, the SNP has been in government since 2007—we understand that it is difficult. We are in unprecedented times; there are tough choices; and a lot of people are afraid and feeling very vulnerable. However, there will always be domestic pressure on the aid budget, and the UK Government have made a choice—an active choice—of deep consequence.

The fact is that this is not what was promised. This is not what was promised to the people of Scotland in 2014. This is not what was promised in the Conservative manifesto 11 months ago. The Foreign Secretary talks about scrutiny of spend, and I absolutely agree, but my inbox—I dare say colleagues feel the same—is unanimous this morning in opposing this move. It is fair to say that in Scotland we have a disproportionate interest in international development, because of the history we have with our churches, our non-governmental organisations, our trade unions and our universities. Civic Scotland is keen on international development, and DFID—now merged, of course, into the FCDO—is based in East Kilbride. This is a betrayal: not just a betrayal of those promises, but a betrayal of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world, who are also facing covid, the economic consequences and climate change, and they are going to be left by this in a dreadful situation.

When I say it is a betrayal, I actually exempt the Foreign Secretary from that. I do not think that this is coming from him. I do not think that he has stopped it, but I do not think it is actually coming from him. I think that it is coming from the people around him and behind him. They are the people in the shadows, with their phoney think-tanks and their blogs. They are the people who proudly denigrate international aid because it is against their project, and the people who want to link international aid to trade policy in the most grubby way possible. They are the people who get excited about a red, white and blue flag on a tail fin, and the people who think that what we need right now to buoy our spirits is a new royal yacht. They are the people who want to spend, as the Government have committed to doing, £120 million on a festival of Brexit—ye gods!

We have today a moment of real clarity and divergence—that Scotland and the UK are two different places with two different ambitions on two different paths. It is a matter of fact that the cynics were right. After the UK's politicisation of aid by merging DFID into the FCDO, there has been a crippling raid on its budget. DFID in East Kilbride is a deeply sad place this morning. Scotland independent—because of our interests, our history, our capacity and our ambition—will put international development at its heart. We will be committed to 0.7%, and it is clearer than ever today to the people of Scotland that the best way to achieve that aid policy, to be that global citizen, is independence.

Dominic Raab: First, may I say this in relation to East Kilbride? Notwithstanding the pressures we face, we will be expanding the UK Government Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in East Kilbride because we know the great work that it does and because we are stronger on the international stage when we are united.

The hon. Gentleman said that this decision was not what was promised in 2014 or at the last election. I hesitate to remind him that that was before the pandemic and the coronavirus, and before we were faced with—*[Interruption.]* Well, he is quite right to say that there are always domestic pressures and competing priorities in relation to the public finances, but we are not under any normal set of circumstances. We have the worst economic contraction in over 300 years. We have a deficit double the size that we faced after the last financial crash, and we are having to make very difficult decisions. If he thinks we have made the wrong decision, I would like to hear from the SNP—a rhetorical, not an actual question—what it thinks should be cut in the investments the Chancellor announced yesterday in order to hit 0.7%.

The hon. Gentleman referred—in what I thought was actually pretty unsavoury language—to a crippling raid on ODA. We will spend £10 billion next year. His inbox may be different from mine, but I think our constituents

[Dominic Raab]

will understand, because they live in the real world, that we have to make difficult decisions. This is still an extraordinary contribution that the taxpayers of this country will make to alleviate suffering and poverty around the world.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I suggest that we squint at the nettles in what was said yesterday and what has been said today? Clearly, it would be illuminating to see the messages that the Foreign Secretary will have sent to the Treasury and the Prime Minister arguing against the cut. We know that this is not his idea.

May I ask the Foreign Secretary how much the amount of money would have gone down if we had kept 0.7% with an 11% contraction of the economy? Is that well over £1 billion? How much extra is being taken by our coming down from 0.7%? Is the proposed legislation designed to make sure we come back to 0.7% or to make it possible to avoid coming back to it for a long time?

I end by saying that I first stood for election when the Foreign Secretary was born, and I became a trustee of Christian Aid to fight to get the Government to meet the commitment they had made a long time before to 0.7%. I rejoiced when we met it. It was not put on us by the Liberal Democrats; it was in our manifesto in 2010. I am glad that the Foreign Secretary was able to say in July that we would stick to 0.7%.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend. He will be able to work out that the difference is £4 billion in savings next year. Of course we looked at whether we could just follow the contraction in GNI to deliver the savings that we need. We looked at every single option, but the challenge we have is that the pandemic is uncertain. That is what we found in the throes of coming out of the second national lockdown. As a result, the impact on the economy and the public finances is not just profound but also uncertain.

My hon. Friend asked some further questions about our seriousness in getting back to 0.7%. We are serious. He is right to say that it was a manifesto commitment that we were proud of, but I think that the country expects us to stand up and make difficult decisions, given the necessity of the situation that we face. We have made it clear that it is temporary, and we will get back to it just as soon as the public finances allow.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: In the past six months, the Foreign Secretary has closed DFID, tried to abolish the Select Committee on International Development and cut more than a third of the aid budget. We still have no clarity on where those cuts have been or will be made, or their consequences. I have specific concerns about some of the areas that he details as priorities, as they might fall outside the ODA definition. The science element is written to fit the heavily criticised Newton Fund, and the trade aspect could lead to tied aid. In his letter to me, he states that

"too often, aid has lacked coherence, oversight or appropriate accountability across Whitehall."

The same could be said in relation to Parliament. To address that, will he agree to present to the House an impact assessment of the cuts? Will he also agree to support the International Development Committee's change of remit, so that we can scrutinise all ODA, so that both taxpayers and Members of Parliament may be assured that the money is being well spent?

Dominic Raab: I have to say to the hon. Lady, whom I respect and admire greatly, that we have not closed DFID, but merged the Foreign Office and DFID, precisely to give deliver greater impact given the financial pressures we now face. She asked about tied aid; we are not suggesting any reversion to tied aid, which comes from a bygone era and is not something that I or this Government support. Nor have we tried to abolish the Select Committee; as I have made clear every time I have been asked, such matters are for the House to decide. Finally, she asked about when we will publish the GNI review detailed breakdown. Obviously, we are committed to full transparency, and the statistics on international development are published next year. They will be provided through a detailed breakdown of all the ODA allocations in 2020.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con) [V]: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. The Chancellor's statement yesterday setting out plans to amend the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015 and to reduce ODA spending for the next few years is profoundly upsetting to many, as it suggests that the UK is stepping back from its world-class, globally respected and unstinting commitment to supporting developing countries. I know that that anxiety is unfounded.

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, while the silo budgets classified as ODA will be squeezed, we should take the opportunity that the global financial crisis has forced on everyone—as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), set out—to review fully the DAC rules on which we classify our ODA spending? In the meantime, will the Foreign Secretary make it clear to the House that all Government spending that works to strengthen the stability, governance, health, education—and I take this opportunity to thank Baroness Sugg for her extraordinary work over the past year on girls' education—and climate shock resilience of developing countries supports all the sustainable development goals? Will he commit to review the historical multilateral payments commitments, which could be used much more impactfully to drive the UK's priorities?

Dominic Raab: I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to Baroness Sugg, a terrific Minister who will be greatly missed. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment as the UK's international champion on various climate change issues. With her expertise, passion and dedication, she makes an excellent case for taking a more strategic approach, not only in relation to the ODA spend that derives from the FCDO, but looking right across the piece, across Whitehall, to ensure that it is allocated in the areas where it has the greatest life-changing impact. We will do that on climate change and biodiversity, and on girls' education and helping the very poorest around the world.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): For the record, the ODA GNI figure in 2010, the last year of the previous Labour Government, was 0.57%.

May I say to the Foreign Secretary that of all the promises that our country has made, to choose to break this promise to the world's poorest people is unforgivable?

We are talking about a cut of roughly one third in the aid budget. The thought that some babies might not be delivered safely, or some children might not be able to go to school or be vaccinated so that they do not die of the diseases that our children do not die of, should trouble every single one of us.

The Foreign Secretary said that he intends to make decisions about where the reductions will fall before Christmas. Will he assure the House that the decision on whether that will go ahead will be brought to Parliament, so that we can decide whether to break our promise or, instead, to keep our word?

Dominic Raab: May I thank the right hon. Gentleman? I know that he cares about this subject passionately and served as International Development Secretary himself. Frankly, he used rather hyperbolic language, but he should have at least noted the reassurance that I gave about strategic prioritisation—even with a reduced financial envelope—and our commitment regarding disease, particularly immunisation and vaccination against tuberculosis, covid, malaria and the like. He mentioned schools, and he will have noted that I said we would be safeguarding girls' education. He wanted to trade figures with me, so I hope that he will bear with me: when he became Development Secretary in 2003, ODA spend was 0.34% of GNI; and when he left in 2007, it was 0.36%. The Conservatives are the ones who hit 0.7%, and we are proud of that. We will go to 0.5% next year. I think I am right in saying that the last Labour Government hit 0.5% in only one year of his tenure as Development Secretary, so he should have just a little bit more humility when he engages in quite such a hyperbolic critique of what we have achieved on this side of the House.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary very much for his courtesy over recent months, for his extremely welcome support for the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, and for his kind comments about Lady Sugg, who was a brilliant Development Minister. I hope that everyone in the House will read her principled and moving resignation letter, which she released yesterday.

My right hon. Friend and I both know that, seen from the Biden White House, this is a dismal start to our G7 chairmanship. As the former Prime Minister said yesterday, the 0.7% is a promise that we as Tories do not need to break. My right hon. Friend knows, does he not, that taking a further 30% out of the development budget will drive a horse and cart through many of the plans that the British Government have so strongly supported for eliminating poverty. It will withdraw access to family planning and contraception for more than 7 million women, with all the misery that that will entail; 100,000 children will die from preventable diseases; and 2 million people—mainly children—will suffer much more steeply from malnutrition and starvation as a result of these changes. In spite of what he says about prioritising girls' education, which is extremely welcome, under the existing plans probably 1 million girls will not be able to go to school. I hope that he will bear in mind that these reductions make little difference to us in the United Kingdom, but they make a massive difference to them.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who was a fantastic Development Secretary. We have talked at length about these issues since our time in opposition, and will continue to do so. He mentioned a number of points. He read out some statistics. With respect, I do not think it is possible to talk with the precision that he did about the implications, because we are not going to take a salami-slicing approach and just say, "We're going to cut a third from all areas of ODA." That is not what we are going to do. We are going to take a strategic approach. We will safeguard the areas that we regard as an absolute priority, including many of those he mentioned, particularly public health and international public health, alongside covid, climate change and girls' education.

My right hon. Friend talked about ICAI. As he knows, I am committed to reinforcing ICAI's role; we welcome the transparency and scrutiny. Finally, he talked about the US. With respect, I disagree. At 0.5% next year, we will still be spending a greater proportion of GNI than the US. Given the widespread cross-party concerns in the US about defence spending within the European context, I think it will welcome the fact that we are increasing our security and defence budget.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): If, during a global pandemic, the Government do not accept that solving problems abroad before they reach our shores is worth doing, this is an argument we are never going to win. There has been a year-on-year reduction in deaths from terrorism and extremism from countries where we have been investing huge amounts of development resources. Now that we are withdrawing that resource, the opposite will happen. This is also an economic argument, because where we have to use the military to respond to extremism, civil strife and the breakdown of law and order, we put British armed forces—our service people—in danger, we spend an absolute fortune and Britain ends up paying a very high price for our credibility. Does the Foreign Secretary not accept that when we withdraw international development aid and resource, we will end up paying far, far more by using the military in the long term? This is an economic and a military argument.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Foreign Secretary answers that question, I must point out to the House that when a Minister makes a statement, the idea is that people ask short questions. They are not meant to be making speeches. A question is one phrase with a question mark at the end. It does not require lots of statistics, a huge preamble or lots of rhetoric. We are only a quarter of the way through the list of people who have asked to speak in this statement, but we have used up three quarters of the hour allocated to it. That simply is not fair to the other people who have yet to ask their questions, so I beg for short questions—and if the questions are short, it will be easier for the Foreign Secretary to give shorter answers.

Dominic Raab: I will take that encouragement, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman asked about two things. I accept the premise that our security is strengthened by the action we take abroad, although of course that includes the reverse proposition, which is that our defence and security spend abroad—including some of the stuff that is covered by ODA and some of the stuff that is not—also has a soft power impact. I mentioned cyber earlier. The creation of the new National Cyber Force and artificial intelligence agency is important to protect us here but it will also reinforce the capabilities of our most vulnerable partners abroad. The hon. Gentleman

[Dominic Raab]

also mentioned health. I have explained at some length why we will be safeguarding and prioritising our international public health spending.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. While I am a supporter of our 0.7% commitment, I understand that in these difficult times tough decisions have to be made. Will he therefore again confirm that it is the Government's intention to return to 0.7% when the situation allows? Will he also join me in reminding the House that while the Opposition are expressing outrage, the Labour Government never hit 0.7%? Our 0.5% will stand very well in comparison.

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Labour barely hit 0.5%, let alone 0.7%. I accept that there is cross-party concern about this challenging set of circumstances and these difficult decisions. The difference is that we are making these difficult decisions and we are being honest and upfront with the British public about it.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: The proposed cut in aid spending, breaking our nation's promise to the world's poorest, is not just callous and unnecessary but entirely against our own self-interest. We are currently an aid superpower, and this move undermines the soft power we so desperately need in the post-Brexit era. I and the Liberal Democrats will join all others across the House to fight this short-sighted move. The Foreign Secretary says he is doing this with regret, and I believe him, but does he accept that in a few years he may well regret what he is doing?

Dominic Raab: I share the hon. Lady's passion and her commitment to the role that ODA plays in our soft power abroad. I gently remind her that, at 0.5%, we will still be on the 2019 figures and the second biggest ODA spender. I just ask her, as we ask all the other parties and all hon. Members, whether she can explain how else she would deal with the financial emergency that we now face, because I have not heard a peep of other positive, credible alternatives from the Lib Dems, let alone from the Labour Benches.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): One of the most shocking parts of the Chancellor's statement yesterday was the news that we will borrow £396 billion this year alone, with a further £369 billion to come by 2023. Given the truly parlous state of our public finances, does my right hon. Friend agree that the temporary cut in our foreign aid budget, deeply regrettable as it is, is a necessary reflection of our altered circumstances and is needed, frankly, to keep our aid spending in line with our taxpayers' priorities?

Dominic Raab: As the Chancellor said at the Dispatch Box yesterday, and notwithstanding the regret and the financial pressures, it would be difficult to justify to our constituents, with all that they are going through and all that they expect of what we do domestically, if we were not looking at every area, including this area, to try and see our way through. However, as my hon. Friend rightly said, it is temporary, and we will get back to 0.7% when the financial conditions allow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now have audio link only, as there is a problem with the proper link, to Margaret Ferrier.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

"International aid saves lives. It supports the world's most fragile and it gives the world hope."

Those are not my words, but the words of just one of many constituents who have contacted me to express their anger and sadness at the decision to reduce the international aid budget to 0.5% of GDP. Has the Foreign Secretary carried out an impact assessment identifying how many lives could be lost as a result of slashing assistance to some of the world's poorest countries?

Dominic Raab: We will still be spending £10 billion next year. I will run an allocation process that allows all the other Departments that bid for aspects of ODA to scrutinise these things very carefully to mitigate precisely the risks that the hon. Lady talked about.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I deeply respect arguments against this decision, but does the Foreign Secretary agree that to describe the enormous amounts of taxpayers' money we will continue to spend as "dismal", "unforgivable" and some of the other things we have heard today actually damages public support for this cause in the long run?

Dominic Raab: I think my hon. Friend has a point about the way our constituents will view the decisions that we take. We need to make sure that everything we do on our aid budget, development and our foreign policy abroad attracts and commands their confidence. If we somehow immunised our ODA budget, in a way that no other budget domestically has been immunised, I think they would ask questions, if not be very concerned by that approach, so I think my hon. Friend is right.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: In the light of the announced reduction in the aid budget, will the Foreign Secretary commit to ensuring that aid will be focused on areas of utmost need, such as tackling the systemic issues and cultures of impunity which enable modern slavery and violence to affect the world's poorest people?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have set out the list of priorities, including conflict prevention, promoting accountability in countries and dealing with violence—particularly violence against women, but all violence against civilians in conflict situations. We will run the allocation process to make sure that we safeguard our top priorities, which include those that she mentioned, as best we can in the reduced financial envelope that we face.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con) [V]: I understand the difficult financial decisions that we as a Government have had to make at this unprecedented time. However, I know that all Conservative Members will agree that we need to ensure our foreign aid is targeted to the most vulnerable in the world. When the Independent Commission for Aid Impact report is published later this year, will my right hon. Friend come back to the House and

update right hon. and hon. Members on exactly how we can target our support better to ensure it reaches the world's most vulnerable?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right, and he will recall that I said back in August that we wanted to reinforce, not undermine, the role of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact to strengthen the transparency, reinforce the accountability and make sure that we get the very best critical analysis of where we have the most impact. As soon as the review is finalised, copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and shared with Select Committees, and I will make a statement to the House.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Foreign Secretary says that this cut is both temporary and a matter of necessity. Although borrowing is up, the overall cost of borrowing has fallen because of falling interest rates, yet the poorest countries are not able to respond to the economic consequences of covid in this way, as richer countries can. As we are the global host of the G7, the UN Security Council and COP26, will he press the Chancellor to lead by example for global Britain, particularly in relation to the new US Biden Administration, and to leverage more funds from the US as well, so the poorer nations get the best deal in the worst year—next year, of all years, when it will be needed most?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which is that we are facing acute difficulties, and we are very concerned about what that will mean for the most vulnerable countries, both on health grounds and on financial grounds. We have a direct stake in that, as well as a moral responsibility, and in everything we are doing—from International Monetary Fund debt relief to World Bank projects and, indeed, the allocation review that I have already mentioned to the House—we will safeguard the £10 billion to make sure it is focused on shoring up the poorer countries, the most vulnerable countries, as they come through this pandemic.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: As a member of the International Development Committee during the previous Parliament, I quite understand the need for the UK to live within its means in these exceptional circumstances, and I welcome the fact that we are still spending more of our gross national income on development than the vast majority of other countries. However, can I have an assurance from the Secretary of State that no more UK aid will go to China—a country that is in effect developed, and of course one that has a very poor human rights record?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend may know that we ended bilateral aid to China in 2011. There is, though, still a case for some collaboration in the development space with China, and the example I tend to give is climate change. Yes, China is the biggest net emitter, but it is also the biggest investor in renewables, and even with all the other challenges we have with China, that is an area in which we want to try to work and engage positively.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Over the past few weeks, the UK Government have threatened to break international law, and are now retreating from pledges given both domestically and internationally to support some of the world's most vulnerable people at a time of unprecedented global crisis. I wonder whether the Foreign Secretary can really be content with the way his Government's policy is undermining the UK's international standing and claims to global leadership, and seeing them shrivel so miserably on his watch.

Dominic Raab: The wonderful thing about this job is that when I travel abroad, I realise the high esteem in which we in the United Kingdom are held, not just for our democracy and our way of life, but for the contribution we make. I hear that from both sides of the aisle in the United States, and there is lots of talk from President-elect Biden about the renewed approach to multilateralism. I have heard it in the calls I have made, from Dr Tedros, from David Malpass at the World Bank, and indeed from António Guterres. If the hon. Gentleman encourages me to look at the United Kingdom in the way that others do, I would point him to the Ipsos Mori surveys carried out by the British Council, which showed that particularly among young people around the world, we are rated as the most attractive country, with the highest trust—alongside Canada—in our institutions.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con) [V]: As a long-term supporter of our global Britain agenda, of which aid is a key part, I am deeply concerned by yesterday's announcement that we will not be keeping to 0.7% next year. I appreciate the difficult economic decisions that the Government have had to make because of the coronavirus pandemic, but given that the 0.7% target is also a manifesto commitment, can my right hon. Friend confirm that this fall to 0.5% is only temporary? I also note that the Government have said we will return to 0.7%

"when the fiscal situation allows."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 850.]

What exactly does that mean, and can my right hon. Friend set out the steps that the Government will take to return us to that aid target?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the enormous expertise and experience she brings to the House from the development sphere. I can confirm that this will be temporary and, as I have already said, it is done as a matter of necessity and with regret. She asks what steps we will take. The most important thing is that we will need to see the impact of the virus on the economy and then on the public finances. We have come through what is effectively a second wave. We need to shore up against that. The measures the Government have announced aim to do that.

We are hopeful about a vaccine for next year, but we have to be cautious because we are not there yet. I am afraid there is an inherent degree of uncertainty about the situation, which is why we are in the position of not being able to rely just on the limited derogation written into the legislation which allows an ex post facto, if you like, derogation, having inadvertently missed the target. That is not the position we are in. We will, as I said, do it as soon as the fiscal conditions allow.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): From actively breaking international law in a "very specific and limited" way to breaking commitments on international aid, does the Foreign Secretary not realise how his Government are slowly weaning Britain from its role as a world leader,

[Naz Shah]

day by day making us more irrelevant on the world stage? Every living former Prime Minister can see why this move is morally wrong and politically unwise. Why can the current Prime Minister and his Government not see it?

Dominic Raab: I think the current Prime Minister—and certainly this Foreign Secretary—gets a little fed up with hearing Britain being done down. I have to say to the hon. Lady that, despite the coronavirus pandemic and the fiscal conditions we face, we are none the less putting in £10 billion, which, on 2019 figures, has us as the second-largest overseas development aid contributor. When I speak to our interlocutors abroad, from Asia to Africa, and when I speak to our multilateral partners, from Dr Tedros to António Guterres, they do not share this self-flagellating defeatism or this will to do Britain down. They understand that we make an unparalleled contribution in the world as a force for good. We shall continue to do so.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): We now know that because of the Government's choices the economic price facing the country is higher, that the manifesto commitments the Conservatives made last December can no longer be trusted, and that when the Government talk about hard choices what they really mean are real-terms pay cuts for key public sector workers such as teachers, teaching assistants, police and firefighters, and cuts to support for the world's poorest. Can the Foreign Secretary at least tell us what he thinks the public will be more concerned about: aid that goes to the world's poorest which actually saves us money in the longer term, or the gross waste of public money through billions of pounds of poor Government contracts and barrels full of public money handed over to Tory donors?

Dominic Raab: I think that's Twitter lined up for later on in the afternoon. The hon. Gentleman asks what the public expect. I think they ask us in a sober way to look at all the choices. We have done that.

Preet Kaur Gill *indicated dissent.*

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady has advocated cutting ODA in the past. She now shakes her head. *[Interruption.]* She wants to fudge it as repurposing. We are not going to fudge it in the way that she does. We are going to be very honest with the British public about an incredibly difficult set of decisions. We are making sure that we can see our way through the pandemic. We will still be contributing £10 billion to the world's poorest, to climate change and to girls' education. I think the public will understand. If the hon. Gentleman has any alternatives, rather than just criticising from the Opposition Benches, we would be glad to hear them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I know how important this statement is, but we do have two further debates, on climate change and on covid-19, so I urge colleagues to have fairly short questions and, correspondingly, short answers.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. A short question coming up. Will my right hon. Friend please confirm to the House that the UK's aid spend will also be focused on ensuring that the most vulnerable around the world get access to vaccines?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have demonstrated that through our leadership of the Gavi summit and our leadership role in the funding and galvanising of international funding for COVAX, and we will continue to do so.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP) [V]: The fact that the aid budget is set as a percentage of GNI means that it is necessarily self-regulating. Budget allocations on such a basis remain consistent with the prevailing economic conditions, so if 0.7% was okay for normal times, surely it must be fine for lean times, too. Having reneged on a key Tory manifesto commitment less than a year after the election—in itself surely something of a record—will the Secretary of State advise the House of what detailed analysis he has commissioned to quantify the cost to humanity of removing £4 billion in aid from the poorest communities in the teeth of a global pandemic?

Dominic Raab: I do not think it is right to say that just because there is a percentage based on GNI, that means we can deal with a situation of the severity that we face now, with the worst economic contraction in more than 300 years and a budget deficit double that of the previous financial crisis. These are not ordinary times in which the natural stabiliser built into the target can apply. The hon. Gentleman asked how we will safeguard and prioritise; we have an allocations process. We are not going to salami-slice ODA across the different pots of money; we are going to make sure that we do it in a strategic way, and I will be taking that forward in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that, going forward, the right decisions will be made to deal with everything from poverty to extremism. For that to be the case, he has to focus on the safety and security of women and girls, which requires access for them to good and safe education. Will he update us on how we will continue to do that? During this, the week of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the greatest number of women being abused are Uyghur women who are being abused by the Chinese state. Will he update us on what support he can provide to Uyghur women?

Dominic Raab: I have set out before the House how we will safeguard what we are doing on girls' education and how we will maintain our leadership role with the global targets that we set.

We are very concerned about the position in Xinjiang. We recently made Five Eyes statements on it and brought together, in the United Nations Third Committee, a much broader pool of countries to express our concern. What needs to happen now is that the UN Human Rights Commissioner, or another independent fact-finding body, is able to have access to check the facts, because China's rejoinder is always that this is just not happening. There are too many reports that it is. We need to get to the bottom of this, and the UN Human Rights Commissioner has a role to play.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: The provision of overseas development aid is not a selfless act: it is in our interest to foster global

peace and sustainable development, thereby reducing the migration associated with war, climate change, disease and famine. What is the Foreign Secretary's assessment of the impact on international peacebuilding and migration associated with the Government's choice to cut foreign aid?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I do not see a siloed distinction between our moral interest in what we do abroad and the national interest—they are often combined. In respect of some of the areas that she mentioned, she should look at what we are doing on defence and security; it may not be strictly within the DAC rules, but it does have a huge impact on our soft power abroad and the stability of the countries that she mentioned. We are going to use the allocation process to make sure that we mitigate some of the concerns and risks she mentioned, but of course we will not be able to continue all the funding that we are doing. These are difficult choices that come as a matter of necessity in the emergency financial situation that I am afraid we find ourselves in.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: The International Development Committee has long recommended that there should be a single sign-off by—since its takeover of the Department for International Development—the FCDO on all UK ODA spend, no matter which Department spends it. Who in the FCDO will ultimately be responsible for that? I appreciate that the Foreign Secretary is far too busy.

Dominic Raab: Ultimately, the Secretary of State and Ministers are responsible to Parliament for financial spending. We look carefully at both the underspend and the overspend. We are constantly looking not just to strengthen our internal processes—we have looked at that again as a result of the merger—but to make sure through ICAI and the Select Committees in this House that we have maximum transparency. If my hon. Friend has any other specific proposals in that regard, I would be happy to consider them.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): On 30 June, the Secretary of State said in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan):

"I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are committed to spending 0.7% of GNI on aid."—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2020; Vol. 678, c. 142.]

Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he was not being truthful with the House at that time, or did the Chancellor and the Prime Minister simply not tell him what they were planning to do?

Dominic Raab: Amid all the hyperbole, I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but the truth is that the full scale of the economic situation was not clear—*[Interruption.]* It was not clear, because we were coming through—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is chuntering. Let me answer the question; I am trying to take him seriously on this and he should listen to the answer. The fact is that if he looks at June, he will see that we were coming through the first wave. We had not got ourselves into a position of having to go into a second lockdown and, frankly, the full financial effects were not clear. He is right to make that point, but there is a very clear reason why we have had to take the measures that we have, which we take as a matter of regret. We wanted to avoid that, but it is because of the nature of the virus and the prolonged financial impact that it has had on businesses and, as a result of that, on the public finances.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Our economy has taken a terrible shock this year and that is why 0.7% means that we have already had to cut aid by £2.9 billion this year. Yesterday, I heard an update from the World Food Programme in South Sudan. It has had an even worse economic shock not just from covid, but from the ongoing conflict and the fact that it has had locusts and biblical floods. Now, more than half the population is facing famine. The Foreign Secretary recently sent his special envoy for famine prevention and humanitarian affairs to South Sudan. Can he reassure the House that he will make no further cuts to the programming in South Sudan?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to South Sudan. I could give a list of countries that risk the compound effect of conflict, covid and famine. We could add Yemen, Burkina Faso and north-east Nigeria, which is why I launched the first UK special envoy for famine prevention and humanitarian affairs, Nick Dyer, and why, as we go through the allocation process that I have described to the House, these are precisely the things—conflict, humanitarian and covid—that we will look very carefully to safeguard for all the reasons that she described.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The UK is seen as a world leader when it comes to international development. Our legislation ensures that aid is focused on poverty reduction. Can the Foreign Secretary share his views on tied aid and address the concerns of numerous Members on both sides of the House about the Government making a return to tied aid, which will harm not only the people who benefit from UK aid, but our nation's reputation globally?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman asks a really good question. I do not agree with tied aid. I do not believe that we should go back to that system; I think it is from a bygone era. However, I have listened carefully to leading economists such as Paul Collier and, in particular, Stefan Dercon, who talked about the fact that the most enduring and profitable—for the countries affected—long-term partnerships, which are sustainable, do have a sense of partnership and two-way benefit. That is what makes them an enduring partnership. I was so impressed with the argument by Stefan Dercon that I hired him into the new FCDO when we merged the Departments to make sure that we had a really good progressive approach to the partnerships—particularly the long-term partnerships—that we make with those countries.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Churches played the key role in the 20-year cross-party consensus on aid, and I pay tribute to their achievement since Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History. We all realised what abolishing DFID really meant. Why did the Secretary of State not realise it?

Dominic Raab: I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the Churches. Maybe they have a power of foresight that has been lost on humble politicians, but all I would say is that even at the point at which we did the merger, I do not think anyone could have

[Dominic Raab]

foreseen the depth of the financial implications. As a former Treasury Minister, I think he would understand this; he has been through the process. The analysis was not there and the structural hit—not just for one year—to the public finances was not clear at that time. It is clear now. We have had to take a difficult decision. I have to say to him, as a former Minister, that these are decisions that, typically, Conservative Governments front up and, on the Labour side, they abdicate.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) [V]: I welcome the opportunities that an integrated budget provides. I also welcome the Foreign Secretary's focus on defending open societies. After the Prime Minister's affirmative reply to my letters to the Foreign Secretary of 4 September and 12 October about securing global Britain's leadership on LGBT+ rights, will the Foreign Secretary undertake to instruct officials to engage with the United Kingdom Alliance for Global Equality and any other relevant organisations to help to formulate the programmes of work that could be delivered and announced by the Prime Minister or him when the United Kingdom hosts the global Equal Rights Coalition conference next year?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has championed this cause relentlessly and with great passion and great eloquence. We are a global leader in this and we should be proud of it—I am proud of it. We are proud to be the Equal Rights Coalition co-chair with Argentina, and we are ambitious about what we can achieve through that strategy and the impact it will have. He talked about NGOs. Civil society has an incredibly important role to play, and we are committed to working with all the NGOs, including the United Kingdom Alliance for Global Equality, in the weeks and months ahead.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con) [V]: Having experienced three 100-year floods within eight years, we are only too aware in the Calder Valley of how vital immediate emergency help is from Government. While I agree with the short-term reduction in international aid because of the massive generational cost of borrowing money, among other things, does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK should continue to be a major donor in addressing the worst humanitarian and natural disaster crises throughout the world?

Dominic Raab: As I have set out, that is of course one of the priorities that we will safeguard as we reduce the financial envelope. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think there is cross-party consensus. For all the public criticism there sometimes is of the ODA spend, alleviating conflict and dealing with the aftermath of humanitarian disasters is what ODA should be spent on and what it should be prioritised for. That is what this Government and global Britain are all about.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The pandemic has reminded us that the virus does not respect borders. Countries with weaker health systems and poor water and sanitation facilities are less likely to defeat covid-19, maintaining the virus's threat to the UK and the world. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether that was taken into account when making the decision to cut vital aid? Can he explain what he means by returning to the 0.7% commitment when the fiscal situation allows? What metrics will be used to determine that point in time?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about covid and other public health priorities. That is why, as I have set out, we are not just taking a salami-slicing approach to the £10 billion of ODA next year. We will look strategically. As I have already said, that is one of the priorities. It is difficult to give him the precision he may want on when fiscal conditions will allow us to get back to 0.7%, but that is a result of the pandemic. I am sure we will have greater clarity as the weeks and months go ahead. We have got to get through this pandemic and allow the economy to recover. This is a temporary measure taken as a matter of necessity and we will get back to 0.7% as soon as the fiscal conditions allow.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): To say that I am disappointed by the decision is an understatement. I am horrified that we have decided to break a manifesto commitment, and I am horrified by the message it sends to the many women who have suffered such horrendous acts of sexual violence in conflict, especially given the fact that yesterday was the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. I know how hard it is and that the Foreign Secretary did not want that decision, but why did he and the Government not look at reforming this and at a multi-year funding formula—rather than one based on the calendar year—to reach the 0.7%? That would have given us the long-term strategy and the commitment to the world's poorest.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for what he is saying, and I understand that he is trying to be constructive. I think he is referring to the idea that we could reform and change the approach, as many have suggested even before the pandemic, so that the 0.7% commitment was averaged out over several years. I understand that, and I think it is a good proposal. It is something that perhaps we should consider in any event, but the reality is that the depth of the economic hit, the depth of the contraction and the knock-on effect on the public finances mean, I am afraid, that we would not be able to meet the challenge and the extent of the necessity that we face in trying to reconcile domestic and international priorities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will now have a three-minute suspension to allow for the safe exit and entry of hon. and right Members.

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

2.15 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.18 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have to inform the House of a correction to the result of the deferred Division held yesterday on the draft European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (Relevant Court) (Retained EU Case Law) Regulations 2020. The number of Members voting Aye was 356, not 354. The number of Members voting No remains at 261. There is no change to the outcome of the Division.

Backbench Business

Climate Change Assembly UK: The Path to Net Zero

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call Darren Jones, I must inform colleagues that there are clearly two well-subscribed debates this afternoon, so I will have to impose an immediate time limit of five minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

2.19 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the report of Climate Assembly UK; gives thanks to the citizens who gave up their time to inform the work of select committees, the development of policy and the wider public debate; and calls on the Government to take note of the recommendations of the Assembly as it develops the policies necessary to achieve the target of net zero emissions by 2050.

It is a pleasure to open today's debate, for which I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee. The Climate Assembly UK's final report runs to more than 500 pages, and, as I suggested in this place a couple of months ago, it provides an invaluable evidence base for Ministers in this and future Governments, and for colleagues across the House, as we chart our course to net zero.

I am grateful to my fellow Committee Chairs, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), whose Committees, together with my own, set that work in motion. Most of all, I am grateful to all the participants, who gave up their time to make the Assembly a reality and so hasten the cause of ambitious action to combat climate change.

None of us doubts the urgency of that work and, with all the other challenges we currently face, we should not forget about the scale of the tasks ahead of us in reaching net zero and persuading other countries to do the same. Before I begin my substantive remarks, I should also declare my interests, as my wife is the head of external affairs at the Association for Decentralised Energy.

Today's debate is especially timely for the House in the context of the Prime Minister's so-called "Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution". Today, using the Climate Assembly conclusions, and noting its outcomes as representative of the British people, I will highlight what the British people think about the Prime Minister's 10 points. At a headline level: barely a quarter of the £12 billion highlighted in the Prime Minister's plan represented new announcements, and our total proposed spend still lags behind that of other developed European economies. It is right to point out that the Committee on Climate Change target of 2% of GDP in net-zero spending includes leveraging private sector spending alongside public sector spending, but, unfortunately, we did not get much further on this issue in the spending review yesterday. Like others, I welcome the Chancellor's announcement on a national infrastructure bank. Such a bank will have the potential to accelerate financing and free up large-scale investment for decarbonisation, but net-zero obligations need to be enshrined in the bank's founding mandates.

On offshore wind, I am sure we all welcome the Government's willingness to invest more in transmission and networks, and the restated commitments both to a quadrupling of our capacity and to significantly expanding the use of domestically manufactured components, but the public will expect action to bear out that optimism. The Government's stated intention to bring these jobs home simply by incorporating requirements for UK content into contracts for difference just will not cut it without a seriousness about how, where and when these jobs will be created and trained for, underpinned by a detailed allocation of resources. Recent failures on this front, including the collapse of the BiFab—Burntisland Fabrications Ltd—contract in Scotland, bring into question our ability to reach our existing offshore sector deal targets, let alone future targets, and show the need for reform. The Climate Assembly report identifies support in excess of 95% for prioritising offshore wind within the UK's energy mix, which should demonstrate to Ministers the appetite that exists for action at the pace and of the scale required.

Next, the Government's plans to boost hydrogen production are also worth interrogating more closely. I know that a number of colleagues in the House have an interest in that and I look forward to their contributions later today. Although 83% of Climate Assembly participants took the view that hydrogen power should form some part of the UK's eventual energy mix, they had substantive concerns about its scalability, value for money, and the risks and early-stage costs associated with producing and storing hydrogen as a usable fuel. Should Ministers agree with the Assembly's conclusions in this report, they may wish to pause to reflect on those concerns and provide some answers on them. That is even truer, it has been argued, if the journey towards developing usable capacity for hydrogen is carbon-intensive, and truer still if the trade-off is forgone investment in cleaner and simpler routes to decarbonisation. However, as I say, I welcome the debate on this topic today.

Carbon capture technologies will also ultimately serve a purpose in complementing the transition to renewable energy, in enabling some less adaptive carbon-intensive processes to continue, and potentially in harnessing the potential of hydrogen, but the scale of that role is up for debate, and some people view the target of 10 million as inadequate without a much faster economy-wide transition to clean energy sources. In that context, the technology did not command a consensus among Assembly members, with just 22% support for carbon capture alongside fossil fuels as a long-term solution.

The eventual role of new nuclear power is also something on which the public are pretty sharply divided, with 34% of assembly members expressing support and 46% voicing opposition. The lines of disagreement will be familiar to Members, with supporters stressing nuclear's reliability and potential to create jobs in the near term, but with sceptics worried about safety, non-carbon environmental degradation and high up-front costs.

The target for 600,000 annual heat pump installations by 2028 is welcome, in conjunction with both energy efficiency measures and obvious job creation. It enjoyed 80% support among Climate Assembly members, but the Government should consider whether these initiatives

[Darren Jones]

are best delivered through empowering and resourcing local authorities to drive investment in local communities, instead of a top-down approach that fails to take a technology-neutral position on policy making. Indeed, in the assembly report there was 80% support for heat pumps, 80% support for heat networks and 80% support for potential hydrogen, and the conclusion was that local people and local communities should get to decide which technology best suits their needs.

The extended deadline for the green homes grant is also welcome, but the early teething problems with the current scheme need to be fixed urgently and the remaining funding for those works, as allocated in the Conservative party manifesto, need to be forthcoming.

Moving briefly to transport, the Government's hugely welcome headline announcement on phasing out conventionally powered cars commanded 86% support in the assembly. In order for the Government's £1.3 billion to be spent efficiently, alongside the Chancellor's welcome announcements yesterday in relation to money for rapid charging hubs and subsidies for home and street-side charge points, it is crucial that decisions are taken on the basis of credibly evaluating demand at the local level. One hopes that there will also be a greater willingness to come out of our cars and to use public and active transport more. Most assembly members support investment in lower-carbon buses and trains, as long as they run more frequently and less expensively, and some early announcements from Ministers, while welcome, must go further.

On jet zero, or lower-carbon intensive flight, the same questions of personal choice and collective responsibility are at the centre of the debate about how to reduce emissions from air travel. Assembly members accepted that growth in air passenger numbers has to be slowed, but many baulked at the suggestion of outright restrictions on people's ability to fly. Instead, there was broad consensus around the principle that passengers should pay in proportion to the frequency and distance travelled, and that airlines themselves must pick up some of the tab for decarbonising aviation.

Lastly, the prospect of a renewed focus on tree planting and peatland restoration, if underpinned by a fair system of incentives and sensitivity to the needs of individual farmers, proved highly popular, albeit with some participants expressing scepticism about the limits of its potential ecological benefit. This is one example where the role of Government in broader educative or explanatory notes on net zero policy decisions is important.

The question of fairness was central to the deliberations of the Climate Assembly, and it should be clear that the broad support that exists for decarbonisation can only be sustained by guaranteeing that the new economy offers the possibility of skilled, dignified work to everyone who seeks it, and that those currently employed in carbon-intensive industries do not disproportionately lose out from the net zero transition. Building such an insistence on fairness into our strategy for achieving net zero is a critical test set for the Government by the assembly, and I would welcome an update from Ministers on how it will figure in the plethora of now very delayed but highly anticipated announcements on all of these issues from the Department.

The public expect the Government to build on the Prime Minister's 10-point plan with concrete, strategic and serious action that is adequate to the scale of the task at hand. Ministers can best do that by learning the lessons of the Climate Assembly, ensuring that our response to the climate crisis is deliberative, democratic and fair, and moving forward with the justified confidence that the public are on board and on side. The report itself also contains additional valuable suggestions beyond the Prime Minister's initial 10 points—there are more things that need to be done—which I hope will be considered carefully.

The valuable, credible and timely conclusions from the Climate Assembly should be taken as a guide to our actions. The report's key recommendation was that the Government should forge cross-party consensus to sustain action beyond political cycles that commands the support of successive Governments. I am confident, and I hope it is now clear, that across the mainstream of this House such consensus exists. It is time now, therefore, to act.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As I said, there will now be a five-minute time limit. I call Sally-Ann Hart.

2.29 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who highlighted some very pertinent points. I welcome the Climate Assembly report and its recommendations, which form a valuable body of evidence about public preferences for how to get to net zero and show that there is public support to get this right. This path requires strong leadership from Government to forge long-term planning between people and businesses, and I therefore welcome the Government's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, which is aimed at eradicating the UK's contribution to climate change by 2050. Two of the points in the 10-point plan that I will highlight today are to do with carbon capture and storage in nature, which tie in with the Climate Assembly recommendations.

To achieve net zero by 2025 necessitates reducing greenhouse gas emissions as much as possible. However, reducing emissions alone will not be enough. Ways of removing and storing carbon were considered by the Climate Assembly. Assembly members heard about potential removal methods through tree planting and better forest management, restoring and managing peatlands and wetlands, and enhancing the storage of carbon in the soil. Better forest management was the members' preferred option. They said that it was a brilliant thing to do but not enough on its own and a starting point.

Taking that into account, we must not forget about our coastal habitats and seas and blue carbon—carbon captured by our oceans and coastal ecosystems. Our oceans and coasts provide a natural way of reducing the impact of greenhouse gases on our atmosphere through sequestration of carbon. Protecting and restoring our coastal habitats is vital to tackling climate change. Our coastal habitats can play a vital role in tackling climate change and protecting us against rising sea levels, as well as being home to internationally important wildlife. They also bring much-needed tourism and

green jobs to seaside communities such as mine in Hastings and Rye, especially as we recover from the coronavirus crisis.

Globally, we have lost more than half our coastal habitats due to a destructive combination of climate change, sea level rise, coastal erosion and development, and we are predicted to lose up to 3,000 hectares more per year by 2050. In beautiful Hastings and Rye, we are blessed with so much nature, including Rye Harbour nature reserve and a coastline of shingle beaches, reedbeds and saline lagoons. The banks of the River Rother, for example, are lined with salt marshes and wetlands that teem with wildlife. When properly functioning, salt marshes can suck up carbon up to three times faster than tropical rainforests, yet it is estimated that as much as 1 billion tonnes of carbon are being released annually from degraded coastal ecosystems worldwide.

In addition, when we lose this natural coastal buffer zone, coastal houses and businesses are put at much greater risk of flooding. Projects such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds nature reserve at Wallasea island in Essex now protect local villages from repeated flooding. If we were to scale this up, it has been estimated that in England alone we could create 26,500 hectares of new salt marsh, which could make use of innovative partnerships that connect local communities and NGOs with Government and private investors. These projects can also provide new outdoor landscapes for local people to enjoy, with physical and mental health benefits, as well as tourism, potential income and rejuvenated fishing stocks.

Although the ocean's vegetated habitats cover less than 0.5% of the seabed, they are responsible for more than 50% and potentially up to 70% of all carbon storage in ocean sediments. Seagrasses and marshes along our coasts capture and hold carbon, acting as a carbon sink. One acre of seagrass can sequester 740 lbs of carbon per year or 83 grams of carbon per square metre, which is the same as the amount emitted by a car travelling 3,860 miles. In the UK, up to 92% of our wonder plant, seagrass, has disappeared over the last 100 years. Seagrasses provide one of the most productive ecosystems in the world. An area of seagrass the size of a football pitch can support over 50,000 fish and more than 700,000 invertebrates, which is great for our fishing industry.

The benefits of blue carbon projects are huge. With the UK Government's plans to decarbonise the maritime industry, the industry can and should play a vital role, working in partnership with blue carbon projects around the UK's coasts. It is time for us to unlock the potential of our coastlines to reach our 2050 goal of net zero emissions and to reverse our loss of wildlife, while simultaneously helping to provide our coastal communities with jobs and investment where it is needed most.

2.34 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Please do not worry, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is not my speech that I am holding. You and I have seen a lot of reports since we came into the House, and I have here the "Millennium Ecosystem Assessment", the "UK National Ecosystem Assessment", the "State of Nature" report, "Net Zero: The UK's contribution to stopping global warming", the "Clean Air Strategy 2019", "Land use: Policies for a Net Zero UK", "Reducing UK emissions: Progress Report to Parliament" and "How carbon pricing can help Britain achieve net zero by 2050"—just a small selection of what is on my shelf. Do we really need another report? Yes, we do.

All those reports are politicians telling the public what needs to be done. This Climate Assembly UK report, "The path to net zero", is the public telling the politicians what needs to be done. About time too! Some fantastic principles have been used to get there. The report is 552 pages long—it is a big read—but it is underpinned by fundamental principles: education and information, fairness, freedom of choice, protecting nature and restoring our natural environment, strong joined-up leadership from Government and a joined-up approach. That is what makes it different.

I will to go straight to recommendation 1:

"We want the transition to net zero to be a cross-political party issue, and not a partisan issue".

I take it that everyone in this Chamber is in agreement that we need to achieve that. If anything that I say to the Minister sounds like a criticism, it is not because I want to play party politics. I want to co-operate with the Minister, to work with him and to achieve what we have all set our face to towards achieving.

I want to focus on how the report looks at joined-up government. In that respect, I recommend to everyone yet another report, the National Audit Office report on "Achieving government's long-term environmental goals". It states that the 25-year environment plan

"brings together a number of government's environmental commitments and aspirations in one place, but it does not provide a clear and coherent set of objectives…and…government has yet to set a clear course for the development of a coherent and complete set of environmental objectives, and for a full set of costed delivery plans".

The report goes on to say that

"government has yet to set out whether or how it will clarify long-term ambitions for the five environmental goals that it has not designated as priority areas…and…that neither Defra nor HM Treasury yet has a good understanding of the long-term costs involved in delivering the Plan as a whole…Defra is developing governance arrangements to help manage the links between different environmental issues",

and has set up the "two oversight groups", but:

"In July 2020 the Implementation Board started work to assign responsibilities for managing the links between goal areas, although it has not yet agreed what the most important links are."

Furthermore, the report recommends that DEFRA

"maps out the most significant interdependencies between the goals in the 25 Year Environment Plan and sets out how decisions about any significant trade-offs will be made, and by who",

and states:

"Government's arrangements for joint working between departments on environmental issues are"

simply not good enough. There are

"no clear indications of senior ownership outside Defra and its arms-length bodies for the Plan as a whole…and…no regular, formal arrangements at all for Defra to engage other departments".

I now turn to page 539 of the Climate Assembly report, where it states that 78% of people engaged in the assembly agreed:

"There should be a Minister with exclusive responsibility and accountability for ensuring net zero targets are met and government departments are co-ordinated in their efforts and achievements to meet their targets".

The Minister must act and do that.

2.39 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As Chairman of one of the six Select Committees that commissioned Climate Assembly UK to report on how the UK should meet the Government's target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, I warmly welcome the report, thank all those who contributed, and look forward to the opportunity to debate the contents in the few minutes that I have. I also thank the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who was Chair of the Transport Committee when the assembly was commissioned.

I want to touch on the transport matters that the report focused on, because, as was rightly hailed, the transport sector is the poster child in its failure to turn itself around. Its carbon footprint still stubbornly contributes 33% of all carbon dioxide emissions released in the UK. There is much for the transport sector to do, therefore. The report rightly focused on surface transport, where 70% of the transport carbon footprint is made. I want to touch on a few of the causes, and comment on what the Government are doing and perhaps on what more needs to be done.

First, the assembly called for a ban on the sale of new petrol, diesel and hybrid cars by between 2030 and 2035, and clearly someone has been listening, because the Government's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution has brought forward the date from 2040, set earlier in the year, to 2035 and now to 2030. That is an incredibly ambitious target from the Government, and it is going to be a big challenge for the motor manufacturing industry and the charging infrastructure industry to ensure that they can deliver.

I am pleased that the Government have pledged £500 million to kick-start that shift, but the key is consumer confidence. It is essential that electric vehicle owners are confident, no matter what their household circumstances or their travel plans, that the mode is the correct choice for them, although I understand that there needs to be a sea change and, indeed, ambitious targets must be set if we are ever to deliver a shift away from combustion to electric. I think that that will necessitate a look at pay-as-you-drive, and I am pleased that the Transport Committee will be looking at both the question of ending sales of vehicles with combustion engines by 2030 and new modes of paying for driving.

I also want to touch on the call for Government investment in low-carbon buses and trains. The Government have introduced, or plan to introduce, at least 4,000 more British-built zero-emission buses, which I welcome. In addition, two towns will have electric-only buses. That is a great start.

There is already a plan to decarbonise the rail network by 2040, and the Transport Committee is currently in the midst of the "Trains fit for the future?" inquiry. We stand at a great crossroads: with 15,400 kilometres of track currently non-electrified, we can look at electrification, at battery power, or even further into the future towards hydrogen, but if we move solely to electrification, we should consider that 1% of the national grid is already used for electrification on trains and 60% of our energy that creates electricity is regarded as dirty, and thus non-renewable. Therefore, if we increase electrification there is a danger that we will increase our carbon footprint, and if in years to come hydrogen is more ready to be used, it would be a huge shame to have vested everything in electrification—and it is more expensive as well. That said, there is a big challenge in industry to ensure that we can get the speed, the range and indeed the freight capability for hydrogen, and I fully admit that at present electrification is the only game in town.

On the question of adding more bus routes and more frequent services, the Transport Committee called for a bus strategy. I am pleased the Government have done likewise.

I disagree with bringing public transport back under Government control, although some might say that that has already occurred by osmosis. Under privatisation over the past 20 years, rail passenger numbers have doubled, as private enterprise is more incentivised to get people on to rail services than the general taxpayer ever will be, so I disagree with that one part of the report.

There is much more in this fantastic report, but I have run out of time. I very much support everything the assembly has done.

2.44 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and, indeed, to see hon. Members from different parties participating in today's debate. Although it is timely, we are very much focused at the moment, of course, on the health crisis created by covid. Normally, I would have had a chance to write a speech, but today I am working from some very rough notes. While we are rightly focused on the health crisis that we face, not just in this country but internationally, the climate emergency has not gone away. Indeed, if anything, it bears on us even more.

The health crisis also gives us reason for hope and for learning. We have seen what amazing things can be achieved in a very short space of time when there is the will to do so. We have seen that people are up for almost unimaginable change when they really understand why it is needed. Parliament made a really important decision when it agreed that we would reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. We cannot afford to wait. In fact, if possible, we need to go even faster, and that is a call that I would make. If we do not achieve that, our planet will be irreparably damaged. Having made that commitment, the Government, and all of us as parliamentarians, must set out how we will get there and how we will reach those decisions. In making those decisions and setting out the steps, public support will be essential, and that is why the role of the Climate Assembly is so vital.

I am proud that the Transport Committee, which I chaired at the time, was one of those Select Committees commissioning Climate Assembly UK, but we owe a huge debt of thanks to the 108 people who took part and actually made this process a reality. I saw for myself, on the first weekend they met back in January, what it involved. It was fantastic to be in the room as an observer and to see the energy and the interest that they showed in the expert information that was being presented to them, the questions that they asked and the participation. It was really excellent.

It is important to recognise the value of assembling a group that is truly representative of the UK population in terms of age, gender, educational qualifications, ethnicity, where they lived, whether they were from an urban area or a rural one, and actually whether they were really

concerned about climate change or slightly sceptical about the whole issue. Too often, we find ourselves in echo chambers. We just listen to those who hold opinions similar to our or hear from those who shout the loudest. The assembly's work provided a rare opportunity to hear some of the quiet voices of people who had been given the information and had time to consider their recommendations. That is hugely valuable.

The assembly's hard work has produced a comprehensive report, as has already been said, and a set of 50 policy recommendations, covering not only how we travel but how we generate electricity, how we heat our homes and what we eat. Those are clear and consistent, and if we follow them, they will help us to get to net zero. I think that they are an invaluable resource to support our work here in Parliament and our decision making. The recommendations are not binding, and I think that is right. We can make different choices, but we cannot avoid making choices and taking action. The Climate Assembly based its recommendations on a comprehensive and balanced set of evidence, and it heard a range of views.

I want to say a couple of things about the transport recommendations. I obviously welcome the assembly's support for extra investment in low-carbon buses and trains and better public transport services, cheaper fares and investment in walking and cycling. I am delighted that the Government have already decided to act on that recommendation and brought forward the ban on new diesel and petrol cars to 2030, but I was disappointed that hidden away in yesterday's spending review was a 15% cut in next year's walking and cycling budget. I hope that when the delayed transport decarbonisation plan comes through, it does not disappoint us.

I would have liked to say more about road pricing. It is interesting that there was a wariness on the part of assembly members around that issue, so although I am glad that we are having a debate about it, we need to think about how we address the impacts on low-income households as we develop the policy.

2.49 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): As a member of one of the six commissioning Select Committees, I have followed the work of the Climate Assembly with considerable interest, but I have to confess that my initial impression was not favourable. The concept of a relatively small number of members of the general public—just 108 people, I think—being imbued with any greater knowledge, understanding or wisdom than the ranks of experts that already advise Parliament and the Government on the one hand, and my own membership of a larger and infinitely more democratic citizens' assembly—this place—on the other, made me doubt the value of the work being undertaken. Frankly, I was also concerned that the assembly would simply become a mouthpiece for some of the more extreme environmental pressure groups. But when the participants were surveyed about the quality of the information that they had received, 78% agreed that it had been fair and balanced between the different viewpoints. Although this was admittedly the lowest score for any of the evaluation questions asked, it still represents a substantial consensus of opinion.

Having now seen the assembly's output, I recognise that my first impression was wholly wrong. Although the assembly's work can in no way supplant the role of this House in formulating and then enacting public policy, its report has added valuable insights to the debate on the mix of policies required to achieve our common goal. The standard answer to the question of which technologies should be used to get to net zero is "all of them", and that is still likely to be the case, but the Government should take note of the assembly's views, and take note very seriously, given that public acceptance of the huge changes required will be critical to their success. If we do not bring the public with us, the best-laid plans will be doomed to failure.

It is for that reason that I was so glad to read the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for the green industrial revolution. I do not believe that it is serendipity that this key policy announcement mirrors so closely the Climate Assembly's conclusions: increasing our target for offshore wind capacity from 10 GW to 40 GW by 2030; promoting the hydrogen generation market; accelerating the transition to electric vehicles, which has already been referred to during this debate; pushing additional investment into public transport, walking and cycling; and researching zero-emission aviation and shipping. The list goes on. It shows that the Government have been listening, and listening hard, and that they are seeking to reflect many of the Climate Assembly's key objectives. It is a testament to the value of this process, and all those who were involved should recognise the impact that their work has already had. But there are some interesting differences.

Technologies that hold out the prospect of fixing carbon emissions without the need for behavioural change by us as consumers did not receive as much support from the Climate Assembly as I would have expected. Carbon capture and storage—either direct air or from bioenergy—were, relatively speaking, less popular than other proposed changes. In the responses in chapter 9 of the report, there was a strong desire not simply to fix carbon emissions but actually to address their root causes.

There is a desire to use our response to climate change as an opportunity to consider what kind of relationship we should have with our natural surroundings —less an industrial supremacy and more, perhaps, a collaborative symbiosis. Although it is my view that we will certainly need all our technological ingenuity in carbon capture and storage, and probably in nuclear, to achieve net zero carbon by 2050, as policymakers we should seek to understand and reflect this deeper and wider need. It is this more mature relationship between us and our environment that sets the current generation apart from its predecessors, and gives me such hope for the future.

2.54 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing this important debate. I also congratulate the members of the climate assembly who took part in producing this important report. As the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) indicated, the involvement of people from across the country in our democratic processes and in discussing important issues should be celebrated, and there is no issue that requires urgent focus and consideration more than the climate crisis.

The report sets out clear, holistic principles that will be central to achieving a liveable future. From how we travel, what we eat and how we use the land to what we buy, how we use heat and energy in the home, how we

[Claudia Webbe]

generate our electricity and how we will remove greenhouse gas, this it provides a mandate for decarbonisation that we in this House cannot ignore.

Climate breakdown is not a distant threat but is happening here and now. The World Meteorological Organisation found that the 20 warmest years on record have been in the past 22 years. Human-caused climate change has already been proved to increase the risk of floods, extreme rainfall, heatwaves and wildfires, with dire implications for humans, animals and the environment. Yet the Government's recently announced green industrial revolution does not go nearly far enough towards addressing this existential crisis. Only £4 billion of the £12 billion scheme is newly announced funding, and that is four times less than the recently announced £16 billion increase in military spending. As Sir David King, founder and chair of the Centre for Climate Repair at the University of Cambridge, said,

"it is nowhere near enough to manage the British Government commitment to net zero… by 2050 or to provide a safe future."

Not only is the 2050 target perilously unambitious, but, according to the Committee on Climate Change, the Government are not even on track to meet it.

The Tory Government continued to give oil companies further tax breaks until as recently as December 2018. The 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that, to prevent global temperatures from rising by more than 1.5° above pre-industrial levels—seen by scientists as a tipping point past which climate disasters will be locked in—oil and gas production must fall by 20% by 2030. I am gravely concerned that if fossil fuel companies are left to their own devices, such crucial targets will be missed. For example, ExxonMobil is projected to extract 25% more oil and gas in 2025 than in 2017. Oil companies such as Exxon and Shell knew that their extractive industries were causing climate change as far back as the 1980s, but instead of informing the public, they funded climate change denial and those lobbying against environmental policy.

A 2017 study in the scientific publication *World Development* found that worldwide fossil fuel subsidies amounted to $4.9 trillion in a single year. It is estimated that eliminating those subsidies would have cut global carbon emissions by 21% and air pollution deaths by over half. It is therefore vital that these subsidies are ended and that Government bail-outs are subject to stringent commitments to workers' rights, tax justice and rapid decarbonisation.

Without immediate Government intervention, the urgent action required to preserve a habitable planet will be too slow. That will cause unimaginable disruption and could cost millions of lives, most immediately and sharply in the global south, whose countries have contributed least to climate change. The current crisis has demonstrated that we are only as secure as the most precarious among us and that rapid social and economic change really is possible. At this unprecedented moment, the Government must consider all possible interventions and regulation to phase out the extraction of fossil fuels and to transition to renewables as soon as scientifically possible. The climate crisis is a class crisis. It must be the big polluters and corporate giants who bear the costs, not ordinary people.

2.59 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am a member of the Treasury Committee, one of the commissioning Select Committees for this report. I also speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the environment and, indeed, as a member of the Environment Bill Committee, which has today finished legislating on many of the measures that were included in this great report.

I see stopping environmental destruction as the defining mission of our generation. To those who have not yet seen the film "A Life on Our Planet" by David Attenborough, I highly recommend it. It shows what has changed on our planet throughout the lifetime of that remarkable individual, including the destruction of habitats, species extinction and climate change. We have a lot of work to do. Tough action needs to be taken, but we are a democracy and we need to take the people with us. Too often, those at the more radical end of the environment movement take a coercive approach: they want to turn back the clock, stop people doing things, dismantle capitalism and tell people what they can and cannot do. The trouble with that is that it risks a backlash. If we do not take the people with us, it might give rise to the anti-environmental populists that we see in other countries.

This is why the Climate Assembly is so important, and I thoroughly welcome its report. These are members of the public considering the issues carefully and coming up with their own recommendations. It really shows just how sensible the British public are. They accept the need to tackle climate change. They know it is a real problem. They are not trying to resist it, and they support practical measures to do it, but they want to do it without sacrificing quality of life, because we do not need to. They do not want to stop going on holidays or living the lives they lead, and it is that pragmatism that is so essential.

There are 50 proposals in the report overall, and I have little disagreement with any of them. I am delighted to say, as my hon. Friends did earlier, that the Government are already implementing many of them. This could be one of the most quickly implemented reports of all time. On electric vehicles, the report recommends certain other vehicles being banned by between 2030 and 2035, and the Government have said that that will happen by 2030. I thoroughly support that. I have just been legislating on the deposit return scheme, which is also one of the report's recommendations. I thoroughly support that, too. The report recommends more offshore wind, and the Government are committed to quadrupling it in the next 10 years to 40 GW.

The report recommends nature-based solutions such as planting more trees and increasing carbon capture in soil. Again, the Government are now fully supporting that. It talks about hydrogen solutions for heating in domestic housing, and that is part of the 10-point plan. The Government are fully supporting that with £500 million to start with. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) noted, the Climate Assembly was less enthusiastic about some things, particularly carbon capture and storage, which I am rather enthusiastic about. It is a new technology, but it is being done elsewhere and it could form an important part of the mix, as most mainstream climate scientists agree.

I am glad that the Climate Assembly did not want to move the date for becoming carbon neutral forward from 2050, which is what some of the more radical environmental groups want. The 2050 date was set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. That UN body said that it was necessary to do that to meet the Paris target of 1.5° warming. That was adopted in the UK by the Committee on Climate Change, which set out a programme of work that the Government and we as a country need to do to reach that target. Obviously we have now adopted 2050 as a legal target, and we are the first major country to do so. This shows the leadership that the UK has taken, and we can be thoroughly proud of that, but there is absolutely no room for complacency. The public support the strong measures we are taking. We are going to need to take many more strong measures in the future, but at least we know that the public are behind this. That is why I welcome the Climate Assembly, and I welcome this report.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sure colleagues understand that there is pressure on time, so after the next speaker I will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes, so that we can get everybody in for this debate and the next one.

3.3 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): This is a really excellent report and set of recommendations, and I want to thank all those members of the public who gave up their time over a series of weekends, as I understand it, during the beginning of the pandemic to consider the difficulties ahead of us as a nation and to think carefully about how we should respond. As they have put in all that time and effort to produce this report, I think it is incumbent on the Government to really think about it, to form their response and to take up the agenda for the radical change that we need to see if we are serious about tackling climate change. It is clear that the public are on board. They know what needs to be done, and it is time that the Government took up their call.

The recommendations in the report are wide-ranging and cover a wide range of Departments across Government. Government policy on climate change currently seems to be funnelled through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but it is quite clear in the report that the Department for Transport, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, not to mention the Treasury, also have a part to play in delivering these recommendations. With all due respect, is the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy sufficiently senior in Government to co-ordinate the response to climate change across each of those Departments? Should we not have a Department and a Secretary of State for climate change, as there used to be, to bring all these strands together and to be held accountable for delivering the Government's net zero pledge?

On that theme, the importance to the UK of our co-hosting of COP26 next year in driving through the change we would want to see internationally has been much talked about, not least by the Government. Would it not make sense to appoint a full-time person to oversee the UK's contribution to this massively important event rather than ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to do that as part of his role? That person could then be well placed to co-ordinate across different Government Departments and become a focal point for driving the change towards net zero.

The contribution made to our carbon emissions by vehicles is well covered in the report, and I welcome its recommendation that electrical vehicle charging infrastructure should receive greater investment and that the sale of petrol and diesel cars should be banned by 2030. It was really good to see the Government commit to that in their 10-point plan last week.

As the Member of Parliament for Richmond Park, the issue of traffic, roads and parking is one on which I receive a great deal of correspondence. In some parts of my constituency, congestion is a real blight on people's everyday lives, and we even see long queues of traffic through the national nature reserve that gives my constituency its name. The negative impacts of excessive car journeys on everyday life go beyond emissions and poor air quality. They threaten lives, create congestion, and cut people off from their streets and town centres; and inasmuch as people are choosing car journeys over walking or cycling, they cause inactivity and poor physical health. At least in urban areas, a policy to reduce the overall number of car journeys that people make would have profound benefits for the quality of life in any number of ways beyond carbon emissions. There was a hope during the first lockdown that people might switch to other forms of travel, but that does not appear to be borne out now. I was therefore pleased to see a recommendation that overall car journeys should be reduced, although a reduction of 2% to 5% per decade seems unambitious when car use has risen by 7.5% in the past five years alone.

The report proposes policy solutions for greater investment in public transport, making it cheaper, greener and more accessible, with a greater investment in cycling. The provision of usable alternatives is key to reducing car journeys. I note that the Government announced a £27 billion investment in roads earlier this year and a £257 million investment in cycling infrastructure yesterday. This appears to be a nettle that has not yet been grasped. I also note that no further support for Transport for London is budgeted in the next financial year. That seems to suppose that public transport usage in London will bounce back to pre-pandemic levels by April 2021. Well, I am very pleased at what that implies about the speed and scale of the Government's vaccination programme.

I was pleased to see the recommendations on upgrading our homes. It is clear that people want a range of solutions and financial support to access such upgrades. We need to develop and embrace new technologies for heating our homes, such as heat pumps, if we are to achieve our net zero target. The Government are right to say that this is an area of potential to create new jobs, and skilled jobs, in every region of the UK, but I am keen to understand how they plan to deliver them. According to answers to written questions I have received from BEIS, on 10 November the Government were expecting 80,000 jobs to be created through the £1.5 billion green homes grant. This mysteriously shrank to 50,000 in the Prime Minister's 10-point plan last week. The shortcoming of the green homes grant is that it is only open for a year, and there are not enough skilled contractors to be able to deliver against the demand created. I asked the

[Sarah Olney]

Department how long it would take to train someone to install heat pumps, and the answer was that an existing builder could take on skilled people and deliver that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

3.9 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing the debate.

I think that each Conservative Member speaking in this debate is a proud member of the Conservative Environment Network, and we all found a lot to welcome in the Climate Assembly report. Starting with its structure, I probably will not say this very often, but I echo what the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) said, because the fact that it was representative of the country at large meant that we got a set of recommendations with a lot of common sense that were not dogmatic and, importantly, placed an emphasis on fairness. Too often, as I have said in this House before, we hear the affluent telling those on lower incomes that the holidays they go on, the cars they drive and the clothes they buy are all wrong. We have to take account of the fact that people have different means and can go at a different pace in making changes in their lives.

I welcome the report's emphasis on education. We are fortunate in my constituency to have Westmill one of the few co-operatives to run a significant wind and solar farm. It has just been given a grant by the Government for a new visitor centre, which can accommodate six times the current number of visitors. There will be a heavy emphasis on teaching children in schools about renewable energy.

I welcome the report's emphasis on getting people on to public transport. I want Grove station in my constituency to be reopened, not just because that would better connect the people of Grove, but because it would get people off congested roads.

I welcome, too, the focus on greener homes. We know that buildings and homes are an issue, and I extend an invitation to the Minister, and also to the hon. Member for Bristol North West or anyone else in the House, to come and see Greencore Construction's Springfield Meadows development in my constituency, which is net zero both in build and in usage. It did not cost much more than normal homes do, so I recommend that people come and visit.

The assembly also wanted leadership from Government, and there is a good story to tell there—the first country to legislate for net zero, and a landmark Environment Bill, which sets and imposes our new governance for a range of new measures on air quality, biodiversity and so on. I am more excited about the Agriculture Act 2020, because paying farmers public money for public goods is an exciting development in our attitude and policy towards farmers, in that we will protect them as custodians of the environment.

We have just heard the 10-point plan for a new green industrial revolution. That is the way to think about this. We led on the first industrial revolution and we can lead on the green one. So much of that chimes with what was in the assembly's report, from making proposals on jet zero, so people can still fly but do so in a way that does not harm the environment as much, to bringing forward the date for banning the sale of new petrol and diesel cars, as well as proposals for greener homes, protecting nature and using offshore wind, which a remarkable 95% of the assembly supported.

There is much in the assembly's report that chimes with the agenda that the Government have set out. I appreciate that people always say, "You could do more." I accept that there is more to do, but what Government announcement has ever been met by people saying, "That sounds about enough"? The Government are doing all they can there.

I am proud that we will host COP26 next year, and the assembly members should be rightly proud that they have helped to point out the leadership direction that we should take.

3.12 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Climate Assembly's report and its 14 recommendations on aviation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) said, this was a people's assembly, not a politicians' assembly. That is why its recommendations are so powerful.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), the Chair and former Chair of the Transport Committee, on which I sit. As I sit on that Committee, and because I represent a constituency adjacent to Heathrow, I am particularly interested in the chapter on aviation.

The impact of covid—to return to the other key topic of the moment—has been devastating for my communities, affecting up to one household in three. We seek support from the Government for aviation communities right now, but that support could go hand in hand with actions on the climate crisis. Air travel accounts for 22% of UK greenhouse gas emissions and 7% of total UK emissions, and that proportion is growing.

Unlike countries such as France and Austria, the UK did not provide covid sector-specific support for aviation, so, to date, the Government have missed the chance to impose conditions, and therefore help to introduce changes, on climate emissions. Such conditions would have helped to support not only work to address our zero-emissions target, but aviation communities such as mine.

The Government should look at emissions from international aviation and shipping, and include those in the Climate Change Act 2008. The Climate Change Committee has also called for the Government to formally include those emissions, and doing so would really show the UK's leadership on this issue, set a clear policy framework around emissions, and create a clear path to the future. It would also help to boost investment in carbon-saving technology in the aviation sector.

Mention has already been made of the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for the green industrial revolution, but I do not feel that this plan goes far enough. For instance, there has been mention of the Jet Zero Council, led by industry leaders, but to date industry on its own has missed targets, such as that to get 10% of fuels from sustainable fuel sources by 2020. With the scale of the crisis facing our planet, and with the rapid need to make urgent changes, we cannot afford just to create more grandiose councils: we need action and leadership from Government.

I will now address two specific aviation issues. On surface transport, we really need the Government to put their money where their mouth is on the western and southern rail links into Heathrow, to get more cars off the road and encourage sustainable transport. We need to require airports to take action on airside vehicles, from coaches, ramps and luggage transport to pushback tugs. In the air, of course, we need the Government to fund research on zero-emission planes, and also to level the price differentials between plane and train journeys to the same destinations.

In conclusion, I welcome the work the Government have done to support walking and cycling, which helps to cut our personal climate emissions, and look forward to hearing the Government's response to the Climate Assembly recommendations on aviation.

3.16 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Obviously, having been part of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee's commissioned report, and given my previous background working for the World Wildlife Fund, but also for a company called Shell, I have a particular interest in this sector.

Like all Members, I welcome what this report has said. We have gone through how many great recommendations it contains and how good it is, but the question I want to pose to the House is this: what now? The Government have already come out with a very good 10-point plan, and they are already implementing it, so what value does this report actually add? Yes, it shows that the public are on our side—the side of lowering carbon—and I completely agree with them, but we knew that before. Did we need a report to help us formulate these ideas? The Government have already moved forward with quite a lot of them.

To me, the assembly's report seems to have missed a slight opportunity, because although we have talked about quite a lot of the measures involved—increased wind power, road pricing, electrification, and hydrogen, which Members know I am a big fan of—they lack some sense of ambition, and of bringing the public forward. Dealing with our carbon emissions is not only something we need to do for the good of our planet and of our health, but a huge economic benefit for this country. It is the new technologies that I am very excited about. A warmer home—a better-insulated home—is not only better for a person's carbon emissions, but better to live in. An electric car is not only good when it comes to emissions: it is a better thing to drive. These new technologies that are helping us deal with the climate crisis are giving us a better standard of living, and although I appreciate that this report was looking at how we reduce our carbon emissions, I fear that it could have done so much more, to help show the public that lowering our emissions is a good thing for everyone. Regardless of the carbon side of it, dealing with our emissions is going to lead to better homes and more jobs, and I firmly believe that if we get it right, we will see a huge economic boom for this country.

Some people have already mentioned hydrogen. I am a bit disappointed with the assembly's report when it comes to the hydrogen elements for transport, because although electrification of passenger vehicles is very far ahead, we have missed the boat on the economic side. With 73% of all batteries made in China, we are not going to get an economic advantage from passenger vehicles. Yes, we can deal with the carbon advantage, and I completely agree that that is very important. However, we also want the economic advantage, which is why I think hydrogen transport—I have an Adjournment debate on this topic later today—can decarbonise heavy goods vehicles, trains and even planes. That is something we are not fully addressing. If we get that right ourselves, we can create jobs and have an economic boom in this country. That is what I think we should do.

So much of this discussion is about how we lower our carbon emissions, but that argument has been won. Nobody in this House has stood up and said that they disagree with the report and that we should not lower our carbon emissions. We have all said that we should. What we should be talking about now is how we get there faster and how we can create economic opportunities for this country. An Opposition Member—I cannot remember which one—talked about having a separate climate change Department. I would say no to that. I would like climate change to be combined with the business side, because the two are interlinked. By lowering carbon, we can have an economic boom. I would rather have climate change in every single Government Department, with every single Department looking at different elements of it, rather than a stand-alone department which would be ignored. I want it embedded at the heart of the Government, and I am pleased that it is embedded at the heart of the Government.

Let me say briefly that I believe so much more can be done on carbon. When we talk about planning new homes, we should be mandating that every new home has an electric charge point and a heat pump. We should be building for the future, not the present.

3.20 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I congratulate my colleague, neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing this debate. As the then vice-Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, I attended one of the sessions of the Climate Assembly in Birmingham. I was impressed by the set-up: how assembly members had been selected, and the huge amount of work and expense that went into trying to ensure it was representative and reflective of the general population. I was also impressed by the contributions of expert witnesses and the efforts that were made to ensure that their work informed deliberative discussion in each group.

There were disadvantages. I share some of the scepticism of the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) about the exercise. It is expensive, certainly if we are looking to replicate it at a local level, as we are in Bristol. If we want to do it right, we have to put in quite a lot of resources. It also takes time. There is the question: we actually know quite a lot of these things, so why do we not just get on with it, rather than having an exercise that will inevitably delay things? One Conservative Member spoke about how the Government were introducing a deposit returns scheme. He implied that that had come out of the Climate Assembly report. The Environmental Audit Committee has been making these recommendations and investigating that side of things for a long time, and that was already on the agenda.

[Kerry McCarthy]

On electric vehicles, the December 2019 Labour manifesto called for a phase-out of petrol and diesel by 2030. It did not really need the Climate Assembly to nudge the Government in the right direction; they could have just listened to the Labour party instead.

Having said that, I was won over by going along and listening to the discussions. There is a quote in the executive summary from an assembly member, who said that he or she—it was someone called Chris, so I am not sure—was worried when they got there that the debate would be somewhat one-sided and it would all be people who were very passionate about the climate emergency. Chris said it was refreshing to see that it ranged from people for whom it was a complete crisis to those who were in complete denial about the issue. Getting that balance is what an exercise like that should be about, but I worry that it means that the process will inevitably lean towards consensus. That could lead to a watering down of ambition when the scale of the twin crises—the climate crisis and the ecological crisis—means that more radical solutions are needed.

Some people have criticised the assembly for not reaching the right conclusions and have said that that was because they were not asked the right questions. These are people who feel that the 2050 target is not ambitious enough. It is worth noting that proposals to bring forward the 2050 date, without a specific date in mind, were put before the assembly but were rejected, with quite a significant proportion of people unsure about it.

I attended the sessions on what we eat and how we use the land, which is a particular interest of mine. I was pleased with the recommendations on low-carbon farming, food waste and natural climate solutions such as peatlands and forestry. It was interesting to see that, by and large, people were coming quite new to those arguments, whereas perhaps if it has been a discussion about transport they would have given it a lot more thought in their everyday lives. It was interesting to see the further information they were asking the experts for, and how willing they were to shift their views as they listened to the answers they were given.

In the final few seconds that I have to speak, I wish to reflect briefly on the additional recommendation that we should get to net zero without pushing our emissions anywhere else in the world, which was endorsed by 92% of assembly members. The fact is that we are already doing that. We cannot tackle climate change in this country unless we also look at our global carbon footprint.

3.24 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I add my voice to those that have welcomed the assembly's report. As an initiative with its roots in Parliament and an exercise in co-operation across the different Select Committees, it was innovative and courageous and something on which we should now look to make progress and to build.

My constituency has been at the heart of this nation's energy supply for the past 40 years. As we have relied on hydrocarbons, we have been home, very successfully, to two of the largest oil terminals that bring in hydrocarbons —oil and gas both—from the North sea and latterly from the area to the west of Shetland. We have a long history of being central to this country's energy supply. We are now coming to a phase of our nation's history in which we anticipate that our reliance on hydrocarbons will wind down. My constituency remains equally committed to playing a full part in energy provision for our future needs. It is therefore somewhat frustrating for us still to find that the opportunities that we have to contribute to green renewable energy in the future are somewhat frustrated by a lack of action and recognition on the part of the Government in respect of the opportunities that exist.

I met the Minister earlier this year with the Marine Energy Council, from which he heard about the opportunities that exist in the development of wave and tidal power, which has been a long, slow burner. We have now reached the phase of having finished the research and development work but not yet being fully able to go to commercial deployment. Every technology goes through this phase; we know that because back in the 1980s we were at the forefront of the development of onshore wind. The prototype of many of the turbines now seen throughout the country was built not far from my house in Orkney, on Burgar Hill—it was initiated by Cecil Parkinson back in the day. We did the groundbreaking, leading work on developing the technology, but we did not then fund the next stage to get it to commercial deployment.

The risk now is that we will do the same thing with marine energy, and in particular the development of tidal energy. We have done the research and development; we now need to find something like an innovation power purchase agreement, or a similar mechanism, that will get the industry through to the point at which it can contribute its full potential through a mature technology. We know that we are not going to get there, but we know also that if we leave it to others, others will take the opportunity. Just in the past week or so we have heard that the European Union is coming forward with its draft marine energy strategy, and it now speaks about an altogether different scale of deployment and development.

My worry is that we are about to lose the opportunities in respect of not just generating power for use in our own country but the development of a home-grown supply chain, which could be crucial and central to providing the green jobs about which we all speak in this Chamber. The sums of money involved in an IPPA for the marine energy sector are relatively small; the opportunities that they could produce for the UK as a whole, and for Orkney and Shetland in particular, are enormous. The Minister has heard this from the industry's mouth; I hope that when he comes to respond to the debate he will have some good news to tell the industry.

3.29 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to the members of the public who came forward, not only for giving up their time to participate but for the effort they put into listening, learning and debating—unlike many of us politicians. It is amazing to see how many recommendations they were able to make on a consensual basis, and they are to be commended for that, too. The recommendations are also reasonable and practical, and I wish to look at some of them and see how the UK Government and the Scottish Government measure up against them.

Perhaps the first UK Government fail is the publication of the 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, which of course makes no reference to the Climate Assembly, nor does it really accord fully with its recommendations. I do welcome the fact that they have brought forward the date for phasing out internal combustion engines to 2030, which matches the recommendation of the assembly. The assembly also calls for grants for low-carbon cars and a car scrappage scheme, which I fully support, but the Government have not yet implemented that, and there need to be bigger grants for electric vehicles. The Scottish Government do interest-free loans for the purchase of ultra-low emission vehicles, and they have extended the interest-free loans to the purchase of second-hand cars to try to extend the market and open it out for a wider public. I think that is something the UK Government could look at as well.

The assembly calls for investment in low-carbon buses and trains. Thanks in part to funding from the EU as well as funding from the Scottish Government, in Aberdeen we have the world's first double-decker buses that run fuelled by hydrogen. The Scottish Government have awarded £7.4 million to bus operators through the Scottish ultra-low emission bus scheme, and that is going to procure 35 electric buses manufactured in Falkirk by Alexander Dennis Ltd, protecting jobs in these tough times. So where are the UK Government's proposed electric bus town and the associated orders, and what replacement funding is there—to replace EU funding—for hydrogen buses?

The assembly's recommendations on air travel are also realistic and welcome, especially the effective points where the polluter pays. We do need to see more from the Government on sustainable aviation.

When it came to home heating, there was strong agreement on the need for hydrogen, heat pumps and heat networks, so again a hydrogen strategy is required. The initial steps outlined in the 10-point strategy are a start, but we need a proper heat decarbonisation strategy. We have 27 million homes currently reliant on fossil fuel heating, so even if we start in January 2021 and go all the way to 2050, that equates to 20,000 homes a week, roughly, that need to be decarbonised. That is the scale of the problem we are dealing with, and it needs to be addressed quickly.

The Government are talking about a roll-out of heat pumps, and again that is welcome, but these need to be targeted, initially for homes off the gas grid. But the roll-out needs to be aligned with energy-efficient installations, because the heat pumps themselves do not work unless the homes are properly energy-efficient. Again, the UK Government need to spend more. We need to see this £9 billion that has been pledged in the Conservative manifesto for energy efficiency.

When it came to electricity generation, it was welcome to see the strong embracement of both onshore and offshore wind by the assembly. That shows that the decision to stop onshore wind bids in the last couple of CfD auctions was actually a major blunder, but it is good that onshore wind can now bid again. But we do need to see the contracts for difference procurement process improved to incentivise the use of local supply chains. It is a disgrace that a yard on Teesside is due to close, and there are the pressures in the BiFab yards in Scotland. I realise there is a consultation ongoing on the CfD procurement process, and hopefully the outcome of that will be that UK supply chains are incentivised.

The public in the assembly also recognised that nuclear is expensive and that waste storage is an issue, so when will both the UK Government and the Labour party wake up to this? It is insane to me that the 10-point plan is committing some £40 billion to £50 billion to new nuclear. I would love to go back to the assembly, ask it to prioritise that £40 billion to £50 billion, and ask where it would want to spend it—would it be nuclear energy, marine, tidal or more floating offshore? I think we know what the answer would be.

My one disappointment in the recommendations was the lack of support for carbon capture and storage, because to date that has been integral to the UK's planning for net zero. We in the SNP want to see carbon capture and storage go ahead at Peterhead as part of the just transition away from oil and gas. This shows that at least a rethink in policy, or much better re-engagement with the public, is needed if the public are to be taken with us on carbon capture and storage. The UK Government need to take account of that.

When it comes to the natural environment, I welcome the recommendations on and understanding of peatland restoration and reforestation. Again, the Scottish Government have led the way on this, because 85% of trees planted in the UK in the last few years have been planned in Scotland. Over 10 years, the UK Government have only planted 20,000 hectares of new forest, so how they are going to get to 30,000 hectares a year by 2025 is a mystery, and we need a long-term strategy for that.

There is so much more I could talk about in terms of land use, food production and all the rest of it. It is a great report. I really hope the Government take account of it and we see that in forthcoming policies.

3.34 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to respond on behalf of the Opposition to what has been an extremely interesting debate. I thank all Members who have contributed this afternoon, the members of the Climate Assembly for taking part in the process and, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for securing the debate and for the focused and well-argued speech with which he opened it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and others made clear, we are in the midst of a climate and environment emergency. With the concentration of CO_2 in the atmosphere continuing to rise unabated, the issue is not whether we can stop climate change—the climate crisis is, after all, already upon us—but whether we are willing to do what is necessary to transition to a net zero world in the coming decades and thereby arrest runaway global heating.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made clear, there is no solution to the climate crisis that does not confront the issue of carbon consumption, but even if viewed through the lens of production emissions, the UK is still not doing enough. Not only are we not on track for the net zero target that Parliament legislated for just over a year ago; we are not even on track for the less stringent one that preceded it. When it comes to the UK's record on territorial emissions, there is much to be proud of, but progress to date is largely the result of our having picked the low-hanging fruit, particularly in relation to the power sector. The decarbonisation involved—this is

[Matthew Pennycook]

the key point—has had only a very limited impact on people. If we are going to get on track for net zero, we will have to make rapid progress in sectors such as transport and housing that are far more difficult to decarbonise and where the impact on people will be much more acute.

Faced with the sheer scale of the challenge, with all the disruption that the kind of systems change required entails, there are those who believe that we will somehow need to distance or even remove people from the decision-making process entirely. The Opposition take precisely the opposite view. The transition to a low-carbon economy is unavoidable, but the pace at which it happens in a democracy like ours and the extent to which it is orderly depend on the consent and, indeed, the active involvement of people and places—a point made by the hon. Members for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) and for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne). Far from that greater involvement leading to inertia or paralysis, the final report of the UK Climate Assembly suggests that if people are provided with the facts, and if they are given responsibility and a real stake in the process, they are likely to support bold climate action.

I do not have time to do justice to the many recommendations the report, and in any case, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West and others have already done so. I want to briefly step back and look at two of the fundamental principles that the overwhelming majority of Climate Assembly members felt should underpin the transition to net zero and that have been prominent themes in today's debate: the need for strong leadership from Government and the need for fairness.

First, on the need for strong leadership, the Climate Assembly showed clear support for

"Leadership from government that is clear, proactive, accountable and consistent"

and leadership that allows for

"certainty, long-term planning and a phased transition."

As things stand, the Government are not providing leadership of that kind. I have no doubt that the Minister will rebut that point robustly. In truth, he knows as well as I do that the Government still do not accord emissions reduction the status that it warrants and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) pointed out, there is still not the kind of grip from the centre necessary to co-ordinate and drive progress on ambitious climate action across Government and ensure clarity, certainty and consistency of approach.

We have seen plenty of announcements from the Government in recent months, some more significant than others, and a 10-point package—I will not call it a plan, because there is still no sign of a comprehensive strategy for achieving net zero and no serious attempt to close the net zero investment gap that exists. We have seen policy making that is at times so wildly inconsistent with that target that the Chancellor sees no issue whatsoever with delivering a spending review in which, in one breath, he talks about investment in a greener future and, in the next, he celebrates Britain's biggest ever investment in new roads. The Government must do better.

The second point, which in the long run is probably more important, is that the assembly's final report stresses the need for fairness to be at the heart of the transition. Historically, our country has a terrible track record of managing industrial change in a fair way. The loss of jobs and the damage to communities in previous transitions, particularly the brutal deindustrialisation of the 1980s, make people rightly suspicious of claims that this time it will be different. The transition to a low-carbon economy is a much greater challenge in many ways than deindustrialisation, affecting in different ways almost every industry and region of the UK. The challenge ahead is to ensure that green policy is designed effectively so we mitigate the inevitable disruptive change that comes with that transition, and to ensure that people and places are protected and supported through it and—as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and others have argued—that there are tangible benefits, particularly for those most affected and the nations and regions hosting infrastructure. For that to happen, I would argue that people and communities will need to be actively involved in the process. Community power and worker voice will have to be factored into an industrial strategy when we finally see one.

The gilets jaunes movement in France is only the most notable example of how badly designed green policy and a failure to embed fairness of process and outcome in the transition can erode the public support necessary for it, so we need to hear more from the Government about how fairness can be embedded in the net zero process, and we need action now to ensure that the benefits of the green transition are realised here at home. I have to say that that is something the Government, along with the SNP Scottish Government, have demonstrably failed to do in letting the BiFab engineering yards in Scotland go to the wall, putting at risk the UK's supply chain for the deployment of offshore wind.

In conclusion, we very much welcome the Climate Assembly's final report. While the deliberative process, such as the one used for it, is not a substitute for representative democracy, we believe that it can improve the way it works. In the Minister's response, as well as addressing the various points made today by hon. Members, I very much hope that he will indicate that the Government also recognise the importance of actively involving the public in shaping the pathway to net zero, and that he will give the House a sense of what consideration, if any, his Department is giving to building deliberative processes into any forthcoming net zero strategy.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): I thank all Members; this is one of the best debates I have seen in the House. I thought it was temperate, with many and extremely well considered and informative speeches, so I am very pleased to take part in it.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for bringing this debate to the Floor of the House. I particularly thank the citizens who gave up their time to take part in the Climate Assembly UK. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy spoke at the launch of the report, and we have taken this report extremely seriously in the Department. Initiatives such as the Climate Assembly play an important role in helping to develop policies that are achievable and fair.

In response to the point from the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), clearly, citizen engagement—the engagement of our people—is absolutely necessary if we to achieve the net zero carbon emissions target that we have set ourselves. I am very pleased that the Select Committees of this House took the initiative and were able to inaugurate the process. Many of the recommendations—others have said this—of the Climate Assembly report have been reflected in the Prime Minister's 10-point plan that was announced last week, and I will return to some of those at the conclusion of my speech.

Public engagement of this kind, as I have said, is absolutely necessary. We completely agree with the spirit of the Climate Assembly's recommendation on greater citizenship involvement, and that point was very ably raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) and for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), who is not in his place, and was alluded to by the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich. The Government will continue to engage with the public on the changes that are needed to develop our ambitions on net zero and to listen very attentively to feedback. People from all over the UK are already doing their bit on climate change, and, with the Together for our Planet campaign, we aim to celebrate this and inspire even more of our fellow citizens to join them.

As a Government, we have also increased dramatically our engagement with the public on policies for net zero. In the past year, we have held deliberative workshops with the public on transport, heat, carbon capture and, particularly, on the environment. Last week, as I said and as has been mentioned many times, we saw the Prime Minister announce the 10-point plan. I remind the House that that 10-point plan delivered and reflected many of Climate Assembly UK's recommendations. The assembly called for a green recovery. The 10-point plan is the Government's plan for that green recovery, particularly focused on jobs.

Barry Gardiner: Will the Minister give way?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There is limited time, so I will allow just one intervention.

Barry Gardiner: I am very grateful to the Minister. Speaking of the recommendations, the second most-supported, at 94%, was:

"We need much more transparency in the relationship between big energy companies and the government, due to concerns over lobbying and influence".

His Department is responsible for that, so will he take that on board, because transparency is absolutely at the heart of gaining public confidence?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Transparency is absolutely central to any governing process, but particularly in respect of the challenge of fighting climate change.

The assembly called for more wind and solar power. We have stated not only in the manifesto on which we stood last year, but also in the 10-point plan, that we would quadruple offshore wind capacity to 40 GW by 2030. The assembly called for the driving of the growth of low-carbon hydrogen, and the 10-point plan committed £500 million in the first instance for low-carbon hydrogen production across the decade.

The assembly called for a faster transition to net zero emissions vehicles, and I was very pleased to hear the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) mention that in her remarks. She pointed out the fact that in London, and particularly in her constituency, congestion, traffic and pollution are huge issues, and they apply equally to my constituency, which is only a few miles away from hers as the crow flies. I am very pleased to say that that call was listened to, and we have brought forward the zero emissions vehicles target to 2030. I have to add at this point that many natural supporters of the Government have been somewhat sceptical about that ambition, but it is something we are absolutely focused on delivering.

Furthermore, the assembly called for the Government to invest in low-carbon buses and trains. Again, we have committed in the plan to £4.2 billion on city public transport and £5 billion on buses, cycling and walking. The assembly requested that the Government speed up progress on low-carbon aviation, and that point was raised directly by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). Once again, as the MP for Spelthorne, which is even closer to Brentford and Isleworth than it is to Richmond Park, I fully endorse that move. I am pleased to announce that the 10-point plan commits to research projects for zero emissions planes and also for sustainable aviation fuels.

The assembly called for a strong policy on greening our buildings, and that point was ably raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston). I am pleased to say that the 10-point plan provides £1 billion to extend the schemes announced by the Chancellor earlier in the year to put energy efficiency at the centre of our building strategy. The green homes grant has been inaugurated and we have extended its deadline. We hope to achieve further successes in the roll-out.

Finally, the assembly recommended maintaining and restoring our natural environment, and that is central to the Government's ambition to meet the net zero carbon target. It is an ongoing area of policy. Initially, the plan has committed £40 million for a second round of the green recovery challenge fund, but I feel strongly that there will be more to come in that respect. Next year we will publish a comprehensive net zero strategy and, crucially and critically, we will use our G7 and COP26 presidencies to promote international climate action and to provide the leadership that the hon. Member for Bristol North West spoke of.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank Darren Jones for offering not to do a wind-up, saving another couple of minutes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the report of Climate Assembly UK; gives thanks to the citizens who gave up their time to inform the work of select committees, the development of policy and the wider public debate; and calls on the Government to take note of the recommendations of the Assembly as it develops the policies necessary to achieve the target of net zero emissions by 2050.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The session is suspended for three minutes.

3.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Coronavirus Outbreak: DWP Response

3.52 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the First Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, "DWP's response to the coronavirus outbreak", HC 178; and calls on the Government to increase relevant legacy benefits in line with increases to universal credit, to take steps to return people who have been inadvertently left worse off under universal credit compared with their previous benefits, and to suspend the no recourse to public funds visa condition for the duration of the coronavirus outbreak.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for this opportunity. The new Work and Pensions Committee had an ambitious programme. Our first meeting in March was with the Health and Safety Executive, but in no time we were in lockdown and our programme was set aside. The Department for Work and Pensions has been key in this crisis as so many have lost the means to earn a living, and universal credit has delivered. I have been a frequent critic. I repeatedly pointed out that transition to universal credit could not be completed by October 2017, but the system that we now have has passed the test of this year. It is a national asset, which we should make the most of.

DWP staff have been on the frontline, with many redeployed to handle the tidal wave of claims. They have withstood enormous pressure. In our report, the Committee expresses thanks to them for their dedication and hard work, and that does need to be reflected in their pay; yesterday's announcement was a heavy blow.

Ministers made good decisions at the start. After a decade of cuts, the £20 increase in universal credit and working tax credit, and the reconnecting of local housing allowance with actual rents, were key for many to surviving the crisis. I had understood that local housing allowance would be kept in line with local rents, so I was dismayed yesterday to hear that it will be frozen—decoupling it once again. My Committee agreed unanimously that the £20 increase should stay and many others have taken that view, including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "Keep the lifeline" campaign. The campaign wrote an open letter to the Chancellor on 30 September with Citizens Advice, the Child Poverty Action Group, Feeding Britain, Oxfam, the Trussell Trust, disability charities and bishops. The Resolution Foundation says that otherwise,

"The basic level of support for an out-of-work single adult would fall to the level it was at when Margaret Thatcher left office".

The Institute for Fiscal Studies warned of a significant decline in the incomes of 4 million families. The Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), a former Work and Pensions Secretary, called the £20 a lifeline and urged its retention. I very much regret that the Chancellor rejected those calls yesterday.

The spending projections show universal credit being cut by £20 in April, and people claiming universal credit are left fearing the worst. Our motion calls for the £20 uplift to be extended to legacy benefits. Yesterday, an increase of 37p per week was announced; Ministers must reconsider.

Not increasing jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance for those out of work because of ill health was done on the grounds, we were told, that computer systems were slow to change, but they certainly could have been changed by now, and it is absurd that people in otherwise identical circumstances, claiming different benefits because of universal credit roll-out sequencing, are receiving such different support. It is legally questionable. People should not face extended hardship because their benefits are run on out-of-date systems. Ministers were absolutely right to introduce the increase; it should be extended to legacy benefits, too

Our report last month, "Universal credit: the wait for a first payment", calls for other much-needed changes. The five-week delay between applying and the first regular payment causes great hardship; we called for non-repayable starter payments to tide people over. We also called for "advances" to be renamed "loans", to make it clear they have to be repaid, because calling them "advances" obscures that.

The motion also highlights the people made worse off by claiming universal credit. Government online advice says: "Apply online for universal credit to get financial support if you've lost your job." For most people, that was sound advice, but not for everyone: if someone on tax credits claims universal credit, their tax credits stop.

We surveyed experiences of the benefits system in the pandemic; 6,000 people responded, and I thank all of them. Some had not realised that claiming universal credit meant losing tax credits. For some, their universal credit entitlement then turned out to be zero—for example, one of my constituents with £16,000 saved. That person was left, as many were, with no support at all. That is benefit mis-selling; the Government should put it right.

In May, answering the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) here in the Chamber, the Secretary of State said that she would look "very carefully" at whether people should be able to return to previous benefits. That held out some hope, but now she says that allowing it would threaten to unravel the roll-out of universal credit; that is a very poor excuse.

Today's motion highlights our call, also made by the Home Affairs Committee, for the no recourse to public funds immigration condition to be suspended for the pandemic. Some 3 million extra people have had to claim universal credit this year, but families working legally, with no recourse to public funds on their immigration status, do not have that safety net. They may get discretionary council help, but provision varies immensely. Indeed, Andy Jolly at the University of Wolverhampton has found that many families refused council help, so our report made this call:

"The Government should publish or at least clarify existing guidance for local authorities on what support they can provide for people with NRPF, including…whether measures such as the hardship fund are classed as public funds or not."

At the Liaison Committee in May the Prime Minister said that people in this situation should get "help" of one kind or another. I agree, but unfortunately they do not. Families facing destitution can apply for exemption, but it is extremely hard. The all-party group on immigration law and policy heard this week from the Unity Project that it takes about 100 pages of evidence; many people cannot provide that. The Home Office takes a month,

on average, to determine an application. No destitute family should have to wait a month for the Government to decide whether they can claim benefit.

Our report in May also called for an impact analysis of the benefit cap in the pandemic. UC and the local housing allowance were rightly raised, but the benefit cap was not, so many families crashed into the cap for the first time. The Department told our inquiry that the number of people affected by that would be "very small". We asked for a full analysis of the numbers and the characteristics of households newly subject to the cap, and of the impact on hardship. We now know that far from a very small impact, the number affected by the benefit cap has almost doubled in the pandemic.

In London, with high rents pushing up LHA, many have crashed into the benefit cap for the first time. People claiming benefit after losing their job have a nine-month grace period when the benefit cap does not apply. The employment Minister says that 160,000 households have a grace period due to end next month—the benefit cap will apply for the first time. I wrote to the Secretary of State yesterday, with the Committee's agreement, about this issue. The Government were right to increase support for struggling families at the start of the pandemic, and there should be a cap easement for those about to be hit.

Our report in May pointed out that the future jobs fund did a great job of supporting young people in the last financial crisis. I welcome the kickstart scheme, with its identical structure, that was announced the month after our report. It was disappointing to see yesterday that spending on kickstart will be much lower than planned. That seems to be because employers have to offer at least 30 places, thus shutting out small firms. That should surely be fixed. The Committee will take evidence on the Restart scheme, which was announced yesterday. An evaluation of the Work programme was published on Tuesday. Major commitment to employment support is absolutely right, but we need it—this is unlike what happened with the Work programme—to do a good job with, for example, disabled people.

The importance of dependable social security has never been clearer. The UC system and Department for Work and Pensions staff have passed an extraordinary test, and they have our congratulations and our thanks. The changes outlined in our report are needed now to minimise damage from the crisis, and to look forward and build back better in the months ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I have asked Members to consider a five-minute limit. We are not putting the clock on, but Members who go wildly over five minutes will be doing a great disservice to those lower down the call list.

4.2 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing the debate. There has been so much criticism of the Government in this place this year, much of it very unfair and political, and much of it fair and necessary in holding the Government to account for things that are going wrong. What we do not hear often from the Opposition, however, is recognition of what has gone right, which is why I note the generous spirit in which the right hon. Gentleman spoke about universal credit, acknowledging it as a "national asset". That is good description of what has been achieved.

I honour Ministers at the DWP for the tremendous success story of 2020. There have been 3.2 million new UC claimants, a near doubling of the total case load, as I understand it, and yet despite all the protests about UC in recent years, I do not think that there been a squeak of protest in this place about the process of onboarding those claims. In my constituency, we have had nearly 3,000 new UC claims and, having just checked, I find I have had eight items of casework on UC this year, which represents a fairly small proportion of my total case load. I honour what has been done, and give my thanks to Jobcentre Plus staff and all the staff at the DWP. There are many heroes working behind the scenes in our country this year, and Jobcentre Plus staff are leaders among them.

I also wish to pay tribute to the coalition Government, and principally to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his role in designing and implementing UC. I can only imagine what would have been the case had we stuck with the old system and the myriad benefits, mostly with paper-based administration; it would have been a complete disaster. But we had a digital system, so when millions of people suddenly needed unemployment benefits, the computer said yes.

On that topic, the right hon. Member for East Ham raises the suggestion from his Select Committee in its report earlier this year that people should be able to go back to legacy benefits after being on universal credit. It is certainly true that, despite the significant increases in universal credit, some people appear to be worse off on it, but as we have seen, and as I have just described, UC is a far more agile system and the intention—I think of the whole House—is to replace legacy benefits. I agree with the Government's position that it would not be right to let people go back. The right hon Gentleman mentions mis-selling: surely that is an exaggeration, but I do wonder whether more can be done to explain to people what joining UC means and to make sure that they are able to check properly whether it is the right move for them.

I also congratulate the DWP and, more particularly, Citizens Advice on its scheme, Help to Claim, which the DWP funds. It is the beginning of the far more substantial system that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green always intended to accompany universal credit. The Government are recruiting 13,500 new work coaches to work in jobcentres, which is tremendous, but people need more than coaches—they need training, professional support and peer support. They might have issues with addiction or debt, or family problems. We need to create the systems that support job coaches and support individual jobseekers, so I urge the Minister to consider what more can be done to deepen Help to Claim beyond the initial period of joining UC to create a system that works with businesses and charities. The gateway system for kickstart potentially offers a model for that.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the future jobs fund. We want to do better than that, because it had quite a high drop-out rate. The opportunity is there for the kickstart scheme to sustain those young people in employment, but in order to do that, we need to ensure that they have the right support around them, not simply the job placement itself.

[Danny Kruger]

My final point is more strategic and about the principles of welfare. I hope that I will not be thought abstract or even flippant when I make this point. I call in my defence Professor Simon Szreter of Cambridge University, who has made the same point. He said that we need to go back to the principles of the Elizabethan poor law. I am not talking about Victorian poor law—the Dickensian horrors of the workhouse and so on—but the original poor law of 1601. It was the first comprehensive system of social security in this country and, as Professor Szreter explains, it had two elements. First, it was local, it was funded from local taxation and it was paid out to people flexibly according to their needs. Secondly, it encouraged altruism and social responsibility among the wealthy through incentives to create almshouses, colleges and churches.

I do not propose going back to those days, but those are the principles that we need—a more local and more flexible approach and one in which the wealthy, by which I mean businesses in today's age, play a central role in supporting local communities and helping people into employment. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the need for a more dependable social security system, and I entirely agree. I support everything the Government are doing to help people facing unemployment, and I hope for more substantial reform in due course.

4.7 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), although of course in the 1600s this Parliament did not exist, so those laws would not have applied in Scotland, thankfully.

I thank the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and all its members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), for the report. However, I might be the fly in the ointment when it comes to some of the issues it raised.

From my perspective, and I hope that of the majority of Members on my Benches, the report provides a true exposition of the Government's position on social security, and their ideological thinking about its role in society. At least on these Benches, we believe that a social security policy worth its name should be based on its role in defining society through support enabling equal access to security for all based on need, especially during a global pandemic. I am afraid that, at least from my perspective, the Government's position and outlook seem to uphold a post-Thatcherite fundamentalism. It is as though they have offered a prayer to a dystopian Saint Francis of Assisi, "Where there is discord, may we bring more. Where there is error, may we entrench it. Where there is doubt, may we add to it, and where there is despair, may we embolden it." I am afraid that I do not see UC as a national asset. I certainly see the members of staff who are having to deal with its consequences as an asset, because I and my team, and many other Members, know how much hard work they have done.

It is as though the Conservative party believes that the path to paradise begins in hell, but, just maybe, the long road to salvation actually lies in the Committee's recommendations. For example, it says:

"The Department should continue to allow claimants to use their Government Gateway accounts to verify their identity once the lockdown has ended. It should also use this as an opportunity to reflect on what other changes to the process are needed, with a particular focus on the needs of people who are vulnerable and digitally excluded."

I would actually go so far as to say that the opportunities of digitisation should not cloud the Government's view of the lived experience of many citizens. Even the most advanced digital states recognise the fundamental truth of digitisation: it is to ensure that traditional means of access to services remain open to all, and it is not some mandatory utilitarian concept of happiness and human worth.

The Committee also states:

"We recommend that the Government urgently take steps to return to their pre-existing benefits, or the equivalent financial position, anyone who has inadvertently left themselves worse off by making a claim for Universal Credit during the coronavirus outbreak."

It is as though those on the Government Back Benches see social security as they see foreign aid—as a reserve worth fleecing. Just as they fail to see the worth of foreign aid, they fail to see the worth of a needs-based social security system. I am reminded by Rachel Maddow that social security is not a Ponzi scheme, is not bankrupting and is not an outrage, and that—these are my words—if it is funded and worked properly, it works. The Government should restore entitlement, as the Committee's report highlights, not just because of covid-19, but because it is the morally just and economically sound thing to do.

The Committee's litany of exasperation continues:

"In these exceptional circumstances, the Government should immediately suspend NRPF conditions on public health grounds for the duration of the outbreak"—

that is, on public health grounds during a global pandemic. As the Committee also notes, the Government might not even know how many citizens have no recourse to public funds—so much for a digital nation approach.

The Committee gets into its stride on the issue of the benefit cap, as the Chair of the Committee highlighted. It states:

"The Chancellor's decision to increase Universal Credit payments by £20…is very welcome. But some households will not be able to benefit from these increases. This is because, as a result of the uplifts, they will be hit by the benefit cap."

The Tory party giveth, and the Tory party taketh away, and all the while 4,100 of my constituents who are claimants have lost an average of £57, which was deducted during a global pandemic. That is the difference between queuing at Asda and queueing at a food bank.

I could go on to a litany of despair from Glasgow East; Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath; North Ayrshire and Arran; Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock; and Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, in each of which nearly 4,000 constituents have lost, on average, about £52 to £55 over this period. That is less a prayer of supplication—a mea culpa, mea culpa—than a Tory mantra of faithless cold-heartedness that repudiates the worth of our common humanity. In summing up, I, my party and, I believe, Scotland repudiate that false dogma and its baseless Thatcherite foundations.

4.13 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): First, I pay tribute to the Clerks, the staff and fellow members of the Work and Pensions Committee, and to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for the work

he did on this report. It was an interesting inquiry to be involved with and, as I am sure he will agree, we heard a wide range of evidence about the Government's handling of the covid-19 pandemic.

The report recognises the unprecedented and difficult circumstances that our social security system has found itself in. Most of the people who rely on it have found themselves having to do so for the first time as a result of this crisis. We heard stories of people who never expected to have to rely on social security now having absolutely to depend on it. What we also heard about, and what has also been shown, are some of the operational challenges that the Department has faced. However, I have been very heartened by my hon. Friend the Minister's listening mood and approach to some of these issues.

I want to concentrate my comments today on three points that I pulled out of the report. I certainly do not wish to step on or repeat any of the comments that right hon. and hon. Members have made so far, but for me a number of elements stick out: the operational challenges that the Department has faced during this period; the support for the self-employed and its impact, nowhere more so than in my constituency; and how we ensure that those people who have to go to work during covid get support from the agencies that are meant to ensure that they remain safe.

I first thank the DWP staff, who have been absolutely phenomenal during this period—I am sure we all agree. They have had to step up, with many seconded into roles of which they have had no experience before, and they have got on with it, worked hard and ensured that people who need access to benefits get those benefits and the entitlements they need. We heard stories in the report about how people not only got access to benefits but felt supported by the staff. People felt that they, were being listened to and were being treated as individuals.

In looking at some of the operational notes, one of the things that stuck out was the verification of ID process. We heard that people sometimes found it complex and complicated. I absolutely support the need for digitisation of our benefits system—that is absolutely right, and we need to ensure that we have a streamlined system, which enables quick processing of people's applications for benefits—but, certainly in a constituency such as mine, where I represent wards with some of the highest levels of deprivation, the digital divide is real.

Many people do not have access to digital services, whether the internet or IT equipment. However, I have been very impressed by the way in which jobcentres have engaged with people pre and post pandemic. This is a cross-Government project: we have to ensure that we plug the digital divide. I have said that repeatedly, and I will keep on saying it. We have to ensure that people can access our services, irrespective of where they are, their background or where they come from. I am heartened by the discussions I have had with my hon. Friend the Minister and with other Ministers to ensure that we address the issue. I know that it is recognised.

I now turn to the self-employed. The fact is, as I said at the beginning of my remarks, many people found for the first time that they required support that they never thought they would need. In the report, I welcome the temporary suspension of the minimum income floor—a welcome acknowledgement by the Government of the problems for the self-employed, in particular those who have volatile monthly incomes. I also totally agree with the report on communications and the need to communicate with people about how to navigate the system. Often, self-employed people have found it difficult to know what benefits they are entitled to or how to get the best support. I therefore welcome the Department's and the Minister's openness to ensuring that the self-employed get the support they need.

To touch on the point about the £16,000 saving limit, I know it is one that my hon. Friend the Minister has recognised. However, we need to be acutely aware that many people put aside savings to pay their tax liabilities or to pay for things that they need. I know that the Department has heard that, and I have been reassured by the conversations I have had with Ministers, but we must be mindful that people have not always burrowed such money away because they are well off; it is often intended to pay off liabilities, so the cash is not accessible.

Finally—because I am conscious that other colleagues want to get in—I turn to those people who went out to work during the pandemic. Many of my constituents cannot work from home, because they work in manufacturing, in food processing or as key workers. In the evidence from the Health and Safety Executive, we can see clearly that work still needs to be done on that. The TUC, for example, had 1,000 contacts from workers concerned about unsafe working and the HSE itself received about 6,000 concerns regarding social distancing.

Often, those workers who are classed as—I hate this expression—low-skilled had the highest risk and the highest death rates as a result of covid-19. It is important that the HSE is empowered to undertake spot checks and that we take an approach of cross-communication with the HSE, employers and, yes, trade unions to ensure that we have that cross-stakeholder approach to keep our key workers safe so that they can go out to work and so that those people in those jobs can continue to provide those vital services.

I commend the Government for the unprecedented effort they have put in—let us not forget that. I commend my hon. Friend the Minister for his listening mood. The times have been unprecedented, and he has accepted the challenges and has the openness to solve them. However, ultimately, I cannot commend highly enough the work of the DWP staff, and the fact that they have come out to ensure that our most vulnerable are supported.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank everybody for showing great time restraint and understanding.

4.19 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this important debate. This report demonstrates how the coronavirus has exposed the critical shortcomings of our social security system, while highlighting issues that we have known about for a long time, such as the five-week wait for universal credit payment and the financial burden on claimants of repaying advance loans. It also criticised the fact that the £20 increase in universal credit had not been carried across to legacy benefits such as jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance. That has resulted

[Claudia Webbe]

in people facing hardship as a result of the Government's inhumanity. The Government must urgently level up their support.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently found that 4 million families face a significant decline in income if the Department for Work and Pensions goes ahead with its plan to scrap the £20 increase. It is deeply worrying that the Government are planning to cut universal credit amid an unprecedented economic crisis. That is especially concerning in Leicester East, as last month, over 5,000 of our residents claimed unemployment benefits—the number has more than doubled and has gone up by over 3,000 since the lockdown began in March. This means that our community's unemployment rate is above the national average. It is also beyond belief that benefit sanctions resumed in July, during an unprecedented period of economic hardship.

The report highlights the impact of the callous "no recourse to public funds" condition during the pandemic, particularly on children. Thousands of UK residents who are undocumented and those who have no recourse to public funds have already been driven into destitution during this crisis. Recent Home Office statistics show that the number of migrants with no recourse to public funds who have applied for destitution funds increased dramatically, by 572%, in the months spanning the coronavirus crisis. This means that nearly 3,000 migrants facing total hardship could be waiting to hear whether they and their families will be able to avoid severe poverty—and that only includes the limited number of migrants who are aware of the destitution provision. Given the hostile environment for migrants, many do not know that they are eligible for any state support.

The statistics also reveal that it took the Home Office an unacceptable average of 30 days to decide on these life-or-death applications. This process must be considerably speeded up, but better still, the concept of no recourse to public funds must be suspended for the duration of the pandemic at least. That would be the more humane approach. It is appalling that the Home Office does not even record the number of UK residents with no recourse to public funds, despite a recent intervention from the Office for Statistics Regulation, which expressed alarm at the Home Office's repeated refusal to do so. It is contrary to reason to develop policy without knowing how many people the condition affects. The Government must adopt this most basic of tasks.

The report highlighted the performance of the Health and Safety Executive and its limited capacity to assess covid-secure workplaces. At the time of the report's publication, the Health and Safety Executive had only shut down one workplace for covid-related reasons. As Members can imagine, this is particularly relevant for my community. One of the main reasons why worker exploitation in Leicester's garment industry has been able to exist unchecked is that 10 years of austerity have severely downgraded our regulatory institutions. The Government have slashed the Health and Safety Executive's budget by £100 million, or 46%, since 2010. Rights are meaningless if they are not properly enforced. The Government must therefore urgently reverse the funding cuts to regulatory bodies to ensure the safety and fair pay of those who work, and support our unions, which are championing them so excellently.

This Government's cruelty over the past decade has transformed the Department for Work and Pensions into a symbol of fear. The coronavirus pandemic has further demonstrated the need for universal welfare support and for us to be there to help and support people, not punish or police them. The Government must therefore empower the Department to act now to prevent the further impoverishment of working people and their families during the pandemic.

4.25 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this debate. I think it fair to say that he is well regarded on both sides of the House for his approach to these issues and for his expertise on them, which was reflected in his opening remarks and in his Committee's report.

I wanted to speak in this debate because I think the performance of the Department for Work and Pensions during the pandemic has been one of the unsung successes of this period. It saw an increase in claimant numbers between February and August from 2.9 million to 5.6 million. Few services saw that level of increase. A lot of services saw a decrease. Some did see an increase, and obviously the biggest pressure was on the health service, but few saw such an increase in this period, and the fact that 93% of people were paid on time is a huge achievement.

I accept that for those among the remaining 7% those delays are very distressing, although I know from my own constituents that the delays are sometimes caused if the Department does not have all the information it needs. I am not saying that that accounts for all the delays—I am sure there have been some things that have gone wrong for that 7%—but I wonder how many services, public or private, could claim a 93% success rate in the past decade or, indeed, the past two or three decades.

I want to pay tribute to the DWP staff. I was at the jobcentre in Didcot just last week, and their commitment and dedication to ensuring that every jobseeker gets the right support hit me in the face the moment I walked in.

Stephen Timms: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. Does he think the staff should get a pay rise?

David Johnston: We could make the case for all public servants to be given a pay rise at all times, but of course we have to keep good control over the expenditure that the Government make on behalf of taxpayers. Considerable support has been given, in one of the most generous packages in the world, through the covid period, and I think that has to be taken into consideration when we talk about a pay rise. And of course some public sector workers are getting a pay rise; in fact, I think the majority still are.

I also want to give credit to the ministerial team and the way in which they have worked flexibly, whether in bringing forward the use of Government Gateway identification by six months or in suspending the conditionality on jobseeking for this period. All those things mattered and played an important role. Some of the criticism that has been made of the DWP involves things that I think are reasonable. For example, I think it reasonable still to require evidence of health conditions if someone wants to claim health-related benefits.

I accept the point about not everyone having the right level of digital literacy, but on the other hand, we wanted a system that was quick and easy to access, and we were keeping everybody inside, and I think that probably affected a small but not insignificant minority of people. Some of the other criticisms are about problems that people have with the system as a whole, such as the benefit cap or no recourse to public funds. I am not saying that those issues have not been exacerbated, but they are broader questions than just the performance of the DWP during this period. I agree with some of the criticisms, however. The delays to mandatory reconsiderations, for example, are a problem. I have seen that for myself, and we have to sort it out. I know that the Department is committed to doing so, and the faster it can do so, the better.

After the Health and Education Departments, the DWP has had the most tremendous pressure placed on it, and the reason we have heard a lot less about it is that things have gone so well. That is not the case with everything, but it is a service that has worked a lot better than could have potentially been expected at the outset of this crisis, given the increase in the number of claimants. That is backed up by the statistics. The bottom 10% saw no reduction in the income level that they received, and the Government's package overall reduced the scale of losses by up to two thirds, in the majority of cases, for working people.

The Department should be commended for this. It has some big things on its plate, like the kickstart programme—which I take a particular interest in, given my previous work with young people—and the new Restart programme. It is right to target people who have been unemployed for at least a year. I think that what we have seen so far bodes well for how it will deliver these programmes.

4.30 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I pay tribute to the members of the Work and Pensions Committee and its Chair, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), for the important work they have been carrying out during the coronavirus pandemic. I welcome the recommendations in their report.

For many of my constituents, this crisis has been the first time that they have engaged with the benefits system. While it is important to note that, as we have heard, there have been some successes, many of my constituents have been shocked to find out that what they believed to be a safety net has some significant holes. I want to limit my remarks to the issue of those left worse off, and one particular constituency case.

One of my constituents, Lara, wrote to me. She is a student mental health nurse, and the previous academic year was the second year of her studies. During the pandemic, like all second-year student nurses, she was offered a fixed-term contract to help the NHS that would run until August. She said:

"It was fantastic to be recognised as having the skills that were needed, and like my classmates, I felt it necessary to take this offer. Should I have declined, I would then have needed to extend my studies by 6 months as in order to register as a nurse, 2300 placement hours must be worked."

Many student nurses work alongside their studies to top up their nursing bursary, but Lara was unable to do that owing to disability, and, as a result, was eligible for housing benefit and for employment and support allowance, as well as the personal independence payment. She said that this was able to help her have a place of her own, which has vastly improved her health, something of which she feels the benefit daily. When she took on the fixed-term contract, that meant that she was receiving a wage, which meant a temporary pause in her benefits. She told me:

"I had to decide between keeping a benefit I was entitled to, or my education, and I chose my education."

So she served on the frontline during the first wave of the pandemic, like so many other student nurses—I pay tribute to them all—putting themselves at risk to help protect our NHS.

But when Lara's fixed-term contract came to an end, she found herself, in her own words, in "an awful situation." She said:

"It turns out, since I started claiming benefits, the system has changed. Housing benefit no longer exists, neither does the version of ESA I received. I was advised I would now have to apply for Universal Credit, which…isn't actually available to students.

Living off my nursing bursary, and PIP, means after I pay my rent and bills, I have £8 a week to live off. I either must take a loan, and leave university in debt, or give up my rented flat and move into a box room at my mum's.

I am honestly so deflated that because I did what I felt was right in helping the country during the pandemic by providing skills I have, that I am now in this situation. It is a kick in the teeth that had I declined the placement, none of my benefits would have been affected."

How is that fair? Lara showed such dedication in the spring to take the fixed-term contract when she was only halfway through her studies, putting herself at risk to help protect the NHS, and giving up the benefits she was receiving in order to do that.

It was people like Lara we were lining up outside our doors to clap for earlier this year. She and so many like her were making an enormous sacrifice to help keep us safe, and that is something we should be rewarding. What kind of society claps for our carers and then leaves them with barely enough money to survive on, applauds our public sector frontline workers and then hands them a pay freeze, and sees the need for a commitment to help the most vulnerable and disadvantaged around the world, only to withdraw that at a time when the need for support has never been greater?

The Committee's report has rightly highlighted the failure of the Government to uplift legacy benefits in the same manner as universal credit. I have had a great deal of correspondence from constituents who have been directly impacted by this. In Lara's case, this is someone on legacy benefits who left them and is now ineligible for both legacy benefits and universal credit. I hope that the Minister will engage with me on this particular case. Is there any estimate of how many other student nurses and doctors find themselves in the same position as Lara, having made the same decision earlier this year? We have seen from the Office for Budget Responsibility's releases yesterday that welfare spending actually makes up a very small proportion of the total covid response. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.34 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, welcome the report, and the speech made today by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

[Ruth Cadbury]

The impact of the covid pandemic has exposed so many of our constituents, who never thought that they would need to apply for benefits, to the Department for Work and Pensions. They have experienced what many have had to put up with for years—politically driven viciousness towards those who, through no fault of their own, need help from the state to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. I do not blame DWP staff, who work hard to support increasing numbers of people in distress, but those staff are having to implement these terrible policies.

There are about 13,000 households on universal credit in my constituency as of last month. That is 50% more compared with the same month a year ago. There are also almost 5,500 households on legacy benefits and tax credits. That is an estimate. I am particularly concerned about people who have no recourse to public funds. We have no local data, but I know there will be many hundreds of such adults and children, given that the national estimate is 1.4 million adults and 175,000 children impacted. With no right to state help, apart from discretionary funds from already overstretched local authorities, there are real concerns about those people.

There is a particular impact on lone-parent families, especially those with black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds. The Local Government Association has called for NRPF to be suspended, because these are people who, in the main, were working. They had a right to work and a right to live here, but their jobs have gone, particularly in my area, where so many jobs depend on Heathrow. That industry has been hit particularly hard. The Unity Project, which works with NRPF families, reports that 54% of its families assisted had no work during lockdown.

I want to cover a couple of cases and the experience of my caseworkers. People are using universal credit for the first time and having real trouble navigating what is a complex system, even for those with a high level of IT and literacy skills. The report mentions the difficulty facing self-employed workers owing to their specific needs. The minimum income floor has been suspended and they are worried that it might be brought back. Many self-employed workers who were excluded, particularly in the creative and arts sectors, have also been denied access to universal credit owing to the savings threshold. Savings are not some sort of indulgence; for many, they are the fund being built up for a deposit, so that they can get on the housing ladder, now that 100% mortgages are something of the deep past.

I want to discuss a case in respect of the benefit cap, which affects so many in my constituency, where rents are between £1,500 and £1,800 a month for a modest flat. Rents are high because we are in west London. The £27,000 benefit cap does not leave much change after the rent is paid. Let me illustrate that by way of the example of a lone parent, recently separated, with three children, one of whom is a tiny baby. Her rent is £1,300 a month. Her partner left her while she was pregnant and she claimed universal credit. She was awarded £1,731 a month, which meant that, after she had paid the £1,300 in rent, she was left with £431 a month, or £99 a week plus child benefit, for everything for her and her children, including a baby, which of course means additional costs. The two-child limit meant that she was not entitled to any more benefit once her third child arrived. She was left with the same amount to live on.

I am particularly concerned about those subject to sanctions and the reintroduction of the requirement for claimants to phone their DWP advisers or risk sanctions. That particularly impacts on those with learning disabilities or mental health issues. We know that mental health problems have escalated this year. Many need access to IT, but they have been dependent on face-to-face support to help them with their benefit claims and their journal. That support was often given in places such as libraries and other public spaces, but those have been closed for much of the year because of lockdown rules.

In conclusion, I support the Committee's recommendations. I also oppose any attempt to cut the £20 a week increase for universal credit. I want to see an increase in legacy benefits in line with the £20 uplift to ensure that those on older legacy benefits, such as jobseeker's allowance, are not missing out. I would have scrapped the benefits cap that penalises private renters, particularly in high-cost areas such as London, and suspended the savings cap. All that would mean money in the pockets of low-income families. That would not only help them: as we know, low-income families are far more likely to spend any additional pound in the local economy and that supports others. It is a win-win.

4.40 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I, too, want to start by thanking all key workers across the Department for Work and Pensions, including many members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, for their critical role in our covid-19 response, and for supporting millions of people across the UK, including the nearly 15,000 in Luton South who claim universal credit.

The unprecedented public health emergency, coupled with its economic implications, has seen hundreds of thousands of people turn to our social security system for the first time. I think it has been a shock for many people as they have realised how inadequate the support actually is and how hard it is to live on. The Work and Pensions Committee's report provides an excellent holistic understanding of the severe shortcomings of the system that have been further exposed by the pandemic. Household incomes across the country have been significantly hit, and when many people have turned to the social security system for support they have had to suffer the five-week wait for a universal credit payment, forcing many to take on the extra financial burden of an advanced payment loan. To prevent increasing household debt, the Government should convert that loan into a grant. To get the economy back on its feet, people need money in their pockets, not increased debt.

The rise in the standard allowance for universal credit and working tax credits was a welcome introduction to support the UK's most hard-up, but it makes no sense that the Government did not extend the increase to legacy benefits, which include critical economic support for disabled people. Analysis by the Social Metrics Commission found that nearly half of people in poverty, 48% or 6.8 million people, live in a family that includes someone who is disabled. More than four in 10 people, 41%, are in a family that includes both a disabled adult and a child and is living in poverty. To tackle rising

poverty, legacy benefits need targeted support. As the Motor Neurone Disease Association told the Committee,

"the amount of financial support through Carers Allowance is not enough, especially at a time when now more than ever extra pressure is being placed on unpaid family carers."

I fully support the Committee's call for the DWP to ensure legacy benefits receive the same uplift as universal credit and working tax credits, but we must also go further. The Government must make the benefit uplift permanent, as the economic impact of the pandemic will continue for the foreseeable future.

The rate of local housing allowance is also insufficient to keep a roof over many people's heads. Shelter research states that more than four in 10, or 42%, of private renting households now rely on LHA to pay their rent. It was a positive step to increase LHA to cover the lowest 30% of private rents, but it does not solve the problem as it still creates a huge chasm between the benefits many tenants receive and the rent they are contractually obliged to pay. Furthermore, the decision at yesterday's spending review to maintain the cash value of LHA but not continue to link it to the 30th percentile of local market rents will worsen the situation by leaving LHA rates falling well behind the cost of private rents once again. I support Shelter's call for a mechanism to ensure that LHA continues to cover at least the 30th percentile of local market rents going forward.

Finally, I want to speak about the huge suffering caused by the no recourse to public funds status. I have heard from families who are recently unemployed or who have lost income about their desperate financial situation due to their no recourse to public funds status. As a volunteer at Luton food bank, I met people with no recourse to public funds who are relying on the foodbank to feed themselves and their children as they cannot access sufficient support. Sadly, this heartbreaking situation is not unique. Children's Society research cited in the Select Committee report estimates that about 142,000 children under 18 and 1 million adults are in this situation. It is not in the public's interests to force people, many of whom are key workers and frontline medical staff, to adhere to restrictive public health guidance while also denying them access to the social security safety net. That is truly callous. Many of these families cannot work, as that would risk their loved ones' health, but they also have no support system to fall back on. They are stranded in mounting household debt, living hand to mouth without any respite on the horizon, so will the Minister explain to the House and those suffering why the Government refuse to suspend the no recourse to public funds rules for DWP benefits?

4.45 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I will start by congratulating the Select Committee on a superb report, as always, and on the introduction by the Chair of the Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), on his introduction. It will not be a surprise that I agree with everything he has said. In the middle of a crisis of this kind, it is very tempting not to welcome rigorous scrutiny and, indeed, challenge of the policies that are brought forward in response to it. However, it is even more important at these times that we hear that kind of scrutiny, which draws particular strength from being cross-party: we have heard contributions from both sides of the House on these important points.

Getting this right makes the difference when it comes to people having food on the table and being able to warm their homes, and being able to have a roof over their heads and communicate with each other—essentials of a basic but decent standard of living. It also means offering people security and dignity at a time of personal crisis, when their worlds are crumbling around them. Getting it wrong means debt, hunger, homelessness, and the fears, stresses and insecurities that can and do trigger mental and physical ill health. It is entirely possible for two things to be true at the same time: that the system has indeed handled, and handled well, a soaring number of claims for benefits, and that too many people are left in desperate need and, in some cases, total destitution. It is true that more money has been spent this year in response to this crisis, but also that the level of need is outstripping it, and it is certainly true that—as we learned yesterday—the temporary nature of so much of that assistance is leaving us with some profound concerns for what happens next.

It is absolutely right, as I think has been said by everybody who has spoken so far, that a debt of thanks is owed to the DWP staff, locally and nationally, supported by the work of voluntary organisations and other public bodies. People have gone above and beyond what is required of them, as they did during the financial crisis 10 years ago, when the system also rose splendidly to the challenge it was put under. As always, we owe our thanks to those dedicated staff.

It is no reflection on the work of the Department's public servants to say that the effectiveness of the policy response itself has been more mixed. In part, that is because of the austerity policies pursued by the Conservative Government since 2010, which left the benefits system woefully unprepared for the impact of this crisis. Ministers like to boast about the £9 billion they have allocated to social security in response to the pandemic, but the Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that £9 billion is the amount taken out of social security by the Government in the 2015 Budget alone. The long history of failing to uprate benefits—the benefit freeze that we had for so many years—meant that between 2010 and the onset of the pandemic, the value of the main income replacement benefits—JSA, ESA, income support and universal credit—fell by 9% in real terms. We cannot ignore the fact that this is the context of what we are now dealing with.

That is why it is also so concerning that we are hearing about measures that have been adopted since the start of this crisis being temporary. Several of my hon. Friends have made reference to the £20 uplift for universal credit. It is essential that the Government lift the threat that is hanging over millions of people who are reliant on a low income, and ensure that this uplift is made permanent. It is also essential, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) in particular mentioned, that the Government continue to increase the support available for people who have a housing need and are reliant on local housing allowance, which has also drifted further and further away from meeting real housing costs. The Government cannot ignore the relationship between that failure to meet genuine housing costs in many parts of the country and homelessness, which has soared over recent years. The local housing allowance must be related to real rents in the real world, in all parts of the country. We have only just come out of a period of freeze of local housing allowance, and now we are told that we are going back into it.

[Ms Karen Buck]

In short, the social security system has been falling further and further away from living costs as a matter of Government policy for a long time. The increases in funding that we have seen this year are no more than a partial reversal of policy. As the Committee has stressed, the Government have taken a completely different approach to universal credit and working tax credit on the one hand, and to other legacy benefits on the other—a point also made by several of my hon. Friends—with the latter receiving only a 1.7% uprating after years of real-terms cuts. This affects 1.8 million people on ESA, nearly 300,000 people on income support, nearly a quarter of a million people on JSA, and more than 1 million working families receiving child tax credit but not working tax credit. On present trends, next year they can look forward to a 37p a week uplift in their benefits.

The Committee rightly condemned this unjustified disparity in the treatment of people in similar circumstances depending on whether or not they are receiving the Government's flagship benefit. To argue, as Ministers have done, that this disparity is due to the greater flexibility of universal credit is particularly galling, as the Government are simultaneously pleading the inflexibility of universal credit as an excuse for not addressing the issue of advance repayments and the five-week wait. I can only echo the words of the Committee:

"We were astonished to hear that the Universal Credit system has been built in a way that makes it all but impossible for repayments of Advances to be suspended in a crisis situation."

The Government's response has been undermined by a failure to join up policy across Government. The pandemic has meant that the Department for Work and Pensions now plays an essential role in supporting public health policy, which is—or should be—a major shift in the Department's priorities. If people are to comply with Government rules on social distancing and self-isolation, we need to ensure that they are able to do so and that the DWP is up to this task. That is why we have consistently called for the suspension of the no recourse to public funds rules for DWP benefits for the duration of this pandemic—a point that was stressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

The DWP has proved its operational ability to deal with unprecedented demands, but that effort has been severely hampered by the impact of austerity over many years, by the inflexibility of universal credit and by a failure to co-ordinate policy across Departments. Above all, the Government must ensure that the measures that have been taken over recent months in response to this crisis are not ended next April, and that they give security to millions of people who are looking to them.

4.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I thank the Work and Pensions Committee for its report, which provides important scrutiny of the Department, and our response to the coronavirus outbreak. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate, and for their largely constructive tone. Of course, I also thank the Chair of the Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), with whom I enjoy a constructive, if not sometimes challenging—and rightly so—relationship.

I will start with some comments on the performance of my Department over the course of the pandemic before moving on to some of the substantive points raised in the debate. I pay tribute to the tireless efforts of my Department's civil servants, who have stepped up to the challenge with remarkable speed and aptitude when faced with overwhelming demand as a result of the unprecedented pandemic. I thank the Committee for its acknowledgement of the work of our hard-working frontline staff.

Let me offer an insight into the sheer volume of UC claims that we have faced. From 16 March to the end of April, we received over 1.8 million claims for universal credit. The legacy benefits system simply could not have coped with this demand. Rather than our seeing the queues in the streets that we would have seen with a paper-based legacy system, our payment timeliness ran at a record high, with over 94% of claims paid in full and on time, and more than 1 million individuals able to access funds quickly via new claim advances. We moved rapidly to roll out a package of emergency and temporary welfare measures, including the injection of billions of pounds into our welfare system this year to support those facing the most financial disruption because of the pandemic. That injection included a temporary increase in the universal credit standard allowance of more than £1,000 for this financial year. We also increased the local housing allowance rates for universal credit and housing benefit claimants to the 30th percentile of local rents from April; that vital financial support for private renters was worth on average £600 throughout this challenging period. We are, though, just one part of an overarching Government commitment to wrap our arms around the public.

Let me turn to the first of the points raised by the right hon. Member for East Ham, on the uprating of benefits and the UC standard allowance. The Secretary of State announced yesterday, as part of the annual review of social security rates, that benefits would again rise in line with inflation at the start of the next financial year. That is a cash increase of around half a billion pounds in 2021-22. We also affirmed the commitment that the increase to local housing allowance rates in April this year will be retained. Earlier this year we invested nearly £1 billion, increasing the local housing allowance rates to the 30th percentile of local market rents, and we will maintain that level of support next year by freezing the rates at current levels.

Let me address the question of the £20 universal credit uplift. The Government introduced a raft of temporary measures—including the furlough scheme, the self-employment income support scheme and, of course, the £20 universal credit uplift—to support those facing the most financial disruption. With the uplift confirmed until the end of March 2021, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out yesterday why it is right that we wait for more clarity on the national economic and social picture before he decides on the best way to support low-income families from April. I stress to the House that discussions are very much ongoing with Her Majesty's Treasury.

Let me turn to the second point raised by the right hon. Member for East Ham, on returning people to legacy benefits once they have moved over to universal

credit. As a matter of fundamental policy design, making a universal credit claim will end any entitlement to legacy benefits and tax credits that an individual may have. This function is supported in legislation and reflects the overarching principle of universal credit: that it will replace the legacy benefits system. The Department continually makes improvements to the UC service in response to feedback and user research. On 3 June, we introduced a new check-through box to remind claimants to check their eligibility before making a claim for universal credit, and to remind them that legacy benefits will cease when a universal credit claim is made and submitted and they will not be able to return to legacy benefits. I encourage claimants to check their independent eligibility calculators on gov.uk.

Let me turn to the third point raised by the right hon. Member for East Ham, on support for those with no recourse to public funds. Access to DWP income-related benefits such as universal credit flows from an individual's immigration status. All claimants, regardless of their nationality, are required to be both legally and habitually resident in the United Kingdom in order to access income-related benefits. Ultimately, these matters are governed by the Home Office, and people without recourse to public funds can apply for a change of condition. I stress that support has been available, including through the coronavirus job retention scheme, the coronavirus self-employment income support scheme, the contributory employment support allowance and, of course, support via local authorities, including the new £170 million covid winter support grant, provided that the relevant eligibility criteria are met.

In the interests of time—I am conscious that it is very tight, and we have Department for Work and Pensions oral questions on Monday—let me conclude by reiterating our commitment to providing a strong safety net for those who need it and targeting support at those most in need. I take immense pride in our Department's response to the unprecedented challenges that this year has brought, and I know that it will continue to play a key role in delivering crucial services to society's most vulnerable and disadvantaged over the coming months. As the recovery phase grows, the Department will continue to offer key services through our £30 billion plan for jobs. The Select Committee was right to acknowledge the exceptional work of our Department in supporting people through these unprecedented times, and I look forward to the important role that we will play in ensuring that we build back better in the coming months.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank everybody for their contributions and co-operation today, without a time limit being imposed. Everybody behaved impeccably—thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the First Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, "DWP's response to the coronavirus outbreak", HC 178; and calls on the Government to increase relevant legacy benefits in line with increases to universal credit, to take steps to return people who have been inadvertently left worse off under universal credit compared with their previous benefits, and to suspend the no recourse to public funds visa condition for the duration of the coronavirus outbreak.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO INDUSTRY)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That the Motion in the name of Nadhim Zahawi relating to financial assistance to industry shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—*(David Duguid.)*

Question agreed to.

Hydrogen Transport

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(David Duguid.)*

5 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is a tremendous privilege to have secured today's debate on the use of hydrogen transport. It is such thrilling news because, unbelievably, this is the first dedicated debate on hydrogen to take place in the UK Parliament. We can all agree that it is long overdue.

It is now clear that hydrogen will be a critical component of our energy and transport policy as we strive to achieve net zero by 2050. We can no longer afford to sit on our hands. At present, 34% of all UK carbon emissions come from transport. This is a colossal statistic. If we do not prioritise decarbonising our transport sector, we simply will not meet our net zero target.

I welcome the work that the Minister and the Government have done and will continue to do to ensure that hydrogen is so high up the Government's agenda. Indeed, the Government have signalled their intent regarding hydrogen in their 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution announced just last week. The Minister has confirmed that the Government will produce an economy-wide hydrogen strategy for the UK, which we understand is planned to be published in February. I look forward to the promised creation of a hydrogen transport hub, the all-hydrogen bus town scheme and implementation of the aforementioned 10-point plan, which includes policies for hydrogen use and production.

Members will be well versed in my advocacy for hydrogen in this House. I serve as a vice-chair of the all-party group on hydrogen and I champion hydrogen technology consistently in my speeches and articles on levelling up and our green recovery. My commitment to this exciting technology stems from my life before entering Parliament. Before I was elected to represent the people of Rother Valley, I worked on environmental issues at the World Wildlife Fund before focusing on the UK's global transition to a green future at Shell. It was then that I realised we need a multi-pronged approach to low-carbon transport.

Despite what some may tell us, there is no silver bullet or panacea to help us to achieve our aims. This is why, alongside other solutions such as electric vehicles, biofuels and carbon capture and storage, we must ensure that we are at the forefront of the hydrogen industry, both in its use and in its production. We must steal a march on international competitors, cornering the market for UK plc and cementing our place as the world leader in hydrogen transport. I like to describe this as a win-win situation, because a strong UK hydrogen industry will create thousands of jobs across the country, cut carbon emissions dramatically and boost our post-covid and post-Brexit economy.

What exactly is hydrogen and how does it work? In layman's terms, hydrogen is a gas that can combust in a way that produces no greenhouse gas emissions. Hydrogen can be produced by a number of methods. The most exciting of these creations is green hydrogen, which is made by electrolysis, using renewable electricity from solar and wind power. While we develop our infrastructure for green hydrogen, we can create blue hydrogen, too, which is made by reforming methane, where the carbon dioxide generated can be captured and stored.

I must address the excitement around electric vehicles. It certainly is a wonderful technology. However, it is not the sole solution to decarbonising transport, and it has significant shortcomings that need to be addressed. It is estimated that it will cost £16.7 billion to get the UK's public charging network ready for mass EV market. This would require 507 new charge points to be installed every single day from now until 2035. Furthermore, there is no recognised figure for how much it will cost to upgrade the grid, but industry figures suggest that it will require hundreds of billions of pounds.

Moreover, we must mention the need to import battery technology from the People's Republic of China, a country that owns 73% of the world's battery supply, often made with electricity from coal-powered stations. Ultimately of more concern is EVs' unsuitability for heavier vehicles, such as HGVs, and longer-distance journeys, and I will cover that shortly. Hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicles, on the other hand, offer flexibility and freedom. Hydrogen vehicles do not produce any greenhouse gases from their tailpipe. The only emission is water vapour. If the hydrogen used by the vehicle is made with renewable sources of electricity or with the help of carbon capture and storage, the process of driving a hydrogen vehicle is nearly free of CO_2 emissions, as well as other particulate matter.

In hydrogen vehicles, energy is stored as compressed hydrogen fuel. That means that hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicles can drive up to 700 km without refuelling and, just like a conventional car, they take only a few minutes to refuel. This is likely to see the deployment of hydrogen in cars and vans that travel large distances or for heavy utilisation, which battery EVs are unsuitable for.

I am excited about the prospects for hydrogen transport beyond cars. This is where hydrogen technology really comes into its own. A hydrogen fuel cell offers cleaner options for parts of the transport sector, particularly in larger vehicles that are less suited to electrification and where consumers demand rapid refuelling. The high energy density of hydrogen means that it is expected to be the dominant choice for HGVs, buses, shipping and rail, as well as having a potential use in aviation.

Hydrogen buses show particular promise, and we are fortunate in Britain to boast the expertise of Wrightbus. It is currently building 3,000 hydrogen buses in the UK for use across the country by 2024, which is the equivalent of taking 107,000 cars off the road.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I apologise for missing the start of the hon. Member's speech on an incredibly important matter. He has touched on hydrogen buses, which in Aberdeen, the city I represent, have been rolled out in great numbers over recent years. Does he agree with me that what we need to see is a greater expansion of hydrogen buses not just in Aberdeen, but across Scotland and the entire UK?

Alexander Stafford: I thank the hon. Member for making that point, and I could not agree more. I was talking to the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), about it recently, and it was exactly that point he highlighted.

That is exactly why, in February, when the Government announced 4,000 zero emission buses, I believe they should have been announced as hydrogen buses, because the economies of scale involved will revolutionise the transport sector. It is of paramount importance that we achieve cost parity between a hydrogen bus and a diesel bus, and at the moment such parity is predicted to happen in this decade, but we would rather have that sooner than later, and I am told if those 4,000 buses were hydrogen buses, that the scales involved would mean parity with diesel buses.

In addition, it is essential that we reform the bus service operators grant to focus only on green fuels such as hydrogen, as we currently spend £600 million per year incentivising the running of diesel buses. Taking this decision would not cost the taxpayer a penny. We must also reform the renewable transport fuel obligation. A simple amendment to this would allow any existing renewable energy resource to be used, and again it would not cost the taxpayer any money. This would significantly increase private investment and stimulate the creation of new jobs in the production of green hydrogen for transport.

The HGV sector is the highest-emitting of all commercial road transport with regards to absolute CO_2 emissions. The majority of commercial vehicles in this category are still powered by diesel, and electrification, as I have mentioned, is not suitable for such heavy long-distance vehicles. Hydrogen-fuelled HGVs had been found to be a more cost-effective option in terms of the infrastructure costs, with a cumulative capital expenditure cost of £3.4 billion in 2016, compared with £21.3 billion for battery electric vehicles—so a lot cheaper. Hydrogen HGVs have already been trialled in the US and parts of Europe, and they are likely to be widely available in the 2020s.

On our railways, a hydrogen-powered train from the University of Birmingham recently travelled on Britain's rail network for the first time. We are looking to lead the world in rolling out more hydrogen trains. In the aerospace sector, British company ZeroAvia has conducted the world's first hydrogen-powered flight, over Bedfordshire, and in 2021 Aeristech will provide a fuel compressor that will make it possible to deliver the power output needed for even the heaviest industries and vehicles, such as aeroplanes. In shipping, UK shipbuilders are already working on cutting-edge zero-emission ferries, and we must increase our international co-operation on hydrogen to achieve the decarbonisation of routes globally.

Beyond transport, hydrogen can also be used to decarbonise home heating, which currently amounts to about 20% of national emissions. The UK is leading the way once again, with HyDeploy conducting the world's first trial of a 20% hydrogen blend in the gas grid, H21 and H100 leading groundbreaking tests of 100% hydrogen in the gas grid, and Worcester Bosch and Baxi producing the world's first hydrogen-ready boilers, so we are already developing this technology in this country.

UK innovation in hydrogen is further advanced by Johnson Matthey's role as one of the global leaders in fuel cell development and components in transport. In fact, its technology ends up in roughly a third of fuel cells globally. I stress to the Government that this is an opportunity for us to corner the hydrogen market in the way that China has dominated the battery market. We can take a world lead on this, and we should—we have the right situation.

Another great British company is ITM Power, based in South Yorkshire, next to my constituency. It is involved in most hydrogen transport products in the UK, and it has indicated that it wishes to open a large hydrogen refuelling station and a network across the country. We must ensure that we have a strong domestic programme to support this, particularly in the bus and HGV sectors. If we act with pace and ambition, with collaboration between industry and Government, we can utilise our natural resources, technological know-how and innovative entrepreneurial spirit to spend taxpayers' money more efficiently than our competitors and stimulate much greater private investment, economic growth and carbon reductions than any other country on the planet.

I have four policy asks of the Minister. The first is to set ambitious targets for the mass commercialisation of hydrogen technology. Hydrogen technologies across all categories have been used extensively in real-world situations across the world for many years. The opportunity now exists to set targets for mass deployment and commercialisation of these technologies across the UK over the coming decade, as other countries have already started doing. For example, Japan is aiming for 200,000 hydrogen fuel cell vehicles on the road by 2025 and 800,000 by 2030. It is also aiming for 1,200 hydrogen buses by 2030. South Korea is aiming for 100,000 hydrogen fuel cell vehicles on the roads by 2025 and 60,000 hydrogen buses by 2040. The world is waking up to hydrogen, and so should we.

The second request is to stimulate supply and demand in parallel. We can steal a march over other countries by setting inspirational, investment-stimulating goals for the production of hydrogen and do so in a manner that maximises the UK's natural resources, academic skills, world-leading manufacturing and experienced workforce. The Prime Minister has set a target for a minimum of 5 GW of hydrogen production by 2030. Let us set ambitious demand-side targets for buses, trains and cars to ensure that we make full use of that.

The third ask is to focus initially on regional clusters—for example, in Rother Valley. The UK's hydrogen economy must be built up step by step, and we cannot make this transition instantly. The Government should focus initially on regional clusters that are most suited to hydrogen production and usage, and on technologies that can be implemented quickly, and scaled up effectively and suit the local skills, geography and decarbonisation priorities. The announcement of a hydrogen transport hub in Teesside is welcome, and I hope that we will see more hydrogen hubs pop up soon—across the north but also in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

The fourth ask is to ensure that relevant Government Departments work collaboratively. Hydrogen policy covers many different Departments. It requires strong local leadership from metro Mayors, council leaders and local enterprise partnerships to be delivered. All the devolved Administrations are developing their own hydrogen strategies.

Stephen Flynn: I appreciate the hon. Member's giving way again; he is being very generous. I have been listening closely to his four points. I may have missed it, but I am not sure whether he mentioned his preference

[Stephen Flynn]

for green or blue hydrogen, and I would be grateful if he expanded on whether he feels that green hydrogen is ultimately the goal that we all seek to achieve.

Alexander Stafford: I believe the hon. Member missed the earlier part of the debate, when I touched on green and blue hydrogen. We all want green hydrogen eventually, but it is blue to start off with, with carbon capture and storage.

I urge the Government to bring about another world first: a hydrogen political working group consisting of representatives from the UK Government, devolved Administration Ministers, Mayors and council leaders. This group can ensure that hydrogen policy across the UK is co-ordinated and implemented at pace.

We must act quickly and decisively to avoid being left behind by international competitors. In the past few months, Germany has committed €9 billion to hydrogen, and France and Portugal have committed €7 billion. The European Union is planning hundreds of billions of euros in investment in hydrogen technology. Australia, China, South Korea, Japan, Canada, Norway, Chile and many other countries around the world see hydrogen as critical to their immediate economic growth and long-term net zero goals. The UK must make its move now if we are to pip those countries at the post. They have announced this money. Let us get the money on the ground first and develop it.

Overall, about 20 countries that collectively represent about 70% of global GDP have announced a hydrogen strategy or a road map as a key pillar of their decarbonisation ambitions. We have only to look to the race for dominance in the battery industry to see why we cannot allow ourselves to fall behind today. For instance, today there are 136 battery mega-factory plants in operation or being planned. Some 101 of those are in China, and eight are in the USA. China is opening almost one new mega-factory every single week. The UK has well and truly lost out in the battery industry, but we are still in the race for hydrogen, and we can still win.

It is apparent why so many countries are clamouring to pursue a hydrogen transport agenda. The global hydrogen economy is set to be worth $2.5 trillion and create 30 million jobs by 2050. The economic benefits for the UK are huge, especially for industrial areas, such as my constituency of Rother Valley. Here in the UK, the Hydrogen Task Force believes that hydrogen can add £18 billion in gross value added by 2035 and support 75,000 additional jobs. More immediately, businesses have told the Treasury that it has £3 billion-worth of shovel-ready private investment awaiting the right policy frameworks and commitment from the Government.

That is fantastic news for constituencies in the northern powerhouse and the devolved nations. The Zero Carbon Humber project is a fantastic example of the potential of so-called hydrogen hubs, which I envisage in areas such as the Rother Valley and across the red wall. The Humber is the largest carbon-emitting industry cluster in the UK, and like South Yorkshire's, much of the Humber's economy is built on manufacturing, engineering and the energy sector. A partnership of 12 major organisations and a bid to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has resulted in the creation of an ambitious project to make the Humber the world's first net zero carbon industrial cluster, supporting new industry and encouraging factories.

Addressing jobs first and foremost, the potential for a hydrogen revolution in South Yorkshire to rival the coal industry is immensely exciting. We have already made great strides in establishing ourselves as a national hub for the production of green hydrogen. Rother Valley's manufacturing expertise remains second to none, and our ambition and drive are matchless. It is those skills that we hope to redeploy in the green revolution, and as such there is no better place to serve as the hub of the hydrogen industry.

For instance, I have been supporting the upcoming opening of the world's largest electrolyser factory, operated by ITM and located in Meadowhall, Sheffield, which is on the border of my constituency. Hydrogen storage cylinders are also manufactured nearby. Rotherham, part of which is in my constituency, is home to England's most northerly hydrogen refuelling station. The region has an onshore wind sector with the potential to expand. It is key to the production of green hydrogen, and our local city of Sheffield has two major district heat networks. Recently, I met representatives of the University of Sheffield's Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, which is a world-leading hub of research and innovation in technologies such as hydrogen.

However, that is only the beginning. As we attract more investment and the local hydrogen industry grows, more companies will want to take advantage of our infrastructure, creating manufacturing jobs, graduate jobs and supply chain jobs alike. In turn, South Yorkshire stands to reap high economic returns that will rejuvenate the local economy. Indeed, I intend to turn Rother Valley into Britain's hydrogen valley.

I conclude my speech by emphasising the importance of using hydrogen as one part of our carbon-free transport future. No one technology alone is the answer, because each option is at a different stage of development and the economics of each are different depending on the mode of transport. The case for hydrogen is irrefutable, particularly for heavy duty, long-distance vehicles such as HGVs. Decarbonising those modes of transport is vital to meeting our net zero targets.

A world-leading hydrogen industry will boost the local and national economy, providing an uplift in these challenging times, and bolster UK plc as we export our expertise and technology around the world. The UK has all the tools required for leading the hydrogen revolution. We must ensure that we seize the moment and take our rightful place as the capital of hydrogen transport. I look forward to working with the Minister and the Government as we march towards a cleaner, greener hydrogen future for all parts of the United Kingdom.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): I heartily congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing this excellent Adjournment debate. I cannot believe it is the first debate we have had in the House of Commons solely on this topic, but I am sure it will not be the last.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley on securing this important and timely Adjournment debate on hydrogen transport and his role in championing the hydrogen sector. It allows me to put on record the role Ynys Môn can play in the hydrogen economy. There are significant cost implications spanning the creation of this new industry, not least the sheer amount of infrastructure that must be built to create, store and transport hydrogen. One of the easiest ways to cut costs is to locate as much of the supply chain as closely together as possible. Anglesey is no stranger to the concept, and in the 1970s an aluminium smelting plant was built near the port of Holyhead—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I will allow the hon. Lady to finish, but it sounds like she is making a speech rather than intervening. She clearly has a point that she wishes to make to the Minister, so I will allow her to do so.

Virginia Crosbie: The Minister has allowed me to speak for two minutes. This has been agreed with the Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker: An intervention should last about 30 seconds. Two minutes is a speech.

Virginia Crosbie: What would you like me to do, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker: If the Minister has already agreed, the hon. Lady can finish her intervention, but this is not an intervention—it is a speech.

Virginia Crosbie: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Anglesey is no stranger to the concept I mentioned. In the 1970s, an aluminium smelting plant was built near the port of Holyhead, allowing alumina ore to be easily offloaded from cargo ships to the site, which was in turn powered by reliable, cheap and clean electricity from Wylfa nuclear power plant. That symbiotic relationship brought decades of jobs and prosperity to the island.

That ethos could be replicated with the establishment of a hydrogen cluster, its electrolysers supplied by a new generation of nuclear from Wylfa Newydd or by offshore renewable energy, creating a consistent supply of low-carbon green hydrogen, which could be used locally, exported around the world or transported within the UK. All these efforts on the energy island represent the joint vision of Menter Môn, Bangor University and the Menai science park. They could kick-start a new industry in north Wales, allowing the creation of synthetic fuels for aviation, shipping and agriculture, and making Anglesey a truly net zero island.

We must pursue the path that gives the greatest certainty of reaching net zero, and I was glad to see the role that nuclear power will play in that highlighted in the Prime Minister's 10-point plan last week. Alongside nuclear, the second of his 10 commitments was to drive the growth of low-carbon hydrogen. That important commitment from the Government needs to be followed by action, to reassure private investors that the Government are serious.

I look forward to seeing the vision that will be set out in the upcoming energy White Paper and in the hydrogen strategy that was spoken of in the Prime Minister's 10-point plan, both of which the Minister and those in other Departments have been working hard on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I just make the point that there has clearly been a misunderstanding here. The hon. Lady thought she was going to make a speech. Everyone else thought she was intervening. I have allowed her to make a speech. Let me make it absolutely clear for the record that I am not setting a precedent. There has been a misunderstanding, so let us just smooth it over.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for your guidance on the matter.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley very much indeed; he made an absolutely excellent speech highlighting his vast range of expertise on this important topic, which is based on his prior experience and on his role in the all-party parliamentary group on hydrogen.

As is clear from the points raised not only by my hon. Friend but by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) and the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), this technology provides a vast and exciting opportunity for our nation. Our world-leading researchers, innovators, engineers and vehicle manufacturers are already putting the UK at the forefront of this new era in transport technology, but we want to keep aiming higher, pushing further and, in particular, harnessing the potential to build back better.

Last week, the Prime Minister set out the 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, which I am proud to say contained several key transport policies, including £20 million to support the development of cost-effective zero-emission HGVs in the UK; £20 million to help develop clean maritime technology as part of the clean maritime demonstration programme, which will take place at key sites, including Orkney and Teesside; further investment in research and development on the infrastructure upgrades required at UK airports to move to battery and hydrogen aircraft; and £3 million for the recently announced Tees Valley hydrogen transport hub, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley referred.

In the Department for Transport, we intend to build on those announcements through our forthcoming and ambitious transport decarbonisation plan, which will set out how we intend to reduce emissions and deliver transport's contribution to net zero by 2050. There is little doubt that the compelling case for green hydrogen set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley has been heard by the Prime Minister and the Department for Transport. It will play a key part in our meeting that goal, and in helping to decarbonise the wider economy. We are committed to exploring what that role might be.

We are already investing up to £121 million in hydrogen innovation, supporting a range of projects in heating, transport and the production of low-carbon hydrogen, with carbon capture utilisation and storage, and electrolysis technologies. Furthermore, our £23 million hydrogen for transport programme is increasing the uptake of fuel-cell electric vehicles and the number of publicly accessible hydrogen refuelling stations.

We are already seeing the possibilities of hydrogen being demonstrated right now, often with the help of Government funding. In the maritime sector, for example, a range of exciting projects is taking place: a company

[Rachel Maclean]

in Lowestoft called Windcat Workboats is leading work to develop hydrogen-fuelled zero-emission vessels; and in the Orkney Islands, Government-supported trials are exploring the use of renewably sourced hydrogen to fuel ferries.

Birmingham's first hydrogen train, the HydroFLEX, has been built by the University of Birmingham and rail company Porterbrook with the support of a £750,000 grant from the Government. In the skies, US start-up ZeroAvia is using a £2.7 million Government investment to develop a hydrogen-fuelled powertrain that is being demonstrated on a small aircraft.

Since 2015, we have also provided £7.4 million through the low emission bus and the ultra low emission bus schemes to fund 62 hydrogen buses and infrastructure. The Prime Minister confirmed our commitment to deliver 4,000 zero-emission buses in his 10-point plan, backed up with £120 million to kick off this programme in 2021. I note that the hon. Member for Aberdeen South has made a clear request for those buses to be in Scotland. No doubt that has been heard. In Northern Ireland, bus company Translink bought a fleet of double-deckers built by Wrightbus which are powered by hydrogen generated from local onshore wind energy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley rightly poses many challenges. Hydrogen provides us with enormous opportunities, but it also presents us with equally important questions: how do we manufacture it in a sustainable and cost-effective way? How do we enable hydrogen-powered transport technology to scale up and get cheaper? How can we make hydrogen a real and viable option for transport operators? To help answer those and other questions, we are developing a transport hydrogen hub in Tees Valley—the first of many perhaps, as my hon. Friend will be glad to hear. It will support and develop cross-modal applications of hydrogen in transport.

Alexander Stafford: Will one of those hubs be in Rother Valley?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I was expecting that question. I have noted his desire for Rother Valley to be a hydrogen valley. I will consider his request very carefully.

Across Government, we are looking to accelerate the use of hydrogen in transport and its development. We have commissioned a master plan—we are cracking on with this work—which will outline options for hydrogen supply and storage infrastructure and support innovation facilities ahead of going through business case and planning processes in 2021, with a view to inviting tenders from industry for the infrastructure build in 2022. I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the case that he is making in more detail in future.

In closing, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Rother Valley and for Ynys Môn very much for their continued interest in the role that hydrogen can play to support decarbonisation. I will of course consider carefully the policy asks laid out by my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley. We have committed to publishing a comprehensive UK hydrogen strategy in early 2021, which will bring together the UK hydrogen story, showcasing activity to date and setting out an action plan for decarbonisation and expansion in the 2020s. Let me assure everyone that hydrogen has a future in transport, and in levelling up Rother Valley and the whole of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 26 November 2020

[Andrew Rosindell *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Covid-19: Freedom of Religion or Belief

1.30 pm

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should sanitise their microphones using the cleaning materials provided before they use them, and dispose of the materials as they leave the Chamber. Members are also asked to respect the one-way system around the room. They should speak only from the horseshoe. Members can speak only if they are on the call list. That applies even if debates are under-subscribed. Members cannot join the debate if they are not on the call list.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on freedom of religion or belief.

It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. Yesterday, 25 November, the world marked Red Wednesday, whose purpose is to draw attention to the plight of those who are persecuted for their religion and beliefs, and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. To mark them, the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief tabled early day motion 1179. I thank colleagues who have already signed it, and I ask others please to do so. In that EDM, we urge the Government and the international community to act to mitigate the impact that covid-19 has had on vulnerable minority communities globally and on women and girls from them, who are doubly discriminated against because of their gender and their beliefs.

The chair of our all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) led the call along with the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) to secure this debate. We thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us time. The hon. Member for Strangford is unable to be with us today, and his compassionate voice will be much missed during this debate. As a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group, I am sure I speak on behalf of many of us when I express the most sincere thanks to him for his dedicated work for the persecuted.

I aim to highlight with examples from around the world how, tragically, both Government and non-state actors have exploited this global health crisis to violate human rights, and in particular the right to freedom of religion or belief. I will show how living conditions have worsened for those who are detained, whether in prison or as refugees, on account of their conscience. I aim to illustrate that the distribution of aid and humanitarian relief is often biased or withheld from those with minority beliefs, and I will speak of the spread of misinformation targeting minority religious or belief communities. There is clear evidence of an increase in violence, both domestic and more widely, affecting those with particular beliefs. I will demonstrate how, in other ways, the right to worship and manifest faith or belief has been curtailed.

All that illustrates how important it is for our Government to be vigilant in pressing others to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms during this pandemic, including in particular the freedom of religion or belief. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in particular is doing so.

In countries around the world, many marginalised religious and belief communities have faced intensified discrimination since the outbreak of covid-19. According to the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,

"Antisemitic hate speech has risen alarmingly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis".

Many faith communities have even been blamed for the virus. The BBC reported that in Somalia, the Islamic extremist group al-Shabaab is warning Muslims that Christians are transmitters of the disease. Such messaging is terrifying for the handful of Christians there who are already forced to practise their faith in secrecy for fear of their lives.

In India, Muslims faced accusations that they were deliberately spreading the virus and a campaign of Islamophobia, in which Muslims were labelled bio-terrorists and corona-jihadists ensued, leading to many instances of violence and discrimination against Muslims. For Christians in India, too, life has become more difficult during the pandemic, on top of a serious increase in anti-Christian violence over the last few years—I see the hon. Member for Glasgow East nodding—particularly but not exclusively in Uttar Pradesh.

We hear of problems in India of mob vigilantism, violence and surveillance of home churches by non-state actors. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, which has already approved a separate debate on the persecution of Muslims, Christians and other minority groups in India. I hope that parliamentary time will be found for that much-needed debate very soon.

The scapegoating of minorities during this pandemic is a truly global problem. According to the Institute of Development Studies:

"In a significant amount of the nations which have encountered outbreaks of the novel coronavirus, politicians and opinion leaders have openly condemned religious minority populations under the guise of epidemiological containment, through hateful messages on social media, public speeches and official policies."

That scapegoating has contributed to the many reports of individuals from these communities around the world being attacked, denied aid or otherwise prevented from accessing life-saving humanitarian interventions.

Accounts of discrimination in food distribution and the biased distribution of humanitarian relief materials are widespread. Alliance Defending Freedom International reports from the Gulf region that people have become so desperate that they are forced to trade their religion for food—they are forced to convert to Islam for just one sack of flour.

In Iraq, there are reports of Christian communities being the last to get necessary food and medical supplies. In Pakistan, there have been reports of non-governmental organisations denying food and aid to Hindus and Christians, or serving them only after Muslims have

[Fiona Bruce]

been served. Some members of the ethnic and religious minority Hazara group in Pakistan have claimed that they need to disguise themselves if they hope to receive medical treatment or testing.

One of the problems is that where national Government aid is being distributed by local groups or where foreign organisations use local staff at the frontline of aid distribution, discrimination against minorities can occur at that point, regardless of the foreign organisation's central anti-discrimination policies. It is important that our Government do what they can to call for mechanisms to be put in place to ensure that religious minorities at the frontline of aid distribution, particularly UK aid distribution, do not face additional discrimination because of their faith.

Certain states have also utilised the covid-19 outbreak as an excuse to intensify persecution of marginalised communities, and not only through church closures. In Uganda, there are reports that the Government's response to covid-19 has systematically excluded religious minority groups, by allowing only certain major religions to attend consultative meetings on the coronavirus response.

China has increased its interference and surveillance of Tibetan Buddhists, under the pretence of attempting to tackle the coronavirus, even using contact tracing apps to monitor every movement of Tibetan citizens. Also in China, where the clampdown on freedom of worship over recent years has been alarming, the pandemic has sadly given an opportunity for state surveillance of religious worship by minorities to increase. Some church members who tried to meet for online worship were detained and had police stationed at their homes to prevent them from joining online services.

I turn to the plight of refugees and internally displaced persons. Many already live in overcrowded conditions, rendering them particularly vulnerable in the event of an outbreak of covid-19. Many are from religious communities who have experienced rights violations that occasioned their displacement and internment in the first place, such as the ethnic minorities who fled Burma's decades-long years of conflict.

Covid-19 has reached the Rohingya refugee camps on the Bangladesh-Burma border, leading aid organisations to warn of an impending humanitarian disaster. First-hand observations by CSW—Christian Solidarity Worldwide—in the Rohingya refugee camps confirm that social distancing, self-isolation and even regular handwashing are an impossibility.

Elsewhere, the pandemic has highlighted failings in legal systems and criminal proceedings, and has underlined the degree to which religious discrimination can be institutionalised in some legal systems. In Sudan, for example, the legal system all but ground to a halt on account of the virus. Cases involving church leaders and church property, which were already proceeding slowly, faced further delays. Overcrowding in prisons during the pandemic has posed an additional threat to the welfare of inmates. A large number of prisoners are in Evin prison in Tehran, where conditions are overcrowded and unsanitary, and where prisoners have contracted the virus.

Eritrea is of particular concern; there, a stringent covid-19-related lockdown, enforced with violence by the armed forces, has provided the Government with an additional means of curtailing freedom of movement, which was already restricted. Tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience there, including long-standing Jehovah's Witness detainees, are held in unsanitary, ill-equipped and life-threatening conditions, where insufficient access to water, food or medical facilities makes their plight desperate. An appeal by the UN special rapporteur for Eritrea for low-risk offenders and vulnerable prisoners to be released was rebuffed.

Although information from North Korea is difficult to obtain—I have the privilege of having been co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on North Korea for some years now—last week there were disturbing reports about North Koreans with covid-19 being left to die in so-called quarantine camps. The full impact of covid in North Korea remains unknown, but we should not underestimate it, given that country's virtually complete lack of respect for human rights, its limited health system and its concentration camps housing thousands of prisoners of conscience—all of which coincides with North Korea's having suffered substantial food shortages this year.

The all-party group is currently conducting an inquiry into human rights violations in North Korea as a follow-up to the UN commission of inquiry of 2014. There is an opportunity to contribute to it through our website, appgnorthkoreainquiry.com, and submissions would be most welcome, particularly in the light of the limited information on the impact of the pandemic in North Korea.

Elsewhere across the world, it is clear that the pandemic has led to discrimination in employment. Open Doors reports having been told of Christian nurses being deliberately assigned coronavirus cases. When India went into lockdown to combat the coronavirus crisis, hundreds of thousands lost their jobs overnight. Many usually work as daily labourers and earn each day what they need to survive; without the day's income they have no money to buy food.

Many work as sanitation workers. They are often from the Dalit community, which is the most neglected and marginalised in India—indeed, I would say, virtually in the world; it is heart-rending to hear how some of them can only come out at night. Their work involves great health risks, collecting waste, emptying sewage and cleaning the streets. We hear via Open Doors from Hyderabad how these people face a serious predicament and are putting their lives at risk, with even women sanitation workers performing these sanitation tasks without gloves, protective masks or even shoes, and often working by hand.

There is no financial safety net or furloughing scheme in India. Official aid is nowhere near enough for the people who need it and, sadly, Christians are often last in line for essential covid aid and food because of their faith. However difficult the pandemic has been in this country, these reports—I thank in particular CSW and Open Doors for their reliable and often first-hand accounts—show that the difficulties in other countries are further exacerbated for the vulnerable, minorities and women.

There is a second debate this afternoon on international development and gender-based violence, so I will not take any further time from other colleagues in this debate by focusing on it now. Suffice it to say that reports in *The Lancet* indicate that domestic violence

against women and girls has increased by as much as 30% in some countries during the pandemic. This huge increase in domestic violence has led to several reports of women from minority communities, such as Yazidis, taking their lives.

Tragically, that increase in violence is by no means restricted to domestic situations during the lockdown. In Nigeria, villagers in Kaduna state and Plateau state were obeying state directives to stay in their homes to prevent the spread of the virus. Sadly, that made them even more vulnerable targets for attack than they were before the pandemic, because they effectively became sitting targets. Fulani militants have carried out multiple raids on villages, and there are reports that Christians have been killed. Christians believe that the militants are taking advantage of the pandemic to uproot them from the area, and although they have made efforts to alert security agents to the attacks, nothing has been done to prevent them. Once again, I call on the Government actively to address the concerns and recommendations of our all-party group's report "Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide", which was published earlier this year.

I look forward to colleagues' contributions. Before I conclude, in the light of this debate, I ask the Minister to reflect on recommendation 21 of the Bishop of Truro's report, about which I have spoken in a number of debates over recent years. The report highlights the importance of recognising the negative consequences of what he refers to as a "need not creed" mantra; of rejecting that mantra; and of the negative consequences of our aid being "religion-blind".

Will the Minister consider the importance of challenging international partners to ensure that disinformation is combated; that there is access to justice; that where religious communities are attacked, there is accountability; that any emergency powers are proportionate; and—during this unprecedented crisis, now more than ever—that the needs of, and pressures on, religious minorities are taken into account, not ignored?

1.47 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who opened the debate and set the picture rather eloquently. I commend my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who secured the debate at the Backbench Business Committee. Those of us who are Westminster Hall season ticket owners will know that the hon. Gentleman is not normally one to miss a debate, especially one on freedom of religion or belief. I know that I speak for us all when I say that we look forward to his return to the House to lead on this issue, about which he has spoken with so much passion and authority.

I also thank our friends at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Open Doors and Aid to the Church in Need for their excellent briefings and their wider work on freedom of religious belief, not just during the pandemic, but before it. It has so often fallen to non-governmental organisations and charities to step into the breach and support religious minorities who face intolerable levels of persecution, and that has been compounded by the covid-19 pandemic.

One example of such practical support on the ground is the Open Doors covid-19 relief package, which is making a real difference in countries such as Nigeria and India. Every £56 donated equips a rapid response team to bring emergency food aid to a family of persecuted believers who are affected by the pandemic. That is vital because research shows that covid restrictions mean that many persecuted Christians are ignored when aid is distributed.

To understand the challenges faced not just by Christians, but by other religious minorities, we can look at CSW's excellent advocacy work and country profiles. On the situation for prisoners of conscience in Iran, overcrowding in prisons during the pandemic poses an additional threat to the welfare of inmates and increases the likelihood of the virus spreading in those locations. A large number of prisoners of conscience are in Evin prison in Tehran, in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. By August this year, at least 25 people in the prison had contracted the virus, and on 10 August, several political prisoners staged a sit-in to protest their unsatisfactory conditions, inadequate protection measures and lack of medical care in prison. When the Minister sums up the debate, can he specifically say what representations the Government have made to the Iranian authorities about prisoners of conscience?

The pandemic has highlighted weaknesses and biases in legal systems and criminal proceedings. It has also underlined the degree to which religious discrimination is institutionalised—very much—in several legal systems. I will not repeat the point already made by the hon. Member for Congleton about the situation in Sudan, but we know that that is a particular concern there, so I ask the Minister whether the FCDO has raised it with the Sudanese authorities.

There have been notable occasions when authorities have misinformed or concealed information from the public in a bid to portray a more positive national image or, indeed, to create conspiracy theories that have adversely affected certain religious communities. There are examples in China, Laos and Vietnam, where people have been arrested for circulating information or rumours about the virus online and, in some cases, for simply questioning official figures or wondering why their respective Governments have not done more to contain the outbreak.

When Governments fail to provide adequate social services, humanitarian relief and healthcare, civil society—obviously and most notably, religious organisations—and individuals invariably attempt to fill the void. However, that can cause suspicion, and that leads to discrimination and even violence. There have been several incidents in Pakistan in which Christian and Hindu communities have been denied food by organisations, which stated that the relief supplies were only for members of the majority faith. Such discriminatory distribution of relief supplies has been reported in the Sindh and Punjab provinces; there have also been posters on mosques and madrassahs stating that food distribution is only for Muslims, which is of huge concern.

In my remaining time, I want to consider refugees and internally displaced people. Refugees and IDPs generally live in overcrowded conditions, which renders them particularly vulnerable in the event of an outbreak of covid-19. In some cases, those providing assistance, some of whom are religious actors, have been rendered vulnerable.

In May, it was confirmed that covid-19 had reached the Rohingya refugee camps on the Burma-Bangladesh border. The confirmation of at least two cases in the world's largest refugee camp led aid organisations to

[David Linden]

warn of an impending humanitarian disaster. CSW has reported visiting the Rohingya refugee camps twice, and it is clear from its first-hand observations that social distancing, self-isolation and hand washing are an impossibility in camps in which families live cheek by jowl and with a limited supply of clean water, and poor sanitation and rudimentary healthcare. The same is true of the absolutely abominable concentration camps in which Uyghur Muslims are also being held. I therefore ask the Minister to comment specifically on camps, which are an enormous concern to us all on the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief.

Concerns about the impact on freedom of religion or belief during the pandemic are legion. I remain extremely concerned that the Government have yet to appoint a new special envoy for FORB at the Foreign Office. Ministers—indeed, the Minister in the Chamber today and, of course, the Prime Minister—have said repeatedly that an appointment will be made in due course, but that has not yet happened, which is a source of great concern to those of us who are following this in the FORB community.

Given the wide-ranging list of countries, referred to by me and by the hon. Member for Congleton, that are clearly violating freedom of religion or belief, this must be a priority for Her Majesty's Government. I therefore look forward to the Minister summing up the debate and confirming when the appointment of a special envoy will be made and who will take forward this vital policy agenda.

1.54 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in these debates, but it is pretty grim that we have to keep having them. The bad news is that the situation continues to get worse and not better, which is why it is so important that we, who have the immense privilege of being able to speak out in the freedom that we enjoy in this country, do speak up for others around the world who do not enjoy the freedoms that we do.

I speak as a Christian myself, but I am here this afternoon to stick up for the Uyghurs in China and all people of the Muslim faith who are suffering persecution. In her excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about the persecution suffered by Dalits, which is absolutely unacceptable. We have heard of Hindus not being treated well in Pakistan, in terms of distribution of aid and so on.

This debate is about freedom of religion or belief, which of course includes the right not to believe in God. A very good Christian friend of mine, Ben Rogers, went to visit an atheist in prison in Indonesia a few years ago—a Christian going to the support of an atheist whose rights not to believe in God were being taken away. I seem to remember they had a very interesting conversation about Mark's gospel—I do not know whether the atheist ever came to faith, as I never caught up with the end of the story. That just makes the point that, regardless of whether someone is of faith or no faith, this debate is for them. The right to freedom of religion or belief is universal and should be applicable all the way around the world.

Having said that, I note that—as the former envoy on this issue, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), said in the main Chamber only this morning—Christians are the most persecuted group in the world. That is something that we just need to say, because we should speak as the facts dictate. In the more privileged west, we sometimes do not realise that most Christians in the world are quite poor and disadvantaged; they are not wealthy, privileged people. They are often at the margins and not in the mainstream, and it is easier to take advantage of them. Although I think, noting our manifesto, that yesterday's decision on aid was unfortunately a regrettable one, I am grateful that combating persecution against people on the grounds of religion or belief remains a Foreign Office priority, which is very important indeed.

It is necessary to understand the context of the debate, because we will all mention some countries, which is absolutely right. I will read out the top 20 countries on the Open Doors 2020 world watch list, because they need to be named so that people are aware. No. 1 is no surprise, because it has been there for a long time: North Korea. Following that is Afghanistan, a country where there has been significant UK involvement for many years, then Somalia, Libya, Pakistan—a major recipient of UK aid spending and a Commonwealth country to boot—Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen and Iran. India, a proud member of the British Commonwealth and a great friend to this country, is at No. 10. I am a huge friend of India, but sometimes friends have the conversations that they need to have but do not always want to have. That is certainly the case with India, as a fellow Commonwealth member. No. 11 on the list is Syria. Then there is Nigeria, which is another Commonwealth country, followed by Saudi Arabia, the Maldives, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Uzbekistan, Myanmar and Laos. They are the top 20, which gives an idea of the geographical spread of this issue.

As I say, things are getting worse. Some 260 million Christians live in the world watch list's top 50 countries—that figure has increased from 2019, when it was 245 million. In countries such as Sri Lanka, where there used to be a degree of stability, an increase in destabilising violence has led to much greater difficulties for Christians. In Burkina Faso, we saw a relentless rise in violence throughout 2019, and Islamic militancy has taken a hold within the country.

The situation continues to get worse in China, which has risen hugely in the world watch list, to No. 23. More than 5,500 churches have been destroyed, closed down or confiscated during the reporting period. In 2018, China was ranked at 43, so that is a huge increase. Many people were upset not to be able to get into our own churches earlier this year and in the last month or so, but what we have had to "suffer" is simply of a different order from 5,500 churches being destroyed, closed down or confiscated.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and highlighting that churches have been closed. Even where they are open, however, Government laws restrict who can attend them. For example, it is now illegal to take a child under 18 into a church and people in certain occupations, such as the military, cannot attend. In just the last few years, the restrictions in China have been incredible. I thank him for highlighting that again in this place.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that extra information, which she has usefully put on the record. I note that many leading campaigners in Hong Kong and many hon. Members on both sides of the House are inspired by their Christian faith to speak out against what is happening in Hong Kong.

In India, in 2019, there were 1,445 physical attacks and death threats against Christians. In Nigeria, in the 2020 reporting period, it was estimated that 1,350 Christians were killed for their faith, and abductions continue, often of children and young people. I was privileged to have Leah Sharibu's mother in my office a few months ago. The pain in her eyes because her daughter has still not been returned to her encourages me to keep on speaking out on the issue.

I hope that this debate gets some publicity. I am generally a great fan of the BBC, but I cannot help noticing that debates on this issue do not always feature as prominently as they should on BBC outlets. I hope that will change and that this important debate will get some coverage.

2.2 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this important debate. The covid-19 pandemic has drastically altered how we work, interact with one another and enjoy our lives. The manner in which we congregate in prayer has also drastically changed, causing some who have contacted me to question the state of freedom of religion in the United Kingdom. As I had hoped, this debate has provided the much-needed perspective to answer them by starkly contrasting the situation here with that suffered by untold millions around the world.

Under the terms of the present lockdown, which will last until 2 December, it is illegal for churches, mosques and any other places of worship to open for congregational prayer. All significant assemblies of people, however pious, whether that be at entertainment venues, sports halls or other arenas, have been severely restricted under the current measures.

Together with all God-fearing folk who are respectful of the law, I am relieved that it will not be a criminal offence to gather for worship in the new three-tier system in England following the current lockdown. Regardless, I do not believe that the measures undertaken by Her Majesty's Government can in any way be construed as representing an attack on the freedom of religion or belief. Rather, they represent restricted access to gathered worship in the interests of public health. Although that is certainly not normal, the essence of religion remains free.

All people of faith should be united in the common belief that the only true way to worship and serve the Creator is to love and protect his creation. I would argue that the very act of following the Government's guidelines, if the intention is to protect one's fellow citizen, is in itself a meritorious act of worship.

During the height of the pandemic and the lockdowns, religious leaders transferred their sermons, prayers, studies and meetings to Zoom calls and other online video-conferencing platforms. Rather than access to religious services being limited, they have arguably become all the more accessible, and it is the same with a wide array of social interactions. Irrefutably, it has been neither the purpose nor desire of Her Majesty's Government to exclusively target worship and religious houses in the fight against coronavirus. However, I appreciate that virtual congregation should never, and indeed could never, replace physical congregation or the feelings and experiences that mass gatherings bring to both an individual and the wider community.

Freedom of religion and the right to believe is actively under assault across the globe. In Pakistan, Ahmadi Muslims are systematically persecuted by the state. Ahmadis can be imprisoned or even sentenced to death for simply describing themselves as a Muslim or describing their mosque as a mosque. In China, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned, up to 1 million Uyghur Muslims, Christians and adherents of Falun Gong have been rounded up and placed in re-education camps, where they are subject to political indoctrination, forced sterilisation and violent torture. My hon. Friend has provided vivid and deeply distressing examples—a litany—of the crimes faced by those who wish to believe, and she described how such actions have been amplified by the perpetrators of such crimes owing to the covid pandemic.

The situation that we in the United Kingdom currently endure in our fight against covid bears absolutely no resemblance to the atrocities inflicted on religious minorities around the world. Freedom of religion here is enshrined and protected and has not been infringed by the state. Rather, temporary measures on access to places of worship have been regrettably implemented to control the spread of covid-19. Religious leaders, churches, synagogues, gurdwaras, temples, mosques and other places of worship have already proven their ability to provide a vital spiritual service to their congregation during the first lockdown through the use of technology.

I pray for the day when all the restrictions are lifted and worship can return to normal in the UK, and that all people, wherever they live in the world, are soon able, like us, to take as a given their right to live, work and worship as they choose without threat or fear.

2.8 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I apologise to you and to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for arriving after the start of her speech. I congratulate her and thank her for securing this important and timely debate.

I will not speak at length about persecuted minorities around the world, not having great experience on the topic, but I do have a powerful memory of visiting the Anglican church in Baghdad in 2003, just after the invasion of that country, with Canon Andrew White, who was the vicar of Baghdad and the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative to the middle east. I tagged along with him on his first visit back to Baghdad after the invasion, and he reopened the church, which had been closed during the war, or during the invasion.

I remember the most joyful service. There were children running around and people from all walks of life, including American and British soldiers. I remember clearly the caretaker, who had looked after the church and kept it going through the invasion and the war. Within a couple of months of that visit, that man and his whole family were dead, and the whole church had been dispersed. That was the beginning of the persecution

[Danny Kruger]

of Christians in Iraq, which led to pretty much the eradication of one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. That terrible scenario has been repeated across the world in all sorts of terrible ways, and not just affecting Christians, as we have been hearing.

The debate is about the pandemic and the role of faith groups, and I want to make two points in the light of that. The first is about how important faith groups are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has said, in reaching the poorest and working through their networks to ensure that support, whether with healthcare or with economic assistance during the crisis, reaches them. Obviously I entirely endorse everything that my hon. Friend said about standing against discrimination on the basis of faith in the developing world.

I also want to observe how important faith groups will be, in the developing world and at home, in countering misinformation about the vaccination programme that is beginning soon. I suggest that we need some religious literacy in working with faith groups and ensuring that misinformation is properly countered. Too often in our debates—frankly, in those about development as well as those about vaccination and misinformation—mainstream opinion seems to be that religion is part of the problem, and that if only people could be disabused of their fanciful superstitions it would be possible to convince them of what the science tells us. That is not going to help.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton talked about forced conversion. It makes me think about what we are asking people of faith to do. We are asking people who are suspicious of secular Governments, big companies and non-governmental organisations to abandon, effectively, what their faith says about those things and to undergo a vaccination that they do not believe in. We have to be much more respectful of them. I would put this, Mr Rosindell—I hope you will forgive me—in spiritual terms. The devil is in the structures of the world. There is injustice. There are bad people doing bad things, and people are victims of injustice through no fault of their own; but I do not believe that the Government—this is the argument we need to make—and big pharma or the NGOs are more particularly evil than the rest of us.

I will quote from Ephesians: "Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this dark age, and against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." Our battle is not against people or organisations, but against spiritual forces, and that is the reality that people of faith hold, recognise and believe in. We have to help them to understand where the real enemy is. I suggest that the devil gets into the resistance to secular globalised organisations as well as into those organisations themselves, sowing distrust and spreading deceit. That can be seen in some of the malign forces that are operating in the way that disinformation is spread through social media. It is a spiritual battle and we need to respect people who think that way and not just tell them they are stupid.

My second point—raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton—is about religious freedom at home. We closed churches through the lockdown, and I regret that. We effectively abolished the freedom of assembly throughout the country, and in all institutions. Okay, fair enough. We only overturned freedoms that were won 400 years ago, in that instance—but in closing churches we overturned the foundation of our constitution itself, which was laid 800 years ago. The first line of Magna Carta, as you will know, Mr Rosindell, is that the Church in England shall be free. I suggest that it was unconstitutional for the Government to pass a law ordering the closure of churches for collective worship.

I note in passing that in answer to a written question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) earlier this month, the Government said that shutting churches was justified under article 2 of the European convention on human rights—that the right to life, interpreted as the right to health, justified the closure of churches. I am sorry that the ECHR has been held to trump Magna Carta.

I interpret what has happened differently. I think that churches shut voluntarily and were under no compulsion to do so. I respect the decision that they made to shut voluntarily, for the sake of closing down the pandemic. I am very pleased that the Prime Minister has said that churches can open for services after 2 December. Sadly, there will be no mixing outside people's bubbles, which means no sign of the peace—a bit of a relief for some of us who do not like that bit of the service. But it is a shame that we cannot mix in churches. However, the principle that churches can remain open is vital—and I obviously extend that to all faith groups, and all communities of faith in this country.

David Linden: I am subject to similar regulations in Scotland. The hon. Gentleman has already quoted scripture from Ephesians, but it should be put on record as well that we are reminded that when two or more are gathered. He shall be present. The four walls of a church are just a building. When we come together in fellowship, whether that is by Zoom or on the telephone, we can still worship God.

Danny Kruger: I recognise that. The Holy Scripture was written for the age of Zoom. There is a sense that the church is the body of Christ, which is the people. However, it is established doctrine that the body consists of people gathering together. I appreciate that "two or three" gathered together is sufficient, according to the Bible, but I feel that the principle of collective worship being physical and the body of Christ being allowed to gather, in physical form, is part of our constitutional foundations.

I appreciate the opportunity we have had to discuss this subject and I endorse everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has said.

2.15 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Rosindell. I thank everybody who has made a contribution to the debate today. There have been some strong and powerful contributions.

I particularly commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate, alongside others. Although he is sadly absent today, he has always been a steadfast defender in this House of the right to religious freedoms. I also thank the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Glasgow East (David Linden) for leading the debate today and for their contributions. I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner, the

hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and I commend the Bishop of Truro's report on the persecution of Christians that was referenced in the debate.

As a Christian myself, I was drawn last night to the words of the Gospel of Matthew about our responsibilities to the poor and the persecuted, particularly at this time:

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

This is a most pertinent debate to have today, as we begin to understand the impacts of the Chancellor's regrettable breaking of the Conservative party's manifesto promise and the commitment shared across this House, including by Members present, to 0.7% for international aid. The decision will have an impact on our work on crucial international issues, such as our work to protect freedom of religion or belief, and, more broadly, to support faith-based organisations and other non-religious but deeply ethically principled organisations in their work responding to the covid-19 pandemic and standing up for development, human rights and justice more broadly.

The hon. Member for Congleton particularly mentioned the situation for girls and for those persecuted around the world. We should reflect on the words of Malala Yousafzai, who was herself a victim of extremists in the Pakistan Taliban, who said this morning that she is deeply disappointed at the abandonment of the 0.7% target when a generation of girls are leaning on that support.

I spent yesterday speaking with a number of faith-based organisations and faith leaders working in South Sudan and Ethiopia. Their warnings were stark about the threats to peace, human rights and development in those two countries, with which we have had strong partnerships. They warned of famine, atrocities and disaster, on top of the impacts that covid-19 was already having on their communities.

I am sorry to say that it has been a deeply disappointing few months from the Government on these issues. Abolishing the Department for International Development already risked undermining UK leadership on freedom of religion and belief. As we know from a similar debate a few weeks back, the Prime Minister's own special envoy on freedom of religion and belief, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), resigned over the Government's planned intention to break international law. Members do not have to take my word or the hon. Gentleman's word for this. Earlier this year, the now former Minister of State for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Baroness Sugg, responded to a debate in the other place on freedom of religion and belief. She rightly and proudly listed the work of the Department for International Development with the John Bunyan fund, which had funded an Institute of Development Studies-led programme on building religious freedoms. She said DFID had a director-level champion on those issues and was working in Rohingya refugee camps, and in many more instances besides, and that

"prioritising freedom of religion or belief can save lives and prevent humanitarian disasters before they emerge."

She also said that

"withdrawal of our overseas aid will obviously affect the persecuted minorities and the very poor, whom we are aiming to help." —[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 6 February 2020; Vol. 801, c. 1878.]

Ministers from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office have spent the last month refusing to be drawn into discussing any specific spending commitments. Now we have had the Chancellor's announcement, can the Minister tell us today which of the programmes supporting human rights, specifically on freedom of religion and belief, will be funded in the years ahead, and which will be cut? Beyond that, what role does the Minister see for faith-based organisations and other organisations of no religious principle but with deep ethical principles in our global development and human rights efforts?

Faith and religious communities have on the whole responded with responsibility, care and compassion to the pandemic at home and abroad. Responding to the Bishop of Winchester on 11 November, Baroness Sugg said faith groups

"have been incredible in their response to Covid-19. They are among the first to respond and can play an effective role in bringing about the behaviour change essential to slowing the spread of Covid and reducing infection and illness."—[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 11 November 2020; Vol. 807, c. 1025.]

Across the Anglican communion—I declare an interest as a member of the Church in Wales—the impact of covid-19 on church life, which was mentioned by the hon. Members for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) and for Devizes (Danny Kruger), has been of the same order in the UK, with impacts on church buildings, the suspension of public worship, impacts on rites of passage, gatherings and so on. There has also been an impact on clergy. I know that will be felt by the leaders in many other faiths around the world. There is increased burn-out and stress as they seek to respond to the needs of their communities.

I have had some difficult conversations in my constituency with churches and other faith organisations, but—the hon. Member for Wakefield made some sensible points on this—there is a stark difference between what we see in this country and what we see abroad, from the wider threat of violence to the use of blasphemy laws. In many other countries, covid-19 restrictions have regrettably been manipulated to oppress religious minorities. Just a few weeks ago, in this place, we heard powerful examples of the persecution of Christians. That concern has been expressed by groups such as Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide. We have also seen antisemitism at the heart of many of the conspiracy theories about covid-19 in this country and abroad

In China, as we have heard, there is an ongoing attack on religious minorities by the Communist regime, including against Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, and other religious and non-religious minorities. Catholic bishops have disappeared. Temples, statues, mosques and churches have been destroyed under the Government's direction. The Uyghur Muslim population is facing a monstrous Government-co-ordinated programme of police surveillance, enforced re-education, disappearances, internment and mass detention. We have even heard reports of forced sterilisation. Of course, 1 million Uyghur Muslims may have been living in camps since April 2017. The risks of that in relation to covid-19 are obvious.

The situation in India was mentioned, where Muslims are demonised by wild conspiracy theories that blame them for the spread of covid-19. Members of some Islamic movements were quarantined despite not having

[Stephen Doughty]

been at risk or having symptoms. In Pakistan, as was mentioned by the hon. Members for Glasgow East and for Wakefield, Christian and Hindu communities were denied food aid by organisations that stated that relief materials were only for members of a majority faith. We have seen attacks and discrimination against the Hazara minority and baseless allegations against them for being involved in the spread of coronavirus. The longstanding persecution of the Ahmadi population has continued in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Where prejudice existed before the pandemic, it has also had a significant impact on testing and tracing. In South Korea, where an outbreak occurred among members of one particular church, other members refrained from testing to avoid discrimination because they are seen as heretical by other Protestant South Korean churches. The Sufi religious community is persecuted in Iran. In Sri Lanka, the Muslim community's rights on burial practices have been suppressed. The pandemic has affected rights and freedoms of the non-religious, too. Humanists International made some powerful points about the impact on the humanist movement, and the impact of lockdown on those being forced into religious practices when they hold no such religion and the impact that has had on them and their communities.

Labour stands firmly by our international human rights obligations, including on freedom of religion or belief. Everyone has the right to freedom of through, conscience and religion. The necessary restrictions in the UK because of the coronavirus pandemic have meant difficult times around Easter, Ramadan, the Jewish high holidays and Diwali. People are now thinking about how they might celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah in limited circumstances. We all face challenges, but in far too many places globally, necessary limitations have been superseded by discriminatory and oppressive measures, using public health to cover up persecution and the whipping up of hatred.

Like many others in this debate, I am a person of faith. My Christian beliefs very much underpin why I went into the humanitarian development sector before I came into this place. I want to return briefly to the point about the 0.7% commitment. I could not agree more with the Most Reverend Primate, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who described the move yesterday as "shameful and wrong." I am reassured by the many Conservative and other Members who had the courage to speak out yesterday and today. This is an issue that transcends party politics. It is about right and wrong, and it is about Britain's national interests.

It matters to this debate, too, because when we talk about a global Britain standing up for freedom of religion and belief and getting behind the incredible efforts of organisations of religious faith and non-religious principle—whether that is directly combating persecution, supporting persecuted communities or supporting communities with the material needs of those affected by conflict, gross poverty, inequality and now covid-19—it cannot just be about words.

Christians often turn to the story of the good Samaritan, but I am reminded of the words of Christ himself in the Gospel of Mark, recounting the parable of the widow's mite. He says:

"He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

That is the example set by many faith and non-religious organisations worldwide. As a country, we cannot just be a fairweather friend to the persecuted and the poor when we have plenty. Britain is better than that.

2.26 pm

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this debate, and I commend them for their long-term commitment to freedom of religion or belief. I agree with my hon. Friend that these debates are not quite the same without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—nor is any Adjournment debate, for that matter. As my hon. Friend said, his passionate voice has been sadly missed from today's debate, but I am sure, via the miracle of the internet, he will be tuning in to the debate. We wish him well in his isolation.

I also thank hon. Members for their ongoing work with the all-party parliamentary group, which continues to raise the profile and awareness of human rights to parliamentarians and the public alike. Like my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), I very much hope that today's debate gets picked up and gets some publicity. It is an issue that is debated regularly in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber, because it is important to so many colleagues.

The pandemic continues to have a huge impact on countries and communities around the world. In this time of stress and uncertainty, religious and belief actors have a role to play in providing social and humanitarian services. Meanwhile, Governments must work with those actors to increase community cohesion and resilience, as well as to communicate important public health messages. Let me take this opportunity to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to championing freedom of religion or belief for all and to promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities.

[Steve McCabe *in the Chair*]

Freedom of religion or belief is a long-standing priority for this Government. Lord Ahmad, my ministerial colleague, continues to champion the cause as Minister for human rights at the FCDO. Religious intolerance and persecution are often at the heart of foreign and development policy challenges. Where freedom of religion or belief is under attack, other human rights are also threatened.

The FCDO is using all its diplomatic tools to ensure that nobody suffers because of their conscience. Nobody should be excluded because of their religion or belief. Discrimination not only damages societies, it holds back economies. Countries cannot fully develop while minorities are oppressed and communities are invariably stronger when they include everyone.

Development and diplomacy work hand in hand, and the FCDO is working on two particular freedom of religion or belief programmes: one is an Institute of Development Studies project, working with minority groups in Africa and Asia; and the other, with the University of Oxford and parliamentarians in nine countries, is working to reduce the use of language that intimidates minority religious groups during elections. That work is vital to advancing freedom of religion or belief.

The pandemic has undoubtedly brought out the best in many religious and belief communities around the world. We have seen remarkable acts of kindness, not least in the UK, including enhanced efforts to care for the vulnerable and actively sharing credible advice on health and safety precautions. Notwithstanding the overwhelmingly positive example set by many communities, we remain deeply concerned by the severity and scale of violations and abuses of freedom of religion or belief in many parts of the world, as has been raised by hon. Members today, including a worrying increase in hate speech and the rising conspiracy theories that certain faiths or beliefs are to blame for the pandemic. We have heard examples of that today. Such incidents are completely unacceptable. The United Kingdom will continue to refute those divisive and harmful claims. No one should suffer in the pandemic because of their faith.

To ensure that the issue is not forgotten in these most challenging times, we have stepped up our engagement at the United Nations and in other multilateral forums to ensure that freedom of religion or belief remains a top priority for all countries. In June, Lord Ahmad urged states to take steps to mitigate the impact of covid on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society, including religious and belief minorities, during the UK's closing statement at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council. Just over a fortnight ago, we demonstrated our concern about the rise of antisemitism, which has been mentioned today, and other forms of discrimination in the wake of covid, in our statement to the UN General Assembly.

We will continue to use our influential voice to raise freedom of religion or belief at the UN, including urging the international community to work together to face the challenges presented by the pandemic. We have also issued a joint statement with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, calling on states to ensure that any restrictions to the right to freedom of religion or belief are necessary, proportionate and time-limited to protect public health. Last week, Lord Ahmad attended the alliance's Ministers forum, where he urged renewed efforts to prevent acts of violence that target individuals on the basis of their religion or belief.

It is particularly important at this time to ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society are actively included in response and recovery efforts. As we have heard today from all hon. Members in this Chamber, members of minority communities are suffering terrible discrimination and abuse throughout the world, so our work in the multilateral forum must be informed by what is happening on the ground. In Pakistan, for example, hate speech and attacks have been aimed at Shi'a Muslims and Hindus, and Christians are being denied food, support and healthcare. We continue to urge the Government of Pakistan to ensure that all citizens enjoy the full range of human rights, as laid down in Pakistan's own constitution, enshrined in international law and demanded, frankly, by human decency.

We are also concerned by the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment and the decision by the Sri Lankan Government to mandate cremations for all those deceased due to covid—Lord Ahmad has raised that issue with the high commissioner. Ministers and officials at the high commission in Colombo continue to urge the Sri Lankan Government to ensure the protection of Christians, Muslims and other minorities in that country. In Iraq, covid has had a significant effect in the regions of the country formerly controlled by Daesh, including on religious minorities such as Christians and Yazidis. Many still remain in camps, where covid is leading to reduced services, and those outside the camps are struggling with livelihoods and access to essential services.

I will now address some of the more specific issues raised by hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton was absolutely right to raise Red Wednesday. I can confirm that the FCDO was lit up in red lights to demonstrate our solidarity with persecuted Christians across the globe. We will continue to work across Government to ensure that these international days are respected in the appropriate manner. She rightly raised cases of oppression of those of faith and other minorities across the globe. She cited evidence of some states allegedly, or actually, using the pandemic as an excuse to clamp down on minorities. She raised, as did other hon. Members, the plight of the Rohingya in refugee camps. I am proud of the work that we are doing to alleviate the suffering of the Rohingya. We are the second-largest donor of relief and support to those people, both in Bangladesh and in the camps.

My hon. Friends the Members for Congleton and for South West Bedfordshire spoke of North Korea. It is very difficult to assess the situation there, as they can imagine. Due to the pandemic, we have had to take the difficult decision to close our embassy in North Korea temporarily, basically to give our dedicated staff there some relief from the situation—they literally could not go out of the perimeter of the compound they were staying in. We took that difficult decision, but we hope to be able to return to that country at the earliest opportunity.

Andrew Selous: When the Foreign Secretary made his very welcome statement about Magnitsky sanctions, North Korea was one of the countries raised. He mentioned organisations, because it was not possible at that time to identify the individuals who led them. Has there been any progress in identifying the individuals concerned, to whom those Magnitsky sanctions will apply in North Korea?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right to mention sanctions. These Magnitsky-style sanctions can have great effect in holding people to account, especially those with assets outside particular countries. He will appreciate that it would not be correct to speculate on individual names—to do so would likely lessen the effect of any potential sanctions—but what I can tell him is that we are constantly monitoring potential individuals for our sanctions regime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned the Bishop of Truro's report. We have made great progress in adopting those recommendations. On

[Nigel Adams]

recommendation 21, which focuses on sharing lessons from the implementation of the review's recommendations, we continue to consider the best way to do that. We will implement them over the next 18 months, as we have committed to doing. We are very grateful to the bishop for his review. My hon. Friend also mentioned India. We are very concerned about reports of discrimination against minorities there, which is linked to covid. We condemn any form of discrimination based on religion or belief. India's strength, like that of the UK, is in its diversity. We call on and trust India's Government to address the concerns of peoples of all religions.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East rightly raised Sudan. Our embassy in Khartoum constantly monitors the human rights situation there, including on freedom of religion or belief, through engagement with civil society and their politicians, and we raise our concerns with authorities. Most recently, on 28 January, Lord Ahmad raised the importance of freedom of religion or belief with the Sudanese ambassador, including concern at the appalling burning of three churches in Blue Nile state. Lord Ahmad stressed the need for the Sudanese authorities to investigate that incident. We are undertaking project work to strengthen the effectiveness of the Sudanese National Assembly. This includes ensuring Sudanese policies and legislation better serve minorities and religious groups, in line with international standards on freedom of religion or belief.

Lord Ahmad also raised the issue of discrimination towards and the targeting of the Baha'i community in Iran. We regularly raise specific concerns about laws that might end up discriminating on the basis of religion or belief, and we do so publicly and privately—we make a judgment on which we believe will have the most positive effect. He also mentioned a replacement for the special envoy. I again pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) for his work in that role. The Prime Minister will be appointing a special envoy replacement in due course.

David Linden: I have a lot of respect for the Minister, but I am getting slightly fed up with hearing the words, "in due course", which I know are a favourite of the civil service. Can he at least commit to saying that the appointment will be made before Christmas? Given how often we are in this Chamber raising these issues, it is rather frustrating to be told that they will be raised "in due course" when this does not actually happen.

Nigel Adams: I understand where the hon. Member is coming from. This is a bigger point. This is not something that needs to be rushed. There will be a replacement, but by no means are we stepping back from our commitment to this role. We know how crucial it is for liaison with the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. However, the hon. Gentleman must forgive me if I cannot give a commitment on whether the appointment will be made this side of Christmas, however welcome that would be.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire is a long-time champion for freedom of religion or belief. He rightly highlighted a wide range of countries where there are serious concerns about the ability to worship freely. We will always condemn any form of discrimination. We will always raise our concerns directly with the countries. He focused on China and the Uyghur population. We are deeply concerned about the human rights situation in Xinjiang. We all know about the so-called re-education camps. Our diplomats have visited Xinjiang periodically to observe that situation, because first-hand access is not easy.

We have repeatedly taken an international role in holding China to account on the issue, including statements at the UN Human Rights Council in June and in the UN Third Committee last October. At the time, the UK was the only country to have led a joint statement at the UN. On 6 October, the UK and 38 other countries made a statement at the UN Third Committee in New York, expressing our deep concern about the situation in Xinjiang, including the mass detention of Uyghurs. This reflects our diplomatic leadership internationally, including the personal involvement of the Foreign Secretary, in raising the issue with a wide range of partners.

On 25 September, we devoted our item 4 national statement to human rights issues in China at the UN Human Rights Council. That was only the second time the UK has dedicated its national statement to a single country—the first time was in 2018, on Russia, following the Salisbury poisonings. In July, the Foreign Secretary raised Xinjiang directly with his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi. I raised my concerns directly with the Chinese ambassador in March.

As usual, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) spoke eloquently on a subject that is very close to his heart. His experience of the discrimination that he has suffered as an Ahmadi Muslim makes him uniquely placed to comment on these injustices. As my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) said, we all look forward to being able to worship to some degree in the UK after 2 December, in all places of worship. Collective worship is clearly preferable to services via Zoom, but that is a step in the right direction at least.

My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes also talked about his personal experience in Iraq. The suffering of Christians and many other groups in Iraq is a matter of serious concern. We are firmly committed to protecting members of religious minorities in Iraq and providing assistance on the basis of need, irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity. We have committed £261 million in humanitarian support to Iraq since 2014, which will provide a vital lifeline of food, shelter, medical care and clean water for the most vulnerable, including the Yazidi and Christian minorities. We have also contributed £23.15 million to the UN development programme funding facility for stabilisation, which works to restore vital services across liberated areas of Iraq, and is heavily committed to areas that are home to minority communities—principally, and historically, those are Christian areas.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) brings great experience in this area to his role as Opposition spokesman, and it is always good to see him across the Chamber in these debates. He rightly raised the issue of the reduction of the development assistance budget from 0.7% to 0.5%, but the pandemic has had a huge and severe impact on our economy, which has fallen to the worst levels in 300 years. That has forced us to take an incredibly tough decision to spend 0.5% of our national income on global poverty

reduction next year, rather than the usual 0.7%. That was a very difficult decision to make, but it is a temporary one. We must protect the economy during the pandemic, but we intend to return to 0.7% as soon as possible.

Of course, we remain one of the most generous G7 donors: proportionately, we will spend more than the United States, Japan, Canada or Italy. In real terms, that means more than £10 billion to fight poverty, improve global health and achieve our UN sustainable development goals.

Stephen Doughty: I take the Minister's sincerity, but those are political choices that the Government have made in breach of their own commitments. A lot of organisations, particularly those working on the crucial issues that we have debated, want some of the granular detail on which programmes will be cut, suspended, changed or altered. The Foreign Secretary just mentioned in the main Chamber that there will be another review over the next couple of months. When can we expect detail and confirmation of funding for the critical programmes that we have discussed?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask. All aid will be focused on seven global challenges where we can make the most difference: covid and global health security; girls' education; science, research and technology; conflict resolution; humanitarian preparedness and response; trade and economic development; and, of course, climate change and biodiversity. The Foreign Secretary will decide the allocation of aid to other Departments in line with those objectives. All the projects will be assessed through a new management process, led by the Foreign Secretary with input from Ministers about their geographic and departmental responsibilities. That will be laid out, although I hate to use this term, in due course. The hon. Gentleman will have heard the Foreign Secretary's commitment on that.

David Linden: The Minister is being extremely generous. I hope that he will reflect on David Cameron's tweet yesterday about it being a regrettable move, given that we share the world with some of the poorest people. It was a deeply retrograde step. Global Britain is not a project that I and the SNP endorse, although I wish it well, but as Britain emerges from Brexit and goes on to the world stage, it strikes me that moving from 0.7% to 0.5% is not good for global Britain's soft power. Even at this late stage, the Government should reconsider, because it looks so bad for project global Britain.

Nigel Adams: The important thing is that whatever aid we give, it has the greatest possible impact overseas. I heard what former Prime Ministers had to say yesterday. Nobody wanted to have to make that decision, but these are extraordinary times. There has been a severe impact on our economy. We will still be the second largest donor in the world in that area.

I would also say that we have managed to achieve 0.7% in previous years. We will be cutting it back to 0.5% temporarily, but I politely say to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth that in 13 years in government, the Labour party never once achieved 0.7%. Not only that, it did not achieve 0.6% either. In two years, it achieved only 0.5%. We are, temporarily, going back to where we were at 0.5%.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister has made that point, and the Foreign Secretary tried to do the same earlier. When they resort to such personal points, it reflects a Government in wider difficulties. The reality is that in 1997, ODA was at something like 0.21%, and by the end of the Labour Government it had come close to 0.6%. There was a steady increase throughout the period after the Thatcher Government, the Pergau dam scandal and many other things.

Rightly—and I have credited them for it—David Cameron, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and others stuck with the commitments and the increases, because there was cross-party consensus. It is a great regret that the Government, and the Chancellor in particular, have chosen to break that consensus. It is deeply regretted by many on the Minister's side of the House, as he knows.

Nigel Adams: It is regretted right across the ministerial team, but such measures have been forced on us by the pandemic. It is a temporary measure.

Imran Ahmad Khan: The Minister mentioned a commendable list of seven areas that will now be the FCDO's core areas of funding, but I noticed the absence of a vital one. Although he mentioned conflict resolution, there was no mention—unless it is a sub-category of that—of upstream conflict prevention. That is certainly the most cost-efficient and best way to stop conflicts occurring, and it is an area in which the United Kingdom has an incredibly valuable asset.

I used to be an active member of the Oxford Research Group with Sir Malcolm Rifkind, Gabrielle Rifkind and Tim Livesey, who used to be the chief of staff of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—it is multi-party. It has a great arsenal of talent and people that it can employ for the sake of security elsewhere. If upstream conflict prevention is not included, are we selling Britain short?

Nigel Adams: I do not believe so at all. It is important to be mindful of all areas. Prevention of anything is better than cure in many ways and less expensive. My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point. We need to strengthen democratic institutions to ensure that these things are headed off. We need to ensure effective governance and free media as part of protecting human rights. All those things are positive contributors.

The effects of the pandemic have been overwhelming and far-reaching, and will continue to have an impact on our lives for some time to come. As a longstanding champion of human rights and freedoms, the UK has a duty to defend our values of equality, inclusion and respect at home and abroad. I thank all hon. Members for their excellent contributions and for the debate that we have had on the issue of the day. I assure the House that the Government will do just that: whatever obstacles lay in our path, we will continue to raise awareness of those who are persecuted for what they believe, stand up for the rights of minority communities around the world and defend the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone everywhere.

2.56 pm

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for his detailed response and for confirming the Government's increasing engagement on the issue of freedom of religion or belief. I have seen that over the past 10 years, and it is

[Fiona Bruce]

genuine—particularly on the part of the FCO. I think there is a bit of catch-up on the part of the Department for International Development, but I am hopeful that now the two are working together, we will see that increasingly.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. The hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned the envoy appointment, and I think that, after two months, he is right. The Minister talked about Lord Ahmad making representations—for example, at the UN—but the role of the envoy was separated from the Foreign Office Minister's role more than a year ago because it was felt that we needed to send a signal to the international community and have an individual dedicated to making representations on behalf of our country. I concur with the hon. Gentleman's comments: that appointment needs to be made soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke of the wide range of countries where there are restrictions of freedom of religion or belief. Concerningly, some of the worst are Commonwealth countries: Pakistan, India and Nigeria.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) reminded us that although collective worship has been restricted in this country, freedom of religion has not been. In fact, the use of online technology has perhaps extended the opportunity for people to engage over recent months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) made a characteristically intelligent speech. I wish I had more time to engage with the comments he made. He talked about the importance of faith communities and the contribution they can make. He is absolutely right. DFID began to recognise that during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, where deaths could have been prevented if there had been greater engagement with faith communities. He spoke of the importance of religious literacy. Yes, there is now a toolkit for the FCO, but are DFID staff being asked to look at that? That is really important.

Finally, my hon. Friend talked about the subtle issue of DFID having over the years claimed to be religion-blind. Actually, in seeking not to discriminate and in seeking to be fair, it has denied the fact that, as I hope we have demonstrated, religion is often an exacerbating factor in aid need, and needs to be taken into account rather than ignored when aid is distributed.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) commended the response of faith groups to covid-19. The APPG on faith and society published a report in the past few days on how, here in this country, local authorities are working much better with faith groups. It is a very encouraging report, and I hope it can be looked at by DFID, in terms of our international aid work. There is a lesson that could be learned there. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the John Bunyan Fund for Freedom of Religion and Belief, but I am a little concerned that there has not been much information about what it applies to.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

3 pm

Sitting suspended.

International Development and Gender-based Violence

3.2 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered international development and gender-based violence.

Thank you for being here, Mr McCabe; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I do, however, take very little pleasure in debating today's motion. Gender-based violence is a scourge upon the world that has devastating and lifelong implications for survivors. At its core, gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed towards an individual, based on their gender. It occurs because of gender inequality, abuse of power, and harmful and outdated norms. While it is predominantly directed towards women and girls, it also impacts men and boys. Across the world, millions suffer from these appalling crimes, all too often in silence. It is estimated that one in three women will experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime—a statistic that is considerably worsened during conflicts, displacements, and at times of crisis.

Gender-based violence comes in many forms, and can include sexual, physical and mental abuse, as well as harassment, coercion and manipulation. It is domestic abuse, it is sexual violence in conflict, it is child marriage, it is female genital mutilation and it is honour crimes—the list goes on. Such acts take place both in private and in public. Its prevalence has only increased over the course of this year as a result of the pandemic.

At the start of this year, the United Nations estimated that 242 million women and girls were subjected to sexual or physical violence in the preceding 12 months—another statistic that will only have increased over the course of this year.

Such acts are used as an effective tool to ostracise individuals, to exert power over others, and to spread fear and subjugation into communities and individuals. As is outlined in Human Rights Watch's latest report, "They Treated Us in Monstrous Ways", which documents crimes of sexual violence against men in Syria by both state and non-state actors, such actions are now commonplace in conflict zones and crises. Rape and sexual violence are effectively being used as weapons of war—a weapon that costs nothing to the perpetrator and everything to the survivor.

As was detailed by ActionAid in 2007, over 87,000 women and girls were intentionally killed. That equates to 137 a day. These are the numbers that we know of; millions more are likely to be suffering in silence, locked behind closed doors and subjected to horrors that are unimaginable to any of us.

As nation after nation entered lockdown and schools were closed, offices shut and places of public interaction and engagement sealed off, so too were places of safety. Millions of people were denied access to those areas where they might briefly find some degree of normality and peace from their perpetrators. The United Nations estimated that in the six months of lockdown, there would be 31 million cases of gender-based violence—just over 5 million a month.

With the closure of schools, millions more girls, no longer able to access an education, will be forced into child marriage. The full impact of covid-19 will not be

known for quite some time, but what we know now is a small glimpse of how widespread and prevalent this issue has become. Gender-based violence is a pandemic within a pandemic.

Yesterday was notable for two reasons. First, it was the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Secondly, the United Kingdom announced its decision to cut our international development budget. In honour of the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, I launched an international statement that was supported by parliamentarians from this Parliament and nine others. The statement called for the protection of funding for programmes to tackle all forms of gender-based violence at home and abroad, working together to find new ways to support women and girls at risk of gender-based violence and ensuring that women leaders are at the heart of our response to gender-based violence. I would be grateful to the Minister if he would let the House know whether he supports that statement, as I think nearly every other Member here has signed it.

On this, the second day of 16 days of activism to eliminate violence against women, we are holding this debate and hoping to ensure that the UK does not shirk its international responsibilities to help some of those in the most difficult situations across the globe. I find it difficult to understand how the UK can take such a short-term approach to our international obligations, reputation and moral duty by cutting the development budget from 0.7% to 0.5%. It may well have been billed as a temporary measure to deal with an unprecedented financial situation, but so too was income tax. I will, therefore, not be holding my breath.

I hope I am not considered to be overly idealistic in believing that the UK is internationally recognised for the work that we do through our development budget. It is aid that is given for no other intention than to support the most vulnerable and those who are suffering. So much of what has been said in the past 24 hours focuses on the financial cost, rather than the enormous benefit of the support and humanitarian assistance that we send across the globe, from the 6 million girls provided with decent education to the almost 52 million people who have been given access to clean water or the 76 million children who have been vaccinated. That is all in the past five years. Our aid budget has made a difference to vulnerable women and girls across developing economies.

I will do all I can to see the return to 0.7%. For the purpose of this debate, however, I wish to point out that in previous spending rounds of our development budget, spending on GBV has ranked at the lowest level. Of the £14 billion spent on international aid, just 0.3% is spent on ending violence against women and girls. That must be rectified. I ask that the Government consider ringfencing 1% of the 0.7%—apologies, I mean 0.5%—to ensure long-term funding and commitment to tackling gender-based violence and supporting those who are so often overlooked, left behind and ignored.

None of us will look back on 2020 fondly, but it has been an important year for several reasons. It is the 20th anniversary of the UK's signing UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, and the first year of the decade of action on the sustainable development goals, focusing on action on gender and women's empowerment. It is the 25th anniversary of the Beijing declaration and the platform for action. While we might reflect on how far we have come since signing those commitments to tackle these issues, we might also reflect on how far we have yet to go to end gender-based violence and to reach gender equality.

Fortunately, I am an optimist—I have to be an optimist—and I believe that the UK can still achieve its commitments and maintain some semblance of its international reputation. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, I have consistently asked the Government to introduce an international body, to be based here in the United Kingdom, to collect and document information on sexual violence in conflict, support survivors and lead international prosecutions against those who commit atrocious crimes such as sexual violence in conflict.

We can shatter the culture of impunity, and with President-elect Biden soon to take office, we have a unique opportunity to implement an organisation that would support so much of the work that he accomplished on women's rights as a Senator. Some might question why I have decided to take up this issue, but for me it is obvious. If men are 99% of the problem, we have to be 50% of the solution, and as the Voluntary Service Overseas points out, change will only work when men change their attitudes to violence towards women and girls.

A new era of activism and education is needed, and it can be led by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and supported by the development budget. I hope the Minister will work with me and others in this Chamber to develop that programme and to ensure that this issue is firmly on the agenda at each and every international event.

With that in mind, next year the UK is set to host the G7, and the Prime Minister will undoubtedly include his women's education initiative on that agenda. I urge the Minister—and the Prime Minister, if he is watching—to also include on the agenda gender-based violence and preventing sexual violence in conflict. If we are to succeed in supporting more women into education, we need to address gender-based violence. They are interlocked pieces of the same jigsaw, and success cannot be had in one without the other.

The Government have launched some truly brilliant programmes, such as What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale, and put more than £67.5 billion of funding into it, but they can and must go further. They must build on the funding, build on access to services, and build on access to police action, justice and, above all, prevention. We have routinely committed to holding a second PSVI conference in this country, only to see it kicked further down the road, so I hope that next year—in 2021, a year of conferences—we might again commit to holding an international conference where we can address the issue of gender-based violence.

I am proud that the Union Jack is recognised across the world as a symbol of aid and assistance and that they arrive without caveats. The UK has real power, soft and otherwise. In supporting people in the most difficult parts of the world, it can continue to commit to those people. We should never forget that, and I hope today's debate, which sadly is all too short, will demonstrate the strength of feeling about this issue, about international development and about what we can do in the world to make it a better place for those who suffer so badly.

3.13 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for all his work as chair of the APPG on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, and I thank him and the hon. Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) for co-sponsoring this very important debate with me. I am pleased that, despite our party differences, we are firmly united on this issue, particularly on the prevention of sexual violence in conflict, which is what I will focus on in my speech.

The year 2020 was set to be a watershed moment for women's rights. It has been 25 years since the Beijing declaration and platform for action, and we were hoping to spend this year reaffirming commitments to gender equality that would accelerate progress towards dismantling the barriers that women and girls continue to face. However, in all corners of the world, violence against women remains rife and has increased in many contexts.

Whenever and wherever a crisis hits, violence against women and girls increases. Today is a dark day for two reasons. First, in Ethiopia and Tigray there have been three weeks of fighting: 40,000 Ethiopians have fled to Sudan and thousands are displaced in Tigray. I hope the Minister will tell us what action he is taking on prevention of sexual violence in that conflict. It is a very live issue.

The second issue is the cutting of the 0.7% aid commitment. The Conservative party manifesto gave that commitment and it was promised for many years, with support from people across the country. I was part of the huge demonstrations of support at previous G7 summits. This is the year before we host a G7 summit, and the prospect of having to walk into that room having cut our own aid budget is very depressing. It is harmful to the cause of taking action against gender-based violence.

Women and girls living in war zones and crisis areas are especially at risk of gender-based violence. In his report on conflict-related sexual violence, released back in June, the UN Secretary-General lists a series of truly harrowing verified case studies of sexual violence in current war zones. I will read some of them:

"In the Central African Republic, a mother of six was subjected to sexual violence by ex-Séléka elements who seized control of her village. During a reprisal attack by anti-balaka forces, she was abducted and repeatedly raped…In northern Mali, two sisters of adolescent age were abducted and gang raped by members of the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad. Upon their release, the girls received medical treatment, but no complaint was filed with the police, despite the identity of the perpetrators being known to the family, owing to the fear of reprisals."

That is all too common a story. In Colombia, the National Victims' Unit recorded 365 victims of conflict-related sexual violence during the armed conflict, saying:

"Women and girls made up 89 per cent of the victims".

I have sat in a room of a similar size to this one with a group of women from Somalia, who told harrowing stories about their experiences during the continuing war in Somalia. I have seen them crying and they are with me in this important debate. The impact of using rape as a weapon of war lasts a lifetime, and it lasts through generations.

As the Secretary-General saliently points out in his report, we need to bear in mind that for every documented case of sexual violence,

"there are countless other stories that will never be heard."

We do not know the enormous extent of this issue.

The recent establishment of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office marks a crossroads for UK foreign policy. It will come as no surprise to Members that I fear that it is a mistake. It does, however, offer an opportunity to reset the up-to-now lacklustre support for the preventing of sexual violence in conflict initiative, which was announced with huge fanfare in 2012, and in 2014 we saw the magic of stardust and celebrity, with Angelina Jolie and a former Conservative Foreign Minister. It was proclaimed by the Conservative Government to be top of the leader board of international priorities, but I fear it is now languishing in the lower divisions. I hope the Minister can tell me how that will be changed.

This year's Independent Commission for Aid Impact report on PSVI gave it the equivalent of an Ofsted rating of red or amber. I sincerely hope that the Minister will tell us how the Government are working differently to bring that back to green. Otherwise, what is the point of the two Departments merging and saying they are going to work better? The merger creates a high risk to the leadership of what was the Department for International Development in uplifting the rights of women and girls around the world.

The International Rescue Committee has written an important report on the need for survivor-centred approaches to tackling PSVI, highlighting the unintended consequences of mandatory reporting, which aimed to bring justice but too often resulted in stigma for survivors. We need to learn from that report. Its important recommendations include the need to listen to survivors, provide safe spaces and give them power and resources to organise themselves and make their own decisions. Those recommendations need to be added to the way in which we work on prevention of sexual violence in conflict.

I support the hon. Member for Totnes and the APPG in calling on the UK to push for a new, expert international body to collect and preserve evidence of conflict-related sexual violence. Evidence is essential to ending this. We need to bring more perpetrators to justice. The armed forces need to change how they act; otherwise, there will be no change at all. But this will be done only through the rigorous collecting of forensic, physical and digital evidence.

Secondly, the Government should ring-fence 1% of the UK's official development assistance—up from 0.3%—to tackle gender-based violence, including sexual-based violence in conflict. Thirdly, responsibility for that should be restored to the Foreign Secretary. The ICAI report found that shifting responsibility to the level of a junior Minister

"resulted in ministerial attention and funding being redirected elsewhere"

and in our dropping down the league table.

Fourthly, the Government should use their new Magnitsky-style global human rights sanctions regime to target those who commit or encourage conflict-related sexual violence. That would send out strong signals that it is not acceptable. Fifthly, PSVI needs a longer-term approach, with a long-term strategy and funding cycle, not just a one-year funding cycle. This is an endemic problem of human rights and justice. It will take many years to solve it, and it needs many years of action.

I will add my own recommendations. The first is to end the stigma, which for many women is worse than the action itself. When they return, they are rejected by their husbands and communities, and many children are also rejected. We need global leadership to tackle the stigma so that it does not continue. I raised that in questions to the Church Commissioners this morning, and I will continue to raise it wherever and whenever I can. I hope the Minister will do so as well.

Secondly, when will the delayed global summit take place? Let us bring back Angelina Jolie and see who else we can get. We need to get back that global attention. In 2014, we were promised it would take place five years later, which, if my maths serves me correctly, was 2019. It did not happen then—although I can understand why—and it has not happened this year either. It really needs to happen next year. I like the fact that the hon. Member for Totnes has called 2021 the year of conferences—why not add one more? Thirdly, I want our work to focus on measures to document evidence and bring perpetrators to justice, and for us to think creatively about how to do that in this digital age.

In conclusion, as parliamentarians we must never lose sight of the profound and unspeakable suffering experienced by women and men as a result of sexual violence. It is not just women who are affected—men are definitely affected, too—but our focus today has been women. Our British values, of which I am very proud and which unite Members on both sides of the House, compel us to take up the issue, do what we can around the world, fight their corner and ensure that justice is done.

3.22 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): I will not congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this debate, but certainly I commiserate with him on the need to discuss this tragic subject. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister has found my hon. Friend's case as powerful and persuasive as I have.

Sadly, I have on too many occasions sat, in distant, dangerous places ravaged by war or suffering a poverty of effective state structures, with women whose painful stories have left my cheeks wet. Over the course of the covid-19 pandemic, it has become glaringly apparent that cases of violence against women and girls have increased dramatically. Globally, 35% of women have experienced either physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner or non-partner in their lifetime. That statistic, however, does not take into account sexual harassment.

According to a report by ActionAid, 87,000 women around the world were intentionally killed in 2017. Of those, 50,000 were killed by a family member or a significant partner. That is an outrage. Globally, 650 million girls and young women alive today are married before their 18th birthday, with Niger, Central African Republic and Chad having some of the highest figures.

[Christina Rees *in the Chair*]

The covid-19 pandemic has only served to intensify some of these issues throughout the world. Domestic abuse cases have increased exponentially throughout the lockdown period. In April, the charity Refuge reported a 700% increase in calls to its helpline in a single day.

The recent merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development presents an opportunity for the United Kingdom to formulate a new strategy in tackling violence and discrimination against women across the globe. We do, of course, have a track record to be proud of in the United Kingdom. Aid and development spending has had a significant impact on reducing violence against women. Through aid programmes, more than 14 million children—6 million of them girls—have gained a decent education. Since 2015, nutrition-relevant programmes by the Department for International Development have reached 60.3 million women, children under five and adolescent girls. One UK aid project reduced rates of domestic violence from 69% to 29% across 15 remote villages in the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo—a place I know—over a two-year period.

I object to the cut in the foreign aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of UK GDP. The potential repercussions for our ability to tackle violence against women and girls are such that it is likely to have significant and long-term negative consequences. However, I do accept that aid is only one tool at our disposal that can be used to tackle violence against women. Applying significant pressure to Governments with poor track records on women's rights and domestic abuse is an alternative. If we are to redetermine and reposition our place in the world following our departure from the European Union, Her Majesty's Government should ensure that we do not shy away from our obligations to those most in need, most vulnerable and most impoverished. I urge Her Majesty's Government to utilise their membership of the high-level panel on women's economic empowerment and our leadership role in the UN action coalition on gender-based violence, to demonstrate our, the United Kingdom's, commitment to tackling this very serious issue.

3.27 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on his thoughtful speech introducing this debate, and indeed the other speakers before me. I want to talk primarily about violence against women and girls that does not take place during conflict situations. I hope that will provide a contrast to the very thoughtful contribution from the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson).

In this debate, marking yesterday as International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, I want to highlight simply two issues: the forcible abduction and subsequent violation of girls from minority groups in Pakistan and Nigeria, which is happening at scale; and the suffering of women in the Uyghur camps in China, which is also happening at scale.

I thank Aid to the Church in Need, whose latest report, "Set Your Captives Free", was released yesterday and also marked Red Wednesday, for drawing attention to the thousands of young Hindu, Shi'a, Sikh and Christian girls in Pakistan who are kidnapped and forcibly married to much older men every year. That happens generally with impunity, because of the vulnerable economic and social status of those girls. Women from those communities have become much more vulnerable since the outbreak of covid-19, and that increased vulnerability puts them at much greater risk. As a

[Fiona Bruce]

result, many young girls from minority communities, such as 14-year-old Maira Shahbaz and 13-year-old Arzoo Raja, have been kidnapped and forcibly married in Pakistan this year.

Many of the girls are subject to rape, forced prostitution and domestic abuse. In some cases, their families succeed in freeing the girls through the courts, but in other cases—remarkably and adding to the injustice of their abduction, forced marriage and alleged conversion—when they get to court, judges frequently order the return of the girl to their abductor. That attaches more credibility and importance to the statement of the girl's alleged conversion to Islam than to the girl's account of her abduction. It gives more credibility to the abductor than to the enforcement of the law that forbids marriage to a minor.

The real tragedy is that Pakistan's very constitution and laws, particularly the blasphemy laws, are often the basis for such discrimination and violation, as in these court hearings. In any country, the constitution and legal system should be the cornerstone of the protection of fundamental human rights. Will the Minister confirm that whenever the opportunity arises, he and his colleagues will raise with his counterparts their concerns about the abduction of hundreds—indeed, thousands—of girls in Pakistan?

I make no apology for raising once again the plight of Leah Sharibu, whose mother Rebecca I met earlier this year. The sadness in Rebecca's eyes lives with me today, and my heart goes out to her. Leah was just 14 when she was among the 110 school girls abducted by Boko Haram from their school. She is the only one still in captivity, because she has refused to renounce her Christian faith. She is now 17. I ask the Minister once again, as I have done before, to ensure that Leah's plight, together with requests for her release, is raised with the Nigerian Government at every possible opportunity. I commend CSW for its continued campaign on Leah's behalf.

I want to turn now to the Uyghurs. It is appalling to hear how women from the Uyghur community have been violated as part of the Chinese Government's brutal campaign to curb its Muslim population. They are violated through forced birth control, pregnancy checks, the mandatory insertion of painful intrauterine devices, forced sterilisation and abortions. We hear that that is happening at scale, to hundreds of thousands of women. These population control measures are backed by mass detention as a punishment for failure to comply. The threat of being sent to prison—to the camps that we hear so much about—hangs over these women. Police raid homes, terrify parents and search for hidden children. Mothers of three or more children can be torn away, unless they can pay huge fines. Simply having too many children is a major reason why people are sent to detention camps. Many receive sentences of years, and in some cases decades, in prison just for having several children.

We even hear of female detainees being taken to prison camps and forced to abort their own unborn children. The result of this birth control campaign is a climate of terror. Birth rates in the mostly Uyghur regions of Hotan and Kashgar have plunged by more than 60% from 2015 to 2018—the latest year available in Government statistics. In the Xinjiang region, birth rates continue to plummet; they fell nearly 24% last year alone, compared with just 4.2% nationwide. Will the Minister, whenever possible, call on the Chinese Communist party to end these horrific practices, which are part of a state-orchestrated assault on Uyghur women and the wider Uyghur community with the aim of purging them of their identity?

3.33 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this very important debate. He talks very passionately about the issues for women, in particular, in regions of unrest and war.

On that note, I would like to talk about violence against women in occupied Kashmir by the Indian armed forces. We know that the rape of women becomes the weapon of choice in areas of conflict. I consider myself a daughter of Kashmir, because I spent my teenage years in Azad Kashmir in a village in Pakistan, where I had the luxury of being able to go to school without opening the front door and finding the military there with guns. I had the benefit and the freedom of going to school and going about my business without worrying about being cornered or subjected to rape, and without worrying about the women in the village being subjected to rape by the armed forces. That was a privilege that I enjoyed—that was in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

In occupied Kashmir, however, there are some instances where women still have not received justice, and I will highlight some of them. The first UN human rights report in 2008 called for an inquiry, and I hope the Minister will support that call. Calls for inquiries have often been dismissed as propaganda by the opposite side—whichever side that is. That is not acceptable, and it should not be acceptable to us that those inquiries have not happened.

Human Rights Watch has identified two main scenarios where women are being raped by Indian forces: first, during searches and cordon ops and, secondly, during reprisal attacks by Indian forces after military ambushes.

Nowadays, 23 February is commemorated as Kashmiri Women's Resistance Day because on that date in 1991, up to 150 women and girls were raped en masse—the biggest mass rape that has ever happened anywhere in this world. Indian soldiers were told to go on a mass raping spree in the villages of Kunan and Poshpora, and that is what happened. The women are still waiting for justice; not one perpetrator was held to account.

Recently, with the revocation of Article 370, Nivedita Menon, a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, said:

> "These are proclamations of conquest and plunder, and reveal the real intention behind the abrogation of 370".

On 10 August 2019, Manohar Lal Khattar, Chief Minister of Haryana, was quoted as saying:

> "Some people are now saying that as Kashmir is open, brides will be brought from there. But jokes apart, if [the gender] ratio is improved, then there will be a right balance in society".

Earlier, the Bharatiya Janata party's Vikram Saini, a member of a legislative assembly, said:

> "Muslim party workers should rejoice in the new provisions. They can now marry the white-skinned women of Kashmir".

I went to Pakistan, to Azad Kashmir, and met lots of Kashmiri women. Many Kashmiri women have come here to make representations to this House, to members of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group and to others, and they have told us of the horrors that they have faced.

I wanted to talk about this today because I have lived in Kashmir; I have seen what it is like to have freedom, even in somewhere like Pakistan and even after having been subjected to a forced marriage myself. I absolutely understand what the hon. Member for Totnes was talking about, but I still had the freedom of not having someone putting a gun barrel against my back, taking me into a corner and raping me. I still had those privileges in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and I am looking forward to taking my daughter there to introduce her to those areas.

What of those women in Kashmir, who cannot leave? We struggle, as people here, with the curfews—

Imran Ahmad Khan: The story that the hon. Member tells about her own forced marriage is tragic. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has mentioned in relation to the case of 14-year-old Maira Shahbaz, it is slightly hollow for Pakistan—whether in Azad Kashmir or the main part—to protest about freedoms and human rights when its own laws allow for the abuse of its citizens.

In Maira's case, it is not just that a 14-year-old girl was gang-raped and then kidnapped out of her home; she was then forcibly converted to Islam, so if she now renounces that religion, she will be sentenced to death for apostasy under Pakistani law. That really makes the points that the hon. Member made, which are all right, hollow in the case of Pakistan.

Naz Shah: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I recognise what he is saying, and he makes a powerful point. However, I do not recognise the idea that this is hollow. That is whataboutery, and we are not here for whataboutery. We are here because every life matters, as we have heard from every single Member who has spoken in this debate. For every 14-year-old that was raped in Pakistan, I can talk about the eight-year-old child that was raped in occupied Kashmir. This is not a competition about which girl deserves more of our concern, or in which area in the world that girl should be protected. That is not what this is about.

Let us get this right: our laws in this country do not give us equal pay, and we are the biggest democracy in the world. I will not take lessons on hollowness from the hon. Member when his Government have not implemented equal pay for women, and when they are even worse when it comes to black and minority ethnic women. Let us not belittle this debate and bring it down to whataboutery. This debate is about women.

The hon. Member for Totnes was spot on. As he highlighted, this debate is about looking at the 16 days of activism to stop violence across the world. Whether that is in Pakistan, India or Uganda, and whether it involves Boko Haram or any other terrorist organisation, women are being used as a weapon of war. They are being raped, and they are being violated. That is what the House needs to understand. We must work together, regardless of whether that is happening in Pakistan or India. I wanted to focus on the issue of women in occupied Kashmir being gang-raped by Indian forces, and I will not have that diminished. That is what must be highlighted, and that is the note on which I will end my contribution to this debate.

3.41 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is a pleasure, in some senses, to take part in this debate. I thank the hon. Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for opening this debate, and the hon. Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) for securing it. It is important that this issue is raised now, although it is a great pity that it is not taking centre stage in the main Chamber, as some of us in this Chamber perhaps feel it should.

Gender-based violence has been described by the United Nations as "a global pandemic", with at least 15 million more cases predicted around the world as a result of covid-19 restrictions. Surely, a problem of that scale should not be sidelined. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a volunteer trustee on the board of the White Ribbon Scotland campaign. I am also the father of a young girl, and I do not want her to grow up in a world that tolerates sexism, abusive behaviour or violence against women or girls.

Today, we are discussing international development, and I will come to that in a moment. In some cases, although we must look globally, we also need to reflect locally. To demonstrate leadership internationally, the Government need to get their own house in order. Eight years ago, the Government signed the Istanbul convention: the gold standard, comprehensive approach to addressing violence against women and girls. It was an opportunity to bring unprecedented positive change, including improvements for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK who have been victims of gender-based violence.

In 2016, I was part of the IC Change campaign to hurry the Government along from their good intentions to solid action. I backed a Bill that was brought forward by my former party colleague, Eilidh Whiteford, to ensure the treaty was fully integrated into UK law. That received widespread cross-party support, yet here we are, four years on, and the Istanbul convention has still not been ratified. That suggests that the UK Government are not taking it seriously enough. Could the Minister reassure me that these crucial protections for women and girls will be put higher up the agenda, and that the Government will finally offer a timetable for ratifying the treaty?

Every year, we hear the appalling statistics about gender-based violence, which affects one in three women in their lifetime. Some of the national studies show figures as high as 70%. The United Nations reports that 137 women are killed by a family member every day. Although progress has been generally slow, this year it is moving at an exponential pace, but in the wrong direction. Pandemic restrictions have meant that women are being forced to lock down with abusers, at the same time as services to support survivors are disrupted. Calls to domestic abuse lines have increased fivefold in many countries. There is a silent pandemic of abuse, and it is not getting the attention it requires.

[Owen Thompson]

The merging of the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office sent the wrong signal about how much the Government prioritise humanitarian programmes that tackle gender-based violence in the poorest nations, but I would be delighted to be proven wrong on that. Certainly, at a time of global crisis, the budget should be ring-fenced, not cut. It was therefore particularly disappointing that yesterday the Chancellor announced a cut in the foreign aid budget. Although I understand that girls' education will be protected in the remaining funds, that is only one element in the battle against violence against women and girls. I have grave concerns about the impact on women's empowerment programmes, aid worker system changes, the women, peace and security agenda, and anti-female genital mutilation programmes, to mention just a few things.

Before the pandemic, violence against women and girls programmes were already persistently underfunded, as we have heard from other Members. They were given far too low a priority in aid budgets. The International Rescue Committee estimates that 14 million displaced or refugee women were subject to sexual violence in 2019, while less than 0.2% of all global humanitarian funding was allocated to addressing gender-based violence. That is shamefully inadequate, and I urge the FCDO to show leadership and dedicate a fixed or minimum percentage of its budget to fighting that crucial issue for global health, wellbeing, justice and economic development.

The UK has an opportunity to set a global long-term standard that other international donors could follow. As highlighted in this month's African Child Policy Forum report, we are witnessing a global roll-back of women's rights. The UK's leadership on programmes to do with women, peace and security and sexual violence in conflict is more important than ever. That leadership extends to creating better strategies to ensure that those who are sent from the UK to provide support in crises do not include the perpetrators of abuse against some of the world's most vulnerable people.

Like most, I was absolutely appalled to read reports of aid providers' sexual abuse and exploitation of sufferers of the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. That came after the previous scandals involving senior male staff from a range of organisations, including Oxfam and Save the Children. The momentum for change has clearly not been maintained, and the International Development Committee has had to launch its third piece of work on sexual exploitation and abuse in only two years. I urge the Government to step up efforts for meaningful reform.

Safeguarding measures are crucial, but with such imbalanced power dynamics, we also need better mechanisms within communities to ensure that the victims can come forward. The Government could use the full capability of their overseas network to help embed that cultural change, provide support services to survivors and victims, and help to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The roll-back of progress is not just a global issue; it is happening here, too, under the cover of covid-19. In my constituency, Women's Aid reports a 60% rise in referrals, including a rise in demand for its services for high-risk victims, where there is a risk to life. Its refuges have been full throughout the crisis and it is urgently seeking more housing. The Scottish Government, in partnership with Scottish local government, are playing their part to assist. They have removed bureaucracy and set up dedicated funding for services to protect women and girls from gender-based violence. Their world-leading Equally Safe strategy is part of their vision to eradicate and prevent violence against women and girls, and they published their three-year update just yesterday. They are also progressing key policy changes, such as the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill. A taskforce on human rights leadership has been set up, and it will consider incorporating into Scots law the UN convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

We are fighting against a rising tide of abuse, and a lot more needs to be done nationally and internationally to raise awareness, provide resources and ensure that we protect all women and girls against gender-based violence. We know that it is rooted in a culture of gender inequality, which needs to be tackled at its roots. At the moment, not a single country is on track to meet the sustainable development goal of achieving gender equality by 2030. Just 0.1% of the total aid from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is committed to women's organisations.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the UN penholder on women and peace and security, the UK is in a rare position to be able to do more. The international community should treat gender-based violence with the same urgency and gravity as natural disasters and humanitarian catastrophes. The UK has a unique opportunity to lead the way on that. I support the calls of the hon. Members for Totnes and for Putney for a summit to be held at the earliest opportunity so that these issues can be looked at in far more detail. I urge the Minister and the Government to grasp with both hands the opportunity that is in front of them to make a genuinely transformational change that improves the lives of so many women and girls around the globe.

3.49 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this important debate on the UK's development contribution to tackling gender-based violence across the world. As colleagues have pointed out, yesterday marked the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the beginning of 16 days of activism, amplifying the call for global action on eliminating gender-based violence by 2030, which is a campaign that we firmly support.

There have been many passionate and important contributions to the debate, but I want first to praise my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has been working hard on this issue throughout the coronavirus crisis but could not be present today. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney made a powerful contribution by sharing her experiences of visiting victims of violence in Somalia, and it is important that those women's voices are heard in these types of debates. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) made a really passionate speech on the impact of gender-based violence on women and girls in occupied Kashmir—that violence is used as an act of war.

Gender-based violence is a moral emergency with devastating impacts. One in three women and girls are affected, and will continue to be affected, throughout their lifetime. Violence and abuse shape and define lives, livelihoods and relationships. It strips a person of their freedoms, and not only in that moment, but in the decisions that they go on to make throughout the rest of their life.

Only this morning I was in a meeting with women from the Syrian British Council. They told me of their horrific experiences and explained how rape and sexual violence is used as a form of torture in Syria. From domestic abuse to sexual assault, female genital mutilation, early motherhood and forced marriages, violence against women and girls includes psychological, emotional and physical abuse. Women experience violence at home, in the street, at school and in the workplace, and during times of both peace and conflict or crisis. It happens online and offline.

The subordination of women by men is a means of control and power, and it is often executed through acts of violence. It is an attack on human rights and dignity, and a threat to our rights in one household, wherever in the world it may be, is a threat to our rights everywhere. Violence against women and girls is also a silent killer. Domestic violence is one of the most common causes of gender-related deaths of women around the world, which should both alarm us and press us into sustaining and furthering action and our commitment to rooting it out.

The UN reports that 243 million women and girls were abused by an intimate partner in the past year alone, although less than 40% of those who have experienced violence actually report it. That should shame us all. It is a major obstacle to building the fair, just, equitable and sustainable future that we all want to achieve and pass on to the next generation—our daughters and granddaughters. Despite the UK being renowned in recent years for our leadership on tackling gender-based violence in the developing world and promoting girls' education and women's equality, we are far from reaching the finishing line.

When scrutinising the use of UK aid, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact reported that DFID had made a significant contribution to the elimination of violence against women and girls prior to its merger with the Foreign Office. We should rightly be proud of that, but we learned yesterday that the Government have cut the aid budget. It is a short-sighted and reckless cut that not only undermines the UK's efforts, but risks leaving exposed women and girls in the developing world who depend on our assistance.

Diluting funding will cut away vital safe spaces, education and support for survivors of sexual violence, as well as our ability to tackle its many drivers, such as extreme poverty, food scarcity and the climate emergency, which aggravate the violence to which many women and girls are subjected. We know that the climate emergency disproportionately impacts women and their health. In fact, 68% of women face much higher health risks from the impact of climate change than men.

Not only does the cut break the Minister's own manifesto pledge, to which he publicly committed in a recent written answer, but the 0.7 % commitment is enshrined in law. Baroness Sugg, the former Minister for the Overseas Territories and Sustainable Development, and the first special envoy for girls' education, who was responsible for driving most this work, as the Minister will no doubt recall, resigned yesterday following the cut to the aid budget, which she said will

"diminish our power to influence other nations to do what is right".

I agree.

We must not forget that the cut represents a third of the budget. No other Department has seen such stringent reductions in spending power. Does that mean that we will write off a third of the girls in the developing world who rely on our educational programming? The International Rescue Committee reported 14 million refugee women and girl survivors of rape and sexual violence in 2019. Will the Minister tell us whether a third of them no longer need our help? At this time of maximum vulnerability, when the scale of need has never been so great, we must not turn our backs on the world's poorest and most vulnerable, and retreat from the global stage.

Even before covid, gender-based violence had reached pandemic proportions. The introduction of national lockdowns at home and across the developing world, combined with additional economic and emotional stresses, saw violence and abuse rise fourfold. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that for every month of lockdown, there are 15 million extra cases of domestic violence across the world. School closures and economic constraints leave women and girls poorer, out of school and jobs, and more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, forced marriage and harassment. Worse still, that abuse is locked firmly behind closed doors. UN reports show that domestic violence has increased as survivors have found it more difficult to access support. This is a shadow pandemic. The covid crisis must not be used as a reason to abandon our promise to be a strong and dependable partner through the tough times as well as through the good.

In many cases, our aid is the first and last hope of improving women and girls' lives. It matters to people such as Alia and her daughter Amira that we keep our promise. They both fled Alia's abusive husband, who wanted to perform genital mutilation on Amira, his 11-year-old daughter. He terrorised and threatened their lives, but they showed bravery and courage in escaping Sudan, enduring hardships and insecurity on the road, and found sanctuary—or so they thought—in Libya. There, however, they became even more vulnerable to violence. Alia describes the harrowing tale of a Libyan man trying to kidnap her daughter from a camp that they had temporarily called home, so that he could force her into marriage. The harassment and exploitation did not stop following them, all because they were female and dared to stand up for their rights to flee an abuser who they had thought they could trust, love and depend on.

It is thanks to a UK-funded project that they have both received what they needed: refuge, support and counselling. That programme will last until 2023, apparently. I asked the Government in September whether they would protect the funding from cuts. The Minister promised that it would be maintained. Can he keep that promise, following yesterday's announcement?

Have the Government undertaken an assessment of exactly what the cut to the 0.7% commitment will mean? If not, why not? Why are we still waiting for the

[Anna McMorrin]

Government's analysis of the £3 billion cuts from August? Can the Government provide clarity and be honest about what they are going to cut, allowing civil society and the wider sector to plan what interventions they can make, rather than making a chaotic withdrawal of funding? Will the Minister also confirm that when he brings back the legislation it will include a sunset clause, to determine when the 0.7% commitment will return?

I endorse the requests from the hon. Member for Totnes and my hon. Friend the Member for Putney about the global summit on the prevention of sexual violence in conflict, which was meant to happen last year, and will not happen next year. Will the Government commit to bringing it forward and hosting it? Those are critical issues, but also this is a moment for self-reflection at home. Gender-based violence happens across the world and it can impact those closest to us. Let us show leadership and demonstrate that we can prioritise that essential issue.

4.1 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing the debate, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke), who is not here, and the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for bringing this important issue to Westminster Hall. I thank the other Members who have spoken for their contributions. I pay tribute to the work that Members present in the Chamber have contributed in various ways on this most important of issues, whether through the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, as a member of the International Development Committee, or as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on domestic abuse.

As Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, I also lead on the women, peace and security portfolio. One thing that has come up during the debate is how the various strands of Government work—on supporting education for women and girls, on preventing sexual violence in conflict, and on ensuring that women peace builders have a meaningful voice in conflict resolution—are not separate; they are all interwoven. It is important that in Government we address the full spectrum of policies. Work to end all forms of gender-based violence, to tackle gender equality, and to ensure that women are empowered and are part of the decision-making process internationally is, and will remain, a priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

I will try to address as many of the points that were raised in the debate as I can. I know that there will be frustrations about this, but hon. Members will understand that I am not in a position to give as much clarity or assurance as they might wish, but I assure them that all the points raised and ideas put forward, and all the requests made of the Government, will be recorded and considered.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes made clear, gender-based violence is not just about violence directed at women and girls, but the sad truth is that they do bear the brunt of it. If he will forgive me, I will focus most of my comments today on the impact on women and girls, because violence affects women and girls everywhere. As has been mentioned, one in three women worldwide will experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, making violence against women and girls one of the most systemic and widespread human rights violations of our time.

This year, the 16 days of activism to end violence against women are more important than ever. As a number of hon. Members have said in the debate, covid-19 has intensified the shadow pandemic of gender-based violence, and lockdown measures around the world have reminded us that homes, rather than being a place of safety and refuge, for many women and girls are in fact a place of danger and abuse—sadly, including here in the UK.

In east and west Africa, increased rates of female genital mutilation have been reported. In some countries, there have been reports of sexual exploitation by those Government officials tasked with enforcing lockdown requirements. A bigger global response is more urgent now than ever, but we should remember that gender-based violence was endemic before covid-19 and that it will not go away when, hopefully, we are able to get control of this disease. Therefore we need additional action to address it; it will continue beyond covid-19 unless we take that action.

However, there is hope. The UK-funded What Works to Prevent Violence programme has proved that violence against women and girls is preventable, and more than half our rigorously evaluated pilots showed significant reductions in violence of around 50% in less than three years. For example, in the DRC—a place that was mentioned during the debate—the project with faith leaders and community action groups halved women's experience of intimate partner violence. We need to use and adapt that evidence to build back better after covid and learn from those successes. The Member for Putney raised the distressing situation in Tigray and asked what engagement my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had. I am pleased to say that he met Ethiopian Foreign Minister Mekonnen yesterday and specifically raised the protection of civilians from violence during their bilateral discussion.

We need to do more, to reach more people and to distribute the learnings of what works to prevent sexual violence. That is why we continue to invest in the successor programme, What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale. That is a programme to scale up our programming and research to prevent sexual violence against women and girls globally. We are delighted to have been selected to co-lead the new Generation Equality action coalition on gender-based violence. The Generation Equality action coalition is a global multi-stakeholder partnership intended to spur collective action to deliver concrete, game-changing results on gender-based violence over the next five years.

We are using this opportunity to increase international action to tackle gender-based violence in the context of covid-19. We are calling on donors to channel funding to women's rights organisations and movements that are on the frontline of delivering change. The UK recently announced an additional £1 million of funding to the United Nations trust fund to end violence against women, increasing our total contribution to £22 million.

The additional funds will support women's rights organisations tackling the surge of gender-based violence due to covid-19.

Naz Shah: Is the money that the Minister is talking about affected by the recent announcement on development funding being cut?

James Cleverly: That money has already been allocated. As I said, I cannot give clarity as to what future funding streams will be like, but this agenda remains a priority for the Government.

We will continue to take a leading role to tackle gender-based violence in conflict and crisis, including through the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. Last week, my noble friend Lord Ahmad launched the declaration of humanity. Crucially, that declaration commits leaders of faith and belief groups to do all in their power to prevent sexual violence in conflict, to support victims and to dismantle harmful cultural norms and misinterpretations of faith. I hope that will go some way to addressing the concerns raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan), because sadly, that is too often used to justify and condone acts of sexual violence.

Through the call to action on protection from gender-based violence in emergencies, the UK works with our partners to drive system change to better protect women and girls in a humanitarian context. We are pushing for increased funding and greater accountability on gender-based violence as part of humanitarian responses. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield made an important point, however, that although ODA is important, it is not the only means to drive change in this agenda.

Several hon. Members have criticised the merger of the FCO and DFID to form the new FCDO, and I recognise the points about yesterday's announcement and the statement from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary today. Using the UK's economic power, however, we will still be one of the most generous ODA-donating countries in the world, and we can also use our diplomatic power as a force multiplier.

We will put women and girls at the top of the UK's agenda for our term as president of the G7. We will use our position as co-leaders on the GBV action coalition to tackle the root causes of violence. As COP26 president, we will promote clean and inclusive resilience from covid and natural disasters, because, of course, we know well that those economic and environmental pressures are drivers of conflict, and that conflict is often a driver for sexual violence against women and girls. We will continue to push the agenda through our diplomatic network.

I reiterate that violence against women and girls is not only completely and wholly unacceptable, but preventable. The key message for today is that we should not, and must not, accept it as a reality. I return to the praise that I gave to hon. Members on both sides of the House who have done so much work to drive this issue and to ensure that the appropriate attention is paid to it globally.

We must challenge the idea that there is inevitability or inertia, or indeed that change takes decades or generations. It does not. It should not. That is why we have prioritised this important work. We are working to stop any reversal of our hard-won progress on gender equality, perhaps driven by the covid-19 pandemic, and we are using the spotlight the pandemic has shone on the violence women and girls have to endure to tackle the root causes and accelerate progress to meet the sustainable development goals on this issue.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): I call Anthony Mangnall to wind up.

4.15 pm

Anthony Mangnall: What a privilege to have 15 minutes to wind up, Ms Rees. You are very generous to give me such time.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): I was not thinking of that long, actually.

Anthony Mangnall: I will be brief. I thank everyone for turning up to speak in this debate. The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) spoke passionately about her experience working with Somali women and with WaterAid in the UK. It is incredible working with her on the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, and I thank her for her support for my support for an international panel and body. I look forward to working with her on many other such issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) was kind enough to inform us about his experiences around the world and the moving impact he has had working with different communities. The House is better for having his experience, and the all-party parliamentary group on foreign affairs is lucky to have him as its chair.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke passionately, if I may say so. She shifted the focus, rightly, out of conflict zones to an area that also needs redress and resolve. To speak of the justice system as she did was a stark reminder of the lack of justice seen by so many people across the world. The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) also spoke about the need for justice, not only in specific geographical areas, but across the world. She raised the important matter of women in Kashmir. I greatly valued her contribution.

The hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) has always been suspiciously kind to me on a whole host of issues. I am particularly grateful for his support since the day that I gave my maiden speech on this issue. He was right to talk about issues such as the Istanbul convention and to say that leadership is more important than ever. He has a global and local vision. This is not an issue on which the UK can sit on a high horse. Domestic abuse happens within our shores. We have seen how prevalent it has been during the lockdown.

The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) has also been kind and direct about what needs to be done. More often than not, UK Aid is seen as the first and last hope. That is incredibly powerful. We are all conscious of the fact that UK Aid, stamped on to humanitarian packages and the backpacks of the people we send across the world to help, is greeted with relief

[Anthony Mangnall]

and the understanding that the international community is engaged. Anything that damages that is particularly worrying.

I thank the Minister for his comments. Change does not take decades, but by my count it is taking eight years. We launched the PSVI eight years ago and I think the UK can go further. I want to say a few words about what I have done on this. When I was elected, I wrote to the ambassador of every country that signed the UK's resolution in the UN on the PSVI. I have had 90 responses to 146 letters. Nearly every one says that they are still waiting for the UK to show leadership on this issue. That is, 90 countries have bothered to respond on this issue, good and bad, and they are asking the UK to continue its leadership. If we do not, we must be prepared to help others lead. That will either be Germany or the United States. I hope that we can find the resolve and determination to do it here and now, with the opportunity presented by the G7 presidency next year. Germany and the US are working very hard on this. If they lead on this, I will be happy to support them with others.

I passionately believe that the UK has a role to play on the international stage not only in defence, but, more importantly, in international development. This issue is a core tenet of international development. I hope that when he goes back to the Foreign Office, the Minister will tell the Foreign Secretary and others that there is a strong group of Members of Parliament who wish to see action on this issue, and that we will continue to raise it at any opportunity we are given.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered international development and gender-based violence.

4.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 26 November 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Departmental Contingent Liability Notification: Human Challenge Project

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of right hon. and hon. Members to bring to their attention the contingent liabilities relating to the contract signed between the Government and Imperial College London for the human challenge project.

This project was announced on 20 October and is aimed at supporting the search for a covid-19 vaccine. A £33.6 million Government investment will back the project in partnership with Imperial College London, hVIVO and the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust.

In human challenge studies, a vaccine candidate that has proven to be safe in initial trials is given to a small number of carefully selected healthy, young adult volunteers who are then exposed to the virus in a safe and controlled environment. These studies offer the chance to accelerate development of promising vaccines against covid-19, bringing them to people more quickly and potentially saving thousands of lives.

The first step of the project is the virus characterisation study. This will begin in January 2021 and establish the smallest amount of virus needed to cause covid-19 infection in the volunteers. Robust safety, ethics, and regulatory approvals will be put in place before the study begins. Imperial College is the academic study sponsor for the characterisation study. As study sponsor, Imperial will be liable for any negative side-effects volunteers may experience in this study. Imperial has therefore taken out its own insurance, up to the sum of £10 million and for up to 36 months after completion of the study.

My Department has agreed to provide the excess for a relief claim that Imperial may make for a maximum of £15,000 per volunteer (to a maximum of the 90 volunteers involved in this study). This is only applicable where the claim arises as the result of the study but not as the result of one of the parties' negligence. In addition to the agreed excess, my Department has agreed to provide unlimited indemnity beyond the £10 million.

My Department believes that this is a justifiable position given the very low risk of exceeding the maximum liability. In a reasonable worst-case scenario, our analysis estimates that liability would be under £1.5 million. Therefore, we do not expect the maximum liability to be exceeded.

A full departmental minute will be laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS605]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Winter Plan: Tiers

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): On 23 November, the Prime Minister set out our covid-19 winter plan in Parliament. Our covid-19 winter plan puts forward the UK Government programme for suppressing the virus, protecting the NHS and the vulnerable, keeping education and the economy going, and providing a route back to normality.

Thanks to the shared sacrifice of everyone in recent weeks, in following the national restrictions, we have been able to start to bring the virus back under control and slow its growth, easing some of the pressure on the NHS.

We will do this by returning to a regional tiered approach, saving the toughest measures for the parts of the country where prevalence remains too high.

The tiering approach provides a framework that, if used firmly, should prevent the need to introduce stricter national measures.

On 2 December, we will lift the national restrictions across all of England and the following restrictions will be eased:

The stay-at-home requirement will end.

Non-essential retail, gyms, personal care will reopen. The wider leisure and entertainment sectors will also reopen, although to varying degrees.

Communal worship, weddings and outdoor sports can resume.

People will no longer be limited to seeing one other person in outdoor public spaces, where the rule of six will now apply.

The new regulations set out the restrictions applicable in each tier. We have taken into account advice from SAGE on the impact of the previous tiers to strengthen the measures in the tiers, and help enable areas to move more swiftly into lower tiers.

The changes to the tiers are as follows:

In tier 1, the Government will reinforce the importance that, where people can work from home, they should do so.

In tier 2, hospitality settings that serve alcohol must close, unless operating as restaurants. Hospitality venues can only serve alcohol with substantial meals.

In tier 3, hospitality will close except for delivery, drive-through and takeaway, hotels and other accommodation providers must close (except for specific exemptions, such as people staying for work purposes, where people are attending a funeral, or where they cannot return home) and indoor entertainment venues such as cinemas, theatres and bowling allies must also close. Elite sport will be played without spectators. Organised outdoor sport can resume, but the Government will advise against higher risk contact sports.

These are not easy decisions, but they have been made according to the best clinical advice, and the criteria that we set out in the covid-19 winter plan.

These are:

Case detection rates in all age groups

Case detection rates in the over-60s

The rate at which cases are rising or falling

Positivity rate (the number of positive cases detected as a percentage of tests taken)

Pressure on the NHS.

The indicators have been designed to give the Government a picture of what is happening with the virus in any area so that suitable action can be taken. These key indicators need to be viewed in the context of how they interact with each other as well as the wider context but provide an important framework for decision making, assessing the underlying prevalence in addition to how the spread of the disease is changing in areas. Given these sensitivities, it is not possible to set rigid thresholds for these indicators.

The regulations will require the Government to review the allocations every 14 days, with the first review complete by the end of 16 December.

We have been able to announce UK-wide arrangements for Christmas, allowing friends and loved ones to reunite, and form a Christmas bubble of three households for five days over the Christmas period.

We have increased funding through our contain outbreak management fund, which will provide monthly payments to local authorities facing higher restrictions.

We are also launching a major community testing programme, homing in on the areas with the greatest rate of infection.

This programme is open to local authorities in tier 3 areas and offers help to get out of the toughest restrictions as fast as possible.

The listed areas will be in each tier from the 2 December. This list will also be published on gov.uk and a postcode tracker will be available for the public to check what rules apply in their local area.

A list of allocations can be found at: https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-11-26/HCWS608

[HCWS608]

Public Health England: Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I wish to inform the House of the publication of Public Health England's annual report and accounts for the financial year 2019-20. A copy of the annual report and accounts 2019-20 ("the Report") has been laid before both Houses.

Public Health England (PHE) is an Executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care, providing the evidence, support and advice needed locally, nationally and internationally. PHE is responsible for four critical functions: protecting the public's health; improving the public's health, improving population health; and supporting the capacity and capability of the public health system in England.

The report sets out the activity, performance and expenditure of PHE for key areas of its business for 2019-2020 financial year and reflects the position as at 31 March 2020. The report is based on activity in the 2019-20 financial year and notes that some performance in the final quarter was impacted because PHE rigorously reprioritised to free up significant internal resource for the covid-19 response.

As referenced in the report, on 18 August 2020, the Government announced the establishment of a new National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP), which will bring together the additional testing capacity at scale of NHS test and trace, the joint biosecurity centre intelligence and analytical capability with the public health science and health protection expertise of PHE. NIHP will be formally and fully established in 2021.

NHS test and trace and PHE put in place integrated arrangements on the covid-19 response and created a joint situational awareness team to provide analysis and insight into the progression of the virus, under single leadership.

Until further formal changes are made, PHE continues to operate and deliver its core functions in line with its framework agreement and continues to be held to account for delivery against the priorities set by Government in the annual strategic remit and priorities letter and agreed business plans through formal quarterly accountability meetings. PHE's governance boards and groups and PHE's advisory board also continue to operate. There will be a continued focus on responding to covid-19, now and throughout the winter. Health improvement, preventing ill health and reducing inequalities will also remain priorities for PHE, prior to full transition to new arrangements.

Work is underway to determine the right future arrangements for PHE's vital non-health protection functions, including health improvement responsibilities, and we will engage widely on proposals before implementing new arrangements in 2021.

[HCWS606]

Elizabeth Dixon Investigation Report

The Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (Ms Nadine Dorries): Today we have published the report into the events surrounding the death of Elizabeth Dixon—a baby who sadly died in December 2001 from asphyxiation resulting from a blocked tracheostomy tube and while under the care of a private nursing agency.

I offer my heart-felt condolences to Elizabeth's family, to Anne and Graeme Dixon for their loss, compounded by the length of time—the passage of 20 years—before the facts of this case have been brought to light.

The investigation led by Dr Bill Kirkup was tasked with reviewing the care given to Elizabeth Dixon between her birth on 14 December 2000 and her death on 4 December 2001—and the response of the health system to a catalogue of errors and serious failings in that care.

This report describes a harrowing and shocking series of mistakes associated with the care received by Elizabeth and a response to her death that was completely inadequate and at times inhumane. Elizabeth and her family were let down by a failure to diagnose or respond to her underlying condition, to put in place the care she required, to acknowledge the circumstances of her death or provide her parents with an honest account of these failings.

The investigation sheds light on what the report describes as a "20 year cover up". It alleges that some individuals have been persistently dishonest in accounting for their actions or inaction.

Underlying all of this was the acceptance of a flawed prognosis that influenced the future course of events. It created a situation in which

"facts were wilfully ignored, and alternatives fabricated".

Shocking too is the implication in the report's recommendations that the presence of her physical and mental health needs may have been used to justify or excuse the inadequate care she had received.

On behalf of Government and the health system I would like to say I am truly sorry for the devastating impact this must have had upon the Dixon family.

Individuals made mistakes and acted unprofessionally, but the system allowed it. The report makes it clear that

"clinical error, openly disclosed, investigated and learned from, should not result in blame or censure; equally, conscious choices to cover up or to be dishonest should not be tolerated".

It is also unacceptable for patients ever to be exposed to unsafe or poor care, and I remain fully committed to ensuring we provide the highest standards of quality and safe services to all patients.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) for commissioning this investigation in June 2017 when he was Secretary of State for Health and bringing these events into the open. I would also like to thank Dr Bill Kirkup and his team for the diligence and hard work that has informed their report.

Particularly, I would like to pay tribute to Anne and Graeme Dixon who have fought so hard for answers. I hope this report is the beginning of a process that will bring some closure for the family. They should not have had to wait for so long.

This report shines a light on a culture of denial and cover up 20 years ago that left a family with little choice but report their concerns to the police. Families should not have to fight a closed system for answers and I will not hesitate to expose this sort of behaviour whenever it appears today. Indeed, Elizabeth's legacy should be that other families will always be told the truth.

Relevant organisations will need to consider and reflect carefully on the report's recommendations. There is no room for complacency. The continual appearance of shocking reports about patient safety—historical or more recent—implies there is much for the NHS to focus on. My Department will therefore have oversight of their responses and report back to the House. There needs to be learning and implementation, but above all I want to be assured that we are doing all we can to make sure such events cannot happen again.

No other family should ever again have to go through the heartache and frustration experienced by the Dixons and I apologise again for the failings set out in this report.

Copies of the report have been laid before the House.

[HCWS607]

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 26 November 2020

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Leaseholders and Cladding

The following is an extract from the urgent question on leaseholders and cladding on 24 November 2020.

Christopher Pincher: He also refers to leasehold reform. A leasehold reform White Paper will be forthcoming. Perhaps we may, at that time, be able to debate the advantages and disadvantages of the Scottish system and see where we are able to learn from them and possibly they are able to learn from us.

[Official Report, 24 November 2020, Vol. 684, c. 696.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Housing, the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden).

The correct response should have been:

Christopher Pincher: He also refers to leasehold reform. **Leasehold reform legislation** will be forthcoming. Perhaps we may, at that time, be able to debate the advantages and disadvantages of the Scottish system and see where we are able to learn from them and possibly they are able to learn from us.

Leaseholders and Cladding

The following is an extract from the urgent question on leaseholders and cladding on 24 November 2020.

Christopher Pincher: The leasehold system and its reform will form part of a Government White Paper and separate debates in this Chamber, and I am sure that the hon. Lady will play her part in those.

[Official Report, 24 November 2020, Vol. 684, c. 702.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Housing, the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah).

The correct response should have been:

Christopher Pincher: The leasehold system and its reform will form part of **separate Government legislation** and separate debates in this Chamber, and I am sure that the hon. Lady will play her part in those.

TRANSPORT

Road Traffic

The following is an extract from the debate on road traffic on 23 November 2020.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady referenced the haulier handbook. This is one part of our plan to make sure that all this information is one place. The handbook will be translated into 18 languages and it will be ready very soon. It is already available on gov.uk, and we will also be making hard copies available in 43 information and advice sites, which are opening up and down the country.

[Official Report, 23 November 2020, Vol. 684, c. 648.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy).

The correct response should have been:

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady referenced the haulier handbook. This is one part of our plan to make sure that all this information is one place. The handbook will be translated into **14** languages and it will be ready very soon. It is already available on gov.uk, and we will also be making hard copies available in 43 information and advice sites, which are opening up and down the country.

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Climate Change Assembly UK: The Path to Net Zero [Col. 1041]
Motion—(Darren Jones)—agreed to

Coronavirus Outbreak: DWP Response [Col. 1067]
Motion—(Stephen Timms)—agreed to

Hydrogen Transport [Col. 1087]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Covid-19: Freedom of Religion or Belief [Col. 467WH]
International Development and Gender-based Violence [Col. 490WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 31WS]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 9MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers]